

FOUR FACTORS WHICH HAVE ADVERSELY AFFECTED THE LITERARY
STATUS OF ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH
CENTURY

by

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ABSTRACT

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This paper presents four factors which are responsible for the still unsettled controversy concerning the value of Stevenson's works: the contempt to which all Victorian writers were subjected for decades and the resulting neglect; an interest in Stevenson's romantic, adventurous life which was exploited and which detracted, and continues to detract, from his works; the fact that the negative reaction to biographical panegyric extended to literary critics who presented criticism of Stevenson, the man, rather than his works; and a part of one sentence that he wrote: "I played the sedulous ape," which has been misinterpreted and used against him ever after. No one of the factors is derived from a flaw in his actual writing; nevertheless, each factor has caused unjust damage to his literary reputation. Evidence of Stevenson's originality is presented in the concluding section.

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FOUR FACTORS WHICH HAVE ADVERSELY AFFECTED THE LITERARY
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The value of Robert Louis Stevenson's contribution to English letters has been a controversial issue for more than half a century. Though there is evidence that his literary reputation, and particularly his status as an essayist, is rising, the subject continues to elicit widely diverse views from contemporary authorities. Even current reference volumes contradict each other in their views of his works as a whole: The 1961 edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica advises: "His literary reputation has also fluctuated. The reaction against him set in soon after his death: He was considered a mannered and imitative essayist, or only a writer of children's books. But eventually the pendulum began to swing the other way, and by the 1950's his reputation was established among the more discerning as a writer of originality and power; whose essays at their best are cogent and perceptive renderings of aspects of the human situation"

But the Collier's Encyclopedia of 1961 gives an entirely different

point of view: "Through imitating the style of other writers, playing the sedulous ape, as he described it, Stevenson early attained great skill and dexterity in writing. All of his writing is marked by a surface perfection that is sometimes more noteworthy than its content The ideas he used were simple, often trite Critics point accurately to the immaturity in Stevenson's fictional works. The same comparative immaturity is obvious in his optimistic, high spirited essays, which are rhetorical and didactic, seldom profound."

Whereas an undecided research student would not expect to find unanimous agreement in literary journals, he would undoubtedly be puzzled to find that authorities continue to present entirely different views of Stevenson in current reference volumes which are generally considered to represent the consensus. If the student should pursue the question merely as a disinterested observer of the contradictory reports, he would surely be amazed to discover that publishers since 1947 have issued at least twenty-five new biographies of Stevenson; that he has been called "the acknowledged master of the essay form in the English language";¹ that George Saintsbury in his History of Nineteenth Century Literature, while not panegyric, called Stevenson "the most brilliant and interesting by far . . . of those English writers whose life was comprised in the last half of the century," and his work "distinguished as few things in this last quarter of a century

¹George Scott-Moncrief, introd. RLS: Selected Essays (Chicago, 1959), Inside cover page.

have been";² and yet that, as Janet Adam Smith observed, there is little valid criticism of his works available: "Admirers and detractors have scrutinized every chapter of his life, societies have been founded to honor his memory and preserve his relics. But in all this activity there has been next to no serious criticism of his writings."³

Graham Greene said in his 1948 review of Miss Smith's work: "This book . . . should do much to raise Stevenson's unjustly fallen reputation."⁴ But Greene did not follow his review with a much-needed critical essay concerning Stevenson's works; instead, ironically, he announced the following year that he had agreed to write a biography of Stevenson.⁵

Four factors are responsible for the still unsettled controversy concerning the value of Stevenson's works: the contempt to which all Victorian writers were subjected for decades and the resulting neglect; an interest in Stevenson's romantic, adventurous life which was exploited and which distracted, and continues to distract, from his works; the fact that the negative reaction to biographical panegyric extended to literary critics who presented criticism of Stevenson, the man, rather than his works; and a part of one sentence that he wrote:

²(London, 1896), pp. 339, 40.

³Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson (London, 1947), p. 47.

⁴New Statesman, Nov. 27, 1948, pp. 468, 69.

⁵"Robert Louis Stevenson," NYTLS, June 24, 1949, p. 413.

"I played the sedulous ape . . .,"⁶ which has been misinterpreted and used against him ever after, "hailed [sic] forth from its context and quoted in italics so as to deny him every claim to originality."⁷

The purpose of this paper is to present the four factors respectively, under one cover, in order to create an awareness that not one of the factors is derived from a flaw in his actual writing though each has caused unjust damage to his literary reputation.

Section one shows that contemporary writers, aware of the negative connotation of the term "Victorianism" and realizing that the term often communicates the image of an era rather than a type of writing, have attempted to present their favorite Victorian authors as rebellious heretics concerning anything "Victorian." Champions of Stevenson have insisted that he was a leader in the revolt against Victorian standards. The fact remains, however, that he is "ranked" with Victorian authors.

Section two presents evidence that Stevenson's early biographers completely destroyed the romantic public image of Stevenson and replaced it with a vision of a sinless saint; a second wave of "debunking" biographers determined to wreck the Stevenson shrine and replace it with their Don Juan version. As the biographical battle concerning the

⁶R. L. Stevenson, "A College Magazine," Memories and Portraits, in The Complete Works of Robert Louis Stevenson (New York, 1925).

⁷G. B. Sterne, introduction to a recent edition of Stevenson's Familiar Studies (New York, 1956), p. 14.

deeds of the man rather than the products of his pen continued, Stevenson's works were completely neglected; only the man was in focus.

The third part of the paper offers evidence that literary critics, adversely influenced by the biographers and blindly following the trend, wrote invective against Stevenson based upon hearsay and biographical malice rather than fact. Analyses and excerpts of three typical examples of the misinformation which propagated slander against Stevenson under the guise of scholarly information by qualified experts are included in this section.

The fourth section exposes the fact that for three-quarters of a century the indelible brand, "sedulous ape," has been used out of context and handed down to new generations as synonymous with the name Stevenson, proof in the writer's own words that he has no claim to originality; though an evaluation of the entire essay from which the famous two words were taken and an examination of the evidence in this section will prove that, in fact, Stevenson was so highly original that some of his works have no counterparts in the English language.

Section four is divided into four parts: One, a discussion of the use of models by literary men from the time of Chaucer to the present; two, a report of Stevenson's gratitude and public acknowledgement for help that he had received in his life, with a lament that a gentleman should be depreciated because of his integrity; three, a comparison of Stevenson's style of writing at the ages of

fifteen and thirty-eight to show that at the younger age he had acquired the ability later perfected to balance sentence structure and subject matter so as to produce an inimitable cadence, an overall rising and receding effect unexcelled, if equalled, to this day; and part four, a presentation of evidence of Stevenson's originality as shown by the unique types of literature which he created, his contributions to the establishment of criteria for evaluating modern fiction, his improvement of the best essay styles of his time, and by his tremendous influence on subsequent authors.

Part four is by far the longest section of the paper because of the necessity to include in this part a large portion of the "sedulous ape" essay to facilitate the readers' participation, excerpts from an early and a much later essay for the purpose of comparison of style, summaries of other selected essays to elucidate Stevenson's inimitable treatment of subject matter as compared to treatments of similar topics by earlier writers, and, finally, a few precis to display the universality of his themes.

The word "Victorian" was a favorite derogatory adjective by the 1890's; the negative connotation which the word acquired hampered objective analysis of the era; all agreed that Victorianism was bad, but its major weakness was a subject of controversy: As Buckley indicates, we are told that Victorians were blind and complacent, yet tormented by doubt and spiritually bewildered; that they were slavish conformers, but rugged individualists; and that their literature is

too propagandistic, purposeful and didactic, yet that it is so romantic, aesthetic and escapist that it is of little meaning to posterity. The aggregate of these charges obscures definition of the culture or literature of the period and gives no clue as to the single tragic flaw of Victorianism: "To one it is a moral hypocrisy, to another a deliberate sentimentalism, to a third a social snobbery But whatever its central defect, the age, we gather, must in some way have been deeply pernicious."⁸

Emery Neff describes the difficulties encountered by any scholar who attempts to interpret the sociological theories of Victorian authors or social backgrounds of their novels because of the overwhelming bulk of contradictory material available. "Nowhere are a scholar's theories so likely to meet contradiction by stubborn fact," he declares. Joseph Baker reinforces Neff's observation by lamenting the fact that so little research is being done in Victorian literature. He says that while Victorian literature generally accounts for one half of the literary space reserved for English literature before 1900, little critical material can be found. The period is "so unexplored that often

⁸ Jerome Hamilton Buckley, "Victorianism," in Victorian Literature: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Austin Wright (New York, 1961), pp. 4,5. Future references to essays in Wright's collection will cite Modern Essays as the source.

⁹ Emery Neff, "Social Background and Social Thought," in The Reinterpretation of Victorian Literature, ed. Joseph E. Baker (Princeton, N. J., 1950), pp. 5,6. Future references to essays in Baker will cite Reinterpretation as the source.

only specialists seem to have any real knowledge of the relevant facts Those of us who are professors of Victorian literature have suffered from a lack of general informed discussion and synthesis."¹⁰

The Victorians are accused of being provincial, narrow, complacent, and bigoted; they are depicted sitting on hair-cloth sofas in carefully arranged bustles, reading Sunday-school tracts, pretending that "if you do not name a thing, it isn't there."¹¹ And as everyone knows, the word "didactic" has been overused by unsympathetic critics to dismiss much of the literature of the entire era.

Many essayists have attempted to remove the Victorian stigma from their favorite authors of the period. One gentleman declared that Alice in Wonderland was really an indirect attack on the nonsense of the daily life of allegedly cultured adults in the time of Carroll;¹² E. L. Lucas began a defensive essay with a long quotation by Arnold to prove that "Here rings out a new note of rebellion amid the complacent peace of the Victorians."¹³ Mr. Lucas later intimated in another essay that Browning's poetry was reminiscent of the hearty manner of a Philistine, and one of Browning's champions rallied: "The general tenor of his criticism seems to me indicative of a mental twist

¹⁰Joseph E. Baker, introduction to Reinterpretation, p. vi.

¹¹Howard Mumford Jones, "The Comic Spirit and Victorian Sanity," in Reinterpretation, p. 20.

¹²Buckley, Modern Essays, p. 5.

¹³"Matthew Arnold," in Modern Essays, p. 54.

which inhibits him from depicting the great men of letters of the Victorian age with disinterested objectivity."¹⁴ The rebellion and manifold dissatisfactions of Tennyson, Morris, Dickens, Carlyle, Stevenson, and others have likewise been illustrated to show that they were emphatically not Victorian.¹⁵ One of Stevenson's champions recently wrote an entire volume to depict a Portrait of a Rebel.¹⁶

This defensive treatment extended to the literature of the period: "Certainly Wuthering Heights is different, primarily, perhaps, because its author was an individualist who spurned the easy road of convention. Not for her was the typical Victorian novel with its study of normal men and women in the normal pursuit of life."¹⁷ "Of all the great Victorian poets it was he [Swinburne] who made the most direct attack upon the idols of his time, upon the sentimental conception of love, upon bourgeois democracy, upon the institutional expressions of the Christian religion. For his daring he has paid heavily: A sulphurous cloud still hangs over his name, his work his always had about it the aroma of heresy, revolt and evil."¹⁸ Chesterton smugly declares that Stevenson initiated the revolt: "It may be complained that I have

¹⁴"The Infinite Moment," in Modern Essays, p. 54.

¹⁵Buckley, Modern Essays, p. 5.

¹⁶Richard Aldington (London, 1957).

¹⁷Melvin R. Watson, "Tempest in the Soul: The Theme and Structure of Wuthering Heights," in Modern Essays, p. 86.

¹⁸E. K. Brown, "Swinburne: A Centenary Estimate," ibid, p. 195.

represented Stevenson as acting against decadence before it existed. And I answer that this is the only real way in which a fighting man ever does successfully attack a movement; when he attacks later, he attacks too late."¹⁹ Scott-Moncrief adds that Stevenson's revolt "was to lead him to his life's work as a conscientious artist, with an undimmed indignation at injustice and hypocrisy of all kinds."²⁰

Champions of Victorian authors and literature have achieved some success. While there are indications that the literature of the period is slowly emerging from the maze of contempt which detoured it for a decade,²¹ the rise is by no means complete: In 1933 Howard Mumford Jones came to the defense of the Victorians; he declared that their social novels had many advantages over psychology and sex centered American novels and added, "I suspect that we have overstressed Victorian prejudice."²² As Lord David Cecil noted in 1935: "The first thin rays of the dawn have begun to strike the nineteenth century";²³ William Raymond noted in 1950: "There are signs that a nadir has been reached, and that a juster and truer appreciation of

¹⁹G. K. Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson (New York, 1955), p. 156.

²⁰RLS: Selected Essays, pp. v-viii.

²¹Lionel Stevenson, "The Pertinacious Victorian Poets," Modern Essays, p. 16.

²²Reinterpretation, p. 23.

²³"Early Victorian Novelists: "As They Look to the Reader," Modern Essays, p. 42.

the Victorian epoch is at hand";²⁴ and Austin Wright said in 1960: "Sufficiently far removed in time from the Victorians to be able to view them objectively, critics of the last three decades have thoughtfully reconsidered and re-appraised them in an effort to replace them in proper perspective. Victorian literature enjoys as a result a much loftier status than was accorded to it in the early years of the present century."²⁵ Professor Lionel Stevenson believes that the rehabilitation of the prose writers is more evident than that of the poets, however;²⁶ and the temptation to set authors apart from their environment continues.

Howard M. Jones, Buckley, Litzenberg, and others, leading authorities on the Victorian age, lament the fact that the term "Victorian" with its negative connotations is so ambiguously used. The term can be and often is applied to any author who lived in Europe during Queen Victoria's reign (1834-1901), even though there is disagreement as to the actual dates of the Victorian period: Norman Foerster, among others, tells us that the period ends about 1880, twenty-one years before Victoria's death;²⁷ but Jones declares that the period opens in 1837, at the time of the arrest of Thomas

²⁴Modern Essays, p. 98.

²⁵Ibid., p. iii.

²⁶Ibid., p. 16.

²⁷"The Critical Study of the Victorian Age," Reinterpretation, p. 59.

Griffiths Wainewright, artist and designer, and closes with Oscar Wilde (1856-1900). Jones includes Meredith and Kipling as Victorians and lists Francis Thompson (1859-1907) and Ernest Dowson (1867-1900) as being members of "the literary groups with which the period closes."²⁸ Karl Litzenberg uses the terms "Victorian period," "Victorian age," and "the nineteenth century" as synonyms throughout his essay "The Victorians and the World Abroad."²⁹

Editors of anthologies use the time and place of birth as their bases for cataloguing works; thus Stevenson is a Victorian author. Frederick William Roe lists him with eleven other authors in his 1947 volume, Victorian Prose (New York, 1947). He includes, besides Stevenson, Carlyle, Macaulay, Mill, Darwin, Froude, Ruskin, Arnold, Huxley, Morris, and Pater. In his introduction Roe says (p. xi): "The twelve men whose work is represented in this volume are masters of non-fictional prose, the most eminent, all in all, in a time of great writers. In thought, style, and influence taken together they reflect the vast range of Victorian thought, style, and movement more effectively than any other group of prose masters could do." The editors Stephens, Beck, and Snow, who include Stevenson in their anthology Victorian and Later English Poets, state that they have attempted to include a sufficient number of representatives to give

²⁸ Reinterpretation, p. 24.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 169-196.

the reader "an adequate knowledge of what all the Victorians, particularly those of the nineties, were doing."³⁰ And Austin Wright includes a paper of Stevenson in his 1961 edition, Victorian Literature: Modern Essays in Criticism, a book of individual studies on "the major literary figures of the time."

We may vigorously deny, therefore, that Stevenson is "Victorian"; but we obviously cannot refute the fact that he is "ranked" with Victorian authors and has thus been subjected to the same scorn and neglect that all authors of the period have suffered. But the fact of the time and place of his birth is only one of the detriments to the establishment of Stevenson's place in English literature: Interest in his romantic life is still being exploited at the expense of his literary reputation.

³⁰(New York, 1947), p. iii. [Please note that Beck and Snow use the phrase particularly those of the nineties in referring to Victorians.]

CHAPTER II

The following section will review pertinent aspects of Stevenson's life, recall the factors responsible for the public interest in Stevenson at the time of his death, and present evidence that his biographers damaged his literary reputation. Early biographers replaced the romantic hero concept of Stevenson with their version of a saint among savages, and they preached his virtues to the extent that a negative reaction resulted; later writers published biographies in the form of exposés of the life of a sloth.

Certainly it was natural for the world to be interested in the most romantic, exotic character of the age; natural, too, for publishers to meet the public demand; but the pity is, as James, Gosse, Swinerton, Chesterton, and others declared, that Stevenson, the man, overshadowed Stevenson, the author. And the absolutely incredible fact is that the subject of Stevenson, the man, continues to detract from his works.

Stevenson became a legend during his own lifetime. He had gained literary recognition when he was comparatively young; by the time he was twenty-five he had published several essays in MacMillan's Magazine, the Cornhill, and London; and he was writing his first book, An Inland Voyage.³¹ He had been elected to the exclusive Saville Club,

³¹ Commins, pp. xi-xiii.

where he had the pleasure and advantage of associating with Professor Fleeming Jenkin, Sir Sydney Colvin, and other members of the Cambridge faculty. At this time he also enjoyed the friendship of Andrew Lang and Sir Leslie Stephen, who were the editors of The Academy and The Saturday Review, and William Ernest Henley.³² Meredith encouraged Stevenson and considered his first book, An Inland Voyage, "literature."³³

Stevenson was a celebrity in America as well as in England by 1888. When he made his second crossing, before he was thirty-eight years old, he was met in New York as if he were a conquering hero.³⁴ For the first time, he had to endure "that humorous discomfiture that is so strangely coveted by those who never attained it, the discomfiture of being famous. He had to hide himself from his interviewers and from lion-hunters; and he was soon bewildered by enterprising publishers who were striving to outbid each other for his services . . ."³⁵ Before leaving New York he had agreed to write a series of twelve essays to appear month by month throughout the

³²Frank Swinnerton, RLS: A Critical Study (New York, 1923), p. 22.

³³Sir Sidney Colvin, Memories and Notes of Persons and Places (New York, 1921), p. 169.

³⁴Malcolm Elwin, The Strange Case of Robert Louis Stevenson (London, 1950), p. 84.

³⁵Saxe Commins, intro. Selected Writings of Robert Louis Stevenson (New York, 1947), p. xix.

year in Scribner's. He was paid \$3,500 for the dozen essays.³⁶ Before he left San Francisco about eight months later, Mr. S. S. McClure offered him \$10,000 for "a series of travel articles to be published in a syndicate of newspapers."³⁷ By this time Stevenson was in demand for headlines, and for his essays and stories; he was admired in literary circles and a hero to the public at large. He was now considered unique among men instead of affected.

If the numerous biographers had contented themselves with propagating the facts of Stevenson's romantic life or, in many cases, had been permitted to, the reaction against him might never have started. He actually did fulfill the requirements and live the role of a romantic hero: He was exotic in appearance; mysterious; he was an accomplished member of a highly respected family; he traveled far, finally across the wide world to the side of his beloved; and he most romantically lived the last years of his life in a strange, foreign setting surrounded by natives of the South Sea Islands. The fact that he lived boldly though mortally ill added a sympathetic aspect to this living character. Naturally, the public was fascinated. J. C. Furnas says: "Degeneration visibly began when Gosse wrote Louis that not since Byron went to Greece had a literary adventure so seized the public as his settling in Samoa where, the newspapers

³⁶Clayton Meeker Hamilton, On the Trail of Stevenson (Garden City, N. Y., 1915), p. 135.

³⁷Elwin, p. 145.

understood, he had become some sort of king of savages."³⁸

Stevenson, now a living legend, continued to excite the public imagination for four years. And then, with no forewarning, he suddenly died of a cerebral hemorrhage; and two hundred Samoan natives cleared a virgin road to the dramatic summit of Mont Vaea and prepared his grave there. The last exotic image of Robert Louis Stevenson was that of the wandering romantic hero being carried through jungle growth on the brown shoulders of sorrowing Samoan natives.³⁹ The legend was replete.

The legend was beautiful. It is amusing to speculate the probable public reaction had all of the actual facts been known. Stevenson's romantic flight to the bedside of his pale and wan beloved is one idealized scene which the facts smudge beyond recognition: Stevenson was infected with itch or eczema on the boat en route to America; he wrote Baxter from New York that he had sat on the floor and scratched himself from ten at night until seven the following morning. At the same time his decaying teeth were becoming more obvious, and his unusually skinny frame was further shrunk because of the rigors of the journey; he had lost fourteen pounds on the boat trip alone.⁴⁰ This personification of the perils of the flesh appeared

³⁸Voyage to Windward (New York, 1951, p. 438).

³⁹Lloyd Osbourne, An Intimate Portrait of RLS (New York, 1924), pp. 149-55.

⁴⁰RLS: Stevenson's Letters to Charles Baxter, ed. DeLancey Ferguson and Marshall Waingrow (New Haven, 1956), p. 66.

at Fanny's bedside; she immediately suffered a relapse, and he rushed away on a rented nag to camp in solitude, contract pneumonia, and almost die alone in the desolate hills. Fortunately, a rancher accidentally came upon the unconscious Stevenson, packed him home, and nursed him through one of his most severe crises.⁴¹

Also carefully ignored by legend builders was the fact that Fanny was the mother of teen-age children and had reached the age of forty plus compared to Stevenson's barely thirty at the time of the wedding. Romantic heroines were simply not mature, divorced women, at least in Stevenson's time; but then, Fanny's role was always subordinate to the public Stevenson image, the vision of a swashbuckling, fearless, velvet-coated, exotic adventurer. The suddenness of his death in Samoa further dramatized the romantic hero, the male leading role of the legend.

Immediately following Stevenson's dramatic demise, poetic outbursts of grief were printed throughout the world.⁴² Elegies were written by Robert Lynd, J. M. Barrie, Richard le Gallienne, Richard Garnett, John Davidson, Austin Dobson, Robertson Nicoll, William Watson, and A. E. Housman. Quiller-Couch wrote: "Put away books and paper and pen Stevenson is dead, and now there is nobody left

⁴¹Furnas, p. 160. See also Anne Roller Issler, Happier for His Presence (Stanford, 1949), p. 21

⁴²Sterne, p. 16.

to write for."⁴³

"Within thirty years every living human being whose cat had patronized the same veterinarian as [Stevenson's dog] Bogue had published dilute memories of Robert Louis Stevenson."⁴⁴ As

G. K. Chesterton says, it was overdone: "It was too noisy and yet all on one note; above all, it was too incessant and too prolonged Especially after he was dead, one person after another turned up and wrote a book about meeting Stevenson on a steamboat or in a restaurant; and it is not surprising that such bookmakers began to look as vulgar as bookies."⁴⁵

Since news of Stevenson's current exciting adventures had abruptly ended, and since Mrs. Stevenson had the right to approve everything printed, the image of the romantic hero gradually paled. In its place the "saintly consumptive among his loving brown vassals, the friend of lit-tul children, kept on growing heavenward in shapely smoke like the genie from the bottle and, as the genie must have, losing substance as he grew."⁴⁶

Many overly sentimental articles and books had been published between the time of Stevenson's death in 1894 and the publication of

⁴³Ibid, p. 436.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Robert Louis Stevenson (New York, 1955), p. 14.

⁴⁶Furnas, p. 448.

Balfour's official Life in 1901. "Anemic ladies itching 'to write' so damply worshipped the memory of the dear, delicate, kind man. Things had been almost equally oozy among some writing professionals." And equally as damaging was the fact that "the indicated correction was too often in the hands of people distortingly eager and ill-natured about it."⁴⁷ James found a "painful interest in observing what the others did with him--how they made him a public figure, how they exploited their association, how they made a flourishing business out of him, how they fell out with each other over his memory."⁴⁸ In 1901 he foretold Stevenson's fate in his letter to Gosse on the publication of Graham Balfour's Life: "I see now that a really curious thing has happened Insistent publicity, so to speak, has done its work (I only knew it was doing it, but G. B.'s book's a settler), and Louis, qua artist, is now, definitely, the victim thereof. That is, he has superseded, personally, his books, and this last replacement of himself so en scene . . . has killed the literary baggage."⁴⁹

The passage of time did not alleviate the situation. Twenty years after Stevenson's death (in 1911) Sir Edmund Gosse wrote: "The charm of Stevenson and the romantic vicissitudes of his life are so predominant in the minds of all who knew him, or lived within earshot

⁴⁷Ibid, p. 441

⁴⁸Smith, p. 23.

⁴⁹Ibid, pp. 45-46.

of his legend, that they make the ultimate position which he will take in the history of English literature somewhat difficult to decide."⁵⁰

George Hellman said that by 1914 he realized that the biographers had been able "to take an actually living being of fame familiar to all the world and, with the hocus-pocus of veils of suppression, of impresses of false emphasis, of gestures of insincerity, so to set forth his life and his character as to create a figure essentially different from the man himself! And, more astounding still, to preserve in the eyes of myriads the world over this misleading presentation, not for a brief day, but for decades!" He added, "What has been done in regard to Stevenson is far and away the most amazing achievement in the record of literary history. Of no other man of letters have so many biographies appeared in such rapid succession, and the truth is yet to be told."⁵¹

Thus for twenty years following the death of Stevenson he was glorified by both professional and amateur writers to the extent that the public image of a romantic hero had been transformed into that of a bloodless saint. By far the most damaging result of this twenty year stream of panegyric was the emphasis on the man, Stevenson, instead of his works. But the tragedy does not end with the metamorphosis of the Stevenson image.

⁵⁰ Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1911 ed., XXV, 908.

⁵¹ The True Stevenson; a Study in Clarification (Boston, 1925), p. 1.

In 1914 Fanny Stevenson died. And in 1914 the first of the "debunking" biographies, Frank Swinnerton's RLS: A Critical Study, appeared.

It should be emphasized that Swinnerton's views did not represent those of the majority of the time. His comments in the preface to the revised edition of 1923 disclosed that he was widely criticized as a result of his treatment of Stevenson: "When this book was first published, in the autumn of 1914, just after the War had begun, it caused extraordinary indignation among lovers of Stevenson. It was at that time thought that any writing about him should be adulatory. Some of the principal newspapers in England ignored the book altogether; others devoted considerable space to abuse of me and misrepresentation of what I had said in the course of the book."⁵²

According to Arnold Bennett the reputation of Stevenson, after Swinnerton's publication, was never the same.⁵³ Other writers gradually joined the opposition and by the 1920's Hellman, Steuart,⁵⁴ and others had changed the saintly Stevenson image to a Mr. Hyde. For more than a decade, and especially from the years 1914-27, many books and articles about Stevenson had all the characteristics of common,

⁵²Swinnerton, p. vii.

⁵³Furnas, p. 546, n. 26.

⁵⁴John Alexander Steuart, RLS: A Critical Biography (Boston, 1924).

malicious gossip. The most damaging result of the second group of biographers was that they continued to focus attention on Stevenson, himself, rather than on his works.

Viewed in retrospect, the first group of biographers caused the most damage: Their panegyric eventually disgusted many writers. George Saintsbury was one of the early critics to note that RLS had been praised by some of his contemporaries with an uncritical attitude which had provoked depreciation from others.⁵⁵

James's observation in 1901 that interest in Stevenson, the man, had "killed the literary baggage" (that is, had distracted attention from his works) seems to have been true for all time. Gosse, in 1911, indicated that interest in the Stevenson legend continued to overshadow interest in his works. In 1925, in his biographical attack, E. F. Benson noted the lack of critical material: "We fail to find the critical assistance towards a true appreciation of his work which we are entitled to expect."⁵⁶ In 1947, two writers lamented the lack of critical analyses of Stevenson's work: Janet Adam Smith deplored the fact that Stevenson as a person had obscured the literary artist (Furnas, p. 138) and David Daiches observed that Stevenson's works, though worthy of serious examination, are rarely discussed. He added: "Interest where it survives concentrates on

⁵⁵A History of Nineteenth Century Literature (London, 1896), p. 339.

⁵⁶"The Myth of Robert Louis Stevenson," The London Mercury (June, 1925), ed. J. C. Squire, XII, 468.

him as a literary figure rather than as a writer."⁵⁷ Again in 1959 Daiches summarized Stevenson's plight resulting from early panegyric: "The reaction was inevitable. As the twentieth century progressed, serious critics came more and more to dismiss Stevenson as a hopelessly artificial stylist or a mere children's writer (or both), and at the same time biographers started to deface the portrait of the 'seraph in chocolate' (as W. E. Henley had called it) painted by Stevenson's cousin Graham Balfour in his official biography of 1901. The biographical revolt began earlier than the critical."⁵⁸

The above authorities clearly indicate that Stevenson's literary reputation suffered as a result of his biographical treatment. James's observation in 1901 has gone unchallenged to the present time.

⁵⁷ Robert Louis Stevenson (A Revaluation) (Norfolk, Conn., 1947), p. 2.

⁵⁸ Robert Louis Stevenson (New York, 1959), p. 7.

CHAPTER III

Adverse reaction to the early panegyric concerning Stevenson, the man, apparently began with critics who published evidence of their personal dislike of Stevenson, the man, and misinformation concerning his works as valid criticism. For at least a decade following the First World War numerous "debunking" Stevenson biographies appeared, followed by new personal criticism of Stevenson. The general trend in biographies during the 1920's probably had some effect on the treatment of Stevenson.

As everyone knows, Lytton Strachey is considered the fountain-head of the "debunkers" of the 1920's. According to John W. Dodds in his colorful article, "New Territories in Biography" (Reinterpretation, pp. 197-199), "Strachey was reflecting the spirit of his age when he wrote satirical accounts of eminent Victorians. His influence inspired "shoals of little Stracheys who swam in his wake." Little known writers wrote irreverently of Victorian giants, particularly giants who were known to have possessed an Achilles heel. According to Albert C. Baugh, the goal was to "de-pedestalize" popular idols.⁵⁹

Adversely critical articles on Stevenson invariably begin with biographical malice and go on with hardly a break in tone to malicious criticism of his works, which indicates that both early and

⁵⁹ A Literary History of England (New York, 1948), p. 1600.

later critics were influenced by biographical trends: early critics were reacting to the panegyric; later ones were following the general trend.

Saxe Commins said that the extreme of the reaction began at approximately the time of the First World War and lasted for a decade. He stated that at the time the critics, "disliking him personally," made it the fashion to be disdainful of both the content and form of his fictional works. "They pilloried him as a posturer and irrepressible purveyor of charm" (p. vii). Fornas said that by 1926 the "seraph in chocolate" was replaced by a "pretentious and clandestinely lecherous poseur" and that to read his works was "literary slumming." He added: "The responsibility probably lies on the posthumous glorification that Louis's less well-advised friends insisted on" (p. 450). G. B. Sterne mentioned only biographers in her statement that they assigned him a lofty place in literature only to scornfully dethrone him again. Since she used the phrase "in literature," she apparently was referring to his critical as well as biographical treatment (p. 14). G. K. Chesterton also declared that the derogatory treatment of Stevenson's works by the 1920's was a reaction against Stevenson, himself, or at least against "Stevensonians" or "Stevensoniana." He added, "It is always a personal criticism, and often, I think, rather a spiteful criticism" (p. 28).

The following samples of criticism reinforce the statements of the above writers.

John Jay Chapman was one of the American critics who apparently

was basing his judgment on hearsay and who obviously was not familiar with Stevenson's works, though he did not hesitate to condemn them.⁶⁰ At the beginning of his paper, for instance, we are told that toward the end of Stevenson's life, he discovered that the public was interested in him, personally, and "his railleries or sermons took on the form of personal talk." Actually, Stevenson began as an essayist who wrote in the familiar style and wrote volumes of essays before he wrote his first line of fiction; furthermore, "toward the end of his life," during his last five years, his only non-fiction consisted of letters to friends and one volume of letters describing the political situation in Samoa, A Footnote to History.

On page two, Chapman ends a paragraph by stating that Stevenson's popularity "may in some particulars give a clew to the age"; and then, leaving the idea of "the age," he begins a new paragraph in which he seriously declares: "The light spirits and elfin humor which play about and support every work justifies them all . . ."⁶¹ Later references "The Sieur [sic] de Maletroit's door," and "Jekyl [sic] and Hyde"⁶² show that he had at least heard of certain of Stevenson's works which are not sparkling with "elfin humor."

Mr. Chapman then praises the Child's Garden, admits that it

⁶⁰ Emerson and Other Essays, Rev. ed. (New York, c1901), pp. 217-247.

⁶¹ Ibid, pp. 217-218.

⁶² Ibid, pp. 245 and 230-31 respectively.

has no prototype, lauds Stevenson's studies in biography"--alas! too few--," and follows this admission of Stevenson's originality with his astonishing pronouncement that "Stevenson is the most extraordinary mimic that has ever appeared in literature. That is the reason why he has been so praised for his style" Speaking of "South Seas" [sic: The actual title is In the South Seas], he calls it "a book he could not write because he had no paradime [sic] and original to copy from"; speaking of Stevenson's ability: "Whether or not there was some obscure connection between his bodily troubles and the arrest of his intellectual development, it is certain that he remained a boy till the day of his death."

"The vice of Stevenson's theories about art" is the next target. According to Mr. Chapman's interpretation, Mr. Stevenson never sought to tell the truth but always contrived to produce an effect, and "It is only when a man is saying something that he believes is obviously and eternally true, that he can communicate spiritual things." After a long and arduous tirade about Stevenson's insincerity, Mr. Chapman concluded his essay with the statement: "Whatever his artistic doctrines, he revealed his spiritual nature in his work. It was this nature which made him thus beloved."⁶³ How can a completely insincere man reveal his "spiritual nature"?

Mr. Chapman's article was published in a periodical between

⁶³Ibid, p. 247.

1894 and 1898, and was included in an anthology of Chapman's works in 1898 and a revised edition in 1909.⁶⁴

C. E. M. Joad in 1925 contradicted himself completely in reference to Stevenson: In one article, he praised Stevenson's works lavishly: "Stevenson was a particularly charming man There have been few so eminently sensible Of the books of adventure I have no space to write, except to say how good they are . . . the delight and relaxations of sages."⁶⁵ In a subsequent article, according to J. C. Furnas, Joad was using Stevenson as a "deplorable example for ' . . . How to Write Badly'" (p. 444). Possibly in the interim between the earlier and later article Joad had been influenced by the general trend.

Also in 1925 E. F. Benson viciously attacked Stevenson, the man, in a fourteen page tirade before adding in the same tone that Stevenson was also a "sedulous ape" who never acquired a style of his own. Benson declared that Stevenson was merely a callous ingrate who had to be the object of attention at all times and even at the cost of lying.⁶⁶ Again, since he combined biographical and critical comments in a personally antagonistic tone, it would seem that he had been influenced by biographers.

⁶⁴ It is unfortunate that this essay by Mr. Chapman is included in a volume of his works; his works were usually more scholarly than this sample indicates.

⁶⁵ "R. L. Stevenson," The Bookmark (London, 1925), p. 73.

⁶⁶ The London Mercury (June, 1925), XII, pp. 468-483.

In 1920 George Sampson wrote an essay in defense both of Stevenson's method of learning to write and his works; then in 1947 he issued an alleged "reprint" which was so altered in tone that it scarcely resembles the original.

Before proceeding with a comparison of Sampson's essay and the "reprint," this writer wishes to state that the purpose of the following material is to show that adverse criticism of Stevenson's works continued to evince a personal feeling of antagonism toward the man, himself, as this century advanced. Mr. Sampson's essays show that even the most distinguished scholars eventually became emotionally involved as a result of the early panegyric and the later "debunking" trend.

In the original 1920 version of the essay, "On Playing the Sedulous Ape," Sampson clearly sustained his point of view throughout the paper; his defense and support were unwavering.⁶⁷ He began by naming the charges that the critics had made against Stevenson's works: "With the unanimity that is always wonderful they have found it unoriginal, unnatural, and imitative, and they have even drawn a moral from its defects How is it, we may ask, that critics, examining the prose of a varied and prolific writer, are able to say with confidence, and with frequency enough to make their views 'a commonplace', that it is not natural, that it lacks originality, that it is a mosaic, a pasticcio, that it is not his own, and so forth?" He answered his

⁶⁷Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association (Oxford, 1920, VI, 67-87).

own question by saying that they know only what Stevenson told them and suggested that they had not correctly interpreted what they knew. Mr. Sampson then produced one thesis after another, and offered convincing evidence in support of each; he declared that "Genius can turn all things to its own growth; talent can only reproduce on a lessened scale Stevenson nowhere hints that he laboured to cultivate an affectation or imitate a manner. What he really does tell us, in that much quoted essay, is that he took immense pains with his writing in the days of his youth when it is so hard to be simple, so unnatural to be natural The value of prose or verse bears no relation whatever to the ease or difficulty of production." He then discussed Tolstoy's and Newman's difficulties; comparing Newman's and Stevenson's confessed adoption of models, he says that Newman's position may be worse because Newman used only one model while Stevenson used dozens.

"A speaker can imitate the clearness of another man's utterance without imitating his voice; and the grubby boy can imitate the cleanness of the model boy's face without imitating his features." Mr. Sampson compared Stevenson's care with style to that of great musicians; he noted that Beethoven took great pains to write into his music exactly what he meant to say.

Mr. Sampson continued his defense by using Stevenson's works for proof: "Almost the only qualities that cannot be sustained by imitation are humour, lovability, and gaiety. It is easier for imitation saintliness to carry a rogue into the Calendar than for

imitation humour to carry a dull fellow into the hearts of his readers All the experience of years cannot imitate the exuberance of youth."

As for style, "What do we mean by 'natural' and 'his own'? Something is 'his' precisely because it is not 'mine'. A natural style is a style natural to the writer, however unnatural it may be to the critic."

Mr. Sampson concluded his defense with the reminder that the Bible of 1611 and the Shakespeare of 1623 have no equals; that "neither our reading nor our writing must be the kind that makes us degenerate guardian of a great inheritance"; that Stevenson's influence should be welcomed, not disparaged, for "Stevenson is both exquisite and popular, with a public that ranges from the elementary schoolboy to the grave and fastidious scholar"; that all should beware "how we depreciate Stevenson's most valuable legacy, . . . and beware of exalting slipshod negligence and disparaging patient effort. To be humble as well as courageous, to scan our faults and failures and strive hopefully for the excellence of our betters is good religion and sound art."

Mr. Sampson's point of view was sustained throughout his essay; every page reinforced his stand: that the style and content of Stevenson's work was excellent.

Twenty-seven years later, in 1947, the essay was "reprinted" in a collection of Sampson's writings, and the "reprint" has little resemblance to the original; actually, the second essay is ambiguous

as to both intent and point of view; and Mr. Sampson does not acknowledge a change in his point of view or in the essay.⁶⁸

In defending Stevenson in the original, he stated that Stevenson's style was unusual, then added, "But then Stevenson himself was a very unusual person, with his velvet coat and his exorbitant locks. It is quite legitimate to dislike both an unusual personal style and an unusual literary style as too mannered and pronounced for good taste; but academic criticism of Stevenson does not take this line."

The "reprint" at this point clearly starts a complete reverse: "But then Stevenson himself was an unusual person, with his velvet coat and his exorbitant locks. He was excessive; he showed off; he wrote too much about himself and his literary exertions. What appears odd is that his earliest writings have the same manner as the latest--odd, because if he had successfully played the sedulous ape to many authors, there must have been evidence of imitation in his first essays. The contributions to the Edinburgh University Magazine during 1871 exhibit no trace of the discipline he claimed to have undergone; what they do exhibit is a young writer with little to say and a forced manner of saying it." At this stage, the attitude is so completely altered that it could be suspected that Mr. Sampson had discovered Dr. Jekyll's formula and imbibed thereof. He continues with samples of Stevenson's works, written at the beginning, the middle, and the end.

⁶⁸Seven Essays (Cambridge, 1947), pp. 69-94.

of his life; then the same author who in the original cried, "Let us beware, then, how we depreciate Stevenson's most valuable legacy," now advises, "If we are to play the sedulous ape, let it not be to prose like this, even if this is the style he was then but on the point of acquiring, a style perfectly natural, free and his own!" He adds the charge that Stevenson's confessions in 'A College Magazine' were "quite obviously exaggerations meant to make an impressive display. See what a clever boy was I!"

The above samples of the adversely critical articles dealing with Stevenson reinforce the observations of Commins, Chesterton, Sterne, and Furnas, who said that early posthumous glorification resulted in a revolt against Stevenson which led to personal criticism of both the man and his works: Chapman refers slightly to his essays as "railleries or sermons" by "the most extraordinary mimic that has ever appeared in literature"; Sampson emphasized his conceit: "He was excessive; he showed off," and "See what a clever boy was I!" Benson published a combination of biographical and critical malice, and both Joad and Sampson wrote papers of entirely different attitudes without acknowledging a change in attitude. Sampson went so far as to publish both of his papers under the same title. These facts would give reason to believe that Joad and Sampson were either insincere or following a trend; and certainly Chapman, Benson, and Sampson evinced a personal animosity in their essays. Mr. Chapman's paper, in particular, appears to have been written with little authority since

it contains much erroneous information and several incorrect titles. One does not get the impression that Mr. Chapman had actually read Stevenson's works.

Anyone even vaguely familiar with Stevenson's works would have recognized the invalidity of many of the statements in the above three essays. However, many of those not familiar with his works would undoubtedly have developed a negative attitude toward Stevenson on reading these essays and other similar ones; it is a strange phenomenon in human society that accusation of an ignoble act is often as stigmatizing as proof of the deed, regardless of the source of the accusation.

Stevenson's reputation, then, has been hampered by the fact that he is ranked with Victorian authors; by the fact that biographers, both the early shrine builders and the later wreckers, continually focused attention on Stevenson's deeds rather than his works; and by the fact that the emotional reaction to early idolizing biographers extended to critics as well as debunking biographers. These three factors partially account for the fact that the value of Stevenson's contributions to English literature remains an unsettled issue.

CHAPTER IV

A fourth factor continues to injure Stevenson's reputation: the continued use, out of context, of his statement which begins, "I have thus played the sedulous ape." It appears that writers feel compelled to include this statement even though they may be writing only a short paragraph or two. Max Beerbohm, already weary of the repetitions almost half a century ago, said that it was quoted so frequently that it must be kept permanently set up in type in printers' offices (Chesterton, p. 141). Used out of context, the statement implies that Stevenson always laboriously copied other authors' styles. Chapman had that erroneous impression: He said that Stevenson was merely a mimic and that his very last work was a failure because he had no original to imitate (p. 274). Apparently Chapman believed that Stevenson had used a model for each of his works except the last. Frank Swinnerton, thirteen years later, echoed the charge. Of course Stevenson was an imitator, he said: "We can find his originals in Wilkie Collins, in Scott, in Mayne Reid, in Montaigne, Hazlitt, Defoe, Sterne, and in many others. No need for him to cleverly admit it: The fact is patent" (p. 190). Swinnerton had earlier stated that Hazlitt's influence on Stevenson was greatest when Stevenson was thirty-two years old (p. 74).

E. F. Benson said in 1925: "He dug in a soil that was not native to him, and built with bricks that had been kilned elsewhere. In his own words 'he played the sedulous ape' to Hazlitt and others,

and by dint of an indefatigable industry that never quite evolved instinct out of imitation, he acquired the note which he always found hard to hold." After the above statement, Benson twice used the term "sedulous ape" in reference to Stevenson: "There is the sedulous ape writing"; and, speaking of Stevenson's characters, "the sedulous ape mouths from their astonished lips (pp. 282-283)." G. B. Sterne said that the "sedulous ape" statement, quoted out of context, has been persistently used to deny Stevenson any claim to originality (p. 14). It should be noted that Swinnerton did not distinguish between Stevenson's style and content.

The following material, consisting of four parts, will show that Stevenson was, in fact, creative and original; therefore, that his "confession" has been slanderously used for half a century and more to stamp indelibly on the minds of three generations the contemptible brand, "Robert Louis Stevenson, Sedulous Ape."

Part one of this section includes a large portion of the "sedulous ape" essay and a discussion of the usual positive reaction to other authors' uses of models; part two emphasizes the fact of his extreme youth at the time of his apprenticeship; part three is a new interpretation of the essay, and part four shows, through evidence of his own influence, that he did not offer imitations as original works: his plots, characters, and style are original.

Carefully chosen excerpts are often unsatisfactory because the analytic reader is understandably suspicious of partial pictures or

passages; therefore, less significant statements in the "sedulous ape" essay are summarized while the most damning sections are quoted in full in order to enable the reader to form his own conclusions. A second reason for including long passages is that this particular essay is currently included only in complete sets of Stevenson's works; therefore, it is not as generally available as his better known, though less often quoted, essays. The statement is taken from Part One of the essay "A College Magazine," which is included in Memories and Portraits (Works, XIII, 211-215).

In the first paragraph of the essay Stevenson described his early efforts to learn to write: He would go for walks and write descriptions of the countryside in his notebook; and he would attempt to write conversations from memory. He lived with words, and practiced consistently, "as men learn to whittle." In the second paragraph Stevenson said that he sometimes tried to keep a diary as part of his training. These three types of training, he thought, taught him "the lower and less intellectual elements of the art, the choice of the essential note and the right word." He felt, however, that this type of training had the serious defect of not setting a standard of achievement for him. This standard was provided in his further effort, his fourth method of self-training:

Whenever I read a book or a passage that particularly pleased me, in which a thing was said or an effect rendered with propriety, in which there was either some conspicuous force or some happy distinction in the style, I must sit down at once and set myself to ape that quality. I was unsuccessful, and I

knew it; and tried again, and was again unsuccessful and always unsuccessful; but at least in these vain bouts, I got some practice in rhythm, in harmony, in construction, and the co-ordination of parts. I have thus played the sedulous ape to Hazlitt, to Lamb, to Wordsworth, to Sir Thomas Browne, to Defoe, to Hawthorne, to Montaigne, to Baudelaire and to Obermann. I remember one of these monkey tricks which was called The Vanity of Morals; it was to have had a second part, The Vanity of Knowledge; and as I had neither morality nor scholarship, the names were apt; but the second part was never attempted, and the first part was written (which is my reason for recalling it, ghost-like, from its ashes) no less than three times: first in the manner of Hazlitt, second in the manner of Ruskin, who had cast on me a passing spell, and third, in a laborious pasticcio of Sir Thomas Browne. So with my other works: Cain, an epic, was (save the mark!) an imitation of Sordello: Robin Hood, a tale in verse, took an eclectic middle course among the fields of Keats, Chaucer and Morris: In Mommouth, a tragedy, I reclined on the bosom of Mr. Swinburne; in my innumerable gouty-footed lyrics, I followed many masters; in the first draft of The King's Pardon, a tragedy, I was on the trail of no lesser man than John Webster; in the second draft of the same piece, with staggering versatility, I had shifted my allegiance to Congreve, and of course conceived my fable in a less serious vein--for it was not Congreve's verse, it was his exquisite prose, that I admired and sought to copy. Even at the age of thirteen I had tried to do justice to the inhabitants of the famous city of Peebles in the style of the Book of Snobs. So I might go on forever, through all my abortive novels, and down to my later plays, of which I think more tenderly, for they were not only conceived at first under the bracing influence of old Dumas, but have met with resurrections: one, strangely bettered by another hand, came on the stage itself and was played by bodily actors; the other, originally known as Semiramis: a Tragedy, I have observed on bookstalls under the alias of Prince Otto. But enough has been said to show by what arts of impersonation, and in what purely ventriloquial efforts I first saw my words on paper.

The above paragraph is Stevenson's famous confession. For a complete evaluation of the entire paper, it seems appropriate to summarize the two remaining paragraphs of the essay.

He began paragraph three with the statement: "That, like it

or not, is the way to learn to write; whether I have profited or not, that is the way." After this rather point-blank opening, he further declared that all men have learned to write in this manner. "Perhaps," he continued, "I hear some one cry out: But this is not the way to be original! It is not; nor is there any way but to be born so. Nor yet, if you are born original, is there anything in this training that shall clip the wings of your originality." His defense of this type of training is at the end of the paragraph:

Before he can tell what cadences he truly prefers, the student should have tried all that are possible; before he can choose and preserve a fitting key of words, he should long have practised the literary scales; and it is only after years of such gymnastic that he can sit down at last, legions of words swarming to his call, dozens of turns of phrase simultaneously bidding for his choice, and he, himself knowing what he wants to do and (within the narrow limit of a man's ability) able to do it.

He concluded in paragraph four by declaring that the apprentice writer is certain to fail in his efforts to write as well as his imitable model. He added that he "clear-sightedly condemned" his own performances and rarely showed them to anyone. He laughingly recalled that one friend called his work "Padding" and that another wrote: "I cannot understand why you do lyrics so badly." He added that on three occasions he submitted papers to a magazine only to have them returned; this statement led to the second section of the essay in which he described a magazine which he and three of his classmates founded.

At least four aspects of Stevenson's famous "sedulous ape" essay should be considered before judgment is passed: One, a majority of the great authors have learned to write by the same method, though in most cases they have used far fewer models; two, Stevenson plainly stated that he was writing only of an apprenticeship which he had served at a surprisingly young age; three, the paper is a testimonial of two of Stevenson's most admirable traits, his humility and lasting gratitude for any help or inspiration that he had received in his life; and four, he was not merely a "sedulous" imitator since his style of writing was uniquely his own; evidence of his influence on subsequent writers offers proof of his originality.

The first point to be settled is whether or not Stevenson's early attempts to learn to write were praiseworthy or ignoble. After surveying the gamut from Chaucer to Graham Greene, one has the very clear impression that to "be influenced by" or to "use as a model" is praiseworthy, but to "play the sedulous ape" is downright villainous. Everyone knows that the majority of great writers have used the works of their predecessors as touchstones during their early efforts to learn to write: both Chaucer and Spenser used Italian models; Milton used Spenser as a model; Browning chose Shelley, Shakespeare and Donne; Keats relied on Shakespeare and Milton. The sources of authors' models are often reported as matter-of-factly as the names of their wives; and sometimes authors are praised for their choices of models.

According to Frank Aydelotte, the mere facts of the desire to

write and the imitation of models do not produce authors, anyway. He explained that Stevenson's style was not the result of imitation; if so, why were colleges which used the imitation theory not turning out students who were able to write? He said: "I have heard of a big sophomore composition class at Harvard which finally came to the point where they would stamp whenever Stevenson's name was mentioned, as at the mention of the ladies or of Yale.⁶⁹ He added that whereas they imitated to the extent of stamping their feet, they did not produce literature.

Whether or not Stevenson's ultimate style was influenced by the scores of models whom he named, the "sedulous ape" statement should be qualified when it is repeated. Contemporary writers should at least say that Stevenson, like Chaucer, Spenser, Montaigne, and other authors, used models when he was very young; this statement would be more courteous and less misleading than the statement used out of context.

The following statement would be apparent to anyone who would read the entire "sedulous ape" essay or another of Stevenson's essays entitled "Books Which Have Influenced Me": He stands alone in his courteous, humble acknowledgement and gratitude for any help or inspiration, literary or otherwise, that he had received from any source in his life.

Stevenson said, "I played the sedulous ape," and then in three

⁶⁹"RLS: Darkening Counsel," The Oxford Stamp (New York, 1917), p. 154.

pages named at least seventeen authors whom he had "aped". In other essays, he continually added to his list of those who had influenced him: Whitman: "I had written another paper full of gratitude for the help that had been given me in my life;" Thoreau: "I have scarce written ten sentences since I was introduced to him, but his influence might be detected by a close observer."⁷⁰ An aside to put in a work of admiration for someone else is a typical aspect of his writing: After quoting Hazlitt he said, "I should like to quote more, for though we are fine fellows nowadays, we cannot write like Hazlitt."⁷¹

His gratitude did not end with praise of the exquisite style achieved by others; it extended to a confession of his sense of indebtedness for their influence in other respects: "Shakespeare has served me best. Few living friends have had upon me an influence so strong for good as Hamlet or Rosalind; Whitman's Leaves of Grass was a "book which tumbled the world upside down for me [and] blew into space a thousand cobwebs of genteel and ethical illusion, and, having thus shaken my tabernacle of lies, set me back again upon a strong foundation. I should be much of a hound if I lost my gratitude to Herbert Spencer."⁷² One might go on and on with similar confessions.

Stevenson publicly acknowledged any indebtedness to the living

⁷⁰"Preface, by Way of Criticism," Familiar Studies of Men and Books, intro. G. B. Sterne (New York, 1956), p. 28.

⁷¹"Walking Tours," A Book of English Essays, ed. W. E. Williams (Baltimore, 1957), p. 190.

⁷²"Books Which Have Influenced Me," Scott-Moncrieff, pp. 89-90.

or dead; he was instinctively courteous. Aydelotte said that his literary consciousness was a form of courtesy, a consideration for his readers: "It is a form of humility and has the loveliness of that virtue."⁷³ A man should not be condemned for good manners. Therefore, a fair introduction to Stevenson should state that he used models when he was young as did Chaucer and others, and that he had the unusual courtesy to acknowledge his debt to his predecessors.

A third factor which should be emphasized is that Stevenson was amazingly young when he was attempting to acquire a style. He plainly reported this fact three times in the damning "sedulous ape" essay: the opening statement is "All through my boyhood and youth"; his attempt to write in Congreve's style, he said, failed when he was thirteen years old; the three manuscripts which he submitted during this period, he added, were rejected. The entire first part of the essay is a discussion of his early attempts to write; he wrote this first part as an introduction. Part two of the paper is a discussion of his eventual success, his work with three of his classmates in founding a college magazine in which he finally was able to see his work in print. Virtually all biographies reinforce this most important fact: that Stevenson at the age of six first decided to become a writer, and he actually was a novice author before he could read or write.

⁷³Aydelotte, p. 155.

At the age of six, he dictated lives of Moses and Joseph and some adventure stories to his mother. He enjoyed telling pirate stories and "creepers" to his friends and often frightened himself with his stories.⁷⁴ After he learned to read and write he would bind stories together and charge a fee of a penny for reading them.⁷⁵ One group of four stories, printed when he was eleven, was entitled The Schoolboy's Magazine; it included "Jan Van Steen's Adventures," "The Shipwreckers," "A Ghost Story," and "Creek Island or Adventures of the South Seas."⁷⁶ The latter title is almost prophetic, since his last home in the South Seas was called Vailima, the Samoan word for Five Waters, because of the "creeks" on it. He was carrying one book to read from and another to write in by the time he was eleven and had entered Edinburgh Academy.⁷⁷ At fifteen he wrote a long romance called Rathillet and a second long story in which he used a historically accurate account of the Pentland rebellion of 1666 as background. His father asked him to omit the fiction and rewrite the latter narrative as history. Louis obliged, and his father had one hundred copies of the story printed and bound to celebrate his

⁷⁴Eulalie Osgood Grover, Robert Louis Stevenson: Teller of Tales (New York, 1960), pp. 17, 18.

⁷⁵Malcolm Elwin, The Strange Case of Robert Louis Stevenson (London, 1950), p. 32.

⁷⁶Grover, p. 40.

⁷⁷Ibid, pp. 42, 46, 47.

son's sixteenth birthday.⁷⁸ This essay amounts to twenty-two pages in the volume Familiar Studies of Men and Books. Furnas said that this early paper, "The Pentland Rising," though not a finished product, sounds more like the work of a "clumsy and superficial scholar of thirty than that of a gangling boy, just reaching his full height."⁷⁹ David Daiches said that Stevenson's early style is a pasticcio of earlier styles and that single sentences remind him of Browne or Lamb; but he felt that the overall effect was Stevenson's own (p. 154). A short excerpt of "The Pentland Rising" shows that, as Furnas indicates, the young author had acquired an awareness of the fundamentals of writing. After introducing an old minister through whose eyes the scene is to be viewed, he began:

With colours flying and with music sounding, Dalzell victorious entered Edinburgh. But his banners were dyed in blood, and a band of prisoners were marched within his ranks. The old man knew it all. That martial and triumphant strain was the death-knell of his friends and of their cause. The rust-hued spots upon the flags were the tokens of their courage and their death, and the prisoners were the miserable remnant spared from death in battle to die on the scaffold. Poor old man! he had outlived all joy. Had he lived longer he would have seen the clouds, then but gathering in mist, cast a more than midnight darkness o'er his native hills, and have fallen a victim to those bloody persecutions which, later, sent their red memorials to the sea by many a burn. By merciful Providence, all this was spared to him--he fell beneath the first blow: and ere four days had passed since Rullion Green, the aged minister of God was gathered to his fathers.

The above passage indicates that Stevenson was, at the age of fifteen, using various sentence structures to produce an overall effect.

⁷⁸Elwin, pp. 32, 33.

⁷⁹Furnas, p. 32.

Daiches, discussing the style of Travels with a Donkey, which was published about thirteen years after "The Pentland Rising," described certain aspects of Stevenson's style which can be detected in the above earlier passage; he described the style as having "sentences of one clause deftly interpolated between longer sentences of two or three clauses of which the third and longest falls away in a pleasing cadence."⁸⁰ He compared the overall effect to that of a tide rising, growing in intensity, and then gradually receding back into the whole. Both of these observations seem applicable to the above passage; it also seems that this effect is produced not only by the sentence pattern but also by the distribution of subject matter: One proceeds from an introduction to the old minister to a view of the pageant; the situation is intensified with a quick summary of the scene by the old man: that his friends and their cause are dead, and that the few remaining are also going to die. The tide begins to recede with the old man's defeated attitude, and is quiet at his death.

The above passage anticipates the much later essay style which Stevenson perfected, which is original and can be recognized in the works of writers whom he influenced.

The sense of rising and falling discussed by Daiches is not always achieved with identical structural patterns; however, the emphasis or intensity of tone achieved by distribution of subject

⁸⁰Robert Louis Stevenson (A Revaluation), (Norfolk, Conn., 1947), pp. 151, 52.

matter always seems to appear at the half-way portion of paragraphs. A passage from "The Lantern Bearers," written when Stevenson was thirty-eight, shows that later he used the same form but had acquired certain sutleties not evident in his earlier writing:

For to miss the joy is to miss all. In the joy of the actors lies the sense of any action. That is the explanation, that the excuse. To one who has not the secret of the lanterns, the scene upon the links is meaningless. And hence the haunting and truly spectral unreality of realistic books. Hence, when we read the English realists, the incredulous wonder with which we observe the hero's constancy under the submerging tide of dullness, and how he bears up with his jibbing sweetheart, and endures the chatter of idiot girls, and stands by his whole unfeatured wilderness of an existence, instead of seeking relief in drink or foreign travel. Hence in the French, in that meat-market of middle-aged sensuality, the disgusted surprise with which we see the hero drift sidelong, and practically quite untempted, into every description of misconduct and dishonor. In each, we miss the personal poetry, the enchanted atmosphere, that rainbow work of fancy that clothes what is naked and seems to ennoble what is base; in each, life falls dead like dough, instead of soaring away like a balloon into the colours of the sunset; each is true, each inconceivable; for no man lives in the external truth, among salts and acids, but in the warm, phantasmagoric chamber of his brain, with the painted windows and the storied walls. (Works XIV, pp. 247, 248).

In the above passage, the two sentences beginning with the word "Hence" seem to represent the most intense surge of words and tone after a gradual rising. The sentence which begins "In each" seems to mark the beginning of the receding.

In comparing these samples, one can observe in each a structural pattern which involves both subject matter and sentence variety used for an overall effect. This fact indicates that Stevenson had acquired the rudiments of his final essay style at the age of

fifteen, a style which Saintsbury called "original" on reading Stevenson's earliest travel books.

The preceding section has shown that Stevenson's "sedulous ape" statement is grossly misleading when used out of context. The entire essay, as Aydelotte observed, is merely a chronicle of the thoroughness and vast extent of his reading and his acquisition of the mechanics of writing (p. 154). It has been shown that other authors are praised for their choices of models while Stevenson is condemned; that Stevenson was writing of an apprenticeship which took place when he was very young, and that at the remarkably young age of fifteen he had acquired the rudiments of the style which he later perfected. Chesterton declares that the words "sedulous ape" are repeated so often because they are so highly original. The explanation seems logical (p. 141).

Authors of introductions should acquaint the public with the fact of Stevenson's youth during his apprenticeship; otherwise, they do not present a true picture. They might well add that he has been unjustly maligned because of his honesty and courtesy in paying due respect to his models. It would be difficult to name another author in the entire history of English literature who has been subjected to as much invective because of his integrity. The "sedulous ape" statement used out of context intimates that Stevenson attempted to acquire for his own use the style of other writers. To use a statement

out of context against an author amounts to libel.

The following section offers evidence that Stevenson's works were original. Opinions of Stevenson's contemporaries as well as those of current critics regarding his originality and his influence on subsequent authors are included.

George Saintsbury recognized Stevenson's originality in his earliest works, declaring that his first four volumes showed "a strong originality, a pleasant humour, and a great faculty of enjoyment."⁸¹ Chesterton declared that in New Arabian Nights Stevenson created a genre so original that those who have not read this work have not sampled all of the possibilities of English literature (p. 168). Furnas said that if Stevenson's style were mere imitation, lacking quality peculiar to itself, it could not be so clearly identified when imitated. "Why does not the reader sensing imitation think rather of Hazlitt, Browne, or Bunyan, instead of Stevenson?" he said.⁸² Apparently, an author is considered original if his style has qualities that resemble no other work and particularly if this method can be recognized in subsequent works. Stevenson, therefore, was original: He has had many imitators.

Furnas declared that Frank Swinnerton in his well-known study of Stevenson was writing what was "identifiable yards away as watered-down Stevenson and nothing else." Sampson reported that Chesterton's

⁸¹A Short History of English Literature (New York, 1898), p. 756.

⁸²Voyage to Windard (New York, 1951, p. 443).

style was patterned after Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and New Arabian Nights (Concise Cambridge History, p. 1000).

Bradford Booth has stated that Henry James was one of Stevenson's disciples: "Primarily, James's achievement lies in establishing a restricted and unshifting point of view. Stevenson, who had attacked Scott's 'ill-written, ragged' romances and Dickens's omniscient point of view in undramatic moments, attempted to rekindle an old fire by clever handicraft. Henry James picked up Stevenson's technique with the narrative of action and adapted it to the narrative of psychological investigation."⁸³

G. B. Sterne mentioned his influence on Barrie and Quiller-Couch, and added: "The books of Graham Greene, a descendant on the distaff side from Stevenson's grandfather, the Reverend Lewis Balfour of Colinton Manse, reveal a startling blood affinity with his kinsman's darker, more ruthless tales, to be noticed particularly if we re-read The Ebb-Tide and compare them."⁸⁴ And: "Housman's elegy must have blended gratitude with sorrow, for it is startling how closely he derived many cadences in his Shropshire Lad from Stevenson's unpretentious lyric 'The Canoe Speaks!'; Stevenson wrote:

The brooding boy, the sighing maid,
Wholly fain and half afraid,
Now meet along the hazel'd brook,
To pass and linger, pause and look . . .

⁸³Reinterpretation, pp. 94-95.

⁸⁴Sterne, p. 12.

And he to her a hero is.
And sweeter she than primroses--⁸⁵

Another author recently observed similarities in Stevenson and T. S. Eliot: Professor Abel, in his paper "R. L. S. and 'Prufrock'" says: "Resemblances in theme, treatment, and expression suggest that T. S. Eliot's 'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' contains reminiscences of R. L. S.'s 'Crabbed Age and Youth.' The theme of both is that the wisdom of age is merely prudential--a husbanding of life at the expense of living A man who grows old without vital experiences is, to both Eliot and Stevenson, too little forceful and dignified to be tragic." After comparing Stevenson's portrait of "crabbed age" to Prufrock, he compares the marine figures in both:

In both the land is a symbol of safety and inane living, and the sea is a symbol of perilous but vital adventuring. Mermaid voices entice the timid person to leave his safe and terrene monotony. Stevenson, remarking that not to venture is true rashness, since, in banal phrase, we only live once (so life is finally a fatal adventure in any case), says: 'We have heard the mermaids singing, and know that we shall never see dry land any more.' And Eliot, expressing in a seductive vision of mermaids Prufrock's longing for vital adventures, has Prufrock muse, 'I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.' Images of drowning, as a kind of exciting overwhelming of the man who finally dares, occur in both the poem and essay.⁸⁶

Professor Wagenknecht says that Stevenson's influence has been enormous. Both he and Professor Chew discuss the indebtedness

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 14.

⁸⁶ Darrel Abel, "R. L. S. and 'Prufrock,'" Notes and Queries, CXCVIII (Jan., 1953), pp. 37-38.

⁸⁷ Edward D. Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the English Novel (New York, 1954), p. 385.

of the entire Kailyard School to Stevenson. Mr. Wagenknecht particularly mentions Barrie, S. R. Crockett, and Ian Maclaren as having been disciples of Stevenson and adds that probably few romancers who followed Stevenson have ignored his example. Professor Chew feels that Neil Munro, of all the Kailyarders, owed most to Stevenson, especially in regard to motive and analysis of character.⁸⁸

In view of the substantial evidence of Stevenson's influence on various writers, and in view of the fact that this influence has been recognized and reported by numerous scholars, there can be no validity to the accusation that he was merely an imitative writer. While he declared that he had imitated dozens of authors, he carefully explained that this painstaking activity took place when he was very young. Excerpts from "The Pentland Rising," written when he was fifteen, show that he had learned many of the fundamentals of writing at a very young age. The continued repetition of his "sedulous ape" statement, out of context, is a misrepresentation.

Stevenson's influence does not end with individual authors: David Daiches, Walter Allen, and others credit him for helping to establish the standards for the modern novel. Walter Allen declares that Stevenson actually created the novel of adventure as we know it and that his work set the standard for subsequent authors such as Graham Greene.⁸⁹

⁸⁸A Literary History of England, pp. 1500-1501.

⁸⁹The English Novel: A Short Critical History (New York, 1954), p. 385.

Daiches says that Stevenson's "A Humble Remonstrance" was a valuable contribution to the late nineteenth century evaluation of the nature of fiction on which the bases of modern criticism of the novel were founded.⁹⁰ It is most important to recognize the extent to which Stevenson's ideas have influenced modern fiction, keeping in mind that no mere imitative writer could possibly set standards which have been followed for more than half a century. Since, as Daiches says, Stevenson's part in the nineteenth century discussion of the qualities demanded of good fiction is all but forgotten, a review of the three essays by Walter Besant, Henry James, and Stevenson, which comprise the discussion, will recall Stevenson's most important role in establishing modern standards.⁹¹

Besant, in "The Art of Fiction," stated that the writing of fiction should be considered one of the fine arts. He reasoned that fiction is one of the oldest arts and that in creating fiction one must abide by rules just as exacting as the rules for painting or creating musical compositions. He then discussed the qualities which he considered essential to good fiction: human interest, the artistic use of gesture and atmosphere, and a moral. His rules of the art were: to create believable characters, to economically select only pertinent description of characters and scenery, to use only characters which

⁹⁰Robert Louis Stevenson, ed. David Daiches (New York, 1959), p. 10.

⁹¹Leslie Fiedler, The Art of the Essay (New York, 1958), pp. 506-544, passim.

one can fully envision and attempt to portray them through their words and deeds; and after the character and setting are established, to provide a plot with incident and emotional scenes.

James read Besant's paper, and answered with his own ideas on the subject of fiction; he also titled his essay "The Art of Fiction." Whereas he agreed with Besant's ideas concerning the portrayal of character and setting, he firmly disagreed that one can say beforehand what constitutes a good novel; rather, in his opinion, the only demand which one can make is that the novel be interesting; the only good reason for the existence of a novel is that it makes an attempt to represent life. James also disagreed with Besant's belief concerning the necessity of incident in the plot: According to James, psychological incident is sufficient action, and physical incident need not necessarily be used. As an example of his stand, James compared Treasure Island with Cherie, a psychological study of a little girl, and declared that both contain action and both are novels.

James further declared that a novel should be an exact reproduction of reality, and that its worth could be measured by the extent to which it succeeded in producing reality. This is the point on which Stevenson strongly disagreed in his answer to both Besant and James which he called "A Humble Remonstrance."

Stevenson felt that the subject under discussion should be considered a discussion of "fictitious narrative in prose" because fiction is involved in every art with the exception of architecture;

it could not merely be called the art of narrative because non-fictional works are wrought with many of the techniques of fiction. After this qualification of the matter under discussion, Stevenson declared that art cannot successfully compete with life because life is so cluttered with complications. Art, in his opinion, should be simplification:

From all its chapters, from all its pages, from all its sentences, the well-written novel echoes and re-echoes its one creative and controlling thought; to this must every incident and character contribute; the style must have been pitched in unison with this; and if there is anywhere a word which looks the other way, the book would be stronger, clearer, and (I had almost said) fuller without it. Life is monstrous, infinite, illogical, abrupt and poignant; a work of art, in comparison, is neat, finite, self-contained, rational, flowing and emasculate.⁹²

Stevenson places novels into three separate categories: the novel of adventure, the novel of character, and the dramatic novel. He claims that the chief criterion of the novel of adventure is that it submerge one, that it act as an escape into another dimension for the reader. This, of course, would include a certain ability of the writer to convince his reader temporarily.

The novel of character is different from others in that no coherency of plot is required. He cites Gil Blas as an example of this type of novel which "turns on the humours of the persons represented." Incidents are involved in this type of novel, but they

⁹²Ibid, p. 540

need not be progressive, one evolving from the other.

The dramatic novel consists of passion, a progressive passion. The plot must depict situations in which duty and inclination conflict, and the characters must be transformed by passion before the story ends and the conflict is resolved.

Besant declared that an author must restrict his subject matter to the extent that the subject include only replicas of the writers experience: A middle class author should not attempt to depict a person of high rank; and he must be certain that his characters' dialogue be authentic, a true representation of the dialect of his setting. James agreed. Stevenson disagreed with the experience theory: He declared that an artist much more forcefully writes of things which he has wished to do, and uses, as did James, the example of Treasure Island, which he had only wished to experience.

Stevenson further disagreed with both Besant and James concerning the necessity of a moral in every novel. Stevenson said: "To add more traits, to be too clever, to start the hare of moral or intellectual interest while we are running the fox of material interest, is not to enrich but to stultify your tale." He was referring, still, to the novel of adventure.

Stevenson considered James's Author of Beltraffo a novel of character, and mentioned that the strong passion which was employed was not displayed but kept behind closed doors. In the dramatic novel the passion must be exposed: "Passion is the be-all and the end-all,

the plot and the solution, the protagonist and the deus ex machina in one."⁹³

It should be remembered (though, as Fiedler says, it is sometimes hard to remember), that at the time of the above discussions Stevenson was probably the better known of the three authors, certainly better established as an author than James. It should also be remembered that James regarded Stevenson as the only Anglo-Saxon who could possibly perceive what he was attempting to do in his work. Since he so greatly admired Stevenson's style, it is perfectly natural that he would, in his own work, adopt some of Stevenson's methods, as Bradford Booth indicated.

Fortunately for James, he outlived the Victorian age; his life was not so romantic as to attract legions of biographers to write about him instead of his works and, in their passion, mold, melt, and remold his image; fortunately, he did not discuss his attempts to learn to master his art and, as did Stevenson, provide critics with a cliché with which to dismiss him. James today is the model for all writers of fiction, according to Fiedler; The Ambassadors is for young writers a supreme example of technique and execution. The fact that James was influenced by Stevenson should not be ignored. David Daiches, Janet Smith, Furnas, and others support this view.

The above section has demonstrated that Stevenson's influence

⁹³Ibid, p. 543

has been recognized in the works of later writers. This fact alone should be proof enough of his originality. That his influence was not limited to individual authors but extended to the whole field of fiction further emphasizes his originality.

Stevenson was always concerned with developing techniques in writing. He realized that the craft of writing, like the craft of painting, must be learned by practice; one must write badly for a time before he can write well. As Hamilton said, "genius" for Stevenson was merely a definition of the aptitude to learn.⁹⁴ To James, Stevenson was a man of genius, and he used the term often when referring to Stevenson's talent. James said: "His special stock of association, most personal style and most unteachable trick fly away again to him like so many strayed birds to nest."⁹⁵

If it could not be shown in any other way that Stevenson's works were original, a survey of only his works which are considered unique should be sufficient to convince the most doubtful person that he was original, not only in style but in subject matter. The following section will survey four volumes which are said to be one of a kind; following the brief survey of unique types of writing, a comparison of three of Stevenson's essays with papers on similar topics by three of his models--Montaigne, Hazlitt, and Browne--will show that Stevenson's essays are distinctly different, both in style and

⁹⁴Hamilton, p. 93.

⁹⁵Smith, p. 274.

treatment of subject matter.

Even Sampson and Chapman admitted that A Child's Garden of Verses is the only collection of its kind. No one has attempted to show that a similar work influenced Stevenson or that a comparable work has been written since. As Saxe Commins said, this volume is half-century-old folklore and unique of its kind.⁹⁶ The work is universal, as Daiches says: It has something to say to the child mind not only of Stevenson's place and time but everywhere.⁹⁷

Treasure Island, it is agreed, is the best written book of its kind;⁹⁸ some call it the best of its kind, while A. C. Ward, among others, declares that it is the only one of its kind.⁹⁹ Kidnapped, another high adventure novel, has recently been called unique. Daiches says that in this great topographical novel Stevenson uses local atmosphere to illuminate history and character with a brilliance that cannot be paralleled in English fiction.¹⁰⁰ Walter Allen calls Kidnapped an archetype of the novel of pursuit.¹⁰¹ Leslie Fiedler points out that in these two novels Stevenson first presented

⁹⁶R. L. Stevenson, Selected Writings, ed. Saxe Commins (New York, 1947), p. xxx.

⁹⁷Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 18

⁹⁸Charles W. Eliot, ed. The Harvard Classics (New York, 1938, XXV), p. 276.

⁹⁹Illustrated History of English Literature (New York, 1955), III, p. 266

¹⁰⁰Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 14.

¹⁰¹The English Novel, A Short Critical History (New York, 1955), p. 335.

his ideas concerning the beauty of evil which he personified in his Beloved Scoundrel characters.¹⁰²

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, J. B. Priestley tells us, is constantly being cited in all of the English-speaking world as a symbol of man's divided nature.¹⁰³ Though the novel may not represent Stevenson's best writing, the story, itself, is unique.

Three of these volumes, A Child's Garden, Treasure Island, and Jekyll are said to stand alone as one of a kind in literature; and yet, strangely, there is almost unanimous agreement that Stevenson's greatest ability as a fictional writer was exhibited in his short stories. It was mentioned earlier that Chesterton credited Stevenson with creating, in The New Arabian Nights, a genre which does not exist elsewhere in English literature. Chesterton was referring mainly to the blending of reality and unreality in this collection and the unique atmosphere which enhanced the stories.

Thus Stevenson created four works which are said to have no counterparts in the English language.

The above works, however, are fictional and poetic works; they are called unique, and yet Daiches claims that it has for many years been the fashion to dismiss the fiction and esteem Stevenson as an essayist (p. 148). Nor is Daiches alone in this opinion: Henry James

¹⁰²"The Master of Ballantrae," in Modern Essays, p. 285.

¹⁰³Literature and Western Man, (New York, 1960), p. 272.

declared that Stevenson's essays, "stout of substance and supremely silver of speech, have both a nobleness and a nearness that place them, for perfection and roundness, above his fictions, and that also may well remind a vulgarized generation of what, even under its nose, English prose can be."¹⁰⁴

Can it be possible that the illustrious Henry James was spending such lavish praise on a mere "sedulous ape"?--that the continental scholar did not recognize cheap imitation? Hardly.

As G. B. Sterne pointed out, when Stevenson made the "sedulous ape" statement he was referring to his literary apprenticeship as a boy; he did not imply that he imitated other authors after he had established himself as an author. However, his statement has been used against him to prove that all of his life he continued to imitate earlier writers. Swinnerton, for example, claimed that at thirty-two Stevenson was imitating Hazlitt.

A comparison of Stevenson's style and treatment of subject matter, using essays by Montaigne, Hazlitt, and Browne, will show that many aspects of Stevenson's style are different. These differences at least show that while he may have learned from his elders, he did not later attempt to produce carbon copies of their styles.

Comparison will show the difference between Stevenson's "Talk and Talkers" and Montaigne's "On the Art of Conversing."¹⁰⁵ Montaigne

¹⁰⁴ Smith, p. 277.

¹⁰⁵ Mickel Eyquem de Montaigne, Great Essays, ed. Houston Peterson (New York, 1960), pp. 4-31.

is one of the models named by Stevenson in his "sedulous ape" essay, though a comparison will show that the styles are different: Whereas Stevenson's style is economical, Montaigne's is not; whereas Stevenson began his essay with a line to show that his paper and title were related, with the straightforward statement, "There can be no fairer ambition than to excel in talk," Montaigne rambled along for seven full paragraphs discussing the fallacy of corporal punishment, the knowledge to be gained from fools, and his own unattainable standards before, finally, at the beginning of paragraph eight he began a discussion of his announced topic, conversation. Since Montaigne is considered the father of the essay and he first used the term essai to describe a certain form of literary composition, one should concede that he had a perfect right to ramble as much as he chose; at the same time, one should credit subsequent authors who improved the form, as did Stevenson.

Whereas the word "I" appears from ten to fifteen times per page in Montaigne's essay, Stevenson carefully avoids the pronoun and continues to discuss qualities desirable in good discussions; while Montaigne uses negative examples to reinforce his ideas, Stevenson uses positive examples of good conversationalists.

Montaigne is much less restrained in his overall presentation than is Stevenson; his uninhibited remarks more closely resemble those of Dr. Johnson than those of Stevenson. Therefore, one may safely conclude that Stevenson read and admired the works of Montaigne, but

that Stevenson's style and approach to subject matter are entirely different.

Swinnerton declared that Stevenson at thirty-two was still imitating Hazlitt; and Stevenson proclaimed Hazlitt the greatest essayist of all times and declared that he had tried but failed to produce such elegance. and he had "aped" Hazlitt's style during his green years; but a comparison of Hazlitt's "On Going a Journey"¹⁰⁶ and Stevenson's "Walking Tours" (Travels and Essays, XIII, pp. 50-59) discloses that Stevenson's style was not a mere carbon copy of Hazlitt's: The first section of Hazlitt's paper includes fourteen quotations, four of which are excerpts from poems; Stevenson uses only four.

A major difference between the two essays is that Hazlitt's paper is a report of his own reactions and opinions while Stevenson not only leads his reader into the inner circle regarding the subject at hand, but manages to enfold, as well, a universal concept before he completes his discussion.

Hazlitt remains subjective to the very end of his essay, declaring that if he had two lives he would travel abroad during one and at home during the other. Stevenson ends with an almost mystic vision resembling the writing of the late Lebanese philosopher, Kalil Gibran: In contemplation, "In the face of the gigantic stars, [one] cannot stop to split differences between two degrees of the infinitesimally small,

¹⁰⁶Ibid, pp. 139-49.

such as a tobacco pipe or the Roman Empire, a million of money or a fiddlestick's end."

Stevenson claimed that he studied the style of Sir Thomas Browne; but nowhere in Stevenson does one discover the biblical, matter-of-fact style of Browne. Browne probably influenced Stevenson's philosophy since one can find seeds of ideas in, for example, an excerpt of Browne's Hydriotaphia: Urne-Burial which Stevenson later expounded in "Aes Triplex": Stevenson's idea that one should not die daily in a sickroom or hoard life like a miser is expressed in Browne's work. Browne said: "If we begin to die when we live, and long life be but a prolongation of death; [sic] our life is a sad composition; we live with death and die not in a moment Our days become considerable like petty sums by minute accumulations; where numerous fractions make up but small round numbers; and our days of a span long make not one little finder [sic]." ¹⁰⁷ Note the biblical, prophet-like rigidity of this passage compared to Stevenson's statements on the same subject.

Stevenson first produced a mental set conducive to agreement in his reader by declaring that man is the most courageous of creatures: "We live the time that a match flickers; we pop the cork of a ginger-beer bottle, and the earthquake swallows us on the instant. Is it not odd, is it not incongruous, is it not, in the highest sense of human speech, incredible, that we should think so highly of the ginger-beer and regard so little the devouring earthquake?"

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 52.

After chuckling over man's nonchalant, blase attitude toward his inevitable end, thereby creating in his reader a sense of pride and heroism, he lightly touches the subject of the result of negative thinking; this particular section of the paper is much less personal, a discussion of "the others," not one of us: Whereas the pronouns "we," "us," and "our" were frequently used in the earlier section, part two frequently refers to "the man," "the victim," "one important body," "the scruplemonger," or "he." Stevenson declares that prudence is like a dismal fungus growing over the brain; it inhibits spiritual growth and courage; it engenders fear resulting in death in one's own lifetime: "The victim begins to shrink spiritually; he develops a fancy for parlours with a regulated temperature; and takes his morality on the principle of tin shoes and tepid milk. The care of one important body or soul becomes so engrossing, that all the noises of the outer world begin to come thin and faint into the parlour with the regulated temperature; and the tin shoes go equably forward over blood and rain. To be overwise is to ossify; and the scruple-monger ends by standing stockstill."

It is easy to perceive the vast difference between Sir Thomas Browne's statement, though he said it first, and Stevenson's expanded treatment of the same idea. Sir Thomas, of course, may have been rendering his own interpretation of a statement in Bunyan, which Bunyan, in turn, had possibly restated from the New Testament or the Old Testament; whose author may have been propagating ideas established

by Siddhartha Gautama.

Stevenson concluded "Aes Triplex" with a studied attempt to relate the reader to the subject matter; by wholeheartedly urging anyone who might have floundered in pursuit of an end to return to positive action toward the desired goal: "It is better to lose health like a spendthrift than to waste it like a miser. It is better to live and be done with it, than to die daily in the sickroom. By all means begin your folio; 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." Browne at no time personally involved his reader.

One finds in the majority of Stevenson's essays a combination of qualities which produces an overall effect of polished precision as well as balanced components, beautifully cadenced, leading the reader step by convinced step from one concept to the next. The overall structure is generally a logically paced presentation, as in "Aes Triplex."

The above comparisons show that Stevenson was highly eclectic: He recognized the value of economy and the advantages of using positive examples, as shown in contrasting his style to that of Montaigne; he realized that constant repetition of the pronoun "I" created a spectator rather than a participant in his reader, a point overlooked by both Montaigne and Hazlitt; he avoided the rigid, biblical style of Sir Thomas Browne. We may conclude, therefore, that Stevenson's style is no mere carbon copy of works of earlier writers.

Furthermore, in Stevenson's essays one discovers many qualities not evinced in the earlier prose; for example, a precise choice of words to produce an aesthetic, euphonous effect on the ear of his reader; many of his passages should be written in the form of verse because they are so musical and poetic, so phonetically perfect. We read in "Pulvis et Umbra" (Works, XV, 291):

We behold space sown
With rotatory islands,
Suns and worlds
And the shards and wrecks of systems:
Some, like the sun, still blazing;
Some rotting, like the earth;
Others, like the moon,
Stable in desolation.

Whereas one may not say that a regular free verse pattern is followed, one is immediately aware of the striking effect produced by the use of assonance and alliteration: assonance in the first and last lines, in each enhancing the imagery; and alliterative sibilants in intervening lines to add aural significance, a suggestion of speed, to the rotatory images introduced in the first clause.

The application of a universal concept to a seemingly commonplace topic is another mark of Stevenson's unique style: In "Pulvis et Umbra" one finds a succinct one-sentence summary of the universal theme later expanded in Francis Thompson's "Hound of Heaven": "They may seek to escape, and yet they cannot; it is not alone their privilege and glory, but their doom; they are condemned to some nobility; all their lives long, the desire of good is at their heels, the implacable hunter (p. 296)."

In "Walking Tours" and "An Apology for Idlers" one finds the philosophy that was later celebrated by Dr. Lin Yutang in The Importance of Living: In "Walking Tours" Stevenson said: "We are in such haste to be doing, to be writing, to be gathering gear, to make our voice audible a moment in the derisive silence of eternity, that we forget that one thing, of which these are but the parts--namely, to live (Works, XIII, 158).

Dr. Yutang acknowledged his admiration for Stevenson's works: He said, in reference to dreams as wistful longs for an ideal: "So Robert Louis Stevenson dreamed And out of the stuff of such magic dreams are woven some of the finest and most beautiful fabrics we have ever seen" (The Importance of Living, New York, 1935, p. 176).

The stuff of such magic dreams was not born of ignorance; Stevenson was aware of the universal needs of man and attempted to supply at least some of them three quarters of a century before The Power of Positive Thinking emerged. He recognized the power of literature, of fiction as well as non-fiction, and disapproved of the naturalistic trend beginning in France. Man needs recognition, success, security, long and short term goals, and ideals. Stevenson attempted to direct thought into positive channels, to insist that success is a relative abstract, to encourage man to define his own goals and attempt to realize them, and to emphasize the value of pleasure in living; he declared, as did Cervantes before him, that reality exists only in the mind of the beholder; interpretation defines externals.

Stevenson expressed his sense of obligation and his recognition

of the power of literature in "The Morality of the Profession of Letters." Stevenson stated that a writer has the power to do great harm or great good, and in other papers he expressed his own sense of obligation to the world.

In "Lay Morals" Stevenson said that a man's only duty to his neighbor is to make him happier, if he can; in "A Christmas Sermon" he said that a man's duty to his family is to make them "happier for his presence" than they otherwise might have been; this attitude apparently was Stevenson's personal philosophy concerning man's duty to his family, his neighbor, and all men. In fiction he left something entertaining for people of all ages and various tastes; in his travel books and particularly his essays, he attempted to present a positive philosophy, knowing full well that man's plight is sufficiently negative in itself. Naturally, there are exceptions, as in "Pulvis et Umbra"; on the whole, however, Stevenson evinces a desire to encourage man, to "make him happier." As Louis Cazamian noted, Stevenson had a rebellious attitude toward the attitudes and methods of science; he wanted to infuse again into the mind the "limpid and fecund sap which rises from elementary experience and from the psychology of the child." Without professing an anti-intellectualism, Stevenson conveyed his attitude in his works.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Louis Cazamian and Emile Legouis, Legouis and Cazamian's History of English Literature (New York, 1957), p. 1269.

In "Child's play" Stevenson expounds the advantages of maturity as compared to those of childhood: He includes as advantages an increased physical sensitivity to material elements, and an ability to extend the horizons of the imagination, both in exercising it without external stimuli, as in acting out roles, and in submerging oneself into a story. Children are merely pedestrian onlookers; therefore, one should not regret his maturity (Works, XIII, 136-149).

In "Old Mortality" Stevenson again indirectly makes a stand for adulthood, declaring that youth is self-centered and vain and that one must outgrow such vanity or go through fire unshielded. He cites the case of a selfish man who finally became humane, thus made great gains, through adversity (Works, XIII, 199-210).

One must not infer that Stevenson was opposed to children and youth; he simply was assuring adults that they were better off for their maturity. In "An Apology for Idlers" he recommends leniency in dealing with the truant schoolboy and declares that a boy must have a chance to learn from life and nature, as must everyone; he also discusses the importance of leisure (Works, XIII, 67-79).

"On the Enjoyment of Unpleasant Places" describes the greater joy of peace and solitude after one has been battling the elements; the pleasure is amplified because of the contrast. This applies to life situations.

Stevenson decries the fact that society favors cowardly and prudential proverbs in "Crabbed Age and Youth." His whole philosophy

of life was an antithesis of, for example, "A bird in hand is worth two in the bush"; he believed that man should be laying out exciting projects up to the very end of life; thus, proverbs, apparently the words of men who have failed, should be ignored. He declared that while allegedly wise men, from Solomon to Ben Franklin, have inculcated the ideal of caution and respectability through their sayings, history shows that those who ignored caution were the great men. Stevenson also called attention to the fact that having a convenient catchword on the tongue is not the same as holding an opinion.

In "Crabbed Age and Youth" Stevenson also contrasts the "green sickness" of youth with the prudence of age. He assures adults that they need repent none of the vagaries of youth; the heat of youth is as important as the philosophy of age. One should live each day as fully as possible, he says, and not try to store up desserts for a time that may not arrive (Works, XIII, 51-66).

"Aes Triplex" is one of Stevenson's better known essays and the favorite of many of his readers. Here he states fully his philosophy that man should not include the idea of death in his plans. He declares that man actually is far more courageous than some philosophers pretend he is: If he really were so frightened by the idea of death, he would be cringing in his room, and there would be no battles or sea-going ships for fear of the consequences. He scoffs at the definition of life as a "Permanent Possibility of Sensation." Man may fear a precipice or an enemy with a club, but he does not fear the abstract idea of death and is not concerned with the Permanence of the Possibility. Man loves

living, not life.

Again in "Aes Triplex" one is reminded of his ideals, the desire to leave the world "happier for his presence." He says, in the concluding paragraph: "Every heart that has beat strong and cheerfully has left a hopeful impulse behind it in the world, and bettered the tradition of mankind."

Stevenson was a master psychologist in recognizing the needs of man: He recognized, as evinced particularly in "Crabbed Age and Youth" and "Aes Triplex," man's need for a goal, a challenge. This idea is amplified in his one political essay, "The Day After Tomorrow," which is a stand against communism. Man needs adventure, the idea of chance; he cannot follow the example of the ant; he must have the opportunity to soar, and his spirit cannot survive in a communal situation of sameness; man is an individual who needs recognition. Naturally, man also loves the idea of security, a warm bed and meal when the need is felt; take away his concern that these essentials may not be provided and thus destroy his initiative. Man needs challenge and cannot be treated as an ant (Works, XIII, 51-66).

"The Lantern Bearers" was William James's favorite of Stevenson's essays, and James took it as a text in one of his own works. He declared that it should become immortal not only because of the truth of its matter but also for its excellent form.¹⁰⁹ "The Lantern Bearers"

¹⁰⁹Selected Papers on Philosophy (New York, 1935), p. 4.

advocates idealism as opposed to realism, opposed particularly to the form of naturalism which was spreading from France at the time. He intimated that every man, in a sense, is Don Quixote; man's true life consists of his internal concepts and not his relation to cold externality. What Ibsen in The Wild Duck termed "life lies" was to Stevenson the only life truth; reality depends on the reactor.

Stevenson began "The Lantern Bearers" with a discussion of a game in which he participated in his youth. It was the custom to carry a bull's-eye lantern so well concealed under the heavy cloak that no one would suspect its presence unless its owner wished to display it to another of his group. The knowledge of the presence of the lantern, which no outsider would suspect, was a matter of great delight to the bearer. Every man is, in a sense, a Lantern Bearer; the presence of such a lantern sustains life, and is the most important and real aspect of life.

One cannot judge a man by externals: "His life from without may seem but a rude mound of mud; there will be some golden chamber at the heart of it, in which he dwells delighted; and for as dark as his pathway seems to the observer, he will have some kind of a bull's-eye at his belt (Works, XV, 242): A vision of Walter Mitty immediately comes to mind when one reads of those "who are meat salesmen to the external eye, and possibly to themselves are Shakespeares, Napoleons, or Beethovens; who have not one virtue to rub against another in the field of active life, and yet, perhaps, in the life of contemplation, sit with the saints (Works, XV, 243).

Stevenson was always aware of a writer's duty to his public: in "The Lantern Bearers" he recommended the writing of works which ennoble one's thoughts; in his "Letter to a Young Gentleman" he urged an aspiring young writer to weigh carefully what he had to say to the world with a view as to the probable results; again in "A Note on Realism" he makes a stand against the ignoble, the "rancid" aspect of naturalism. Stevenson always felt a great sense of responsibility toward his readers.

His several essays on the art of writing reflect this attitude: in each essay he fulfilled what he considered the duty of the established writer to the beginner, the duty of giving him detailed information on how to write rather than yards of definitions of the ideal finished product, as discussed in "A Humble Remonstrance." "A Gossip on Romance" is a discussion of the techniques involved in producing adventure stories: The plot should thrash and churn with brute incident; the setting should enhance and help to produce the desired atmosphere: "Certain dank gardens cry aloud for a murder; certain old houses demand to be haunted; certain coasts are set apart for shipwreck (Works XIII, 330). The characters in stories of adventure may be mere puppets so that the reader can better vicariously live the adventure; if the character is too well delineated, the reader is forced to become a spectator; and a reader must experience vicariously a fresh experience before he can truly say that he has been reading a romance. A writer of romance should attempt to satisfy the unfilled longings of the reader and adhere to "the ideal laws of the day-dream."

In "A Note on Realism" Stevenson assures the aspiring author that style can be acquired; he recommends that the student attempt to decide upon the unit as a whole, his point of view and the necessary attitude, as a preliminary measure; following this, he must suppress any material which does not contribute to the central theme. Only works which are "philosophical, passionate, dignified, happily mirthful, or at the last and least, romantic in design" should be written.¹¹⁰

In "The Morality of the Profession of Letters" Stevenson presents further views on the duty of an author: He should realize that he can cause great harm or do great good; he should be truthful to fact both in tone and in his words; too slanted a point of view, as practiced by newspaper writers, is the same as a lie; and as published in tracts of sectarian religion, small, trite, and inhuman. Finally, an author should be sincere.¹¹¹

"Preface, by Way of Criticism" and "Truth of Intercourse" are discussions of difficulties encountered in saying exactly what one means and in presenting a true picture. This problem is especially evident when one is attempting to write a short critical article; one must choose a point of view in order to produce a unified idea, and yet strict adherence to the point of view shows only one side of an author

¹¹⁰ Essays and Criticisms (Boston, 1903), pp. 212-223.

¹¹¹ Ibid, pp. 157-177.

which, in turn, results in caricature or calumny. Stevenson enumerated his own difficulties in writing the essays in Familiar Studies of Men and Books and said that he had done justice only to Pepys; the use of a point of view was the main problem (Works, XIV, 1-16).

Further suggestions for young writers can be found in Adelaide Boodle's book, RLS and His Sine Qua Non; Miss Boodle set down in the form of rules many helpful techniques which Stevenson suggested to her during her apprenticeship to him (New York, 1926), pp. 65-69.

Stevenson's philosophical theories, which he discussed in his moral essays, are as applicable and pertinent this week as they were during his life and will be for all time: They deal with fundamental needs of man which time will not change.

His essays on the art of writing contain sound, useful suggestions for aspiring authors; there seems little difference in his theories and those expounded in current essays, with the possible exception of his "puppet" theory of characterizations in novels of romance.

This paper has attempted to show that the four main factors which have adversely affected Stevenson's reputation are unrelated to his works. Certainly his unfortunate background and his treatment at the hands of biographers have nothing to do with what he wrote. It has been shown that his negative critics wrote hearsay and personal invective rather than scholarly articles based on fact; and that the continued use out of context of the "sedulous ape" statement is simply propagation of slander: An author who has wielded strong influence in many genres

most definitely is not a mere mimic. An author who has produced works which have no counterparts in the English language is not an empty echo. As J. B. Priestley recently said: "Stevenson's enormous popularity, partly the result of his narrative gift but also the reward of his style, which has an unusual and very personal grace and charm (and some of his sourer critics might try to learn something from it before dismissing it as a mere trick), has now lasted a long time, so long that only prejudice would deny this continuing popularity a hard core of genuine literary acceptance."¹¹²

It is possible that future critics will take the time to read some of his works and, as Priestley and others suggested, attempt to learn something from them before they have the audacity to dismiss them; that discerning readers will discourage writers who gullibly accept and quote handed-down prejudiced attitudes and thus propagate the greatest injustice in the annals of literature; and that there may be an increase in the number of critics (such as Daiches, Fiedler, Priestley, Furnas, and Sterne) who have the integrity to investigate and formulate their own opinions, a scholarly approach, and the courage to publicly disagree with traditional legends. Stevenson, the man, has been discussed long enough. An objective appraisal of what he had to say should be the focal point of future works.

¹¹² Literature and Western Man, p. 272.

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