

RLS 2002 Gargnano: Picturesque Notes

by Richard Dury

Conferences are often no holiday: those Nuremberg plenaries, the desolate migrations of bag-people between parallel (and never-meeting) sessions; self-service lunchtimes (where, edging to the cramped table, things start to slide); the secular ritual of opaque papers which the audience follow like polite churchgoers. . . And the poor graduate student who no-one has talked to who returns to his lonely room to contemplate early departure.

Well, Gargnano wasn't like that. Let's admit it, the setting helped. The small town (with its dependent villages of Villa and Bogliaco) lies on a sliver of shore between a low shoulder of hillside to the south, round which the road curves on an oleander-lined *corniche*, and a mighty headland of precipitous lake-cliffs to the north. With mountain slopes beginning right behind the little town, there is no room for expansion and, the local people miraculously having managed to hold on to many of the houses, the place retains the charm and coherence of a traditional community. Along the street with shops there are no luxury-goods boutiques or concentrations of tourist-trade craft shops, instead a cavernous ironmongers with just the right multitude of diverse and practical objects, a shoe shop selling quite ordinary shoes and ordinary bags, a clothes shop not masquerading as an art gallery . . . Everyday life goes on, with much meeting and talking outside, especially in the inner street parallel to the lakefront. Just to the south, Villa is even prettier and (unlike other picture-postcard villages) is without busloads of trippers looking for something to photograph or buy. From 5 till dinner and then in the evening, the mothers in their floral pinafores meet to chat and knit, while their

children run around or sit on the harbour wall and play cards in their outdoor communal living room.

At the end of the Second World War and with the Allies steadily advancing northwards, the puppet 'Repubblica di Salò' was situated at various points along this western shore of Lake Garda, and Mussolini had his office and daytime apartment in a requisitioned Palazzo Feltrinelli. After the War, the firmly anti-fascist Feltrinelli family felt they could no longer return to the building, so donated it to the University of Milan, who now run a month-long Italian language course in July-August and hold conferences there for most of the rest of the year. It is a square Beaux-Arts palazzo of white, beige and orangey-brown with projecting three-arched stone portico. In the centre of the entrance hall ceiling is a square panel with panes of stained glass, equally at the centre of the floor above it. This upper level is definite 'feature': a double-height central space (and rooms around), with Pompeian-style frescoes and overlooked by the railings of the top floor, where most bedrooms are.

In the centre of the ground floor and extending out to the back, is the main conference hall, ending in three french windows, the central one left open, so that those on the dais at the other end had a constant view of the changing sparkling blue of the lake and, twice in the morning, and twice in the afternoon, could see the arriving or departing ferry, with its colourful passengers at the rails, glide seemingly just past the end of the room. Those in the audience could hear the gentle ruffling beat of the propellers and were perhaps unconsciously aware of a slight change of luminosity and the sound of the wash against the terrace. This was no distraction: the passage of the ferry was like a passing breeze on the face while reading at an open window in summer: allowing you to continue still absorbed with what you are doing, yet concurrently aware of – yourself – this place – this time.

Sunday

Sunday was warm and occasionally sunny. I had lunch with Alda, and the artist Amedeo Pieragostini by the little port in Villa: grilled

fish, salad and a flask of white wine beaded with condensation. At five we could enter the Palazzo Feltrinelli and Registration began – a whirlwind nightmare that left the office strewn with paper like a field after a festival. But by seven it was over, I had taken a most necessary shower and we were outside for our first *aperitivo* by the lake parapet: a magical moment when (in the long Gargnano twilight) everyone started to relax from their often long journeys and to gaze around at the beauties of the place. Dinner was at tables outside, and while we ate we watched the lightning of a distant storm somewhere on the Verona side of the lake, flickering away like a firework display in the next village.

Monday

Monday was more *afoso* (humid) but the rain kept off till the evening. Proceedings began with gently-spoken Jenni Calder on ‘Figures in a Landscape: Scott, Stevenson and Routes to the Past’. While both Scottish writers, she said, responded to the clear diversity of landscape in Scotland (onto which oppositions of characters, plot and cultures could easily be mapped), the half-century that divides them marks a clear change in approach. If for Scott the ‘other country’ of the past and the distant region was part of a ‘mythic history’ that he was attempting to recover, an area of wildness and danger, of the primitive and archaic, yet also vibrant and invigorating, for Stevenson the landscape is more hostile, a scene not for shared cultural history but for trials and personal development. So, while Scott describes Highlands and clan members organically united, Stevenson presents Cluny in *Kidnapped* as isolated and in a temporary construction, and in *Ballantrae* shows the American wilderness as harshly indifferent to human life.

A tanned and fast-speaking, yet relaxed Barry Menikoff came next, our guide to linguistic and cultural aspects of Chapter 25 of *Kidnapped*, ‘In Balquidder’. Here – and we couldn’t help feeling the continuity with what Jenni Calder had just been saying – Stevenson presents an uprooted society in a harsh environment: ‘small septs, and broken remnants, and what they call “chiefless

folk”, driven into the wild country’. Stevenson’s use of archaic terms, taken over from his historical sources, are a reminder of a culture that no longer exists. Later, with admirable economy, Stevenson sketches a whole scale of values in Robin’s enquiries about David’s family and in the aggressive yet also generous reactions of the highlanders in the bagpipe duel.

The question of Scotland’s divided relationship with England was central to Caroline McCracken-Flesher’s talk on ‘The Body Snatcher’. In this text, Stevenson presents the confrontation of Dr. MacFarlane (the wealthy and anglicised ‘London doctor’) and Fettes (the drunken Scotsman, familiarly known as ‘the Doctor’) in a protagonist-vs-double configuration that suggests (among other things) the anxieties of a Scottish elite in the face of a national identity that has been buried and repudiated as ‘Other’ yet walks, refuses to go away – with Fettes now taking the place of the original corpse last seen carried off crazily towards Edinburgh.

Coffee breaks were on the terrace: two tables with white tablecloths, cups, glasses, fruit juice, coffee- and tea-flasks, and a variety of home-made biscuits that I was never able to do justice to because of the flurry of conversation of those crowding round the tables or lounging against the lakeside railings. As we talked we could look around us and understand, by glances that informed as unconsciously as breathing, of the simple pleasure of living inside such a landscape: the way lake and mountains are always the same, always different.

After coffee came the contribution that required the fastest note-taking on my part, Jean-Pierre Naugrette’s densely-woven talk on ‘*The Master of Ballantrae*, or the writing of frost and stone’. Subtitled ‘A Winter’s Tale’, *Ballantrae* is dominated by winter, cold, ice and snow. A reference in the opening paragraph to the ‘many sad tales’ of ‘that winter’s journey’ reminds us not only of Shakespeare’s ‘a sad tale’s best for winter’ (and so of the subtitle of the tale) but also of Schubert’s *Winterreise* (which Stevenson was studying in this period). In a Borges-like way, Mackellar even quotes from

Stevenson's own poem 'To the Tune of Wandering Willie' (which, like several of the 'Songs of Travel', is reminiscent of poems in the Schubertian cycle). An associated lexical field is that of stone and petrification, in part related to male fear of the female Medusa, for while the men 'turn to stone', Alison maintains plasticity and even thrusts the sword into the frozen ground – 'a blunder', but then Naugrette reminded us that 'blunders are always correct' and Alison's gesture is 'true' even if impossible. Mackellar finally cuts his prose in stone, just as Stevenson 'graves' the epitaph for his grave in 'Requiem', a requiem about a requiem. The knotch cut by Billy Bones, Alison's thrust with the sword and Mackellar's chiselling of the epitaph all seem close to Stevenson's art writing as en-graving, writing as epitaph.

Manfred Malzahn's talk was in complete contrast, but showed that loosely-woven talks have their beauty too. His luggage being lost, he spoke without notes and in the red T-shirt that became a familiar sight in the first couple of days. Referring to Caroline McCracken-Flesher's point about Scotland being a 'buried corpse' he saw Stevenson's journey to the South Seas as a way of getting into contact with something that was alive. Was Stevenson participating in colonialism, though? Do his South Seas tales echo racist attitudes or are they a critique of racism? Certainly Scots were important agents of the British Empire, yet they have a double experience of being colonized as well as colonizing, and there is a Scottish cultural tradition of lack of pretentiousness and tolerance for others. We can see elements of this Scottish tradition embodied in Wiltshire in 'Falesá'. Wiltshire doesn't overcome racist feelings, but he learns to put individual loyalty above what he has been taught by culture. In the end, we cannot say that Stevenson was anti-colonialist, but (as with Twain) he was capable of imagining something more humane in his treatment of individual voices.

The interesting overlap between Scotland and the South Seas was continued in the last paper of this crowded morning by Ilaria Sborgi (a bright PhD student from Florence doing a thesis on Stevenson and South Seas fiction) entitled 'Colonial Laboratories: Stevenson's Unfinished Autopsy of the Other'. In mid-19th-century Britain a feeling of cultural and racial differences

combined with anxiety that the evolved races could easily revert to savagery. This provided the humus (in Brantlinger's thesis) for 'Imperial Gothic' fantasies, such as *Jekyll and Hyde*, where Hyde's behaviour can be seen as an urban version of 'going native'. The description of Hyde by a few telling details also resembles Lombroso's dissection of the physical traits that reveal a clear and distinctive propensity to crime. 'The Body Snatcher' and 'Falesá' can also be linked to the same anxieties – both have an openness of ending coupled with the return of the repressed (as Caroline McCracken-Flesher had just said): at the end of BS there is 'a wild yell', but we don't know who cries out; it's not clear if Macfarlane and Fettes have got the right body; and the gig with the copse careers towards Edinburgh, but we don't know what happens to it. In 'Falesá', the return of the repressed is the non-European body and the issue of race ('Where am I to find the whites?'). The open endings in these texts show that the body of the Other can be temporarily removed but not eliminated, the attempt to create boundaries by dividing and suppressing does not work in the end.

Lunch was a buffet eaten at the U-shaped arrangement of tables outside (the weather now was warm and overcast): simple, abundant dishes of cold pasta or risotto, salads, cheeses, salami and pies, with white and red wine. This was part of the magic of Gargnano: ending a session and stepping out to the flowery gravel terrace for coffee or lunch. The personnel of the Palazzo were also wonderfully efficient and yet also easy-going and pleasant. Hey, I want to live in this place!

Oliver Buckton's paper on 'Cruising with R. L. Stevenson: Leisure and Literary Labor in the South Seas' started the afternoon's Pacific-centred session. It opened with a theme that bounced around a number of other papers in the conference: the idea of pleasure in reading and writing. In fact cruising, travel for sensual pleasure, was associated with a new and fragmentary kind of writing in which travel writing and fiction come to be interdependent (as in the periodical publication, the South-Sea

reports were interrupted for ‘The Bottle Imp’). There was also a second theme to the talk, an examination of how the South Sea letters were quarried for fictional texts: the ‘Island Landfall’ that opens *In the South Seas* clearly lies behind the beginning of ‘Falesá’ and the arrival at ‘New Isle’ in *The Ebb Tide*. Another example is the affinity between King Tembimok and Attwater in *The Ebb Tide*: Tembimok fires a warning shot in the air like Attwater, who is a similar island-ruler, large and heavy and arbitrary in judgment.

Eric Massie’s paper comparing *Victory* and *The Ebb Tide* opened with an appeal to consider Stevenson on the same ‘strategic fault-line’ of Modernism as Conrad, despite a conventional view of the two writers as very different: Conrad as colonized Pole, Stevenson similar to Kipling. Yet as a Scot, Stevenson too was a member of a subaltern nation (as Manfred Malzahn had earlier pointed out). Both writers pursue similar themes in colonial settings, and Conrad is clearly influenced by Stevenson’s Attwater for his Kurtz and Heist. Stevenson’s colonial characters are very different from Kipling’s heroes: he makes clear the exploitation and damaging of local societies of these intruders who ‘carry activity and disseminate disease’. Both writers too use a symbolic and metaphoric mode of writing to make sense of a world in which certainties have disappeared.

During the coffee break Bob Turnbull took a photo of Oliver and Eric sitting relaxed at the back of the room by the open French window – both in open-necked light-blue shirts, the very picture of two conference-speakers happy that their talk is over.

The theme of attitudes to colonialism was continued after the break with Ralph Parfect’s paper on Stevenson’s attitude to violence in his South Seas works (*The Ebb Tide*, ‘Falesá’ and *In the South Seas*), in particular in relation to the eye: dominating gazes, threatening gazes, excluding stares, and (following Bataille) the eye as locus of both seductiveness and horror. Hostile gazes are often reinforced by the universal gaze of a harsh sun. And, as always in Stevenson, violence (and here, violence and the eye) is connected

with desire.

Ann C. Colley – in a cheerful yellow jacket, speaking in rhythmic and comforting phrases carried us gently to the end of the day's proceedings by telling us how Stevenson exploited the discontinuous island nights' lamplight and mingling of light, darkness and shadow as powerful symbols of imperfect knowledge and understanding. The Stevenson party themselves made light and shadows: they had cameras and flash equipment, 'made shadows' (silhouettes) to give as mementoes, and gave magic-lantern shows. The disconnected details revealed by partial lighting present a challenge of interpretation to the viewer in the fictional world and to the reader of the text. In Stevenson, darkness is the foundation of knowing and it is the obscure moment that brings significance.

At seven we had another *aperitivo* – and how pleasant it was it gather on the lakeside terrace before dinner for a drink together – this time for the inauguration of the Mirando Haz exhibition of etchings inspired mainly by *Jekyll and Hyde*: a series of grotesque nightmare visions not without irony and points of campish humour. The humid air of the last two days then resolved itself in a sharp shower of rain and for dinner we ate in the semi-basement dining room under the lecture room: pasta, followed by a buffet of local cheeses and accompanying wines – the *vezzena stravecchio* was especially good: a fissured mature cheese from Trentino of golden orangey-yellow with a fine *profumo* (also included in the lunchtime buffets) that was among the many memorable things of the conference. As we came out up onto the terrace again after dinner, the rain had stopped and, in the washed air, the points of light low on the Verona shore twinkled strongly against the black of Monte Baldo.

Tuesday

Tuesday morning greeted us with sparkling sunlight, the pale green leaves and pastel-coloured flowers of the oleanders brighter and

clearer than the day before. The morning wind drove waves constantly lapping against the shore so that our wide terrace seemed magically transformed into a raft, the motion of which, by some strange trick of habit, we no longer perceived.

The conference session devoted to *Jekyll and Hyde* was opened by Linda Dryden on Stevenson's narrative in the context of contemporary perceptions of London. The size and population of London caused alarm, as did the opportunities that this divided and labyrinthine area gave for crimes, committed both by an underclass and by apparently respectable gentlemen. Hyde, like Jack the Ripper, is able to disappear into this frightening 'City of Dreadful Night'. Fiction and reality merge a few years later when *Jekyll and Hyde* is evoked in discussions of the Ripper murders. This was a strong presentation of the usefulness for interpretation of seeing historical London (rather than a 'transposed Edinburgh') as the imaginative and symbolic setting for Stevenson's tale. But this is one (as they say) that will run and run.

Richard Walker came next – in black Existentialist (or Armani?) T-shirt – speaking fluently without notes accompanied by a fine range of rhetorical gestures (grasping at a thought, balancing concepts, indicating the subtle point). The stable/unstable middle-class world of *Jekyll and Hyde* pervades Victorian culture, even the Great Exhibition, apparently establishing a monolithic bourgeois identity, takes place within an avant-garde and moveable structure of glass. Wordsworth's idea that art should be sincere, natural and ethical is undermined in the second half of the century. Though Wordsworth and Arnold admit to feelings of doubleness, they still search for a single authentic self. The possibility of sincerity is clearly challenged by Rimbaud's 'Je est un autre'; and art was detached from ethics and to become a pleasurable activity (Stevenson himself declares that a writer is like a prostitute). In Dallamora's terms, Hyde is a dandy (of the cool Satanic type) who invents himself, lives for the fleeting moment, and challenges bourgeois stability. He is also a Satanic literary critic, scrawling blasphemous comments on a 'pious work', impatient with fake sincerity like some angry, avant-garde writer.

In *Jekyll and Hyde* Stevenson undermines ethic-aesthetic Victorian coherence and paves the way for Modernism.

Jane Rago, a PhD student from West Virginia University, finished off this excellent series of talks by examining *Jekyll and Hyde* as a 'Men's Narrative of Perversion and Containment'. While Utterson, Lanyon and Jekyll represent the homosocial professional world which asserts the right to examine, analyse and define reality through the authority of their written texts, Hyde threatens this. Attempts to identify the marks of otherness and degeneracy are undermined because Hyde is also similar to the group of professionals: he is a gentleman who can be threatened with scandal (he is 'my gentleman' for Enfield, while the wild 'others' are the women). The professionals agree on aspects of themselves remaining invisible and unsaid, yet Hyde's *refusal* to remain hidden leads to the hysterical text of attempted professional containment (containment in an impersonal 'case', as someone pointed out in the discussion afterwards).

This brought us to the coffee break when once again we moved out onto the gravel terrace – not a vast crowd, more a 'happy few' – gathering round the tables in a hubbub of conversation, exchanging views about the talks or the weather (would it rain for the *cena sociale?*), or leaning against the parapet to form a frieze of moving figures against the background of the shining lake. And, hooray! the two missing suitcases had finally been delivered and Manfred Malzahn appeared on stage, visibly refreshed and in a new change of clothes.

The Masculinity session was opened by Dennis Denisoff (in grey open-necked shirt) on 'Ageist Masculinity in Stevenson's Stories'. Stevenson, he informed us, rebelled against the Victorian masculine ideal of the mature gentleman (virile in his self-mastery and restraint, powerful in his ability to define what was real and important) by emphasizing boyishness, unfixed identity, ambiguity, and an absence of constraint by economic and social imperatives. In *The New Arabian Nights*, for example, we have a series of

dandies and aesthetes ('poetical boys') who are 'sick of the performance' they are expected to keep up all their lives. Florizel, 'Bohemian' in his rejection of middle-class masculinity, makes use of the rhetoric of the gentleman, but does so to show it to be completely empty.

Next came Luisa Villa from Genoa University (in elegant black dress with white stripes) whose talk centred on the father-son conflict. Alan Mintz in his 1985 historical study of the Victorian family (which includes a chapter on the Stevensons) remarks on the ritualistic nature of Victorian quarrels with fathers, on how differences over religion were often chosen as a 'safe ground' for conflict, in order to avoid the tensions generated by the son's economic independence and the erosion of the father's authority. In Stevenson's case, paternal authority must have been weakened by Thomas Stevenson's greatest failure, the collapse of the Wick harbour wall, followed scarcely a month later by the pivotal father-son quarrel. Here the shapeless feminine sea overcomes the patriarch it as later does in 'The Merry Men'. In this story, and in Stevenson's later series of criminal father-figures, anger at patriarchy is expressed without challenging its structures, since the more virtuous sons are ready to take over. In later narratives, generational ethical roles are reversed or more nuanced – typical Stevensonian twists and reversals, calling into question the oppositions of good and bad. Even the theory of being submerged in romance 'as by a billow' implies an abandonment of binary ethical distinctions and a flirting with the female element of water.

The session was rounded off by Martin Danahay, bearded, jolly and (the helpful revelations of conferences) unexpectedly English (though teaching in Texas). He started with the provocative idea that *Fight Club* is the most authentic film version of *Jekyll and Hyde*. Even the admired Mamoulian version is in the Mansfield romanticized tradition, with Jekyll played by a box-office star and Hyde an expression of sex and violence. In contrast, in *Fight Club*, Jack, the conformist consumer, takes on the identity of Durdon to enter a squalid male environment and reclaim his masculinity. Durdon and Hyde are rebels against the emasculated male professional world (and Stevenson too – as

Stephen Arata has reminded us – was anxious about entering the world of the professional writer): Durdon blows up a credit-card company, Hyde puts Jekyll's 'credit' at risk. The film, like Stevenson's narrative, asks disturbing questions about the relation between men and violence that are, however, left unresolved.

After the lunch-break we had a session of two papers mainly devoted to short stories and essays, starting with Michela Vanon from Venice (her shoulder-length blonde hair set off well by a striking red dress) on 'Markheim'. Important literary influences on the tale are Shakespeare (Macbeth's hesitation to act, his awareness that the act cannot be undone), Hogg (the murderer's self-justification), and Dostoevsky (the Raskolnikov figure). The moral dualism acquired from Stevenson's upbringing is used here as a tool of psychological penetration (and self-analysis, given that the character has the same age as the author). In a modern way that reminds us of writers like Camus and Kafka, man is shown to be a stranger to himself, with inevitably ambiguous motivations and a drive to self-annihilation.

Next followed an interesting study of *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* (1882) by Liz Farr (who has the fortune of teaching by the seaside in Devon). The collection was seen in the context of the work of two influential periodical editors with whom Stevenson worked, John Morley (*Pall Mall Gazette* and *Macmillan's Magazine*) and Leslie Stephen (*The Cornhill Magazine*), both of whom also edited biographical series ('English Men of Letters' and *The Dictionary of National Biography*). Both favoured a scientific and moral approach to biographical writing that Stevenson actually undermined in his essays, which are openly impressionistic and subjective, refusing to make moral judgements.

Nathie Jaëck (combining charm and intelligence as always – but I should declare here that I am the founder member of the Nathalie Jaëck Fan Club) took us up to the break with a dense and fascinating talk about Stevenson's tendency to multiply and scatter the text. Zola wanted language to be a transparent glasshouse to view reality, but for Stevenson the text is more a self-fertilizing greenhouse. Lawyer guardians try to enclose and control language

and would like a reading of unequivocal 'baldness', yet the texts proliferate out of their control: the Captain's bundle is dismembered into map and book; 'several enclosures' fall from Utterson's envelope; M'Brair's single strong text-wrapper reveals a collection of odds and ends. Within these texts, authoritative omniscience is defeated as narrators multiply; texts enclose texts (as spaces enclose spaces in Jekyll's house and the Suicide Club building). Mackellar reveals his own unreliability and comments on that of others – until his own text is cut short by a higher-level editor ('R.L.S.') in an destabilizing footnote printed in italics. Subjectivity is shown to be inevitable, textual integrity a myth. Stevenson's stories become 'textual adventures' – proliferating, opaque, a rhizome, their own reflective subject, the real treasure to be found. The heterogeneous textual fragments, full of blank spaces, show there is no authoritative verticality: the text becomes level with itself, an opaque surface to be explored in all directions.

After the coffee break and our renewed contact with sunlight, water and the now-familiar forms of mountains, we returned for a session on biography. This was billed as an informal 'causerie': in retrospect this would only have worked with a skilled 'interviewer' in the chair. To imagine that we could improvise an entirely new type of conference-contribution genre was, I now see, expecting too much. Instead we heard Yoshida Midori, Clotilde De Stasio and Jenni Calder, one after the other (and nothing wrong with that), on their experience in writing about the life of Stevenson. Particularly interesting was the first contribution from Yoshida Midori, not only for what she said about writing her biography in Japanese (illustrated with her own calligraphy-brush drawings, as we could see in a display copy in the book exhibition upstairs – giving us an immediate idea of things familiar seen from a different cultural perspective), but also for the gentle and kindly manner in which she said it. At the end, pointing out affinities between Stevenson and Japanese culture, she introduced us to Kaneko Misuzu (1903-1930), who wrote poems (apparently 'for children' but also for adults) using nursery-rhyme forms and simple language that are reminiscent of Stevenson's *Child's Garden*

of Verses. As this contribution ended I was called out to the office for some small emergency, now completely forgotten, but which unfortunately kept me there till after the end of the other two contributions. My apologies for this – this is not an objective report, but a more informal narration of what I saw and heard (and can remember).

Tuesday was the night of the *cena sociale*, and the prayers of the organizers were answered when, despite distant rumbles of thunder from beyond Monte Gargnano at lunchtime, the weather remained fine and we were able to eat – by candle light – on the lakeside terrace. The meal was excellent, the main dish being the local lake fish *coregone*, which has a mild but distinct taste and is easily filleted, cooked *in crosta di patate* (wrapped in very thin slices of potato and then baked). Halfway through, Jenni Calder presented the two organizers with a small thank-you present each (a bottle of whisky – later shared with those who stayed on that evening). Then I stood up with Francesca Cuojati to read, in alternating Italian and English, Michele Mari's invocation of Stevenson from 'Otto scrittori' as a toast 'to the memory of' – it didn't go down as well as I had thought (I faithfully record failures as well as successes), but I've just about got over the disappointment now. As with all good meals of this kind there was visiting between tables and temporary changes of place, with the additional pleasure that here we could go to the lake railing to hear the water lapping and see the line of lights along the opposite shore. At one point a ragged opening in the clouds showed a sailing moon – the moon which never once during our stay rose from behind Monte Baldo to shine its rippling reflections on the lake. Too refined for such a cheap romantic effect perhaps? Well, maybe next time.

Wednesday

Alan Sandison (in a tartan shirt and speaking without mike)

reminded us that Richard Le Gallienne had predicted that Stevenson's 'final fame will be that of the essayist'. A comparison with Musil is useful to show the attraction for both writers of this literary form, by its very nature incomplete and fragmentary. [A gust of wind slams a door.] Another writer with a similar temperament is Barthes (the most committed essayist of our time), who for Sontag is essentially 'an aphorist' because he emphasizes 'the design of thought'. This might be applied to Stevenson too, a writer ever aware of form who in his essays foregrounds taste and subjectivity and revels in the freedom given by the essayist's amateur status. The essays which Musil incorporates into his major work is in harmony with his basic world-view, emphasizing the mobility and incompleteness of personality and perceived phenomena [the note-taker here is aware of the luminous room in which we are sitting with open French window to the lake] and is opposed to the despotic reductionism of philosophers. The affinities with Stevenson are easy to see. [Here the speaker receives a time reminder which he calls 'a black spot'.] Stevenson too is 'a master of the hovering life' who views with suspicion those, like Attwater, who have no doubts. Both writers are sceptics attracted instead to ideas embedded in lived experience.

Should the American cinema ever need a modern Gary Cooper, the next speaker, Dan Balderston, would fit the bill: tall, with blond moustache, softly-spoken, polite. He was an especially welcome speaker, bringing the point-of-view of a Spanish literature specialist to the conference. He started by telling us how both Borges and Bioy Casares were enthusiastic readers of Stevenson and in 1943 included an episode from *Ballantrae* in their anthology of 'the best detective stories' with the supplied title of 'La puerta y el pino'. (The same extract was included in another detective story anthology edited by Dorothy Sayers, this time with the title 'Is That Murder?') The narrative in question is notably enigmatic, leaving the reader to fill in the gaps. The idea of 'murder by suggestion' in this story is used by in three stories by Borges, but the closest parallel with the *Ballantrae* story is found in Bioy's *El sueño de los heroes* (1954): here, Gauna's dream, like the count's, spurs the victim on to his death. The sinister Valerga, who turns out to be brave, causes the death of Gauna, who is good, but

a bit ridiculous (in a way similar to James and Henry Durie). Stevenson's ambiguity appealed to Borges and Bioy and anticipates their experiments in fiction.

Wendy Katz (shoulder-length blonde hair; loose red blouse), spoke next on Stevenson and America (the subject of a larger study that she is making). The USA certainly influenced Stevenson's writing: Furnas talks of the 'new energy' of the American travel writings, Noble talks of him reaching a 'maturity' through his American experiences. *The Amateur Emigrant* involves the crossings of multiple boundaries. This account of his own experiences was also partly shaped by Whitman and Thoreau: recurrent images of sunrise and dawn in these writers associated with New World optimism are taken up by Stevenson in his description of sunrise at the arrival in California in *AE* and his optimistic 'dawning of the stars' at the end of *The Silverado Squatters*. Another influence can be seen in the generous Whitmanesque appreciation and understanding of ordinary lives of the fellow passengers on ship and train, and the Thoreau-like exultation in independence and the emphasis on the pleasure of simple physical activities in *SS* (where the description of 'visitors' to the camp is also very reminiscent of *Walden*). Even the language has Whitmanesque cadences in the litany of place-names and the proverb-like overviews of human life.

After the coffee break Ann Lawson Lucas, looking somewhat like the leonine Fanny Stevenson in the Samoa and Sydney photographs, told us about the tradition of piracy in European literature, *Treasure Island*, and the Italian literary tradition. In Italian literature Salgari's pirates 'il Corsaro Nero' (1898) and Sandokan (1883-4) are ambivalent and transgressive aristocrats, who also both fall in love with the daughter of their antagonist. Sandokan's island of Mompracem is different from *Treasure Island* – no folk-story movement from home to adventure and back to home, but a to-ing and fro-ing with no clear culmination. In the twentieth century, Calvino, who made intertextuality his literary trademark, wrote his second novel (*Il visconte dimezzato*) as a variation on *Jekyll and Hyde*, and in his first novel *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (1947) has

numerous references to *Treasure Island*: the Resistance partisans are brave fighters but like pirates they are misfits and undisciplined, isolated in the mountains like Silver's crew on the island; they have a cook, Mancino, with a bird – a hawk called Babeuf (the parrot is Mancino himself, always repeating Trotskyite slogans); and there is a treasure (a buried gun), treacherously dug up. *Treasure Island* does not obviously lie behind Salgari's pirate tales (the affinity could depend on common sources and the same fin-de-siècle moral ambiguity), while it does clearly lie behind Calvino's *Sentiero*.

Two new PhDs ended the morning. First, a sprightly Olena Turnbull (drawn-back hair, a navy-blue suit for the occasion) talked of 'Stevenson and Nineteenth-Century Theories of Evolution'. For Stevenson, constant variety was the essence of both life and art and it was from this perspective that he opposed evolution theory as a new inflexible doctrine. Scientific ideas could never be sufficient guides in life anyway: they could not provide an answer to the problems of existence; they are idealizations (the physical world does not behave like an ideal machine); and in the end they must needs be expressed in imperfect language. His basic religious feeling about a final dignity and inner essence of mankind also led him to oppose Naturalism with its view of life as merely an objective phenomenon. In a way, his very variety of styles is a statement against the inevitable superiority of one type, and *Ballantrae*, which might seem to be dark and pessimistic, is also a celebration of heterogeneity and an argument against simple interpretation and in favour of the centrality of chance. He was, however, interested in evolutionist ideas (cf *Jekyll and Hyde*), and saw them as contributing to a partial understanding of our 'rough but noble universe'. Man, however, is strangely capable of ideals, and this is an important part of the man's suffering 'surely not all in vain'.

The last talk of the morning and of the day was Julia Reid, who gave a talk related to her Oxford D. Phil on Stevenson and the evolutionary sciences. In the 1880s, Stevenson wrote a series of essays in which he argued for the connection of modern individuals with early evolutionary states. In contrast to the evolutionary scientists Spencer and Tylor, however, he did not see human development as a story of progress from savagery to

civilisation. Instead, he saw the creative unconscious as gaining new life from a renewed contact with 'the sincerity of savage life', to counter 'the comfortable fictions of the civilised'. The serious modern novel, he argued, is the product of degeneration from the oral tale, but the romance still has the power to touch the reader's atavistic instincts. 'A Chapter on Dreams' argues for the persistence of pre-civilized states of consciousness and explores the affinities of dreams, myths and the literary imagination (and against the idea of a fully rationalized consciousness). Hence Stevenson's originality: his rejection of any idea of gradual progress in psychological history, and his celebration of primitive states of consciousness. For him there were no clear boundaries between savagery and civilization, low and high culture, the unconscious and the conscious mind.

Wednesday was our day with a free afternoon: some took the ferry to the Sirmione peninsula with its Roman villa and its grove of twisted age-old olive trees; others took the ferry to Malcesine and then the cable car to the top of Monte Baldo; some drove up to Limone and Riva or down to Verona; Stephen Arata had the good idea of going to Gardone to visit the poet d'Annunzio's excessive and obsessive 'Vittoriale' home and self-memorial. I went with a small group up the mountainside, a walk of just under two hours, to the farmhouse of San Gaudenzio, described by D.H. Lawrence in *Twilight in Italy*. There we met Germana Capelli, an elderly countrywoman, a person from another era in the simplicity of her home and the unselfconscious way she chatted to us about the house, her life, and her family. As we sat in the shade of the pergola in the courtyard to recover from the hot climb, she brought us glasses of water. A man came by in working clothes; 'That's my cousin' she said; 'The good-looking one!' he called out humorously over his shoulder. We then went in to see the room described by Lawrence in 'Il Ballo', and I read a paragraph about the dance and the amateur musicians. After this we went down the slope to the old *limonaia* where Lawrence started writing *The Rainbow*, with a view, when he looked up from the page, of the lake far below and the Verona mountains on the other side.

Yoshida Midori had remained behind to do a brush-sketch of the courtyard, so when we came back up and told her of the ruin and the wonderful view she went down for a quick look, but didn't have time to sketch the place. It was the following day that she told Manfred Malzahn about it and he offered to give her a lift there so she could make the additional drawings. This visit is described in Manfred's touching 'Taking Pictures in Muslone'.

That evening Dick Ringler gave us a version of a talk on Father Damien, Stevenson and Joseph Dutton. Illustrated with a continuous sequence of slides (including one of a younger Dick Ringler, Karen and children in Hawaii) this was a study of Dutton, a man who went to the dogs after a short and unsuccessful marriage, became a workaholic, then an alcoholic (a transition relatively easy for the manager of a distillery), but then finally succeeded in pulling himself together. He became an Anglican then a Catholic priest before going out to work as a missionary for the rest of his life with Father Damien, continuing to run the leper colony after the latter's death: it was he who greeted Stevenson when he came on his visit. Dutton was clearly a man with problems yet managed with great effort to overcome his dysfunctional state. A memorable talk.

Thursday

'A tangible air of sadness' was what Eric Massie said as he joined us at the breakfast table on Thursday morning, and we all had to agree. As with all periods of experienced time, the passing of the halfway mark had caused a subtle change: time was no longer carrying us into the centre of our stay but gently towards its end.

We had a full day ahead, however, and Stephen Arata started it off in fine form with a talk that seemed to exemplify itself some of the poetry of existence that it discussed. The subject was 'mental abstraction, idleness, reverie and pleasure' in the writings of

Stevenson and Morris and their relation to late nineteenth-century theories of reading. In *An Inland Voyage* (1878), Stevenson describes the ‘apotheosis of stupidity’, a state ‘between sleeping and waking’ brought on by the repeated yet purposeful activity of paddling. Similarly, Morris in 1880s essays and *News from Nowhere* (1890) praises the state relaxed, diffused attention and ‘repose amidst of energy’ of the directed body-and-mind activity of craftwork. Both writers place importance on activity not uniquely centred on one simple end, unlike the tedious tasks of industrial production where a simple activity (paradoxically) leads to disattention. Stevenson calls into question the ideology of work, though in a less overtly political way, in ‘An Apology for Idlers’ (1877). Both writers are opposed to the professionalization of reading, then beginning to be seen as work for trained readers of new ‘serious’ novels. But while Morris composed poems while weaving, Stevenson worked hard at stylistic perfection of writing that rewards close attention yet at the same time seems to discourage it, in favour of a playful relationship in which reading is a pleasure not a task.

Next came the most humorous talk of the conference, from Robert Louis Abrahamson: blond beard, light linen waistcoat and plum-coloured shirt, a master of the dramatic pause and the admonitory index. An opening quotation created a link with the previous talk: Stevenson compares Henry James’s detached style of reading and his own practice of ‘living *in* a book’, entering it (leaving behind one’s normal consciousness) as ‘a house of life’. We were all impressed, then, by the speaker’s exposition of how much Stevenson read (the six-volume *Bragelonne* ‘five or six times’, *Huck Finn* four times) and the range of authors he was able to quote *en passant*. We are also struck by his enthusiasm: while capable of sophisticated and objective criticism, the final response is always in the language of personal experience. For him, reading involved crossing a boundary from the self to the other, eliminating the ego in order to be refined in an almost mystical way. The good reader (like one of Stevenson’s own heroes) encounters ‘the other’ and locates meaning and value in personal experience not in conventional morality. The cheerful banter and emotional effusion of his remarks about reading are

encouragements to face the challenge and the purifying ordeal of escaping the boundaries of the self.

The first part of the morning ended with Glenda Norquay (slight Scottish accent, in a simple but elegant long grey shirt over a black T-shirt) who talked about Stevenson's ambivalent attitudes towards professional and popular writing with reference to *Treasure Island*. Opening with a report on a dispute in *The Academy* in 1900 on the circumstances of the writing of *Treasure Island* that displayed a desire by Colvin and others to distance it from popular works and the system of commercial production, she went on to point out the more complicated stance of Stevenson himself in his writings on his own books. In 'My First Book' he recognizes influences on *TI*, yet his ability to recognize them keeps him on a high literary plane. In 'Popular Authors' he accepts the pleasure of commercial art, but stays at an amused distance: he does not include the popular *Tom Holt's Log* in the influences on *TI* despite a number of affinities, nor does he mention its elements of textual sophistication. In the 'Epilogue' to *The Wrecker* we find a similar ambiguity: he presents it as an example of the popular thriller yet points out the limitations of the genre. The 1924 preface to *The Wrecker*, Lloyd Osbourne presents writing as a pastime not a trade: like Colvin in 1900, he wanted to maintain boundaries that Stevenson himself was always crossing and recrossing.

Francesca Cuojati opened the last section of the morning with a talk on the 1968 TV adaptation of *The Black Arrow*, an important milestone in the history of Italian TV drama, and part of Anton Giulio Majano's Stevenson trilogy of Stevenson adaptations, together with *Treasure Island* and *The Master of Ballantrae*. Speaking in the pool of light of the computer projection, she first sketched the cultural and television context before going on to discuss aspects of Majano's transcodification. Of particular interest was his desire to find equivalences for the 'stylistic stringency' of the text. The insanity of war, the highlighting of the victims of violence and the terror induced by Gloucester were themes clearly influenced by the cultural context of the time.

The next talk, by Stephen Donovan, was an overview of

Stevenson's attitudes towards popular entertainment. Though the expansion of popular entertainment in the late-19th century was often seen as a threat, Stevenson saw it as valuable because of its links to the instinctive imaginative life. His own works have affinities with popular text-types (*New Arabian Nights* and *Jekyll and Hyde*) and they also contain numerous references to popular genres (e.g. Davis singing music-hall songs in *The Ebb Tide*). Above all, in his narratives Stevenson emphasizes the importance of staging and performance in human interaction and perception. In an 1874 letter that Donovan has discovered to 8-year-old May Johnson in Menton, Stevenson thanks her because 'the sight of you / Makes me glad' and suggests that 'some fine day... It may make you glad to know / You gave pleasure long ago' and 'It may make you glad to see / How your childhood... / Was pure delight to me.' Apart from the interesting affinities of this with the later *Child's Garden* verses, here is the artist playing a game and assuming a childlike role by himself trying to give simple pleasure. Contemporaries saw popular entertainment as infantile, Stevenson sees its childishness as the source of its great value: writers express the daydreams of common men, also found in child's play and popular entertainment, and create the precious experience of 'pure delight'.

We then left the conference room and moved in groups to the terrace or lakeside streets of the little town, into the sunlight, for our last lunch together.

The next two papers involved economic issues, starting with bearded and bespectacled Gordon Hirsch who informed us of the financial and cultural background to *The Wrong Box*, the farcical text which contains a criticism of a new commercial culture yet also betrays some personal doubts by the writers about their own position in this. The 'tontine' was actually not a 17th-century historical curiosity, but a matter of current concern at the time of writing, since from 1867 US (and then British) life insurance companies had been offering policies where payment of dividends was deferred for up to twenty years and were lost to those who died or allowed their policies to lapse in the meantime, thus holding out the chance of huge payments to those who survived.

By the 1880s the inequitable gambling element in these schemes (which had actually become the most popular form of life insurance) was beginning to be harshly criticized in the press. Stevenson and Osbourne took the tontine system as a symbol of greedy competition and the replacement of traditional family ties with market forces. The corpse becomes a kind of family capital of varying value to the aspiring heirs; crimes are committed for the sake of an inheritance – all this in an urban context of young men struggling to earn a living while retaining some ideals.

Quietly-spoken Robbie Goh from Singapore University came next, talking about linguistic and commercial interaction across cultural boundaries. Stevenson, as we know had an ambiguous attitude towards money: the artist should not think of profit and has a social and ethical duty to be a good influence on others, yet at the same time money is necessary and an author has to be read in order to be a good influence. For him both linguistic and financial exchange involve reciprocal negotiations (Adam Smith's 'sympathy') and took place in spaces crossed by cultural boundaries. In 'Falesá', Case has linguistic abilities and cultural knowledge but no values, so he uses his abilities merely to exploit others. He meets his end by accepting the dehumanising logic of profit (treating women as a commodity, for example), while Wiltshire is redeemed through his emotional relationship with Uma. Despite his prejudices, Wiltshire has a degree of open-minded acceptance of local culture and is willing to negotiate. Stevenson sometimes depicts failure of intercourse, yet does not see individuals as necessarily imprisoned in one language and culture; like Wiltshire he is ready to explore the possibility of narrative, imaginative and social exchanges.

Then came the last coffee break: the delicious home-made biscuits, the steaming black coffee contrasting with white cups and white tablecloth; the flowers, the view of mountains and clouds and water.

Richard Ambrosini (tall, impassioned) then wrapped it all up with

a talk with the same title as the conference itself. Stevenson's textual boundary-crossings have played a part in his critical history since, being difficult to fix into schemes, he has been marginalized by critics. In his little more than 20 years as a writer he passed from debonair author of Hazlett-style essays to creator of the first colonial novel, and linking artistic prose with works of politics and anthropology. This elusive nature as a writer is an asset: more properly, he is not a marginal, but a liminal writer, one who opens door after door. In his career he crosses four main thresholds. 1) The first is the transition from the essay to narrative prose, after a decade of perfecting an elegant prose style, refusing to enter the world of the three-volume novel, and working instead through his essays on a poetics of prose. 2) The second is the sea-change of the transatlantic crossing. His observations of the function of pleasure-inducing stories for the suffering emigrants led to his 'Gossip on Romance' in which he sees narrative as 'the apotheosis of the day-dreams of common men', then to the actual writing of *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped* (where he uses anthropological cultural divisions to talk of doubling). 3) The third boundary-crossing is marked by the twelve essays for Scribner's (1888), which carry forward his thoughts on popular narratives with epical value. 4) But his most important boundary crossing was the move to the South Seas, leaving the boundaries of the Roman Empire, questioning his previous identity as an artist. After collecting Polynesian myths and tales he returned to the barbaric origins of European culture and depicts its present-day shabby colonial manifestations

At the following business-meeting we agreed to hold a biennial series of conferences and agreed that the next one should be in North America, though it was sad to turn down the proposal made by Karen Steele of Samoa – supported by Alan Sandison, but generally considered too risky for a second conference and unlikely to attract graduate students. In the lack of any definite offer of a North American university, a small conference committee was co-opted to examine the matter and ensure that the meeting be renewed in 2004.

At seven came our *aperitivo d'addio* and then the last dinner together on the terrace, during which Barry Menikoff, standing in a line of light that crossed the gravel, gave an impromptu speech that linked his own history with that of Stevenson and then went on to outline not only Stevenson's long apprenticeship towards a mastery of style but also his stoical human qualities. Barry will forgive me if I give no more details: I was not taking notes and if I have forgotten some of what he said, I have forgotten too the exact quality of the light or temperature of the air, or whether there was a slight breeze or still air. All I can say is that the setting was perfect – what is more *struggente* (heart-rending) than a last dinner together in the shadows of a late summer evening – and Barry's talk perfectly fitted the setting.

Another memory to take home was that of general feeling of shared interest and enthusiasm and a conviction, amid the busy days and conversations of the conference, that our Stevenson project will be carried on further: it was a slight, but exhilaratingly definite, sense of forward movement, as at the departure of a sailing ship.

And who will forget the surroundings: the gradations of grey clouds, the hillsides (silhouetted, sunlit or mistily distant), and the changing spectacle of the water (blue, white, black, shining or opaque), its wandering windways, its apparent river-flow at dusk, and its golden spangled surface in the morning. And who will forget the sunrise from behind Monte Baldo: a flash, a sunburst and a path of golden light across the lake, with drifts of softer sunlight sent in streams across the upper slopes and irregularly through declivities to right and left. A beautiful place. A memorable conference.