

Richard J. Walker, 'Pious Works: Aesthetics, Ethics, and the Modern Individual in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*',

On 13 May 1871, Jean-Nicolas-Arthur Rimbaud-Charleville malcontent, budding anarchist, future Communeard, poet of precocious talent, and not yet seventeen-corresponded with his old schoolmaster Georges Izambard. In what has become known as the "seer" letter, Rimbaud set out his manifesto for modern poetry claiming "**Je est un autre**" ["**I is another, I is somebody else**"]. Graham Robb, in his authoritative study of Rimbaud, observes that the statement that "has often been treated as a poetic $E = mc^2$ " (Robb 2000: 81). Rimbaud's equation is clearly provocative, and as a result has been read in many different ways, "from the banal to the fantastic" as Robb goes on to point out. **It certainly attempts to challenge the assumption of a coherent and autonomous individual identity in Western thought, one that can be traced back to Descartes' "Cogito ergo sum" from that seminal document for modernity Discourse on Method (1637), an equation that continues to provoke debate among philosophers and critical theorists in the twenty-first century.** For the purposes of the present essay, Rimbaud's statement is important for the way it disturbs the prevailing concept of the sincerity of the lyric in nineteenth-century British poetry. As a result it also problematizes meditations on the seemingly insoluble connection between art and ethics that critical writing of the century strives to sustain. **Significantly enough, Rimbaud's equation also evokes the theme of doubleness that haunts cultural representation in nineteenth century Britain,** one that is evoked in dynamic if problematic ways in fin

265

267

de siècle writing, and in particular Robert Louis Stevenson's classic tale of "I" being "somebody else," *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). Arguably, it is the Romantic poet William Wordsworth, in his preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), who first attempts to establish and consolidate a connection between ethics and aesthetics for nineteenth-century culture in Britain. His vision of a coherent and morally instructive culture is one that-whether we agree with it or not-still remains resonant today, regardless of developments in critical theory in the academy from the mid-twentieth century onward. Wordsworth claims that "the human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants, and he must have a very faint perception of its beauty and dignity who does not know this" (Wordsworth 1800: 243). For Wordsworth, culture needs to have an ethical dimension; but he sees the modern reader's mind reduced to a "savage torpor" because "the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies. To this tendency of life and manners the literature and theatrical exhibitions of the country have conformed themselves. The invaluable works of our elder writers (I had almost said the works of Shakespeare and Milton) are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse" (243). This statement can come across as the grumblings of a conservative, provincial, little-Englander: it seems to be nostalgic for a

"Golden Age" of English Literature (offering the talismans of Shakespeare and Milton), it laments urbanization over "natural" life and bewails the influence of technology on the modern world. In effect, for culture to have both an aesthetic and ethical value it should be "natural," incorporating "the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions" as Wordsworth famously put it (242). In effect it is possible to argue, as Neil Sammells does, that the equation "nature plus culture equals an ethical life" turns the interaction between all three into "a kind of moral gymnasium" (Sammells 1997: 313). However, it is often easy to overlook how important Wordsworth's words are in establishing a correspondence between aesthetics and ethics; and it is in the correlation between the two that his vision becomes interesting with regard to this debate. What Wordsworth suggests is that modern culture is affected by a malaise, and one that is not only "sickly," if not "stupid," but intrinsically "evil" (Wordsworth 1800: 243). In effect he posits a series of boundaries, based upon doubling, that haunt cultural criticism.

268

Evolutionary Psychology, Masculinity, Jekyll and Hyde

and theory in the nineteenth century, through the twentieth, and no doubt on into the twenty-first: "High" contra "Low," "Good" contra "Bad," "moral" versus "immoral," "healthy" versus "sickly." What is particularly significant is that what Wordsworth identifies as the source of "evil," as the cultural malaise, is "frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies"; in short it is not just popular culture that is to blame, but the gothic novel in particular. It is, of course, the gothic novel that, apart from giving birth to a variety of popular literary subgenres from science fiction to the detective novel, emerges as the "penny dreadful" in Victorian culture and leads Stevenson to allude to his gothic text, *Jekyll and Hyde*, in a self-deprecating way as his own "shilling shocker" (Masson 1922: 213). Stevenson's description of the novel, as flippancy as it may be, is a significant one; it allows the text to enter the literary marketplace, therefore removing it from the world of creative integrity privileged by Wordsworth, and one where bourgeois self-interest is the only law. Indeed, as Inspector Newcomen puts it in the hunt for the murderous Hyde, "money's life to the man," (Stevenson 1886: 50) and Hyde's trampling of a little girl, which opens the strange case, evokes Marshall Berman's "modern men and women" who "may well stop at nothing": "free from fear and trembling, they are free to trample down everyone in their way if self-interest drives them to it" (Berman 1983: I).

In this light, Hyde can be read as "boorish" (Miller 1985: 211); his crimes are petty, malicious, and self-indulgent. Indeed, it is possible to read Hyde not only as the industrial bourgeois of Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto*-who experiences "uninterrupted disturbance" and "everlasting uncertainty" (Marx and Engels 1848: 83), manifest in the fluidity of identity between Jekyll and Hyde and in the strange, shifting nature of Hyde's appearance itself-but also as the "philistine" of Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, the uncultured and bourgeois product of utilitarian thought. It is Arnold whose work most clearly sustains the correlation between aesthetics and ethics in nineteenth-century debates on culture.

Picking up on Wordsworth's ideas in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Arnold argues for a conception of culture that is moral, cathartic, instructive, and beautiful; in effect culture should be "the endeavor to know the best and to make this knowledge prevail for the good

of all mankind" (Storey 2001:18). In effect culture should consist of "Sweetness and Light" rather than sourness and dark, and, as he puts it the preface to *Poems* (1853), modern culture should evade the "doubts" and "discouragement" and return to the "disinterested objectivity" of classical verse (Arnold 1853: 115). Such a program would seem certain to exclude the gothic "shilling shocker." The

269

Wordsworthian and Arnoldian critical position therefore propagates a theory that advocates coherence and an ethical dimension to culture through establishing a binary opposition between good and bad, high and low, pious and impious, inside and outside with, of course, an emphasis on privileging the center ("High" culture) over the margins (popular culture). Ironically, neither Wordsworth nor Arnold, the high priests of ethical aesthetics, are averse to their own, maybe unwitting, forays into the territory of the uncertain and disruptive divided self that haunts nineteenth-century literature. This is the area of Rimbaud's declaration "Je est un autre," a statement that deconstructs both Cartesian self-affirmation and the sincerity and authenticity of Wordsworthian lyricism. The same can be said of Stevenson's *Strange Case*, where Jekyll's inability to speak the self ("He, I say-I cannot say, I"; Stevenson 1886: 94) uncannily echoes the Rimbaudian equation of otherness. Wordsworth experiences similar self-division in book two of *The Prelude* of 1805 where, recollecting his childhood experiences, he finds that:

so wide appears
The vacancy between me and those days
Which yet have such self-presence in my mind
That sometimes, when I think of them I seem
Two consciousnesses-conscious of myself
And of some other being. (2: 28-33)

Arnold's experience of doubling is perhaps more problematic than the gulf between mature and infant self evoked by Wordsworth. In the aforementioned preface to *Poems* of 1853, Arnold discusses his disillusionment with modern culture, and finds that "the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced; modern problems have presented themselves" (Arnold 1853: 115). More significantly, in the lyric "The Buried Life," the poetic voice knows that

the mass of men conceal'd
Their thoughts, for fear that if revealed
They would by other men be met
With blank indifference, or with blame reproved;
I knew they lived and moved
Trick'd in disguises, alien to the rest
Of men, and alien to themselves. (Arnold 1852: 84)

*From Part 3. Evolutionary Psychology, Masculinity, and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde
Robert Louis Stevenson: Writer of Boundaries Edited by Richard Ambrosini and
Richard Dury, University of Wisconsin Press, 2006*

Range of other useful essays in this section but only have text of 'Pious Works'

Stevenson, Romance, and Evolutionary Psychology

"The fortune of a tale lies not alone in the skill of him that writes," Stevenson wrote in 1887, "but as much, perhaps, in the inherited experience of him who reads; and when I hear with a particular thrill of things that I have never done or seen, it is one of that innumerable army of my ancestors rejoicing in past deeds" (Stevenson...

Crossing the Bounds of Single Identity: *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and a Paper in a French Scientific Journal

Commenting on the origins of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Stevenson's wife suggested that the story evolved first of all from the writer's fascination with Deacon Brodie, combined with thoughts provoked by an article on psychology in a French periodical: "In the room in Edinburgh occupied by my husband as a child, was a bookcase...

"City of Dreadful Night": Stevenson's Gothic London

In his study of crowds, published in translation in Britain in 1896, Gustave Le Bon warned of the atavistic nature of crowd behavior, declaring that "an individual in a crowd resembles primitive beings" (Le Bon 1895: 3). In 1886 Jekyll and Hyde had concentrated on individual duality, separating the moral from the immoral...

***Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*: A "Men's Narrative" of Hysteria and Containment**

In Western cultural imagination, Stevenson's Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde has become a metaphor, almost the very name for the duplicitous self. The categorical tradition of the good/bad, normal/deviant construction of the subject is revealed in the numerous attempts to fix Hyde's identity. Critics have read Hyde as a figure...

Consumerism and Stevenson's Misfit Masculinities

At the end of the nineteenth century, a matrix of mutually reinforcing cultural values privileged a masculinity characterized by responsibility, industry, and new money. And yet, as Martin Green notes in *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire*, despite the glorification of a mature, productive masculinity, it was "a striking feature..