Going for Eternity: ***A Child's Garden of Verses***

• *Elizabeth Waterston* •

Résumé: *Dans cet article, Elizabeth Waterston tente d'expliquer la fortune littéraire du recueil de poèmes de Robert Louis Stevenson,* **A Child's Garden of Verses,** *dont le succès reste encore très vif de nos jours. D'après elle, plusieurs auteurs ont tout simplement oublié l'influence marquante que ces poèmes ont exercé sur leur première jeunesse.*

Summary: *Elizabeth Waterston discusses the reasons for the continued popularity of Robert Louis Stevenson's* **A Child's Garden of Verses,** *and suggests that many writers have forgotten the strength of the poems' influence on their pre-school days.*

When Robert Louis Stevenson rhymed "children" with "bewildering" in the trial edition of his verses for children, his friend Sidney Colvin objected. "A Cockney rhyme," he jotted into the margin of the little book titled *Penny Whistles.*[1] Stevenson responded with his own marginal jotting, "Good enough for me.... These are rhymes, jingles; I don't go for eternity." Whether or not he thought he was in the race for immortality when he published his little rhymes, *A Child's Garden of Verses*, first published in 1885, has proved to have great survival power. It is still available in all sorts of editions, variously illustrated, and is still a preeminent choice of educators as well as of parents and care-givers. It is a book for children too young to express an opinion of its charms; but many of us re-open it as adults to discover just how deeply it has sunk into our pores. Poem after poem chants itself: "I have a little shadow...," "The friendly cow, all red and white...," "The world is so full of a number of things...."

The influence of a book absorbed in pre-school days is hard to trace. Many writers by the time they reach maturity have forgotten just how strong that influence was. I once wrote to Dennis Lee, creator of *Alligator Pie* and other very popular books of children's poems, asking, "Would you mind

telling me if you ever read *A Child's Garden of Verses* very intensely? Was it important to you, either in early days, or when your own books were in process?" Dennis Lee, in very kind response,[2] began by saying that although the Stevenson poems were pretty certainly in his home, and read to him by his parents, "and I know I imprinted some of the poems," he was perplexed as to the degree of influence. He went on to list the poems that "came back with a rush to me." Then, after a disclaimer as to taking Stevenson as a model when he started doing his own poems, Lee continued, "All that said, I still think he's one of the half-dozen or so normative children's poets in English.... His best pieces are treasures, and part of the lifestream of children's poetry."

The treasures in *A Child's Garden of Verses*, in their lyric clarity, their whimsy and rhythmic excitement, offer great pleasure to the very young child, and to the adult who must act as mediator for this preliterate being. They also radiate light for students of child psychology, of cultural history, of biography, and of the literary institution that consists of the complex of writer, editor, publisher, reviewer and marketer of the book. For the child psychologist,[3] the opening section of *A Child's Garden* manifests Stevenson's remarkable retention of childhood attitudes and interests. The poems recall exactly the earliest responses to language: the delight in reiteration, the pleasure at new words. "The Swing," for instance, catches the child's fondness for repetition: "Up in the swing ... up in the air ... up in the air and over the wall ... up in the air and down" — that last phrase adding the joy of antithesis and surprise. The verses are sing-song chants, just beyond the "mum-mum" and "dad-dad" stage: in "Rain": "The rain is raining all around / It rains ... It rains ..." and then the joyous whoop at a delicious "big word": "It rains on the UMBRELLAS."

But there is something beyond the memory of word-play in these poems. There is also a catching of mind-play as the psyche develops. "Bed in Summer," the first poem in *A Child's Garden of Verses*, pouts at a common grievance of being put to bed too soon, when child-time is at variance with grownup-time, clock-time. The child initiates a "me / they" antithesis, the first mark of self-awareness. Bedtime gives way to "Night Thoughts," modulating into the terrors of "Windy Nights," with its haunting, frightening, galloping dactyls. "The Land of Counterpane" reflects ego-growth, as Lilliput becomes Gulliver, "the giant, great and still / That sits upon the pillow hill." Stevenson thus sings of timeless aspects of childhood, to tease the psychologist into analysis. But the poems also offer some time-tied motifs, of interest to the cultural and social historian. The social interests of late Victorianism appear in the smug piety of a tiny Briton pleased with the thought of "little children saying grace / In every Christian kind of place." British chauvinism is ironically punctured in "Foreign Children": "Little heathen Japanee /

O! don't you wish that you were me?" The poem catches the solipsism of any child, but more specifically reflects the imperial smugness that Stevenson himself had of course shucked off, perhaps in pre-school days. These two poems, which have caused some distress to politically correct educators, come with an irony and an accuracy from a particular period of materialistic self-satisfaction.

There are other obviously period poems: "The Lamplighter," of course, but also perhaps "From a Railway Carriage": today's diesel-drawn trains make no such pounding rhythms. The blocks and the toy boat, the story-books and picture-books and the pretend tools, the chisel and hammer of "My Treasures," all reflect modish "Froebelianism." Friedrich Froebel had convinced mid-century parents that all children should be offered "gifts" in simple shapes, that they should be entertained with nursery rhymes, traditional folk songs, and taught crafts such as simple weaving, and digging and planting. "Kindergarten" is an innocuous word to us today. In 1850, when Stevenson was born, it was a term fraught with controversy. Froebel, the German educator who coined the term, also minted the revolutionary idea that children should be treated like little flowers. Not as little beings born in sin, to be trained and directed with an unsparing rod toward adulthood, and not as seers blest, Wordsworthian beings with visions superior to the limited perceptions of adults: the Froebelian concept was that childhood should be a time of gentle growth toward happy and sociable maturity (see *The Education of Man).* Robert Louis Stevenson was raised by modern parents. Like any Froebelian adept, Margaret Balfour Stevenson kept a journal of her child's doings, his games and fantasies, pets and toys.[4] Solo play and companionable make-believe with his cousins both flourished in Stevenson's childhood garden. These pleasures were shadowed, however, by feverish illnesses, asthma and bronchial troubles and a growing threat of tuberculosis. Between the sunshine and shadow of Stevenson's childhood and the actual penning of the verses stretch years of other experiences which intensified and sophisticated his poetry. As a young man invalided to France and Switzerland for treatment of his lung troubles, he watched wistfully the lively games of little children and published two articles, "Notes on the Movements of Young children" (1874) and "Child's Play" (1878).[5] Surprising productions for a young bachelor of twenty-four and twenty-eight! Then Fanny Van de Grift Osbourne, the American divorcee whom he eventually married after a theatrical transcontinental pursuit, brought a ready-made family into his life. (Incidentally, in Monterey, California, where Stevenson followed Fanny during that melodramatic courtship, he must have lived within a few blocks of one of the earliest trainees in kindergarten work. Kate Douglas Wiggin, later to write *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* and other popular children's books, was teaching kindergarten classes in Monterey in 1879.) In 1880, after his marriage and return to Europe, Stevenson helped his stepson

Lloyd Osbourne write and print little books with titles such as *Martial Elegy for Some Lead Soldiers*, surely renewing his memories of his own collection of tiny warriors. Those memories welled up soon in that very different elegy, "The Dumb Soldier," about a lost toy, underground through a long winter of forgetfulness, but waiting to reappear. "I shall find him, never fear, / I shall find my grenadier." Stevenson found his grenadier, and all the other toys and dreams and experiences that had lain buried in the maturing years, in a series of reclaimings, between 1881 and 1884. Again there was a timely stimulus. Books for children were proliferating. A thin trickle had been coming from John Newbery's press since the beginning of the century, but it was while Stevenson was a young man with literary ambitions that serious writers began working this new field: Lewis Caroll, with *Alice in Wonderland* in 1865, Christina Rossetti with *Goblin Market* in 1869, George MacDonald with *At the Back of the North Wind* in 1871. Rhymed picture books for very young readers flourished in the 1880s, following publications by Randolph Caldecott, Walter Crane, and Kate Greenaway.[6] It was Greenaway's work that stirred Stevenson to have a go at nursery rhymes. Her *Birthday Book* sold 150,000 copies in 1880. Stevenson, on holiday in Scotland, in the climate of his childhood, close to young Lloyd and strapped for money, re-entered the garden of his memories and dashed off a few little poems.[7] Over the next four years — crucial ones in RLS's private life and in his development as an artist — he returned again and again to the composition of little rhymes for little people. He mocked his own work in this genre in letters,[8] but he was intense, even obsessive, in his careful revisions and deletions. When he had completed forty-eight poems, he put out *Penny Whistles* as a trial run. Forty-one of these survived his friends' criticism and his own censorship and made it into the final *Garden of Verses*, published in 1885. This final version contains sixty-five poems, including a set of Envoys. The final envoy, "To Any Reader," reminds the reading child, lost in the book, to remember the writer who dreamed up the poems while remembering himself as a child in a garden. So the poetry leads back to biography. *A Child's Garden of Verses* reveals many of Stevenson's persistent motifs. Recalling Northrop Frye's phrase, "Fables of Identity," we recognize with amazement the way the tiny poems unroll all the kinds of stories that Stevenson would go on telling as a way of defining himself. *Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is often instanced as epitomizing the neurosis of a split personality. Long before he wrote that classic, Stevenson revealed his döppelganger bent in "My Shadow." For the wanderlust that would catapult him into a fabulous series of voyages, there is a diminutive version in "Foreign Lands." "Marching Song" swings with the military zest that carries Alan and David along the road to the Isles in *Kidnapped*. Rebellious dreams of piracy, raids, and anti-social adventure, released in *Treasure Island*, were pre-released in "A Good Play."[9] Finally, for anyone studying the "literary institution," the whole cycle of book production from inspiration to

publication to distribution to reviews and imitative responses, *A Child's Garden of Verses* offers great rewards because there is so full a record of the book's history. Stevenson was well enough known and well enough connected to pull a full range of reviewers into contemplation of his book. Regardless of the critics' views, *A Child's Garden of Verses* continued to be bought by generations of parents, aunts and godfathers, and to be enjoyed by generations of children. Do the poems still work? I can only say that they worked for me when I read them to my own children, and as for grandchildren, the only rival I have found so far in the popularity sweepstakes is Lee's *Alligator Pie*. At the outset, Stevenson may not have known he was "going for eternity." Later, however, when he penned the final envoy "To Any Reader," I believe he was at least playing with the idea of immortality. He knew that his poems would hold any child's attention. Perhaps he may have guessed that over many years adults, also, looking "through the windows of this book," would remember their own childhood, and the child who played, and the man who wrote in the garden.

Notes

1 *Penny Whistles* (Cambridge, privately printed, 1993). Of the three known copies extant, one is at Houghton Library, Harvard, and one at the Beinecke Library, Yale.

2 From a letter to me dated 14 March 1991.

3 See Piaget; Droz and Rahmy.

4 Her *Notebook, 1850-1870*, is held at the Beinecke Library at Yale University, MS uncat. 370 List Sect II, no.1.

5 "Notes on the Movements of Young Children," published first in Portfolio, London, 1874, is reprinted in *Juvenalia and Other Papers* XXI, 126. "Children's Games" is reprinted in *Miscellanies* XX, 157.

6 Crane's *The Baby's Opera* appeared in 1877, Caldecott's *John Gilpin's Ride* in 1878, and Greenaway's *Under My Window* in 1878.

7 The manuscript notebook containing these first poems is held at the Beinecke Library as MS 3071.

8 See *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*.

9 See Paul Maixner, *Robert Louis Stevenson, the Critical Heritage*.

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