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Reviews

ROBERT KIELY. *Robert Louis Stevenson and the fiction of adventure*. Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press. 1964. X + 286 pp. \$5.50.

"I am an Epick writer with a k to it, but without the necessary genius," wrote Stevenson to Henry James in December 1892 (*Letters*, ed. S. Colvin, New York, 1911, Vol. IV, p. 157). But the genius had gone unquestioned or unregarded, and contemporaries, biographers, idolaters and critics have hastened to discover and proclaim an epic in Stevenson's own life. Mr. Kiely's book is therefore especially welcome, for it is one of the few serious attempts to write impartial criticism about Stevenson's aims and techniques as a writer of fiction; to ask "whether as a writer . . . he has a value for the mature reader which transcends the entertaining accidents of his life and the virtuosity of his prose style" (p.13). As the publishers claim, this is the first full scale criticism of Stevenson's major works of fiction in nearly 35 years.

Mr. Kiely starts by defining the type and scope of adventure fiction. The essentials are all present in Stevenson's novels; — the necessity of youth breaking with authority, the idea of escapade without serious consequences — though adventure turns on disobedience, — and, in the end, authority is inescapable. In other words, the adventure mode can have a built-in morality; heroes find "flight from conventional society is no exit from the universe of which their own being is both part and image" (p.265).

Mr. Kiely's method is to show the "development from adventure as an entertaining counterfeit [*Treasure Island*] to adventure as a symbolic chart of the formidable risks in which life involves all men [*Weir of Hermiston*]." (p.268). He begins with a long discussion of the "aesthetics of adventure," and proceeds chronologically through the novels to show how Stevenson developed in his treatment of the mode, and attempted complexity in his characters. Biography is rightly subservient to criticism, though "biographical information can occasionally shed light on the work rather than burning through and obliterating it as it has done so often in the past" (p.13). Not all the stories receive equal attention, *The Black Arrow*, for example, is mentioned but

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once, while *New Arabian Nights* receives an unduly lengthy consideration.

One of the most exciting developments in contemporary criticism is the consideration being given to the terminology of the novel. Wayne C. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, 1961) for example, attempts with considerable success to provide a vocabulary with which to discuss the complexities of narrative and effect in psychological fiction. In the present volume, therefore, there was need for some consideration of the basis of adventure fiction — the story — and close examination of Stevenson's technique in manipulating incident, interest and action. Mr. Kiely starts well in his chapter "The Aesthetics of Adventure" by stressing the importance of "event," but the rest of the chapter does not fulfill this early promise.

There is unevenness and obviousness in the consideration of the novels themselves. It was surely unnecessary to narrate the plot of much of *The Master of Ballantrae* (p.202). Too much space is devoted to elaborate character analysis, for despite the evocations of satanic and unearthly powers, James Durie remains an unsuccessful and unconvincing character. He has the stage trappings of a villain, without any mysterious substance. Likewise, too much significance is seen in the conventional epic imagery of *The Master of Ballantrae*.

Yet there are some excellent things in this book. Mr. Kiely writes particularly well when summing up and assessing the novels, as with *Catriona* (p.90), or *Weir of Hermiston* (pp. 197-9). He has useful things to say about related themes, such as the Victorian fictional quest for far away places (pp. 149-154), or on points of detail, as Stevenson's technique of "casting off" our awareness of time, personality and mortality in *Treasure Island* (pp. 68-71). The style is usually sprightly and energetic, with some witty phrases and stimulating generalisations: [Stevenson's] "first impulse may be Romantic, but his second thought is almost always classical. . . . How often his novels and short stories open in Romantic suggestiveness with inviting scenes of rustic nature or in dark corners of Gothic kirk-yards, with hints of vague mysteries or unspeakable passions, only to develop the clear outlines, in his early career, of a child's game and later on, of moral fable" (p.42). Mr. Kiely is fond of criticism by imagery, with the consequent dangers of lack of precision and mistaken meanings. His use of tropes is excessive, some work well, many seem but ornate additions to the argument.

One quirk is the reluctance to compare Stevenson's techniques with

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those of Scott. The justification is the excessive use of Scott made by earlier critics— ". . . the name of Scott began to assume in Stevenson criticism a shorthand hieroglyphic significance which no one bothered to decipher" (p.15), yet Mr. Kiely is eager to compare Stevenson with almost everyone else, from *Widsith* to D. H. Lawrence. Many of these references and generalisations, i.e. p.63, add little to the argument.

Consideration of Scott might have helped in the discussion of *Kidnapped* and *Carriona*, for David Balfour, well described as "one of the most inactive and inept heroes in the non-comic literature of adventure" (p.98), is surely formed in emulation of Scott's own passive heroes, such as Waverley or Francis Osbaldistone.

One development of Stevenson's narrative interest, disregarded in this book, is noteworthy in the last novels. There, the eventual outcome of the story, or the fates of the main characters, is never in doubt. MacKellar throughout *The Master of Ballantrae* harps on the final disaster, the ultimate doom of the Duries. Similarly, in *Weir of Hermiston*, there are constant remarks and nudges about the "destiny" of Archie Weir, of the inevitability of his fate. Consequently the primary interest is not that of typical adventure fiction—in the story, in what is going to happen—but rather in the grouping and clash and motives of the characters.

Readers should be warned that the index is incomplete. Mr. Kiely quotes from Sidney Colvin's 1911 edition of Stevenson's letters (no place given); the page references do not correspond with the London edition.

Robert Louis Stevenson and the fiction of adventure is welcome and often stimulating. It could have been more concise, but Mr. Kiely justifies his consideration of Stevenson as a novelist; his book may lead to a renewed interest in Stevenson as a writer and a demand for more reliable texts of the works.

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