



Journal of Stevenson Studies Volume 9







Editors

Professor Linda Dryden
Centre for Literature and
Writing
School of Arts and Creative
Industries
Napier University
Craighouse
Edinburgh
EH10 5LG
Scotland
Tel: 0131 455 6128
Email: l.dryden@napier.ac.uk

Professor Emeritus
Roderick Watson
English Studies
University of Stirling
Stirling
FK9 4LA
Scotland
Tel: 01786 467500
Email: r.b.watson@virgin.net

Contributions to volume 10 are warmly invited and should be sent to either of the editors listed above. The text should be submitted in MS WORD files in MHRA format. All contributions are subject to review by members of the Editorial Board.

Published by
The Centre for Scottish Studies
University of Stirling

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ISSN: 1744-3857
Printed and bound in the UK by
Antony Rowe Ltd.
Chippenham, Wiltshire.





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Editorial

Our thanks go to Robert-Louis Abrahamson and Richard Dury who have been the guest editors of this special issue of the *Journal of Stevenson Studies*, which is entirely dedicated to Stevenson's work as an essayist. As they say in their introduction they are both involved in editing volumes dealing with Stevenson's essays for the New Edinburgh Edition of his works, and this project will undoubtedly bring much-needed attention to the essays along with new and rewarding critical insights. The present issue of the journal is already an example of just how much is to be gained by a renewed critical focus on the essays, and we are indebted to Dury and Abrahamson for this initiative. In fact, with this in mind, we would like to encourage Stevenson scholars to consider taking on, or proposing guest editorships in their turn, if there is a particular theme in Stevenson studies that they would wish to explore in any future dedicated issue.

On the international front, professor Roslyn Jolly has posted an invitation for papers for the 7th biennial International Stevenson Conference, which will be held at the University of New South Wales from 8th to 10th July 2013. It seems likely that volume 11 of the *Journal* will contain papers from this event, continuing a tradition that goes back to the first such conference in Stirling in the year 2000. The topic for the 2013 conference will be 'Stevenson, Time and History'.

Readers should know that the *Journal of Stevenson Studies* is now available online through EBSCO, starting with volume 8. Previous numbers will still be available online (and current issues after two years) on the Stevenson website located at Napier University. Nevertheless, we would still like to encourage readers to place an order at their own institution for hard copy versions of the *Journal*.

Finally, it is with great pleasure that we announce that Edinburgh Napier University has taken possession of the bulk of





the Ernest Mehew collection, with other items being lodged at the National Library of Scotland. For over sixty years Ernest Mehew collected a huge library of Stevensoniana, some which may be very rare. This now amounts to around 2000 books and journals as well as copies of letters and other materials. In due course the collection will be housed in a special room, dedicated to Robert Louis Stevenson, within Edinburgh Napier's Merchiston Library. Eventually a plaque for the room will acknowledge the tireless work of Ernest Mehew and his wife, Joyce, in preserving these items for posterity. It is anticipated that the Edinburgh Napier collection will be available to scholars in the autumn of 2013, once funding has been secured for the housing and curating of the bequest. Linda Dryden would especially like to thank Nick Rankin and the Ernest Mehew Estate for the enormous effort that went into ensuring that this collection was finally delivered in its entirety to Edinburgh. It is entirely fitting that Mehew's bequest will now be permanently situated in the city of Stevenson's birth.

Roderick Watson and Linda Dryden





Stevenson the essayist

Robert-Louis Abrahamson
Richard Dury

The contributions to this issue of the *Journal of Stevenson Studies* all address some aspect of Stevenson's essays. As guest editors, along with Lesley Graham and Alex Thomson, we are editing Stevenson's essays in five volumes for the New Edinburgh Edition. The four of us have been working together on the project for the last few years, discussing the essays with others in the 'ReadingRLS' internet forum and speaking with each other often several times a week via Skype. Volume 1, prepared by Abrahamson, will present the 1881 text of *Virginibus Puerisque*; Volume 2, prepared by Abrahamson and Dury, will contain *Familiar Studies of Men and Books*; Volume 3, by Thomson, *Memories and Portraits*; Volume 4, by Dury, *Uncollected Essays, 1871-80*; Volume 5, Graham, *Uncollected Essays 1881-94*.

In the context of this work, it made sense to propose a whole issue of the *JSS* to the essays, both to assess what aspects of Stevenson's essays are currently engaging the attention of scholars and critics and to open up new areas of discussion. The call for papers brought forth a good crop of proposals, eleven of which survived to this publication. These gave us an immediate picture of current interests: no proposal concentrated on the 1870s essays (representing almost exactly half of Stevenson's 100-odd published essays) and no fewer than three proposals focussed on one essay, 'Popular Authors' (one of the proposers was persuaded to widen his approach and the two others that remain are interestingly complementary). This gives us a hint of current interest in non-canonical 'popular' texts and suggests an uneasiness among literary critics as to how to approach the genre.

Two of the pieces included in this issue, however, offer some clues as to how to talk about essays in their own right: Thomson





focusses on the interesting self-reflexivity of the familiar essayist and Dury looks at how to read the essay as performance. The relative blindness to the 1870s essays (which, however, are dealt with at length on the overview contributions of the two guest editors) suggests that there is a persistence of certain commonplaces about the early essays: that they are merely stylistic exercises of no intrinsic interest, that they are either heavy sermonising or else mere light humour.

Nevertheless, the guest editors are pleased with the general coverage of the contributions (over eighty of Stevenson's hundred-odd published essays are cited at least once) and with the interesting way the papers on the later essays fall into examinations of aesthetic and ethical aspects, giving us a confirmation of these two centres of Stevenson's interests. The present collection constitutes certainly the lengthiest study of Stevenson's essays yet published, and we hope this will open up a way for critics to talk about them, not merely in an instrumental way, when explaining the narrative works or the historical context of when they were written (revealing though these approaches are), but also in their own right as interesting literary works and memorable reading experiences. The eleven contributions gathered here fall fairly easily into groups, providing an organising shape for the present issue.

First come two overviews of Stevenson's essays. Abrahamson looks at the publishing history and the context of the literary marketplace in the production of the essays, emphasising the importance of contacts and social structures, and Dury identifies some typical qualities and individual techniques of Stevenson's essay style. He considers why 'style' seems important when evaluating essays in general and emphasises Stevenson's essays as performances enjoyed in time.

The rest of the contributions can be divided into two main sections: (1) 1880s essays, specifically essays on memory, art and imagination, and (2) Californian and South Seas essays, with





their attention on sympathetic understanding. In the first category, Richard Hill considers together, for the first time, the six essays Stevenson wrote for Henley's *Magazine of Art* in 1882-4, showing that, though apparently diverse, these essays are linked by their common interests in the relationship between the visual arts and literature, in the possibilities of an illustrated text, and in the influence of childhood memories on imagination and the creative process. Alex Thomson examines *Memories and Portraits* as a collection of 'familiar essays' that explores autobiography, memorial and the consequences of pervasive inherited memory, and suggests how the self-reflexive essay form distinguishes these essays from the Scottish tradition of nostalgic 'reminiscences'. Dewi Evans presents a study of the connected and contrasting ethical and aesthetic ideas in essays from the first half of the 1880s in order to demonstrate how these ideas are consolidated in the *Scribner's* series of essays (1888), with particular attention to Stevenson's feelings about the writer in the literary marketplace. In an extended scholarly footnote to 'Popular Authors' (1888) Neil Macara Brown documents Stevenson's reading of popular authors, and supplies biographical and bibliographical information about them; he also speculates on the attraction of these writers for Stevenson and identifies Stevenson's planned and finished works connected with these genres. In addition, he suggests scenes from popular books we know Stevenson read that may have inspired scenes in his own fiction (for the first time identifying the probable source of all the memorable scenes from past reading that Stevenson refers to in the first paragraph of 'A Gossip on Romance'). Continuing the focus on 'Popular Authors', Marie Léger-St-Jean compares Stevenson's essay with one written on popular literature by James Malcolm Rymer (1842). Stevenson takes the imaginative life as central to existence, and sees popular authors as supplying readers' imaginations with an embodiment of their daydreams and images that stimulate further dreaming. This leads to an exploration of the imagina-





tive importance of illustrations for Stevenson and their link with 'romance', dreams and daydreams.

The second major category of articles focuses on the Californian and South Seas essays, primarily ethical, as opposed to aesthetic, and marking Stevenson's evolution as an essayist. Jennifer Hayward examines how his writings about California helped him develop shifting views of national identity and race, and empathy towards the marginalised, culminating in 'The Foreigner at Home' (1882). Andrew Robson traces a line from the concern for the dispossessed and oppressed in Stevenson's early essays that runs through later writing, especially the American and Pacific works. Timothy Hayes also traces a thematic line from the early essays to the Pacific essays (treating *In the South Seas* as a collection of essays), connecting the early interest in childhood and its relation to adult existence to passages of the 'South Seas' pieces where Stevenson attempts to understand apparently 'childlike' behaviour in adults.

Finally, the issue closes with Lesley Graham's survey of the critical reception of Stevenson's essays in his lifetime and down to the present day, with special attention to the way this reception was shaped by both the rise and fall of Stevenson's reputation in general and the shift in status of the essay as a literary genre.



As we have seen, one of the papers is about *In the South Seas*, treating the chapters of that book as essays. We do not wish to enter here into a definition of the essay, as we believe that, like 'game' (which includes chess, hide-and-seek and cricket), there will be no one definition that will cover every example or eliminate uncertain peripheries. Here in the sand-pit of discussion, we had no trouble about including this contribution.

For the Edinburgh edition, we have a different problem, having to deal with inflexible physical structures, actual pages and volumes, and having to bear in mind collections of essays or essay-like texts that have their own identity. Hence, the travel





books are not included in the series of essays volumes (though we are happy to discuss their contents as essays or essayistic texts). We had problems with a range of short, nonfictional texts that we felt were too far from the archetypal 'familiar essay' to be usefully included in our series: history with a strong narrative line (*The Pentland Rising*), letters to newspapers, autobiographical writing designed as personal memoir not publication, journals and also (what we see as the isolated and rather special) 'Father Damien', though all of these will have some affinity with the essay and may be included by others in this definition.

We felt however, that there was a sense and usefulness in bringing together Stevenson's most typical production in this generic area, accepting that there will always be a problem of inclusion and exclusion of peripheral examples. Effectively the Edinburgh Edition will include all short non-narrative non-fiction published in magazines, as well as those few previously unpublished essays that first appeared in collected volumes ('*Virginibus Puerisque* II' and 'Some Portraits of Raeburn' in *Virginibus Puerisque* and 'A College Magazine' and 'Memoirs of an Islet' in *Memories and Portraits*). We have also included certain peripheral items that we felt had sufficient affinity with the archetypal examples of the essay: reviews, prose poems, *Reflections and Remarks*, *Lay Morals*. We abandoned the collection *Across the Plains* (as have all collected editions to date) because it includes a long text ('Across the Plains') to be published in *The Amateur Emigrant* and because of the marginal involvement of Stevenson in its publication. In compensation, and as a result, we have been able to bring together all twelve *Scribner's* essays (thirteen, including the suppressed 'Confessions of a Unionist'), which, surprisingly, has never been done before.

Many other arrangements and criteria for inclusion and ordering would have been possible; our basic aim is to create a collection that is both interesting to read and easy to refer to. We also hope that the volumes will stimulate interest in Stevenson's





essays, which exists already but lacks a certain consistency. It is not rare to come across spontaneous appreciations (in newspapers and blogs) of single essays of Stevenson by readers who knew nothing about his essays before, or to hear academics wonder why they are so little studied (essays represent about a third of Stevenson's output but are the subject of a much smaller number of studies). We hope that the contributions to this number of the *JSS* will not only encourage more people to read the essays but also encourage critics to examine them both as an aid to understanding other texts and contexts, and also as texts of interest in themselves.





‘The Essays must fall from me’: an outline of Stevenson’s career as an essayist

Robert-Louis Abrahamson

Stevenson began his literary career writing essays for the *Edinburgh University Magazine*, and the last piece of writing published in his lifetime was also an essay, ‘My First Book: *Treasure Island*’.¹ At the end of the first half of his twenty-year writing career (in 1884) he had built a reputation as one of the foremost essayists of his day. When his fiction became popular, however, he gradually reduced his essay-writing until he virtually abandoned the genre almost altogether under the pressure to write more lucrative narratives and, in Samoa, more urgent non-fiction in the form of the *Footnote to History*, the ‘big book’ on the South Seas and the political letters to newspapers.

Tracing his career as essay writer can present us with a fresh perspective on Stevenson’s writing habits, his relationship with the market and his ideas and beliefs. We can see too the way Stevenson relied on his personal connections with influential editors and publishers and yet insisted throughout on upholding his own standards and taking the directions he himself chose: a spoiled boy who got his own way, or a clear-sighted writer of high integrity, depending on our point of view.

Getting started

Of the nine writers Stevenson specifically claims to have played the ‘sedulous ape’ to as an apprentice writer, four were essayists – Hazlitt, Lamb, Sir Thomas Browne and Montaigne – and later he adds Ruskin and Charles Lamb as early models (Tus 29: 29). The essays he contributed to the *Edinburgh University Magazine* in 1871 show the playfulness and breadth of allusions found in the later essays, yet the subjects seem a little sophomoric (e.g., ‘Modern Students Considered Generally’, ‘The Philosophy





of Umbrellas', 'The Philosophy of Nomenclature'). His notebooks of this period show him drafting essays and essay fragments, committed to the form, but unable to reach a larger audience, or earn money, until he could find the right subject and venue. His connections with Fanny Sitwell and Sidney Colvin were to provide both for his first paid essay, 'Roads'.

In the letters he wrote to Fanny Sitwell after they first met at Cockfield in 1873, Stevenson often practised turning the material of his everyday life into 'sensitive' essayistic passages on landscape, weather and the seasons, observations of children and Edinburgh street scenes. Occasionally he asked her to return the letters containing these passages so he could use them in more substantial essays (L2: 98-99, 139, 108). 'Roads' grew out of his walks around Cockfield and his discussions with Fanny Sitwell. It seems probable that she encouraged him to turn his perceptions into an essay, and he sent her a copy of the essay as soon as he had finished it, less than two weeks after his return to Edinburgh (L1: 299). And yet he was unsure what to do with it. 'I fear it is quite unfit for any possible magazine.' Indeed it was difficult to categorise: part travel writing, part treatise on the beauties of landscape, part psychological study on the effect of landscape upon the mind and imagination. He felt he had better hope of 'honest earnings' with the more conventional pieces he was planning on John Knox and Savonarola (L1: 299).

It was Sidney Colvin who recognised that in fact it was 'Roads', and not the work on Knox and Savonarola, that showed the real promise. Five years older than Stevenson, when they first met in 1873, Colvin was already Slade Professor of Art at Cambridge University, soon to be appointed director of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, and an art critic publishing articles in several prominent magazines. As a leading member of the Savile Club he knew many of the most influential editors of the day, also Savilians. He was just the sort of well-connected literary man Stevenson needed at this point, and he saw his task as 'to make





[Stevenson] known to editors and get him a start on the path of literature' (L1: 283).

Stevenson sent Colvin his essay 'Roads', and Colvin replied with 'six sides of advice'. He performed some 'kind revision and correction' to the essay and submitted it to the prestigious *Saturday Review*, where it was rejected (L1: 311, 336, 344), and then to the *Portfolio*, a magazine dedicated to the fine arts, to which Colvin had for the past two years been contributing 'regularly and with weight'² and was on friendly terms with the editor, Philip Hamerton, and proprietor, Richmond Seeley. The essay appeared in November 1873, under the name 'L S Stoneven'.

Colvin and Stevenson spent several weeks together in Mentone in 1873-74, talking about writing and discussing Stevenson's literary career.³ Although Stevenson wanted to promote his attempts at fiction, Colvin apparently felt the essays would provide a quicker entrance into the literary world, and helped Stevenson to prepare 'Ordered South' for publication. After supervising several drafts, Colvin sent the essay to *Macmillan's Magazine*, where it was immediately accepted (L1: 462, 470, 481; 2: 2).

Stevenson's first two essays present impressionistic pictures, in 'Roads' of walking in Suffolk and in 'Ordered South' of recuperating on the Riviera from a break-down. Colvin recognised that Stevenson's abilities ranged more broadly, and when Leslie Stephen asked him to write a retrospective article on Victor Hugo's novels, Colvin passed the assignment to Stevenson. Impressed by Stevenson's submission, Stephen wrote in May 1874 a long letter of praise ('I think very highly of the promise shown in your writing' –Tus 31: 161n), discussing the ideas in the essay seriously, and inviting Stevenson to call on him at home when he was next in London. A door had been opened; his writing was praised by a literary arbiter who invited him to 'call at home', the mark of social as well as literary acceptance. As Edmund Gosse reported, 'A very few of us were convinced of [Stevenson's] genius; but with the exception of Mr Leslie Stephen, nobody of editorial status was





sure of it.⁴

Colvin's support of Stevenson was founded not only on his affection for the young writer and his faith in Stevenson's abilities, but also on finding in Stevenson an ally in appreciating fine art and opposing doctrinaire piety and bourgeois respectability. '[H]e hoped a great deal from me,' Stevenson reported, 'and looked forward to having me to fight with him under all good banners, and under the private flag that we both follow lovingly' (L1: 472). Stevenson's essays appeared as part of a larger cultural campaign.

Although Stevenson soon was able to polish and submit essays without first consulting Colvin's advice and aid, Colvin remained a help in times of trouble throughout the 1870s. When, for instance, John Morley at the *Fortnightly Review* turned down Stevenson's essay on Whitman, Stevenson sent it to Colvin. 'If you have time,' he wrote in late 1877, 'glance at the paper and see if it is worth anything; if you haven't, send it somewhere for me, and I'll bless you forever' (L2: 230). Colvin used his influence to have the article accepted at the *New Quarterly Magazine*.

Building his career

The most obvious way for a young writer to start his career in the early 1870s was by writing for periodicals. The 1860s had seen a shift from the old Reviews and Quarterlies, with their heavily intellectual content (what George Saintsbury called 'the peculiar aridity of the older *Quarterlies*, which seem to have retained the ponderous clauses of older days, while neglecting the form which saved those clauses from being cumbrous'⁵) to a group of new monthlies – *Macmillan's* (1859), the *Cornhill* (1860), *Contemporary* (1866), *The Portfolio* (1870) and others. The monthlies published 'articles' rather than 'reviews', and featured fiction, poetry and (thanks to technological innovation) illustrations. Stevenson submitted work to several different monthlies during the mid-70s until he found a home at the *Cornhill*.

As part of his campaign to gain Stevenson an entry into the





world of professional writing, Colvin apparently suggested that Stevenson might produce a series of monthly essays for the *Portfolio*, the magazine that had published 'Roads'.⁶ This was a privileged open door for the young writer, and it would at least supply Stevenson with some much-needed money, but he would have none of it. 'Do you imagine,' he replied to Colvin, 'I could ever write an essay a month, or promise an essay even every three months? I declare I would rather die than enter into any such arrangement. The Essays must fall from me, Essay by Essay, as they ripen.' He wanted to be free to choose his subjects, and not feel confined to the topics required for an art magazine. He was determined 'to write as I please and not [be] bound to drag in a tag about Art every time to make it suitable. Tying myself down to time is an impossibility' (L2: 32).

Stevenson had wider goals than to be a mere writer of monthly articles about art. What he often would call his 'Scotch' self had a message to preach, though the message was radically unorthodox and the preaching was far from the heavy pieties one would expect from a pulpit. The 'message' would integrate art and morality by insisting on our duty to be open to the delights of everyday life in the same way that we appreciate the gusto and joy of art. Those essays ostensibly about art were, he insisted, actually 'contributions towards a friendlier and more thoughtful way of looking about one' (L2: 32). After only a handful of essays had appeared in print, Stevenson announced to Colvin in September 1874 his plan to produce 'a little budget of little papers [...], call it ethical or aesthetic as you will', about '[t]welve or twenty such Essays, some of them purely ethical and expository, put together in a little book with narrow print in each page, antique, vine leaves about, and the following title.

XII (OR XX) ESSAYS ON THE
ENJOYMENT OF THE WORLD:
BY ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON'

(L2: 43).





Stevenson aimed to have these essays appear (in his own time) in the *Portfolio*, but in the end he submitted only three essays to the *Portfolio*: 'Notes on the Movements of Young Children' and 'On the Enjoyment of Unpleasant Places' (both in 1874), and the following year, the more substantial 'An Autumn Effect', spread over two issues.

An important shift from the *Portfolio* occurred in 1876 when Stevenson sent 'Forest Notes' to the *Cornhill*, even though, dealing as it did with an artist colony in Fontainebleau, it would have seemed more appropriate for the *Portfolio*. Writing for the *Cornhill*, the 'most important magazine of the latter part of the nineteenth century',⁷ allowed Stevenson a much broader range of subject and style. Within the next few months following the appearance of 'Forest Notes', Stevenson sent to the *Cornhill* 'Walking Tours', 'Charles of Orleans' and 'Virginibus Puerisque', his first essay to address specifically 'ethical' issues, in this case, the question of what makes for a good marriage.

The *Cornhill* was known for its generous payment: it 'pays best and has much the largest circle of readers', Matthew Arnold had said a decade earlier.⁸ And even though the number of readers had fallen from its high point in the early 1860s when Thackeray had been editor, it was still one of the leading monthlies of the 1870s, maintaining its reputation both in fiction and in articles on (non-controversial) political, historical, social, scientific and literary subjects. Each issue contained several serialised works of fiction, two with a full-page illustration.⁹

Stevenson was soon a regular contributor to the *Cornhill* where he published twenty essays from 1874 to 1882, including most of those collected in *Virginibus Puerisque* and *Familiar Studies of Men and Books*. Although the magazine had originally been founded with the aim of resisting the cliquishness that characterised its rival *Macmillan's*,¹⁰ by Stephen's time the number of regular contributors had become equally restricted, with many of the writers (such as Colvin, Gosse and Stevenson) also being





members of the Savile Club. Stevenson was thus quickly admitted to a prestigious circle of writers where he took on the role of a lively free spirit.¹¹ His lighter style played against James Sully's more heavily philosophic and pessimistic essays, which often alternated with Stevenson's.¹² Stevenson sought to defy the heavy Victorian moral and literary conventions by showing that he was at home in French and American culture, and by adopting potentially outrageous positions.

Stephen's handling of 'An Apology for Idlers' shows how deftly he worked to retain the Scot as a popular contributor to the *Cornhill*. Stevenson, still looking towards producing a book of essays, announced to Leslie Stephen in early 1877 that he had prepared several unpublished essays to form a new book. (Publishing essays first in a monthly before collecting them in a book was good enough for most writers of the time, including Arnold and Pater, but not, apparently, for Stevenson's ambitions.¹³) But Stephen advised him to lay this plan aside. 'He said he didn't imagine I was rich enough for such an amusement; and moreover whatever was worth publication, was worth republication. So the best of those I had ready: "An Apology for Idlers", is in proof for the *Cornhill*' (L2: 208). Leslie Stephen thus got his copy and after 'An Apology for Idlers' appeared in the July 1877 issue of the *Cornhill*, he approached Stevenson for 'something more in that vein' (L2: 217). Stevenson followed this up with 'Crabbed Age and Youth', deferring his plans for a book, but confirming his position as the *Cornhill* spokesman for rebellious youth.

The relationship between these two men can be illustrated also in the delicate way in which Stephen invited Stevenson to produce his essay on Burns. Stevenson had been asked in 1875 to write on Burns for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, but after working on it for almost nine months, he had the piece rejected. In 1879, Stephen wrote to Stevenson that the new book on Burns by J. C. Shairp 'might suggest to you a text for some remarks about Burns which you once told me you were contemplating' (L2: 319n).





Stephen writes as a friend, aware that he may be raising a sore subject but giving Stevenson the chance to redeem himself with a more substantial article on Burns in a welcoming venue. Yet Stephen must also have been aware that he would get good mileage by pitting his star bohemian essayist against Principal Shairp, a highly respectable Professor of Humanity at St Andrews, the Professor of Poetry at Oxford, and an orthodox Presbyterian. And Stevenson gave him good copy: an essay judging Burns by an unconventional set of moral principles, which outraged many Victorian readers.¹⁴

Stephen's invitation to write on Burns carried behind it the message that he, at least, would not invite the article and then turn it down, as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* had done. In fact, Stephen declined only two of Stevenson's submissions: 'Some Portraits of Raeburn', which he felt was of interest only to Edinburgh readers, and 'Choice of a Profession', which may have been too acerbic for the *Cornhill's* polite readership, and which was written in the uncouth persona of a wise old man rather than the young rebel. And although Leslie Stephen sometimes made suggestions about how an essay might be written, Stevenson felt free to reject the advice. For example Stephen accepted 'Forest Notes' but suggested that the essay be shortened, especially if it were to have a chance of an early publication. Stevenson was desperate for 'money and *money soon*' but it appears that he did not agree to shorten the article, and got his own way (L2: 170-71, n).

Contributions to *London*

From February 1877 to April 1879, the most important vehicle for Stevenson's essays, after the *Cornhill*, was *London: The Conservative Weekly Journal of Politics, Finance, Society and the Arts*. Again Stevenson's relation with a periodical was both personal and professional, and here it seemed he was contributing as much to help friends and enjoy himself as to promote his career. *London* was founded and edited by R. Glasgow





Brown, one of the Edinburgh friends with whom he had written the *Edinburgh University Magazine*. More significantly, Stevenson's close friend W. E. Henley was an active presence on the newspaper, and after December 1877, its editor. Stevenson later described the newspaper as 'one of those periodical sheets from which men suppose themselves to learn opinions; in which young gentlemen from the universities are encouraged, at so much a line, to garble facts, insult foreign nations and calumniate private individuals; and which are now the source of glory, so that if a man's name be often enough printed there, he becomes a kind of demigod' (Tus 29: 33). Stevenson, *not* one of the 'young gentlemen from the universities', gained no glory from writing for *London*, but gained other benefits.

Much of the work for *London* was to supply quickly written material to help fill columns,¹⁵ and though there was some immediate money for contributors, it was not much. (Stevenson received £1.11.6 for 'A Plea for Gas Lamps', for instance, in contrast to the £6.6.0 he received from the *Cornhill* for 'Æs Triplex', which was two and a half times longer.¹⁶) The readership was small and with nothing to lose, the group of young writers felt freer than with an established magazine, a situation that allowed Stevenson to experiment with narrative in his 'Latter-Day Arabian Nights' and to indulge himself with his most playful language in the essays he wrote there. Some of these were interesting but inconsequential, such as the series 'In the Latin Quarter', but Stevenson produced three significant essays, good enough to be reprinted in *Virginibus Puerisque*: 'A Plea for Gas Lamps', 'Pan's Pipes' and 'El Dorado', an essay Henley was particularly fond of, regretting that 'it should go forth in *London*, and that I cannot give it to the 50,000 [readers] it deserves'.¹⁷ Stevenson's Edinburgh mentor, Fleeming Jenkin, objected that giving over his time to mere journalism would interfere with more serious writing,¹⁸ but the ephemeral nature of this work probably allowed Stevenson to be





more experimental here than elsewhere.

Stevenson as a reviewer

Stevenson's time with *London* was also significant in producing a definitive break with writing reviews. He had been reviewing books for various magazines since 1874. They provided a way to earn quick, though not copious, money, yet he was never very happy with this work, especially since it required hurried composition for a short-term deadline. Early in their friendship, for instance, before Stevenson had published any essays, Colvin 'kindly offered to give [him] a chance of reviewing anything [he] wanted for the *Pall Mall [Gazette]*', but he did not think he was 'fit' for the job (L1: 307). Or probably he did not think the job fit for him. He had higher ambitions.

Stevenson's first review – Lord Lytton's *Fables in Song* (1874) – was obtained through Colvin's friendship with John Morley, editor of the *Fortnightly Review*, a prestigious magazine that paid well (he received £5 for it).¹⁹ He wrote no other review for the *Fortnightly*, but had two in *Vanity Fair* and in 1874-75 was commissioned by Charles Appleton, editor of *The Academy* and another Savile Club connection, to write eight book reviews mostly on Scottish and literary subjects.

The reviews gave Stevenson a chance to work on some ideas that he would develop in later writing. In the Lytton review, for instance, he proposes that contemporary moral uncertainties meant that an author could no longer simply affix an explicit moral at the end of a fable but must allow the reader to work out some meaning from within the ambiguous story itself, a view that shapes most of Stevenson's own fables, informs his later essays on art and literature and, especially in the later essays, leads him to speak through stories and images rather than argumentation ('History instead of Definition', as he argued in 'Gentlemen' [1888] – Tus 28: 100). A review of Basil Champneys' *Quiet Corner of England* shows an early example of Stevenson's interest in the





way we perceive the world: we must not 'isolate special things artificially' when looking at a landscape, but be open to everything before us, including the buildings, which are integral to the view. This aesthetic point gives him a chance to digress and take his readers to 'a block of high barracks, built in late days upon the battlements of an old citadel' and 'a monumental tower of some architectural pretensions' – perhaps the first of the many disguised appearances of Edinburgh in the essays (Tus 28: 168-69).

Stevenson's reviews offered judicious assessment of the books under consideration, but showed no patience with sloppy thinking and writing. He criticises Ingram's edition of Poe's stories for its 'deplorable errors' in French, and, after condemning James Grant Wilson's 'perfervid' Scottish chauvinism in his edition of *The Poets and Poetry of Scotland*, he reminds Wilson that 'in 1414 the English King Henry IV did not take James I along with him on his second expedition to France. If for no other reason, Henry IV had then been some time dead' (Tus 28: 185, 187). In some reviews, Stevenson plays with his tone so that, for instance, we can never be quite sure when his ostensible praise of Lauder's 'delightful' *Scottish Rivers* turns to mockery. In other essays Stevenson is clearly trying out the voice of the scornful reviewer scoring a quick laugh at the expense of a bad writer. He appears to praise J. Clarke Murray, who, in his *Ballads and Songs of Scotland*, 'professes himself unable to decide' upon the large questions the book raises, but 'had rather [...] leave the matter open for the better judgment of the reader. Now, modesty is a good thing in itself; but the same modesty which withholds a man from resolving a question, should certainly keep him back from publishing the fact of his indecision to the world in more than two hundred pages of type' (Tus 28: 216).

The pressure to produce these reviews reached a crisis when, in February 1877, Brown both criticised Stevenson's reviews for *London* and asked him to read 'three volumes and writ[e] an article in two days'. Stevenson quit. 'I cannot have any more of





these barbarous five-minute's orders. I must have time' (L2: 202). Fleeming Jenkin may have been right after all: reviewing for a newspaper like *London* was distracting from Stevenson's true career. It may have given him the freedom to experiment with style, but it robbed him of the freedom to work as he chose: slowly and carefully. He wrote one more review for the *Academy* and then no more for the rest of his life.²⁰

The shift in the career

It is convenient when tracing Stevenson's biography and his literary career to see a break in 1879/80, with his year-long trip to America as a watershed moment and indeed we can see a shift in Stevenson's essays after his return from California. His time spent with non-whites and outcasts on the journey and in Monterey and San Francisco produced a larger sympathy towards the underdog, and in many essays in the 1880s the 'enemy' is not the respectable bourgeois ('crabbed age') condemning youthful playfulness and imposing a rigid code of social and religious conventions, but that same bourgeois as a smug provincial, scorning all cultures but his own. 'A Foreigner at Home' (1882), for instance, condemns the parochial British and Yankee, who exhibit 'a domineering nature, steady in fight, imperious in command, but neither curious nor quick about the life of others' (Tus 29: 2). His essay on Monterey ('The Old Pacific Capital', 1880) dramatises the expansive vision called for in 'Foreigner at Home' by offering sympathetic depictions of the Mexicans, Indians and Chinese, and an awareness of the way the sweep of American settlements was quickly destroying the culture that had existed before.

The long years spent as an invalid after his health broke down on the American journey also affected the subject and tone of the essays in the 80s. '[M]y aim, even in style,' he wrote in 1885, 'has quite changed in the last six or seven years' (L5: 141). There are fewer moments when he takes up an outrageous position just for





the fun of seeing how far it can take him and fewer flourishes of style – though these flourishes never disappear. But generally he adopts a more sober tone, as of one coming to terms with disappointment and failure and grappling with the moral complexities of the inner life. It is as if the earlier essays dared us to break conventions and find pleasure in our lives through taking risks, while the later ones assess the difficulties these risks have brought us. ‘*Virginibus Puerisque*’ (1876), for instance, asserts that marriage is ‘a field of battle, and not a bed of roses’, but still encourages us to fight joyfully. The follow-up ‘*Virginibus Puerisque II*’, however, which Stevenson wrote in 1881 after two years of marriage, admits that the battle will inevitably be lost, yet we fight on, sustained by the faith that ‘between the failures, there will come glimpses of kind virtues to encourage and console’ (Tus 25: 11, 20).

The years of illness before he left for the South Seas intensified the notes of darkness in his essays, as can be seen in the contrasting endings of two essays meditating on the horrors lying so close to our everyday lives. ‘*Æs Triplex*’ (1878) asserts the indomitable human spirit, even in the face of immanent death, ‘when, trailing with him clouds of glory, this happy-starred, full-blooded spirit shoots into the spiritual land’. ‘*Pulvis et Umbra*’ (1888) still clings, just barely, to a shred of hope (‘Let it be enough, for faith, that the whole creation groans in mortal frailty, strives with unconquerable constancy: surely not all in vain’ – Tus 25: 81; 26: 66), but, as Roderick Watson has argued ‘any ameliorating possibility is completely overwhelmed by the sheer crepitating horror of Stevenson’s vision of existence’.²¹ Looking back later from the South Seas, Stevenson agreed with Colvin that the ‘lights’ in the essays written during his invalid years ‘seem a little turned down. [...] what I wish to fight is best fought by a rather cheerless presentation of the truth’ (L7: 200). We are no longer in the world of ‘Enjoyment of Unpleasant Places’ or ‘El Dorado’.

Yet although we can chart a decided shift in tone and subject matter after America, it would be wrong to see the American jour-





ney as a significant watershed in Stevenson's career as an essayist. Stevenson himself certainly did not see this trip as changing his career. In America he wrote essays on Thoreau and Yoshida-Torajiro for the *Cornhill*, which followed the same pattern as the earlier essays on Burns and others. When he returned he picked up where he had left off and continued to contribute essays to the *Cornhill* as before ('Samuel Pepys', July 81; 'Talk and Talkers', April 82; 'The Foreigner at Home', May 82; 'Talk and Talkers [A Sequel]', August 82).

The real shift in his career as an essayist might be better marked with the publication of *Virginibus Puerisque* (1881) and *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* (1882). At last he had achieved his ambition of seeing his essays in book form. At last they would be treated seriously enough to be reviewed. The reviews were mixed, but on the whole favourable. *Virginibus* did not sell well, however, and the publication of *Familiar Studies* met with a series of difficulties. The book was initially going to be privately printed by Thomas Stevenson until, almost at the last minute, Chatto and Windus agreed to produce it. By this time Stevenson was ill in Davos, he had lost some of the proofs and was worried about his wife's health. He was at last the author of two books of essays, but the pleasure was muted.

Perhaps the most significant single event during this period of transition was his break with the *Cornhill*. Although he had published a few essays outside of the *Cornhill* after his return from America ('The Old Pacific Capital' for *Fraser's Magazine*,) and the five brief essays about convalescence in Davos, which appeared anonymously in the weekly *Pall Mall Gazette*.²² Even so, he continued to give his best work to the *Cornhill* until Leslie Stephen left the magazine in 1882, when he was succeeded by James Payn, a popular novelist, who had worked as a reader for Smith, Elder (publishers of the *Cornhill*) since 1874.²³ The circulation had fallen considerably at this point, because, as Payn said, of 'the failure of the literary and especially the classical essay





to attract the public',²⁴ as well as a change in popular taste away from the monthlies towards newer more popular magazines and the daily and weekly press. Payn tried to revive the *Cornhill* by introducing a new series in July 1883, which 'increased the amount of light fiction at the expense of literary essays, reduced the size of the journal, and [lowered] the price from 1s. to 6d.'²⁵

These changes meant that Stevenson no longer felt the warm welcome his essays had received under Leslie Stephen. And despite his assertions in 'The Morality of the Profession of Letters' (1881) that the writer must regard himself as a tradesman, serving the public, Stevenson was ill at ease with the new market-driven atmosphere at the *Cornhill*. The magazine had lowered its standards, and lost its club-like feel, at least for the essayists. As Fanny Stevenson in November 1882 expressed it to J. A. Symonds, a member of the old *Cornhill* crowd: 'Are you not sorry for the change in the magazine that so long has lived and thriven upon the small handful of names? It cannot be the same any more' (L4: 27).²⁶ And to Payn himself Stevenson commented in December 1882 that the off-hand treatment of the proofs of 'The Merry Men' 'smacked to me of the New Pharaoh that knew not Joseph' (L4: 40). In the following year he asked his mother to cancel the family subscription to the magazine: 'The *Cornhill* won't do. Stop it, and let's have the *Century* instead. The *Cornhill* is too much' (L4: 154).²⁷ The shift of allegiance to the New-York-based *Century* heralds another change in Stevenson's career as essayist – his publication in America – which will be considered below.

Essays, 1883-87

From 1883 until the publication of *Memories and Portraits* in 1887, Stevenson kept up a steady flow of essays in a variety of magazines, but no one periodical took the place of the *Cornhill* as his chief venue. He wrote no further 'studies' after the publication of *Familiar Studies*; his critical and historical energies were





directed to larger projects such as a history of the Highlands from 1746 to the present and biographies of Hazlitt and Wellington, all of which were ultimately abandoned. And his critical attention was turning to topics such as literary composition and genre rather than focusing on individual authors.

After the success of *Treasure Island* (1882–83), Stevenson's essays became more relaxed and the autobiographical voice of the travel writing became more prominent. The earlier essays had featured a veiled autobiography most notably in 'Ordered South', which describes Stevenson's own experience of Mentone in 1873–74, but this was only from the generalised point of view of 'us' or 'the sick man'. Any direct autobiographical writing in the early essays comes as incidental illustration to a larger point, such as the anecdote in 'Child's Play' about how 'my cousin and I took our porridge of a morning'. In the essays of the 1880s, however, the autobiographical element becomes much more pronounced, even when, as in 'A Chapter on Dreams' or 'The Lantern Bearers', the autobiography points to larger literary or psychological conclusions.

So it is that over this period a kind of mythic RLS was created. In these essays and in interviews and articles in the press, we discover the melancholy adolescent who moons around cemeteries, wanders the streets instead of attending lectures, plays the sedulous ape, learns arcane Scots words from a shepherd in the Pentlands, and so on. These personal stories became such a feature, in fact, that Stevenson shaped his next book of essays around just such memories. 'I had no design at first to be autobiographical,' he says in the Note to *Memories and Portraits* (Tus 29: [viii]), but it was becoming clearer to him that the memoir was a useful form for bringing together the style of a personal essay, his views on literature and art and his interest in the way racial heredity shapes personality and perception.

His growing popularity naturally increased his value for magazine editors. Thus when Charles Longman started *Longman's*





Magazine in 1882, Stevenson was one of the first writers he asked to contribute to the new magazine ('A Gossip on Romance', November 1882). Four more essays appeared in *Longman's* in the next five years ('Across the Plains', July, August 1883; 'Old Mortality', May 1884; 'A Humble Remonstrance', December 1884; 'Pastoral', April 1887). *Longman's* came close to the old *Cornhill* in tone and format, but the days of allegiance to just one magazine were gone.

Another journal Stevenson appeared in at this time was the *Contemporary Review*, which published three of his essays, unrelated in style or content. The *Contemporary* was a monthly that welcomed technical and scientific papers and controversial political and religious discussions, especially those promoting Liberal reform.²⁸ It was thus a fitting venue for 'On Style in Literature: Its Technical Elements' (1885); 'The Day after Tomorrow' (1887) with its warnings against the inevitable oppression and boredom of socialist culture; and the memoir of Stevenson's father, the religious engineer 'Thomas Stevenson' (1887).

'The Character of Dogs' (1884) was Stevenson's only submission to the *English Illustrated Magazine*, 'the new sixpenny illustrated magazine' (L4: 209). That the essay was illustrated by Robert Caldecott, one of the leading graphic artists of the time, indicates the prestige Stevenson's essays were now attracting.²⁹

The Magazine of Art

In the years 1882–84 Stevenson directed much of his essay-writing to contributing to another periodical run by Henley, the *Magazine of Art*. Henley took over editorship in 1881 and continued in the position for five years, transforming the 'insular, uninspired trade journal into a lively, cosmopolitan review of the arts, containing criticism, prose, and poetry of lasting worth'.³⁰ In the years before Henley, the *Magazine of Art* had served as a vehicle for established Academy views and catered to the new middle class interest in art, focusing almost exclusively on





contemporary British paintings, praising the morality and the sentiment conveyed in the subjects of the paintings, with Ruskin as the model critic. Henley shifted its focus to Continental, American, Japanese and older British art, and instead of evaluating a painting on the basis of what it portrayed, he encouraged examination of its technique and form. Besides the visual arts, he included articles on literary and performing arts, as well as pieces of fiction and poetry, with engravings by some of the most notable illustrators.

Stevenson was placing himself in the ranks of the artistic avant-garde by writing for the *Magazine of Art*, a movement he had been familiar with since his days at the artist colony at Barbizon. He was also, however, stepping into a place of conflict since Henley was not above rewriting an article to improve its style or to emphasise his own polemical views on a subject.³¹ Stevenson, on the other hand, had very definite ideas about what he wanted his essays to say and resented any interference, even from Henley. Angered by the changes made to 'A Modern Cosmopolis', for instance, Stevenson told Henley that 'in future you shall write *all* of the articles yourself. I will not take it at the hands even of a friend' (L4: 108).

Stevenson's contributions covered diverse subjects (Bagster's illustrations of *Pilgrim's Progress*; illustrations to Japanese romances; San Francisco; Fontainebleau; Skelt's toy theatres and the 'Note on Realism'), but, as Richard Hill has pointed out in this issue, they 'demonstrate a consistency regarding the artist's craft and responsibility, about the relationship of literature and painting, about the possibilities and pitfalls of the illustrated text, and about the importance of childhood memories and imagination in the creative process'.

New volumes of essays

Stevenson's essay-writing tailed away as the decade progressed. Compared to eight essays published in 1881 (including the Davos





five) and six in 1882 (returning to the levels of the 1870s), he published only two in 1883, four in 1884, one in 1885 and none in 1886. In 1885 and 86 he was ill for much of the time, or busy writing fiction.

Yet, though his published essays declined in number, Stevenson still considered himself an essayist. In 1883 he was planning another collection of essays, called *A Traveller's Tales*, which would include some essays already written and others only planned (L4: 121n).³² This volume would have been an attempt to gather essays bringing together travel writing and autobiography, with, as the title suggests, a strong narrative component. The project was set aside to make room for fictional narratives, which would pay more and, in the case of *The Black Arrow*, would build on the popularity of *Treasure Island*.³³

Two years later Stevenson was thinking again of a collection of essays. Arranging for *Virginibus* to be transferred from Kegan Paul to Chatto and Windus, Stevenson was projecting how best to present the essays. 'Should we republish [*Virginibus*] as it stands? Should we bring out simultaneously a companion volume, for which I have enough material? Or should we combine the two, or the pick of the two? [...] The companion volume would not be perfectly homogeneous, about 150 pages would be matter quite of the same mark as the *V.P.*' Besides 'Talk and Talkers', 'A Gossip on Romance' and 'The Character of Dogs', Stevenson also proposed 'my papers as an emigrant, which are scarce in the same style but a deuced sight more entertaining' (L5: 156).

The project seems to have been dropped until, almost two years later, Stevenson needed money and returned to what he called 'the dung-collecting trade of the republisher. I shall re-issue *Virginibus Puerisque* as vol. I of *Essays*, and the new vol. as vol. II of ditto: to be sold however separately' (L5: 348). These two collections were apparently meant to be seen as similar, but distinct from *Familiar Studies*, as their tentative title of *Familiar Essays* suggests (L5: 436).³⁴ It is noticeable that *Familiar Studies*





was never considered as part of the same publishing project, though this volume too was reprinted under Chatto.

Memories and Portraits (1887), as its title indicates, directs us towards the autobiographical element in the essays, all in some ways associated with Stevenson's former selves, as explained in his prefatory note: 'Memories of childhood and youth, portraits of those who have gone before us in the battle – taken together, they build up a face that "I have loved long since and lost awhile," the face of what was once myself' (Tus 19: [viii]). The contents were arranged to present a kind of autobiographical unity, suggesting that Stevenson was quite aware that his essays may have appealed to the public more for the persona of RLS than for any specific content. He was playing into the hands of those who saw him as an egocentric trifler, but he knew what would sell the book.³⁵ Stevenson revised 'An Old Scotch Gardener' from sixteen years earlier, and wrote 'A College Magazine', 'Memoirs of an Islet' and 'A Gossip on a Novel of Dumas's' to flesh out the collection. He read the proofs as he crossed the Atlantic, leaving behind his career as an essayist in Britain.

The essays in America

Stevenson's essays were published in America as early as 1874 when *Littell's Living Age* pirated 'Ordered South'. From that time, until *Memories and Portraits* was published in 1887, nineteen more essays appeared in *Littell's*.³⁶ The author's growing popularity thanks to *The New Arabian Nights* and *Treasure Island* enabled Will Low to arrange for Scribner's to publish *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885) on very good terms (L5: 86 + n).³⁷ For the next several years this was the house that published Stevenson's fiction in America, but it was not until May 1887 that they included an essay in *Scribner's Magazine*, and this came about almost by accident. The publishers had sent Stevenson a £100 advance against his next contribution to the magazine, expecting a work of fiction. But another severe illness had





stopped work. Finally, in February, Stevenson sent ‘a small paper [...] – the only kind of work I am at present fit for’ (L5: 357). This was the essay ‘The Manse’, which had been written to fill out the new volume that was to become *Memories and Portraits*. ‘The Manse’ was thus Stevenson’s first (unpirated) essay to appear in America and not in any British magazine. In the same letter, he offered to Scribner’s *Virginibus* and *Memories and Portraits* (as *Essays*, 2 vols).

The scene was set for Edward Burlingame, the editor of *Scribner’s Magazine*, to make his big offer as soon as Stevenson landed in New York six months later: \$3,500 (£720) ‘for twelve articles in *Scribner’s Magazine* on what I like’ (L6: 10).

Scribner’s Magazine was in many ways comparable to the *Cornhill*. Both magazines had the reputation of paying generously for high quality writing. As the *Cornhill* was founded to compete with *Macmillan’s* and other popular monthlies, so *Scribner’s* was founded (January 1887) to compete with the high-selling *Harper’s* and *Atlantic Monthly*. It was quite in keeping, then, that Burlingame should offer Stevenson such a large sum, especially when he was aware that other editors were tempting Stevenson with attractive offers, most notably McClure, with the sum of \$10,000 for fifty-two weekly newspaper articles. Stevenson refused McClure’s ‘lucrative job. They would drive even an honest man into being a mere lucre-hunter in three weeks’ (L6: 10). Perhaps it was easier to refuse McClure knowing he had the alternative option of \$3,500 instead.³⁸ America was to bring Stevenson to the climax of his career as an essayist: published monthly in an esteemed literary magazine, which sold to a wide audience across the continent and paid so well that Stevenson did not have to worry about his income for an entire year.³⁹

Writing for *Scribner’s* every month would mean going back to strict delivery dates, but this was different from the stressful deadlines he had chafed under when writing for *London*. Stevenson had time to work ahead and began planning the essays





even before he left New York City for Saranac Lake. He was determined to free himself from the pressure of deadlines ('I shall not be happy till I have six months banked up ahead' [L6: 31]) and he finished the first essay, 'A Chapter on Dreams', less than a week after arriving at Saranac Lake in early October ('after a fit of my usual impotence under bondage, [I] seem to have got into the swing' [L6: 26]).

He soon came to regret this commission, however, no matter how much it freed him from financial worries. 'I have done with big prices from now out. Wealth and self-respect seem, in my case, to be strangers,' he said to Anne Jenkin; and to Burlingame after completing the first three essays, 'I have not often had more trouble than I have with these papers: thirty or forty pages of foul copy; twenty is the very least I have had. Well, you pay high; it is fit that I should have to work hard: it somewhat quiets my conscience' (L6: 72, 55). He agonised over the fear that 'Pulvis et Umbra' may have been too short and thus not worth the high price he was being paid for it, and struggled to produce a second 'sermon' to lengthen that month's instalment (draft essays posthumously printed as 'On Morality' and 'The Ethics of Crime' – Tus 26: 50-59). Work on *The Master of Ballantrae* and the quarrel with Henley disrupted his self-imposed timetable, and a week before he left for California at the end of May, he complained, 'I am in dreadful arrears. I have still two articles which must be done in eight days, a feat I know not how to accomplish' (L6: 192). But he did accomplish it, concluding with one of his strongest, and most popular essays, 'A Christmas Sermon'.

The word Stevenson used most often to describe these essays was *gossips*, a word that seems to imply a kind of whimsical personal piece along the lines of Hazlitt or Lamb. 'A Chapter on Dreams', for instance, was 'just a gossip with stories' (L6: 23). But *gossips*, even *gossips with stories*, does not describe all of these works. 'Pulvis et Umbra' was 'a Darwinian Sermon' (L6: 60); 'Confessions of a Unionist', suppressed at the last minute





as too offensive to the American readers, was a political argument; 'A Letter to a Young Gentleman Who Proposes to Embrace the Career of Art' is an epistolary essay, while the 'Epilogue to *An Inland Voyage*' and the two 'Random Memories' are almost entirely autobiographical narrative. (The 'Epilogue' also contains several pages of mini-drama between the *Arethusa* and the Commissary.) 'Gentlemen' and 'A Christmas Sermon' discuss ethical issues; 'The Lantern-Bearers', 'Some Gentlemen in Fiction' and 'Popular Authors' discuss literary genres and decorum; 'A Chapter on Dreams' speaks of literary creativity; 'A Letter to a Young Gentleman' develops the idea of the author as tradesman, first discussed in the 1881 essay 'The Morality of the Profession of Letters'. It is wrong, however, to try to classify these essays too rigidly since part of their strength comes from Stevenson's interweaving of the genres and themes. The contract with Scribner's allowed him to write 'on any mortal subject' (L6: 18), and it seems that Stevenson made a real effort to create a diverse set of essays in repayment for the money he was given.

The one consistent feature in all this is Stevenson's consciousness of his celebrity status, and of his readers' being acquainted, through the press, with many details of his public and private life. 'A Chapter on Dreams', for instance, recounts the dreams of a 'poor gentleman', an 'honest fellow', under the coy pretence of speaking about someone else until the revelation that 'he is no less a person than myself; – as I might have told you from the beginning, only that the critics murmur over my consistent egotism' (Tus 30: 50). This is a game between speaker and reader, in which the speaker's mock modesty keeps at a distance the American reader's eagerness to learn every little detail about RLS. Roger Swearingen suggests that the essay 'was probably inspired by the questions interviewers in New York asked him about his methods of composition'⁴⁰. He would have had to answer the interviewers with at least the appearance of earnestness, but the essay form allowed him to answer the questions on his own terms. In the 'Epilogue'





to *An Inland Voyage*, Stevenson again assumes anonymity, but anyone who had read *Inland Voyage* – and Stevenson assumes that his readers have read the book – will identify him as ‘the *Arethusa*’. Halfway through the essay, however, as the *Arethusa* gives his name to the French official (‘Robert-Louis-Stev’ns’n’ [Tus 17: 118]), the autobiographical connection is made – but only indirectly, in the course of the dramatic encounter.

Gossips might have been an appropriate term for these essays if they had developed the way Stevenson apparently hoped they would. He complained to Burlingame later, ‘I was promised, and I fondly expected to receive, a vast amount of assistance from intelligent and genial correspondents.’ Such correspondence would have been fascinating for Stevenson, setting up an intimacy with his readers that would bring to life in a new way the conversational style of his writing. Such interplay never occurred, however. ‘I assure you,’ he told Burlingame, ‘I never had a scratch of a pen from any one above the level of a village idiot; except once when a lady dowed my head full of grey hairs by announcing that she was going to direct her life in future by my counsels’ (L6: 391).

The *Scribner’s* articles comprise the only group of Stevenson’s essays coherent in time and venue, but they were never collected as a unit. Before the first essay even appeared, Stevenson and Burlingame had been tossing around ideas for a general title, but none seemed appropriate. Stevenson left for his Pacific cruise while the series of essays was still running, and there was no further discussion of reprinting them all together in one volume.

Essays after 1888

After the *Scribner’s* contributions, Stevenson published only two more essays. Further ones were contemplated: in 1889, a sequel to ‘Popular Authors’, for instance,⁴¹ and in 1890, a second series for *Scribner’s*, to be called *Random Memories*, clearly aimed at continuing the autobiographical approach included in the 1888 series. (‘Random Memories’ was the subtitle for two of the





Scribner's essays: 'Contributions to the History of Fife' and 'The Education of an Engineer'.) Stevenson felt freer to set his own terms now, and proposed that these 'reminiscential' papers were not to be produced at monthly intervals as the previous twelve *Scribner's* essays had been, but only 'from time to time' (L7: 32).

We have some idea of the topics Stevenson was entertaining for this series from a list of titles he jotted down about this time: 'The Beginnings of a Soul'; 'Health Resorts'; 'Simoneau's Inn'; 'Relations with Children'; 'My Russians'.⁴² In late 1890 or early 1891 Stevenson produced a few pages of 'Random Memories. An Onlooker in Hell', about his experience of gambling places, several starts of an essay 'Simoneau's at Monterey' and a few paragraphs on the Water of Leith. In 1893 he wrote an eight-page draft of 'Random Memories. Rosa quo Locorum'.

These *Random Memories*, we can see, were designed as a merging of travel writing and autobiography. The celebrity of RLS created a demand for any biographical details and would ensure the sale of his work. Stevenson was also, however, using this project to revisit places in his past, now that he knew he would not return from the South Seas except perhaps to die. If these projected essays had followed the pattern of 'Chapter on Dreams' and 'Lantern-Bearers' they would have presented the autobiographical details not as stories for their own sake, but as evidence (the only evidence Stevenson could confidently supply) of his interest in the psychological relationship between imagination, language and literature.

But essays were no longer a priority for Stevenson, and if such a series was to be undertaken, it would have to wait until more pressing work was finished. When he was reminded of the project in 1894 he showed no interest: 'I doubt if I could write essays now; I doubt, even if I tried, whether I should find I wanted to' (L8: 317). Burlingame continued to press Stevenson, however, and in the same year he renewed the proposal for further essays in *Scribner's*, offering \$350 for each one. Stevenson hesitated, but





agreed to 'have a try, if I bust, I'll send one article, and you shall say if you like it' (L8: 379, 380). Swearingen suggests that the 'three leaves containing "reminiscences of childish days"' were probably the start of the article Stevenson mentioned to Burlingame.⁴³ But nothing more came of this.

Around the middle of 1891 Colvin proposed another volume of uncollected writing, which would become *Across the Plains*. Stevenson did 'not feel inclined to make a volume of essays', but was so frustrated with his South Seas letters that any new idea was welcome, and he reluctantly selected for Colvin six *Scribner's* essays ('A Chapter on Dreams'; 'Popular Authors'; 'Beggars'; 'The Lantern Bearers' and the two 'Random Memories' essays), along with two essays from the early 1880s ('The Old Pacific Capital' and 'Fontainebleau') and 'The Emigrant Train', which was a chapter from the aborted *Amateur Emigrant* (L7: 154). The volume Colvin produced included these works, but added much more of the 'Across the Plains' material and three more *Scribner's* essays: 'Letter to a Young Gentleman'; 'Pulvis et Umbra' and 'A Christmas Sermon'. It is possible that Stevenson had not initially included these three *Scribner's* essays because they contained no autobiographical elements, but treated general moral problems instead.

Although several times Stevenson light-heartedly repudiated ownership of *Across the Plains*,⁴⁴ he may well have simply meant that he was not going to work on producing the book, and certainly the problems he had had over *The Wrecker* and other writings of this period, due particularly to his distance from New York and London, would have made him unwilling to deal with publishers and proofs for this collection. But Stevenson did write a brief dedication to *Across the Plains* to Paul Bourget (L7:205) and this suggests he accepted ownership of the book.

In 1893 Colvin proposed another collection, for which Stevenson provided some suggestions. The book would have included both complete essays and selections from other essays,





all having previously appeared in volume form (L8: 66-67). It seems likely that Colvin was using these to counterbalance the exotic material now coming from Stevenson's pen and to present readers with the old Stevenson they knew and loved. Again the essays were being used as a cash cow, with Stevenson's half-hearted collaboration, but like other projects, this book never got further than its initial planning stage.

Stevenson's final word on his career as an essayist appears in connection with the Edinburgh Edition of his Complete Works, for which plans began in 1893. When proposing the major divisions of his *oeuvre* for the Edinburgh Edition, the volumes of essays ('these little kickshaws') were relegated to the third major section of 'Prose Works' (L8: 225-26), which came to be called 'Miscellanies'. They were not, he seems to have felt, his major work.

There are hints, however, that had he lived, Stevenson might have added one more chapter to his career as an essayist. The proposed prefatory notes to several volumes of the Edinburgh Edition might have continued the pattern of the later essays by merging literary discussions with autobiography. He had already written 'My First Book: *Treasure Island*', which was commissioned in 1894 by Jerome K. Jerome for a series of 'My First Book' articles published in *The Idler*. This may have given Stevenson the idea of writing notes on his other works, but only the essays on *The Master of Ballantrae* and *Kidnapped* were begun. Colvin and Baxter both opposed the idea of these prefatory notes. Baxter attempted to deflect Stevenson with the idea that perhaps these essays 'might form a chapter of autobiography, and an interesting one, later on' (L8: 227n). So we are left with the tempting hint of what might have become his strongest set of essays yet, but, like so many other projects, this never appeared.





NOTES

Quotations from Stevenson's works are cited, in the text by 'Tus.' –Tusitala Edition (London: Heinemann, 1924) followed by volume number: page number.

Quotations from Stevenson's letters, ed. by Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Meheew (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) by 'L' with volume and page number.

- 1 Published in *The Idler*, August 1894, and *McClure's Magazine*, September, 1894. For the purpose of this paper, I am defining essays as those non-fiction prose works designed to be published independently in periodical form, but not as part of a series, as the essays in *Edinburgh: Picturesque Notes* or *In the South Seas*.
- 2 Edward Verrall Lucas, *The Colvins and Their Friends* (New York: Scribner's, 1928), p. 18.
- 3 See R. L. Abrahamson, "'Of some use to me afterwards': Stevenson's Pivotal Experience in Mentone" in *European Stevenson*, ed. by Richard Ambrosini and Richard Dury (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp. 37-51.
- 4 Edmund Gosse, *Critical Kit-Kats* (London: Heinemann, 1896), p. 281.
- 5 George Saintsbury 1876, 'Modern English Prose', *Fortnightly Review* 19:110 (Feb. 1876), pp. 243-59; p. 246.
- 6 The *Portfolio* already ran a monthly feature by R. N. Wornum, looking at an etching of a painting from the National Gallery, and the magazine's editor, P. G. Hamerton, contributed a monthly column called *The Sylvan Year: Leaves from the Note-book of Raoul Dubois*.
- 7 R. G. Cox, 'The Cornhill Magazine' in *The Victorian Web* <http://www.victorianweb.org/periodicals/cornhill.html>
- 8 Cited in J. W. Robertson Scott, *The Story of the Pall Mall Gazette* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 95.
- 9 The range of material in the *Cornhill* can be illustrated by the contents of the June 1876 issue, which featured three serialised works of fiction (*Carità* by Margaret Oliphant, *Lord Fairland's Secret* and *The Atonement of Leon Dundas*); two literary essays (a study of the Homeric Hymn to Demeter by Colvin and a study by Gosse of the mediaeval poet Walther von der Vogelweide, both





- pieces informative but not scholarly); a musical essay on Bach's Mass in B Minor; Stevenson's personal essay 'Walking Tours'; and a military poem by Francis Hastings Doyle.
- 10 Spencer L. Eddy, Jr. *The Founding of The Cornhill Magazine*. Ball State Monograph 19. (Muncie, IN: Ball State University, 1970), p. 19.
 - 11 See R. L. Abrahamson, "'Of all men the most clubbable'? RLS at the Savile Club and the *Cornhill Magazine*", *Journal of Stevenson Studies*, 8, 2011, 125-42.
 - 12 Sully's essay 'Pessimism and Poetry', for instance, appeared in the February 1878 *Cornhill*, followed in March and April by Stevenson's far from pessimistic 'Crabbed Age and Truth' and 'Æs Triplex'.
 - 13 "Arnold was not a writer of books," Walter Houghton wrote; "he was a writer of periodical literature." (Walter E Houghton, "Periodical Literature and the Articulate Classes", *The Victorian Periodical Press: Samplings and Soundings*, edd. Joanne Shattock and Michael Wolff, Leicester University Press, 1982, p.21)
 - 14 Even as late as 1924, J. A. Steuart was condemning the Burns essay as being 'as unworthy of [Stevenson] as it is of the genius of Robert Burns' – *Robert Louis Stevenson: Man and Writer* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co, 1924), vol 1, p. 177.
 - 15 Lloyd Osbourne remembers Stevenson at this time full of 'eager talk about "going to press," and "closing the formes," and Henley "wanting a middle" about such and such a subject. [...] He was constantly dashing up in cabs, and dashing away again with the impressive prodigality that apparently journalism required.' (Tus 25: vii-viii).
 - 16 Roger Swearingen, *The Prose Writings of Robert Louis Stevenson* (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 31.
 - 17 *The Letters of William Ernest Henley to Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. by Damian Atkinson (High Wycombe, Bucks.: Rivendale, 2008), p. 50.
 - 18 In his *Memoir of Fleeming Jenkin*, Stevenson tells of the only time he and Jenkin seriously quarrelled. 'I had been led to dabble in society journalism; and this coming to his ears, he felt it like a disgrace upon himself. So far he was exactly in the right; but he was scarce happily inspired when he broached the subject at his own table and before guests who were strangers to me. [...] he spoke so freely that I soon made an excuse and left the house with the firm





purpose of returning no more'. (Tus 19: 129) Sidney Colvin also disapproved, as seen, for instance in L2: 210.

19 Swearingen, p. 14.

20 In 1874 Stevenson planned to help his cousin Katharine de Mattos, in need of money, by 'going "on to" an Edinburgh newspaper: 'I shall read the books and make my own notes, and then send them on to her; she can then write what she will, I can always straighten it up when it comes back' (L2: 90, 91). In June 1879, in desperate need of money, Stevenson approached the *Times* for a job, but nothing came of his interview. He says he 'refused leaders' but conceded that he would 'dance [attendance]' on the editor; presumably that suggests that he would have written reviews if required to (L2: 323 and n, 324-25, 326).

21 Roderick Watson, "'Ginger beer and earthquakes" –Stevenson and the terrors of contingency', *Journal of Stevenson Studies* 8 (2011), 111.

22 Perhaps the contributions to both *Fraser's* and *The Pall Mall Gazette* were arranged to help the ill and struggling writer, newly returned to the home country, get back on his feet. John Tulloch, editor of *Fraser's*, was a family friend, who had visited the Stevensons shortly after Louis and Fanny's return to Scotland in the autumn of 1880, and John Morley, editor of *The Pall Mall Gazette*, was a friend of Colvin's and former member of the Savile Club.

23 Damian Atkinson, 'James Payn', *Dictionary of National Biography*.

24 Cited in J. W. Robertson Scott, *The Story of the Pall Mall Gazette*, (London: Oxford Univ Press, 1950), p. 96.

25 Damian Atkinson, 'James Payn', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/21640>.

26 James Sully gives another hint of the club-like (and Savilian) intimacy of the *Cornhill* under Leslie Stephen: 'Although I was [Stevenson's] senior, the fact of our having joined the Savile at about the same time, and still more the synchronizing of our series of contributions to the *Cornhill*, made him seem in a curious way a brotherly companion' – *My Life and Friends* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1918), p. 215. Is it significant that after Payn took over the editorship, Sully's contributions also diminished considerably to just three essays in four years?

27 The *Century* had published a very favourable review of *New*





Arabian Nights, and was promoting Stevenson further in America by serialising *The Silverado Squatters* in November and December 1883.

- 28 *The Contemporary Review*: Scholarly Commentary. <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/ap4.c7.raw.html>.
- 29 It is possible that this piece was sent to the *English Illustrated Magazine* as an act of friendship towards the editor, Joseph Carr who, like Henley, was strongly interested in artistic subjects, supporting the Pre-Raphaelites and opposing the provincial British art establishment. The fragment of correspondence recollected by Mrs Carr shows that her husband and Stevenson were on friendly terms. Later Stevenson spoke of the essay as 'a paper on dogs for Carr' (L4: 179), as though the piece was connected to the editor rather than the publication.
- 30 Liela Rumbaugh Greiman, 'William Earnest Henley and the *Magazine of Art*', *Victorian Periodicals Review* vol 16, 2 (Summer, 1983), 53.
- 31 Greiman, 56.
- 32 'Across the Plains' was already written; 'The Stowaways', a chapter in *The Amateur Emigrant*, was already written; 'Memoirs of a Plot' never was written, at least under such a title; 'A Misadventure in France' probably recounted the story that forms the 'Epilogue to An Inland Voyage', written in 1888; 'An Angora Goat Rancho' would be a memoir of his collapse and recovery in the hill country above Monterey; 'An Island Workshop' might refer to what later became 'Memoirs of an Islet'; 'Fontainebleau' was being written as Stevenson planned this volume; and 'An Autumn Effect' had been written as early as 1875.
- 33 For instance, he complains to Henley in June 1883, 'I have had to leave "Fontainebleau", when three hours would finish it and go full-tilt at tushery for awhile' (L4: 132)
- 34 The title *Familiar Essays* was dropped from the British edition, but Stevenson still hoped it would be used by Scribner's for the American edition (L5: 440). A little later Stevenson was struggling to find a label for the essays he planned for Scribner's. 'I am for once bankrupt of a name. I can think of nothing but sordidly silly or else misleading ones: Sketches, Gossips, Chats etc. Perhaps after all, essays is the right word: Familiar Essays' (L6: 31).





- 35 What essays had he not included? The Alpine pieces; 'The Old Pacific Capital'; 'The Morality of the of Letters'; the two pieces on *Byways of Book Illustrations*; 'A Modern Cosmopolis'; 'A Note on Realism' and 'Fontainebleau'; 'On Style in Literature' and 'The Day after Tomorrow' from *Contemporary*, (though the essay on Thomas Stevenson was included). Only one of the six articles for the *Magazine of Art* was considered worthy of reprinting: 'Penny Plain and Twopence Coloured', minus the illustrations.
- 36 Here are the essays published in *Littell's Living Age* until 1887: 'Ordered South' 27 Jun 1874; 'John Knox 1' 11 Dec 1875; 'John Knox 2' 25 Dec 1875; 'Apology for Idlers' 18 Aug 1877; 'Æs Triplex' 4 May 1878; 'English Admirals' 27 Jul 1878; 'Child's Play' 5 Oct 1878; 'Truth of Intercourse' 21 Jun 1879; 'Henry David Thoreau' 17 Jul 1880; 'Old Pacific Capital' 25 Dec 1880; 'The Morality of the Profession of Letters' 28 May 1881; 'Samuel Pepys' 13 Aug 1881; 'Talk and Talkers' 29 Apr 1882; 'Talk and Talkers' 2 Sept 1882; 'Gossip on Romance' 16 Dec 1882; 'Character of Dogs' 1 Mar 1884; 'Old Mortality' 31 May 1884; 'On Style in Literature' 2 May 1885; 'Day after Tomorrow' 30 Apr 1887; 'Pastoral' 14 May 1887; 'Thomas Stevenson' 2 Jul 1887.
- 37 Will Low also acted as intermediary between Stevenson and other publications, such as *The Manhattan*. It is not clear in Stevenson's reply to Low about *The Manhattan* whether the editor was asking for an essay, a piece of fiction, a poem or whatever Stevenson might have wanted to supply. (Stevenson wrote to Low in October 1883: 'Please tell the Editor of *Manhattan* the following secrets for me: first, that I am a beast: second, that I owe him a letter: third, that I have lost his and cannot recall either his name or address: fourth, that I am very deep in engagements, which my absurd health makes it hard for me to overtake; but, fifth, that I will bear him in mind: sixth, and last, that I am a brute' [L4: 195].)
- 38 McClure had some consolation in being allowed to publish 'copious extracts from "A College Magazine"' in the *New York World*, and also being promised *The Black Arrow* to bring out in book form (L6: 31, 39n).
- 39 Each essay appeared as the final item in each of the *Scribner's* issues, except 'Letter to a Young Gentleman', which was followed by an essay in reply by Will Low.
- 40 Swearingen, p. 118.
- 41 In February, 1889, just after his *Casco* voyage, as the *Scribner's*





series had come to an end, he had plans for a follow-up essay to
'Popular Authors' (L6: 248).

42 MS Yale B 6198.

43 Swearingen, p. 194.

44 E.g., 'let it be your book' (L7: 203).







Stevenson's essays: language and style¹

Richard Dury

In 1881 W. E. Henley wrote a letter to Stevenson in praise of the essay-collection *Virginibus Puerisque*, in which he says, 'You have Style, dear lad – the great quality, the distinguishing sign of the Artist [...] You are a Writer and you are a Stylist – or, to be more correct, a Master of Style.' Such comments become one of the most frequent characterisations of the writer by his contemporaries. The first serious article devoted to his work, both narratives and essays, has the title 'Robert Louis Stevenson: His Style and Thought', and starts by asserting that 'In the front rank of our new school of stylists, Mr Robert Louis Stevenson holds an undisputed place'. Similarly, Henry James begins his 1888 overview with, 'Before all things he is a writer with a style'.²

In all these appreciations, 'style' is used with the meaning, not of simple 'manner' but of 'perfect, admirable manner'. One aspect of such style is that it is carefully 'finished', reworked with attention to both detail and overall effect. For Gerard Manley Hopkins (not referring specifically to the essays) 'Stevenson is a master of consummate style and each phrase is finished as in poetry'. Richard Le Gallienne thought that Stevenson's essays, which he considered his most significant works, were written as 'a poet using the medium of prose'.³ Stephen Gwynn (1894) and F. C. Riedel (1969) analyse passages from the essays in terms of sound-combinations and rhythmic groupings and their connection with meaning, clearly following Stevenson's own observations in 'Some Technical Aspects of Style'.⁴

Another aspect of a carefully finished style is the artful deployment of rhetorical tropes and schemes, and in his study Riedel finds numerous examples of repetitive and symmetrical structures (pp. 191-99). Alice D. Snyder, in one of the best studies of Stevenson's essays, focuses on paradox and antithesis. Taking





typical early essays, 'Æs Triplex', 'Crabbed Age and Youth' and 'An Apology for Idlers', she finds a structural scheme that can also be found, less fully developed, in other *Virginibus* essays and in essays from the 1880s (those that are not travel, biographical or critical essays). She claims that 'Stevenson's use of paradox is [...] unique', since he does not use it as an occasional device (in the essay tradition), but structures the whole essay around it ('he takes his antithesis seriously at the same time as he takes it playfully').⁵ Stevenson typically first presents the narrow meaning of two opposed antithetical terms ('life' and 'death', 'age' and 'youth', 'industry' and 'idleness') and then reinterprets them until we see that one pole will include the other ('life' can be a kind of death) and their positive-negative opposition unfounded and of no importance ('And, after all, what sorry and pitiful quibbling all this is!' as Stevenson concludes 'Æs Triplex', Tus. 27: 80). It is this structure and development, says Snyder, that gives Stevenson's essays, despite informality and digressions, their widely recognised finished quality.

As we have seen, William Archer in 1885 refers to Stevenson in 'our new school of stylists', and Travis R. Merritt has identified a late Victorian 'cult of prose style', aiming at 'the elevation of the prose medium to new heights of expressiveness, distinction and finesse'.⁶ Such a 'school' can be seen as part of the Aesthetic movement, and influenced by French writers, in particular Gautier, Flaubert and Baudelaire (in his 'poèmes en prose'). Spontaneous expression of emotions was avoided and the hand of the artist foregrounded in an artful and eccentric style aimed at expressing personality and the workings of imagination. Prose was carefully composed like poetry with attention to proportion, co-ordination of parts, control of sound, and attention to continuous form. For Merritt, the influential writers and critics in this movement were Walter Pater, George Saintsbury, and Stevenson.

In this paper I will look at the importance of style of Stevenson's essays, with 'style' seen as 'distinctive foregrounded manner'. I





will attempt to characterise this style both formally and as related to world-view, and suggest the contribution it makes to the reading experience. I will be studying Stevenson's essay style neither in terms of the influence of other writers, nor in terms of personal stylistic development, but I will survey both points briefly before moving on to my own analysis.

Concerning influence of others, it is true that Stevenson himself said that as a youth he had taught himself to write by imitating earlier writers – playing 'the sedulous ape' ('A College Magazine'; Tus. 29: 29). This self-mocking admission was then used repeatedly as a serious criticism of all his works, first of all by John Jay Chapman in 1898:⁷ Stevenson's narratives imitate Scott, Defoe and Mérimée, he says; his essays imitate Sir Thomas Browne, Lamb, Montaigne, Dr John Brown, the prose of the early seventeenth century, the sprightly style of the eighteenth century, James Russell Lowell and Carlyle. Here Chapman undermines his own argument by emphasising Stevenson's sheer variety and virtuosity, adding with an enthusiasm that is – well, Stevensonian:

He can write the style of Charles Lamb better than Lamb could do it himself, and his Hazlitt is very nearly as good. He fences with his left hand as well as with his right, and can manage two styles at once like Franz Liszt playing the allegretto from the 7th symphony with an air of Offenbach twined about it. (p. 242)

As Chapman himself admits, Stevenson is 'this Proteus who turns into bright fire and then into running water in our hands'.⁸ His style (as we examine later) partly resides in this very mutableness, his constant variety, his ability to take stylistic features from different languages, linguistic registers, and literary traditions and use them to produce a fresh creation that is 'Stevensonian' – an adjective that in itself attests a consensus view of stylistic distinctiveness. Listing authors that Stevenson





echoes does not seem the best way to identify what is distinctive about the way he writes. Slavish, monotonous or unthinking imitation is not a quality of his writings, which is lively, mercurial, constantly-changing.

Can we see a difference in essay style, similar to the early and late narrative styles that have often been noted? Raleigh (in 1895) makes a distinction between Stevenson's earlier work with its 'daintiness of diction' and the later work: though the later works too contain typical 'felicities that cause a thrill of pleasure to the reader'.⁹ The idea of a change in style around 1880 would have been supported by Stevenson: in the letter that he wrote to William Archer in response to the latter's 1885 article, he protested that his style had 'quite changed in the last six or seven years', in other words since his journey to the USA in late 1879 and his marriage to Fanny Osbourne. His former style he calls 'a neat brisk little style, and a sharp little knack of partial observation' (L5: 141-2).

In contrast with the complex, allusive, playful style of *Virginibus Puerisque*, 'The Old Pacific Capital' (1880), along with *The Amateur Emigrant* (written just before, 1879-80) marks a change to a more sober treatment of observed phenomena, 'more vigorous and direct' as Raleigh says – though still with playfully unexpected language-choices, a detached ironical view of life and a style of constantly-shifting focus.

There is certainly a development in subject-matter: the later essays show a greater interest in theories of aesthetics and narrative fiction;¹⁰ for, though he had written reviews and 'familiar studies' of authors and their works in the 1870s, in the 1880s Stevenson is now the well-known author, writing about his craft. Also typical of the 1880s are the series of autobiographical memoirs either as separate essays, or contained within other essays, such as his memoir of Robert Hunter contained in 'Talk and Talkers II' (1882) and of John Tod in 'Pastoral' (1887).

A comparison between 'Virginibus Puerisque I' (1876) and





'*Virginibus Puerisque II*' (1880) shows a development in world-view: in the latter we find a greater interest in social analysis (girls are brought up 'under a glass house among reproving relatives' and are taught different 'catchwords' from boys) and a grimmer view of reality ('the tyranny of circumstance', and the idea of life as a struggle in which we can only aspire to 'honourable defeat'), as well as a focus on conduct and morality not found in the earlier essay. The later essay also contains first appearance of Stevenson's interest in evolution and memory, which appears repeatedly in the essays of the 1880s.

However, from the point-of-view of purely linguistic and rhetorical features, the style of the two essays is very similar: the same bold opening, the clear marks of an approaching conclusion, the typically hesitant essayist's voice, the frequent use of first and second person pronouns, and the frequent references to literature, including popular literature. It is true that the two essays were only written four years apart and the second was deliberately designed to accompany the first, but the comparison suggests that any stylistic change between early and late essays is more in subject matter and world-view than in absolute change of linguistic characteristics.

Yet though the same stylistic features are to be found in both periods, they may occur with differing frequency. Subjectively, one would say that early essays contain a greater concentration of strange Stevensonian words and phrases than the essays of the 1880s. The 1878 essay 'A Plea for Gas Lamps', for instance, refers, in a kind of game with the reader, to a lantern as 'stable lanthorn', 'vagabond Pharos', 'migratory lanthorn' and 'his own sun'. In contrast, an anecdote involving a lantern in the 1888 essay 'The Coast of Fife' refers four times simply to the 'lantern', and only once periphrastically to the 'barred lustre'. *

Another preliminary matter that needs to be answered is the question of whether the style of Stevenson's essays is different from the style of his other works, and even if so, whether any such





difference is merely due to the differences of literary genre.

In answer to the first question, style, as a foregrounded distinctive manner of writing, seems to be prominent in essays in general,¹¹ especially personal essays, since what these are *about* is the essayist's character and way of seeing the world, and this is expressed above all through a foregrounded style. (As Stevenson himself says, 'style is of the essence of thinking', Tus. 27: 74.) It is by means of style that the essayist creates a reading experience that resembles hearing someone speaking, someone with a distinct personality, a personality that is expressed in the essay's ideas and the way they are presented:

The essayist's authority is not based on formal credentials or academic expertise, but on his or her personality as reflected in the style of writing. Persuasiveness is based on distinctiveness of style rather than on the use of an accepted professional or technical vocabulary.¹²

Hence, though many of the stylistic features of Stevenson's essays identified here will also be found in his other works, in the essay they have an additional and essential persuasive and relation-creating function. In the essay, too, they are more prominent because there is no competition for the reader's attention from a story line.

In addition to sharing this general essayistic focus on style, Stevenson's essays display his own special attention to form in sound and syntax in 'elegant and pregnant implication', at times unobtrusively and not registered by the reader, but also 'obtrusively' and with 'gain to sense and vigour' (Tus. 28: 37). The reader of Stevenson's essays is not only aware of the character of the author as revealed through style, but also of the stylistic forms themselves as they are clearly and 'obtrusively' presented.

The idea that stylistic features, even if shared with narratives, will be more prominent in essays seems to be supported by a





tendency for commentators to illustrate Stevenson's distinctive style by quotations taken from the latter. Although essays form a minor, though substantial, part of Stevenson's output, between 20 and 30% (depending on whether we count the early travel books, which are indeed very similar),¹³ it is essays that dominate lists of quotations illustrating his stylistic traits. In 1905, William James Dawson gives examples from 'Stevenson's writings' of 'constant and delightful surprises [...] the unexpected harmony [...] of some resonant word', and of the seven illustrative quotations that follow, five are from *Virginibus Puerisque* and one from the essay-like 'Across the Plains'. Raleigh (1895) gives five examples of 'careful choice of epithet and name', three from *Virginibus Puerisque* (which he says is 'crowded with happy hits and subtle implications conveyed in a single word'), one from 'Across the Plains'. Leslie Cope Cornford (1899) gives five examples from Stevenson's works of 'harmonious, ingenious rhythms, nimble combinations, apt subtle contrasts of colour, apt and witty elements', three of them from essays (two of these from *Virginibus*).¹⁴ It would seem that the stylistic traits that were considered most typical of Stevenson are either more frequent in the essays or are more easily perceived there.

Another preliminary matter to discuss is the question of what aspects of Stevenson's essay style belong to the genre of the essay itself. These include: 'an informal style, a casual, meandering structure, [...] the clear imprint of the author's personality'.¹⁵ To this can be added honesty about feelings and thoughts, 'a compulsion towards fresh expression', the challenging of commonplace popular opinion, alternations of modesty and egotism, and 'mischievous impudence'.¹⁶ Apart from its specific contents, this list in itself gives an idea of another important aspect of essayistic discourse: its multiple and fragmentary nature (as suggested by terms used above, like 'meandering', 'self-contradiction', 'alternations'), a fragmentation further clarified if we look at specific typical stylistic elements: embedded narratives, elabora-





tion in drawing out a point ('through example, list, simile, small variation, hyperbolic exaggeration'), aphorism, digression, and 'movement from the individual to the universal' often involving frequent modulation of subject ('I', 'one', 'we', 'you'). This 'fragmentary and random' nature of essayistic discourse allows it to explore reality of which we not in total control and to foreground the very process of exploration. As Alexander Smith says, 'The essayist gives you his thoughts, and lets you know, in addition, how he came by them'.¹⁷

The majority of Stevenson's essays clearly fit these descriptions, and yet they remain distinctive. When his first essays were published in the 1870s, Stevenson immediately appeared as a new voice. After the mid-Victorian domination of the quarterly magazines and their serious and emphatic formal essay styles,¹⁸ Stevenson arrives with his constantly changing viewpoint, inserted personal anecdotes, brief narratives, imaginary dialogues, hints of stories, addresses to the reader. 'Some Portraits by Raeburn', for instance, starts as an exhibition review but the section on Braxfield, after an imaginative description of the portrait, then digresses to an account of Braxfield's courtroom style and then to an imaged picture of him walking home from court 'in a mirk January night' and then of his thoughts as he does so.

Although RLS wrote some formal essays of a conventional kind (the encyclopaedia entry for 'Jean-Pierre de Béranger', for example), he also wrote essays on historical, literary or moral subjects in which he adopts the typical stylistic features and exploratory, fragmented approach of the personal essay. He calls his essays on writers 'the readings of a literary vagrant' (Tus. 27: xii), and they are as much accounts of personal experience as his travel essays. The essay on 'Pepys', for example, gives a good picture of his subject with a penetrating analysis of his motivations for keeping a diary, while at the same time displaying Stevenson's own enthusiasm and wonder. 'On Style in Literature', though divided into sections and provided with footnotes and a conclusion, uses





original terms, includes bold metaphors and features his typical wordplay.

But let us now attempt to characterise Stevenson's essay style. Exhaustive description of style being as impossible as a full description of a person's face (which yet remains immediately recognisable on sight), my strategy will be to characterise Stevenson's typical manner of writing by means of a few prominent broad characteristics.

Lightness

In 1885, William Archer says that Stevenson's style is notable for a modern 'lightness of touch', 'a buoyant, staccato, touch-and-go elasticity'.¹⁹ Perhaps this quality can be best understood by what it is opposed to: hierarchical structures, complexity, close reasoning, dogmatism, earnestness and emphasis. Over and over again in the commentaries that followed during his lifetime and afterwards, Stevenson is praised for this 'lightness' of his style.²⁰ Calvino (not referring only to the essays) praised the 'marvellous lightness' and 'surprising levity' of this writer who 'flies'.²¹

Stevenson's 'lightness of touch' has affinities with Calvino's ideas on *leggerezza* in literature, discussed in his planned Harvard lectures, in which 'signifieds are carried on a web of language as if weightless', involving therefore a certain foregrounding of (weightless) linguistic structure, so that the matter referred to ('the weight, thickness, concreteness of things') does not monopolise the reader's attention.²² Indeed, Stevenson himself seems to be expressing the same idea metaphorically when he says (in 'The Lantern-Bearers') that in realist novels, 'life falls dead like dough, instead of soaring away like a balloon into the colours of the sunset' (Tus. 30: 39). Here, a reference to heavy reality coincides with a dense, three-syllable structure of sound and rhythm ('dead like dough'), but is followed by an unexpected long clause of twenty syllables and unpredictable development describing how literary language should be light – like a balloon,





but also multiple, varied and elusive, escaping into the immaterial colours of the sunset. At the same time, the reader is aware of the performance of a writer who is light in the sense of free, since he can add and add to the sentence in an unpredictable way. Such readerly awareness creates what Calvino calls 'a lightness of thoughtfulness', with attention given both to the writing and to the represented world. Our awareness of Stevenson's style in the essays is not enjoyment of superficial display, but a consciousness of 'words as a perpetual pursuit of things, as a perpetual adjustment to their infinite variety'. This formula, used by Calvino to describe his personal view of language, fits the language of Stevenson too, and above all else in his essays.²³

'Lightness' will also be associated with a lack of syntactical complexity. Instead, we find a paratactic sentence structure, which places phenomena on the same level, at the same time as it traces the development of thought by linked ideas; clauses juxtaposed with Stevenson's frequent semicolon; exuberant listings, a treatment of everything as equally interesting, and a lack of dogmatic emphasis.

In the case of Stevenson, lightness does not mean the expected and transparent – his word-choices and word-combinations are typically idiosyncratic – nor does it mean writing that can be lightly skimmed, as his prose encourages a careful, attentive reading. What happens is that the lightness which foregrounds the linguistic structure and sounds, and which calls attention to the experience of reading, induces the reader to attribute relatively less importance to the represented world. In other words, lightness of foregrounded structure is also connected with a focus on present experience and with lightness of world-view: a debonair attitude, an acceptance of existence, an unconcerned view that life is meaningless and that decisions are indifferent: 'lightness' in Kundera's sense.²⁴ In early essay 'Walking Tours', Stevenson calls this world-view 'that kingdom of light imaginations':





If you ask yourself what you mean by fame, riches, or learning, the answer is far to seek; and you go back into that kingdom of light imaginations, which seem so vain in the eyes of Philistines perspiring after wealth, and so momentous to those who are stricken with the disproportions of the world, and, in the face of the gigantic stars, cannot stop to split differences between two degrees of the infinitesimally small, such as a tobacco pipe or the Roman Empire, a million of money or a fiddlestick's end. (Tus. 25: 124)

For Janetta Newton-Robinson, 'His philosophy of life is remarkable for an outspoken confession of the puzzle and wonder and comicality of "this flux of things": he has no dogma to propound'.²⁵ The 'lightness' resides in a serene acceptance of phenomena as illusions of no importance,²⁶ the reduction of human institutions and symbols (the Roman Empire, a million of money) and feelings to things of no value in the context of the present moment, amid infinity and eternity. Stevenson's essays revive for the late nineteenth century the sceptical view of Montaigne that nothing in life need be taken seriously – a view that has been said to open up 'a world of lightness and pleasure'.²⁷

The presentation of this view has its playful side, as in the introduction of unconventional and transgressive concepts as presuppositions, as 'sudden sweeping generalisations'.²⁸ In the phrase 'two degrees of the infinitesimally small, *such as a tobacco pipe or the Roman Empire*', the parenthetical exemplification (here italicised) is assumed as shared, not openly asserted or established by argument. Another example is the presupposed proposition in the (italicised) relative clause of 'An Apology for Idlers': 'Idleness so called, *which does not consist in doing nothing, but in doing a great deal not recognised in the dogmatic formularies of the ruling class*, has as good a right to state its position as industry itself' (Tus. 25: 51).





Readers are amused by the effortless way they accept this unusual world-view and by the cool presumption of the writer. Of course, this does not work for the reader who resists entering the game, like the anonymous reviewer of the *British Quarterly* in 1881, who (analysing this practice) dislikes Stevenson's intention 'to surprise us by edging-in paradoxes on the mind as if they were verified truths of his own experience'.²⁹

The use of words that are themselves unusual or have an unusual meaning in use (dealt with at greater length in the sections on 'playfulness' and 'strangeness') is related to this use of daring presuppositions, since in both cases the transgressiveness is not normally (or not fully) perceived by the reader. The operation is lightly done (no quotation marks around unusual words, or hedging expressions like 'as one might say') and the word or phrase is presented as if known and shared.

Such 'lightness' of Stevenson's style was greeted as a refreshing change from the impassioned polemics and earnest world-view of the Victorian sages like Carlyle and Ruskin: 'he is amply content to please and amuse us', writes Grant Allen in a 1879 review of *Travels with a Donkey*, 'as though he had been born in the easy eighteenth century, before the rise of earnestness and intense thinkers' (Maixner: 65). Colvin, too, contrasted him to 'Carlyle, Macaulay, Ruskin, Dickens', who were given to 'stress and vehemence [...] splendid over-colouring and over-heightening', while Stevenson cultivated 'restraint and lenity of style' (Maixner: 7).³⁰

Enthusiasm

Lightness as a world-view is related to a focus on the present moment, and that same child-like focus is also found in another distinguishing mark of Stevenson's style, his enthusiasm. In an introduction to translations of Stevenson's essays on writing, Giorgio Almansi actually singles this out as 'the basic feeling of Stevenson's writing', especially marked in his essays on the art of literature. His enthusiasm is 'festive, no respecter of traditions,





liberating, not subject to a moral imperative'.³¹ R. L. Abrahamson remarks that it is the first thing that strikes us about Stevenson's discussions of his reading in both essays and letters.³² It was also a characteristic of Stevenson the man: Leslie Stephen refers to his 'pervading vitality' and adds that 'Whatever he took up, [...] he threw his whole soul into it as if it were the sole object of existence'.³³ Even John Jay Chapman, whose 1898 essay condemns Stevenson as merely imitative, says that his imitations are not made consciously, but 'He gives them out again in joy and in good faith with zest and amusement and in the excitement of a new discovery'.³⁴

The word that Stevenson most often uses for 'enthusiasm' is 'gusto', borrowed from Hazlitt's essay 'On Gusto' (where it is defined, in relation to art, as 'power or passion in defining any object'). It is the word he uses to describe the absorbed dancing of a little girl, Raeburn's painting, Salvini's acting, Bunyan's writing, Skelt's toy theatres, the character and literary style of Pepys, and the writer when describing 'those things he has only wished to do' and when absorbed in technique.³⁵

Expressions of enjoyment and praise will be a mark of such style, 'vivacity and vividness',³⁶ fascination with many phenomena, as well as a transferred fecundity of playful linguistic invention showing an enthusiasm not only for the object described but also for the act of description itself, the one reflecting the other. While Stevenson's lightness contrasted with the emphasis of the mid-Victorian essayists, we can see that he too was emphatic about some things: not in support of codified moral principles or rules but about his own feelings of pleasure, especially in reading or conversation.

Enthusiasm can be seen in strings of similes and words of praise, the rapid literary and cultural allusions, celebration of memorable reading experiences, and an exhilarating display of linguistic skill. We find it in essays both early and late: 'On the Enjoyment of Unpleasant Places' (1874), 'Notes on the Movement





of Young Children' (1874), 'Walking Tours' (1876); and then 'Talk and Talkers' (1882), 'A Penny Plain' (1883), 'A Gossip on a Novel of Dumas's' (1887), and 'Popular Authors' (1888). We see it in accounts of the fervour of artistic ideas:

Lastly, there is something, or there seems to be something, in the very air of France that communicates the love of style. Precision, clarity, the cleanly and crafty employment of material, a grace in the handling, apart from any value in the thought, seem to be acquired by the mere residence; or if not acquired, become at least the more appreciated. The air of Paris is alive with this technical inspiration... (Tus. 30: 103);

There is youthful passion:

Every sheet we fingered was another lightning glance into obscure, delicious story; it was like wallowing in the raw stuff of story-books... (Tus. 29: 104);

And, above all, there is the total abandonment of self in a story:

In anything fit to be called by the name of reading, the process itself should be absorbing and voluptuous; we should gloat over a book, be rapt clean out of ourselves, and rise from the perusal, our mind filled with the busiest, kaleidoscopic dance of images, incapable of sleep or of continuous thought. (Tus. 29: 119).

We even see it in the grim gusto of the description of man in the Cosmos:

What a monstrous spectre is this man, the disease of the agglutinated dust, lifting alternate feet or lying drugged





with slumber; killing, feeding, growing, bringing forth small copies of himself; grown upon with hair like grass, fitted with eyes that move and glitter in his face, a thing to set children screaming; - and yet looked at nearer, known as his fellows know him, how surprising are his attributes! (Tus. 26: 62).

Variousness

Though variation is essential to any aesthetic form, the kind of 'variousness' that we find in Stevenson's essays becomes a distinctive stylistic feature. Here we will restrict ourselves to examining this quality briefly in his unexpected verbal and phrasal choices, and in his contrasting clauses. Following this, and under the same quality of 'variousness', we will also look at his typical shifting presentation of the represented world.

A key-word for Stevenson's stylistic variety and contrast is 'picturesque', which he often associates with picture-making narrative and 'romance', but also frequently associated with linguistic style: Villon's poetry is 'so full of colour, so eloquent, so picturesque', contrasting with the plain language of contemporary chroniclers; the style of Pepys is 'lively, telling, and picturesque'; and Whitman has the ability to put things 'in a bright, picturesque, and novel way'. The speech of his father, Thomas Stevenson, was 'apt, droll, and emphatic [...] both just and picturesque'.³⁷

It was Uvedale Price who had extended the aesthetic idea of 'picturesque' to speech: conversation is picturesque when it is 'full of unexpected turns, of flashes of light', when it offers 'singular, yet natural points of view' and when it displays 'such unthought-of agreements and contrasts; such combinations, so little obvious, yet never forced or affected, that the attention cannot flag; but from the delight of what is passed, we eagerly listen for what is to come'.³⁸ Although the adjective was applied in the nineteenth century above all to rural dialect, Stevenson





uses it of the style of three admired writers (Villon, Pepys and Whitman) and it is striking that Price's characterisation of picturesque speech closely resembles what critic after critic have identified as characteristics of Stevenson's own style: 'full of unexpected turns', displaying 'unthought-of agreements and contrasts'. Ann Colley, for instance, sees Stevenson's 'style of writing' as notable for contrasts and irregularities: 'sentences not only move in delicate gradations and pause in pools of meaning but also progress through brusque juxtapositions, irregularities, or even through outlandish uses of words', and she identifies his 'alterations and interruptions' with Stevenson's idea (in his essay 'On Style in Literature') of the 'knot' in the sentence.³⁹ The qualities of the elements that make up the picturesque – contrasting, unexpected, discontinuous, striking, varied – are clearly qualities of Stevenson's prose style.

We will examine Stevenson's unusual word-choice in the sections on 'playfulness' and 'strangeness', but here we may usefully look at the contrasts of longer phrases and clauses. Stevenson may have been inspired here by Baroque examples, such as Sir Thomas Browne, in examples such as the heterogeneous objects of the verb 'prevent' in 'Even Sylla, that thought himself safe in his urn, could not prevent *revenging tongues, and stones thrown at his monument*'.⁴⁰ Here, the syntactic and rhythmic irregularity combines with a typical final clause that moves from the general to the concrete. A similar irregularity can often be found in Stevenson's essays, as in the following move from general 'etiquette' to concrete 'teaspoons':

Ballades are very admirable things; and a poet is doubtless a most interesting visitor. But among the courtiers of Charles, there would be considerable regard for the proprieties of etiquette; and even a duke will sometimes have an eye to his teaspoons. ('Charles of Orleans', Tus. 27: 170)





The added-on, more concrete (and often longer) final coordinated clause is an example of 'loose' style.⁴¹ The model is not necessarily Sir Thomas Browne, as it could just as easily be Montaigne (who Stevenson declares to have been an influence), as in 'I want a man to act, and to prolong the functions of life as long as he can; and I want Death to find me planting my cabbages'.⁴²

However, it would be a mistake to class Stevenson's asymmetric sentences as mere superficial imitation. They can also be seen, not only as helping to make the essay resemble the unpredictable sequencing of conversation or of thoughts, but also as reflecting Stevenson's own world-views, since by this irregular construction of the sentence, as in the adopted rambling sequence of the personal essay, he refuses to force phenomena into a system, he will always ground his enthusiasm in a concrete detail, he accepts variety and irregularity and the impossibility of understanding everything. The paratactic 'and' (already mentioned in the section on 'lightness') implicitly denies explanation and accepts things as they are: various, irregular and fragmented.

'Picturesque' variousness applies especially to word-choice, word-order and irregular syntax, but there is another type of variety characterising Stevenson's style: that associated with shifting 'viewpoint', which I will also refer to as shifting 'perspective' and 'focus'. I distinguish it, however, from 'point-of view' and its idea of a change in the subject of perception: by shifting 'viewpoint', I mean shifts in spatial or temporal closeness and distance in addition to shifts between first, second and third person pronouns, not accompanied, however, by real changes of subjective point-of-view.

One obvious and word-related manifestation of a change in viewpoint is the shifting of personal subject pronouns. Although it is undoubtedly a feature of Stevenson's essay style, we will only mention it briefly, because it is a common rhetorical technique found in sermons, essays⁴³ and public speaking, associated with a variety of involving, persuasive or distancing effects. Stevenson





often narrates a personal experience using ‘you’ as subject, as in the whole paragraph in ‘The Old Pacific Capital’ about the exploration of the Monterey Peninsula,⁴⁴ while, in the next paragraph, the subject suddenly switches to the first person (‘When once I was in these woods I found it difficult to turn homeward’). On other occasions, the reader is included as a companion in ‘we’, as in the paragraph of ‘Forest Notes’ (beginning ‘Dinner over, people drop outside to smoke and chat. Perhaps we go along to visit our friends at the other end of the village...’). At the end of the same paragraph the subject shifts to one of the party separated from the others and alone in the strange silence of the forest, all narrated in the ‘alienated’ third person, though it is clearly a personal anecdote.

A related feature is the shifting of focus between first-person observer and the thing observed. Vernon Lee, analysing a passage in *Travels with a Donkey*, remarks on ‘a seesaw between nominatives [i.e. subjects] of different parts of the sentence’ in switches between focus on others and focus on the writer. She quotes a sentence illustrating this, then adds that it ‘prepares one for a perpetual give and take between the told thing and the teller, which is very characteristic of Stevenson’s mode of exposition’.⁴⁵

But it is not only the subject viewpoint of Stevenson’s sentences that is continually changing. Vernon Lee refers to the changes in tense in Stevenson as ‘*dimensional movements in time*, and their variety and intricacy enlarges it, as variety and movement in space enables us to feel an object as cubic’.⁴⁶ This interesting observation captures an important aspect of Stevenson’s style and I will look at it in some detail here as it has not been fully studied before.

Time and space are constantly changing for the perceiver in Stevenson’s descriptive prose – seen as near and then far and then near again – as in the beginning of the fourth paragraph of ‘A Modern Cosmopolis’:





Thus, in the course of a generation only, this city and its suburb have arisen. Men are alive by the score who have hunted all over the foundations in a dreary waste. I have dined, near the 'punctual centre' of San Francisco, with a gentleman (then newly married), who told me of his former pleasures, wading with his fowling-piece in sand and scrub, on the site of the house where we were dining. (Tus. 18: 144)

Here, the switching of subject from 'the city' and 'men' to 'I' is accompanied by the switching of temporal focus, from the period of living memory (in which the expansion of San Francisco has taken place), to a few years ago (when I dined there), then back to a period before then (the experience of the fellow-diner). The introduction of the apparently irrelevant detail 'then newly married', could be to indicate that the witness was young so his experiences were comparatively recent, but (since people can marry at any age) it could also serve to add another element of temporal relativity, back from the dinner to the recent wedding day, for the mere variety of another small temporal shift. At the same time, spatial focus, too, is continually changing: from the whole area of the present-day city (seen first as city, then as former 'dreary waste'), to its 'punctual centre', to the area previously 'sand and scrub' just around this centre, before returning to the even smaller point of 'the house where we were dining'.

In a similar way, in the first two paragraphs of 'Forest Notes' the focus of attention moves, in one continuous fluid movement, from plain, to forest, to the peasant in the plain now, the peasant in the past, the lord in the past, the lord's partly-ruined chateau now, and the peasant farmer now at work on the plain, content that that the chateau no longer houses a lord, 'And perhaps, as he raises his head and sees the forest, [...] forest and chateau hold no unsimilar place in his affections' (Tus. 30: 117-18).

In a passage of the walking tour of the Chiltern Hills described





in 'An Autumn Effect', Stevenson analyses a strange personal experience of shifting perspective:

It was not unpleasant, in such an humour, to catch sight, ever and anon, of large spaces of the open plain. This happened only where the path lay much upon the slope, and there was a flaw in the solid leafy thatch of the wood at some distance below the level at which I chanced myself to be walking; then, indeed, little scraps of foreshortened distance, miniature fields, and Lilliputian houses and hedgerow trees would appear for a moment in the aperture, and grow larger and smaller, and change and melt one into another, as I continued to go forward, and so shift my point of view. (Tus. 30: 78-79)

Here things lose reality and it is the changing act of perception that is central, within a state of heightened awareness.

The following virtuoso example was singled out for praise by an anonymous reviewer in 1892:⁴⁷

The plateau broke down to the North Sea in formidable cliffs, the tall out-stacks rose like pillars ringed about with surf, the coves were over-brimmed with clamorous froth, the sea-birds screamed, the wind sang in the thyme on the cliff's edge; here and there, small ancient castles toppled on the brim; here and there, it was possible to dip into a dell of shelter, where you might lie and tell yourself you were a little warm, and hear (near at hand) the whin-pods bursting in the afternoon sun, and (farther off) the rumour of the turbulent sea. ('Education of an Engineer'; Tus. 30: 21-22)

Here, the description of the coast is presented as a heterogeneous sequence (plateau, outstacks, coves; but also sea-birds,





wind) with opposed movements ('broke down... rose') and a movement of focus from visible forms (cliffs, stacks etc.) to sound ('clamorous... screamed... sang'). This inharmonious context, the emphasis on extreme dimensions and excess ('formidable... tall... over-brimmed'), the unexpected mention of 'the seabirds screamed' and the almost hallucinatory 'small ancient castles' provide an expressionistic context for the sudden focus on an observer ('you') in the second part, his imagined thoughts and feelings. The shifts in scale and focus suggest a slightly uncanny experience, as we saw in the passage from 'Forest Notes' just examined.

Shifting viewpoint of various kinds seems also to be found in the poems. Both Jean-Pierre Naugrette and Penny Fielding have noted the constant shifts, in the *Child's Garden of Verses* poems, between the voice of the child and that of the remembering adult, and Fielding has noted how temporal and spatial focus shifts back and forward in poems like 'To S. C.' and 'The Tropics Vanish', and how, in the latter, 'the [spatial] focus expands and then contracts again'.⁴⁸

The reasoning of Stevenson's essays is sometimes full of movement too. From the short first paragraph of 'Virginibus Puerisque' here are words used to make distinctions between categories, to include and exclude: 'With the single exception of... Even... and, what is far stranger,... although... For that matter, if...'. The subject under discussion is being constantly defined by examining exceptions and surprising memberships of a category, excluding the relevance of a possible objection ('although'), and adding something that contrast with what has just been said ('for that matter', here meaning 'nevertheless'). Vernon Lee remarks of a passage in *Travels with a Donkey*, 'although the whole passage is perfectly clear, it is remarkably complicated; full of turns and superpositions' with a 'degree of logical activity' that is 'a pleasure to the intelligent Reader'. Here we have an interesting paradox: Stevenson's prose, despite syntactic and semantic complexity, is





‘perfectly clear’.⁴⁹

If, however, we look more closely at Lee’s examples, one is struck by the lack of complex subordinating conjunctions: she cites a series of indicators of subjective modality (‘I suppose’, ‘It seemed’, ‘I own’), which relate the represented world to the observer, and then a series of co-ordinating (paratactic) elements. Only one subordinating conjunction is mentioned and that belongs to a two-word elliptical clause (‘although fleshly’). She does not mention two subordinate conditional clauses, but these too are remarkably short. I suggest, therefore, that the ‘Virginibus’ example is an exception, a display of syntactical complexity, a mere opening flourish in an early essay, and that Stevenson’s typical syntactic style is notably simple and paratactic, as we might imagine from his frequent use of the semicolon and the paratactic juxtapositions already noted.

Playfulness

Stevenson’s style in the essays typically involves linguistic artistry and word-play of the kind found in Shakespeare and Donne: linguistic manipulation not intended as humorous but aimed instead at creating an intensely felt reading experience. Critics would later find this aspect of his style bizarre, class it as merely superficial decoration, probably because too different from developing literary norms. Playfulness is a central quality of Stevenson’s style since it is connected with several other characteristics: with ‘variousness’ (play is changeable, involves the unexpected), with ‘enthusiasm’ (in the focus on the present), with ‘lightness’ (in play, we enter a space of spontaneity, freedom and creativity) and with involvement of the reader (since play is a shared activity that creates a sense of equality). It also, interestingly, borders on ‘strangeness’: when we lose the idea of the ironic artist and the reader is no longer able to fully understand ‘what’s going on’. Playfulness being by definition elusive, we will limit ourselves here to a few common devices in the area of





manipulation of form and meaning.⁵⁰

On the level of sounds, play is found in repetition-with-variation (or ‘paranomasia’). In the early essays, examples of this such as ‘*memorial* stones are set over the least *memorable*’ (‘Æs Triplex’, 1878; Tus. 25: 73) are reminiscent of Baroque poetics, and can be seen as imitation or as playful stylistic allusion.⁵¹ By the time of ‘Health and Mountains’ in 1881 we find the more artfully-constructed sentence ‘a *wind* cunningly *winds* about the mountains’ (Tus. 30: 146), where the reader is forced to an awareness of difference of phonetic form and meaning of the two words; at the same time, the subtle variation of sound between ‘wind’ and ‘winds’ can also be mapped onto the subtle variations of the wind’s trajectory, while the adverb ‘cunningly’ winks at the ability of both wind and writer, with the latter as the reader’s playful antagonist.⁵² This form:meaning mapping (sometimes called ‘iconic’ use of language) involves language that in some way resembles what it represent. Like all forms of artistic self-reference, this can be seen as a form of play.

Stevenson in his typical poetic prose also marks important parts of the text by alliteration and assonance, or experiments with difficult consonant sequences to raise the reader’s awareness or to underline some form of difficulty described in the text. So, in ‘Pan’s Pipes’ (Tus. 25: 125), the sun is described as ‘the great, conflagrant sun: a world of *hell’s squibs*, tumultuary, roaring aloud, inimical to life’, a notable phrase iconically imitating what it represents: the chaos of the sun is described in a chaotic sequence of words – long, short; Germanic, Latinate; syntactically varied – in which the difficulty (or playful challenge) of processing a list of words that falls into no repetitive pattern is heightened at the point of enunciating the adjacent sibilants of ‘hell’s squibs’.

An example of playful ‘iconic language’ not involving sound is, ‘Even in the cloak-room the eye is *scared* by unexpected and inharmonious details’ (‘In the Latin Quarter’),⁵³ the unexpected





word 'scared' in a sequence that also presents the eye as an independent entity, creates a moment of alarm in the reader as he or she tries to assimilate the unusual word-choice and point-of-view: the word is itself an 'unexpected and inharmonious' detail that creates a small alarm, so resembles what it describes. Inventiveness of this kind is found repeatedly in the essays, even in the 1880s, and contributes to the heightened awareness of the reader in the reading process.⁵⁴

In 'The Truth of Intercourse' the unexpected word 'teeth' (where we expect 'mouth') is notable: 'The cruellest lies are often told in silence. A man may have sat in a room for hours and not opened his *teeth*, and yet come out of that room a disloyal friend or a vile calumniator' (Tus. 25: 35). Here, the word stands out not only because unexpected but also because its articulation involves closing and exposing the teeth. We experience an uncomfortable identity with the person referred to and to the silent equivocation, a relief that it is only a language game, and then perhaps admiration for the writer's skill at creating this inventive sequence.

The first section of Stevenson's essay 'On Style in Literature' discusses how to restore 'primal energy' to words and phrases, and he himself achieves this by unexpected word-choices, a prominent feature of his style, commented on by many critics. In his essays, Stevenson often uses archaic, obsolete words and colloquial words.⁵⁵ There are frequent Gallicisms, such as *rumour*, used with its meaning in French of 'noise' – yet chosen for a purpose, where the sound and rhythm of the word contributes to the larger phrase and the unusual choice focuses the reader's attention on the singularity of the phenomenon referred to, as in 'the rumour of the turbulent sea' ('The Education of an Engineer', Tus. 30: 22). Scots lexis is also not uncommon and, like the other unusual word-choices, is not identified by quotation marks or parenthetical comment, an implied declaration of the writer's freedom from constricting conventions of language

Related to the use of unfamiliar words is an even more typi-





cal feature of Stevenson's style: the use of familiar words with a meaning that is unusual, yet perfectly understandable from the context.⁵⁶ Examples abound in the essays, for example: 'Many *wakeful* people come down late for breakfast' (Tus. 30: 158), where 'wakeful' is used, not in the normal sense of 'keeping awake, especially while others sleep' (OED), but in a totally new, backward-looking meaning of 'having kept awake' or 'looking as if they had been awake all night'. In 'The Gospel According to Walt Whitman' Stevenson complains that language is unfit to express thought because 'the words are all coloured and *forsworn*, apply inaccurately, and bring with them, from former uses ideas of praise and blame that have nothing to do with the question in hand' (Tus. 27: 60). Since Stevenson uses 'forsworn' in the context, a few words later, of 'former uses', it is not difficult for the reader to imagine a new word '*fore-sworn*' i.e. '*already* bound [to a meaning]', combining this new meaning with that for with the normal word (and its spelling) 'forsworn', meaning '*falsely* bound', '*fraudulently* promised'.⁵⁷ When (in 'A Letter to a Young Gentleman') he says that 'The French have a *romantic evasion* for one employment, and call its practitioners the Daughters of Joy' (Tus. 28: 8), he uses 'evasion' as a sort of euphemism for... 'euphemism', perfectly understandable, but requiring the participation of the reader to infer the meaning from the context and recognise the playful icononclasticism.⁵⁸

In some cases a new word-use exists indeterminately along with the old (in a combined or 'portmanteau' meaning): for example, in 'An Apology for Idlers', 'my gentleman sits bolt upright upon a bench, with *lamentable* eyes', where the adjective can be interpreted with the normal meaning of 'causing sorrow' in the viewer (the normal meaning) and with a new additional meaning of 'expressing sorrow'. In 'Æs Triplex', 'cities in South America built upon the side of fiery mountains' are situated in 'this *tremendous* neighbourhood', where 'tremendous' has a meaning that combines 'terrible' and 'immense' (the normal





meanings) and a new context-created meaning of 'trembling'.

Indeed, Stevenson's own speech seems to have had this playful and manipulative characteristic right from his university days, when (a fellow-student attests):

He seemed to attach great importance to the use of words which from association carried with them a fuller connotation than a mere dictionary one; and to the effectiveness of words and phrases in everyday use when employed in a not altogether usual connection.⁵⁹

Playful manipulation of sounds and words continues on the level of the phrase: Stevenson continually avoids expected fixed phrases and invents phrases that are new. His 'phrases do not run into set moulds and get fixed in formulae', he bore a 'hatred to the commonplace formula [...] His words are always alive'. As Arthur Symons remarked in 1894, 'He was resolved from the first to reject the ready-made in language, to combine words for himself, as if no one had ever used them before', and G. K. Chesterton praises his 'rather curious combination of [...] words', and his 'picked and pointed phrases'.⁶⁰ One simple technique is the use of an unexpected epithet, as in 'Here, by a *ferocious* custom, idle youths must promenade from ten till two',⁶¹ leaving the reader to work out a possible meaning.

In 'Child's Play' Stevenson comments 'There may be two words [=opinions] to that' (Tus. 25: 11) – an apparent invention of his,⁶² though it has the characteristics of a proverbial expression, and indeed probably derives from 'there are two words to a bargain',⁶³ and 'there are two sides to every question'. The result is a new expression that sounds familiar yet unfamiliar at the same time. An example, instead, of a recognisable idiom that has been made strange by a small alteration is: 'in the end, I was forced to eat up my words' ('Crabbed Age and Youth'; Tus 25: 39), where 'eat up' (rather than 'eat') sounds like something a foreigner might say, or





something that exists in a regional dialect.⁶⁴

A more conventional way of making a word stand out is by simple contrast with surrounding words: in sound, length, Germanic or Latin morphology, abstract or concrete reference. Shakespeare could be an influence here ('and his 'blanket of the night', 'multitudinous sea incarnadine' etc.) and also Walter Pater.⁶⁵ An example in Stevenson of abstract-concrete pairs of words linked by 'and' is 'that very *pinchbeck and indiscriminating* enthusiasm' (Tus. 28: 169); also (with an added contrast of monosyllable and polysyllable), 'another person becomes to us the very *gist and centrepoin*t of God's creation' ('Falling in Love'; Tus. 25: 22). Single Latinate words additionally stand out for length and for constituting a rhythmical group 'of Nature's making' (Tus. 28: 41). An example is the following appreciation of the North American sunrise in comparison with that of Europe: 'it has a duskier glory, and more nearly resembles sunset; it seems to fit some *subsequential* evening epoch of the world' (Tus. 18: 85).⁶⁶ The marked use of a Latinate word continues in the later essays, for example in 'Pulvis et Umbra' we find 'gravity that swings the *incommensurable* suns and worlds through space', and 'our *rotatory* island loaded with *predatory* life, and more drenched with blood, both animal and vegetable, than ever mutinied ship' (Tus. 26: 60, 62).⁶⁷

Stevenson's techniques of word-play and language manipulation (like his frequent questionings of strict dualistic oppositions) destabilise conventional hierarchies, and so they reflect his general stance in the early essays against pre-established order. And as with Stevenson's cheeky presentation of transgressive ideas as presuppositions, his constant word-play can only be appreciated by those who want to enter the game. Those who did not (especially in the seventy years or so after the First World War) saw his style as bizarre and uninteresting: 'His writing is a game', said the *TLS* in 1919, 'but it is a game in which we are seldom





tempted to share'.⁶⁸

Strangeness

Where the reader has difficulty in perceiving the hand of the playful author, he or she will experience Stevenson's manipulated language as 'strange'. For example, where Stevenson alters the collocational rules of a word, then the reader will not easily understand what has happened and so get the feeling of strangeness. A word comes with certain rules that dictate the other words it can normally combine with; violation of these restrictions can produce metaphor ('the air sings'), but Stevenson habitually uses a more subtle and subliminal form of such syntactical violation, forcing the reader to confront and then accept a new combinational possibility without reaching explicit metaphor. For example, in 'Pan's Pipes', the sentence 'no repetition can *assimilate* these contrasts' (Tus. 25: 125).⁶⁹ does not involve a metaphorical use of the word 'assimilate' but forces us to understand it as 'make similar', rather than the normal meaning of 'absorb' (e.g. 'Modern cultures can assimilate these contrasts'). While metaphors are overt and easily recognised, Stevenson's syntactic inventiveness remains hidden, is not clearly recognised, at the same time as it gives the reader an experience of the strangeness of language itself, of the way it is not fixed and codified in dictionaries and grammars but varied, fluid, adaptable.

Another example of this technique is found in 'Samuel Pepys': 'at a given moment we *apprehend* our character and acts by some particular side; we are merry with one, grave with another' (Tus. 27: 182). Here, 'apprehend' seems to be used in a new causative way ('cause [others] to apprehend'), though in this case we might also infer a totally new meaning, such as 'present'. In 'Walt Whitman' we find 'if you *flatter* the portrait' (ibid.: 62), where although the object of 'flatter' is normally a person, here the object is 'the portrait' and so the verb must mean 'make flattering', 'cause to flatter'.





In other cases the valency-switch is from active to passive, as in the case of ‘many *loveable* people’ (contrasted with people running no risk of falling in love), who ‘miss each other in the world or meet under an unfavourable star’ (‘Falling in Love’; Tus. 25: 23). Here, ‘loveable’ does not have its normal meaning of ‘deserving of being loved’ but is used instead with a new active sense ‘inclined to love’, or rather, in the context, ‘inclined to fall in love’.

Another way that Stevenson makes language slightly strange (not in an obviously playful way) is by unconventional use of the article or prepositions. These grammatical items, as proofreaders know, are less frequently noted consciously by a reader than lexical items (nouns, verbs etc.), so (rather like the manipulation of word syntax) unusual uses of them will seem strange yet not be fully perceived. Many of Stevenson’s odd uses of articles will be found in cognate forms in French or other languages (Gaelic, for example), so they could be seen as influenced by foreign forms, but perhaps it would be best to see them as part of his general freedom of language manipulation. In ‘Yoshida Torajiro’, for example, we learn that Yoshida’s hair ‘was not tied more than once in *the* two months’ (Tus. 27: 113). Here, the unusual use of the article could be Scots, or French or archaic – you can’t quite place it. Examples of unusual choice of prepositions are not hard to find: ‘His familiar spirit of delight was not the same *with* [normally: ‘as’] Shelley’s’ (‘Samuel Pepys’; Tus. 27: 189); ‘poets [...] striking the lyre in high-sounding measures *for* [normally: ‘about’, ‘in praise of’] the handiwork of God’ (‘Pan’s Pipes’; Tus. 25: 125); and (an adverb this time) ‘one who should go straight *before him* [normally: forward] on a journey’ (‘John Knox’; Tus. 27: 224).⁷⁰ One effect of this strangeness is to make the reader aware of the language and the communicative situation, and to heighten perception by the effect of estrangement.⁷¹

‘Charm’

A frequent characterisation of Stevenson’s style made by early





commentators was ‘charm’, used both in praise and condemnation. In 1910, John W. Cousin said ‘His style is singularly fascinating, graceful, various, subtle, and with a charm all its own’;⁷² and a few years later, John A. Stuart unenthusiastically summed up Stevenson’s achievement in a short list, including ‘A few charming essays in a minor key’.⁷³

It is important to note, however, that Stevenson himself uses the term to refer to no less than an essential quality of art: ‘the one excuse and breath of art – charm’, and says the ‘essence’ of art is ‘significance and charm’.⁷⁴ Clearly he is not talking about anything superficially pleasant and entertaining but rather something to do with the fascinating aesthetic individuality of the work. Interestingly, it is used in a similar way by Proust in a notebook draft for *Sodome et Gomore*:

Imitations, concentrating on exterior traits that are only apparently of the essence, have so invariably neglected a charm which in truth is impossible to imitate and even difficult to perceive, that when we find ourselves in the presence of the work itself it is this charm that we were far from imagining that we would find that strikes us more than all the rest and that enchants us with its newness. Our reading of critical works and a few passages makes us think we know Chateaubriand, Gluck, Racine, Nerval or Saint-Simon. Then one day we find ourselves in the presence of their work, and [...] the conventional features [...] fall away like a mask and we find ourselves in the presence of something strange [...], which couldn’t be imitated because it is charm and genius and it would have been necessary to have the genius of these writers to imitate it.⁷⁵

What is interesting here is Proust’s association of ‘charm’ (and the related ‘enchant’) with being ‘in the presence of’ the work





itself (a phrase repeated three times) and the way that what we then perceive is something new and strange.

‘Charm’ (etymologically, *carmen* or ‘song’) is a quality revealed in interaction and temporal experience, something that ‘works’ during performance/experience. We can use the term as a starting point in this last section to look at two related qualities of Stevenson’s essay style: the creation of a perceived personal relationship with the writer and the way his prose may be strongly felt as an experience in time.

Stevenson was repeatedly praised by early readers because they felt a personal relationship with him. Richard Le Gallienne talks of ‘the real feeling of *camaraderie* set up between him and his reader’, and Walter Raleigh said he had ‘the happy privilege of making lovers among his readers’.⁷⁶ This will be especially true of the essays, since ‘The hallmark of the personal essay is its intimacy’, the use of a confidential voice, an attitude of sincerity and self-revelation.⁷⁷ A series of rhetorical techniques help create this perceived relationship. The use of questions, explicitly signalling the interactive dimension of communication, is frequent in the essays.⁷⁸ ‘A Penny Plain’ has a paragraph ending with the memorable sentence fragment ‘Reader – and yourself?’ and five of his essays actually end with a question.⁷⁹ These questions involve the reader, as well as implying a sceptical view of life, exemplified in the interrogative form of Montaigne’s motto: ‘Que sais-je?’⁸⁰

Another involvement strategy common to the essay tradition is the direct address to the reader (as in the brief quotation from ‘A Penny Plain’ above). Found in essays both early and late, some of the more inventive uses date from the 1880s. In ‘Fontainebleau’ Stevenson even illustrates the isolation of many areas of the forest by playfully involving the reader in a hypothetical story:

if I may suppose the reader to have committed some great crime and come to me for aid, I think I could still find my way to a small cavern, fitted with a hearth and chimney,





where he might lie perfectly concealed. A confederate landscape-painter might daily supply him with food; for water, he would have to make a nightly tramp as far as to the nearest pond; and at last, when the hue and cry began to blow over, he might get gently on the train at some side station, work round by a series of junctions, and be quietly captured at the frontier. (Tus. 30: 106)

In other essays, from the early 1870s onwards, the reader is presented as having the same experience as the writer:

The reader knows what I mean; he must remember how, when he has sat himself down behind a dyke on a hillside, he delighted to hear the wind hiss vainly through the crannies at his back; how his body tingled all over with warmth, and it began to dawn upon him, with a sort of slow surprise, that the country was beautiful, the heather purple, and the far-away hills all marbled with sun and shadow. ('On the Enjoyment of Unpleasant Places'; Tus. 25: 179)

In 'Rosa Quo Locorum' the reader is even asked to remember a familiar poem from 'the Fourth Reader' (though it is unlikely that many readers would have used the same primer), and in 'The Old Pacific Capital', he mentions the place where 'you had the first view of the old township'. Stevenson here is both addressing himself and inviting the reader to take on this role.

In an associated way, the reader is invited to adopt the persona of someone who shares the same cultural knowledge as the writer. With a few rare exceptions from early essays, Stevenson typically presents cultural references with bald directness, assuming shared knowledge, yet his frequent unreferenced quotations and allusions do not create any feeling of inferiority in the reader who fails to recognise them. He artfully places such allusions so that





understanding is not hampered by lack of full recognition, i.e. this is no annoying display of erudition. But more than that, the reader feels no puzzlement or disorientation. In 'The Old Pacific Capital' many geographical and historical references such as 'the Gabelano Peak', 'Pinos lighthouse' and 'Vasquez, the bandit' are presented as known, though Stevenson knew that most readers would not be familiar with them. The assumption of knowledge of this kind in the essays is perhaps like the way the reader of a novel will happily accept the assumed shared knowledge of a narrative world in a story. Thus, the reader willingly accepts, as known, the location 'between the two seas' in Stevenson's fable 'The Song of the Morrow', entering into a community of shared knowledge of storyteller and listener/reader.

We have already mentioned Stevenson's enthusiasm, and enthusiasm is infectious and attractive, so this too will contribute to that sense of a special relationship with the writer and also help focus attention on the present moment. Stevenson's freedom (from the constraints of systems of thought and his playful linguistic freedom) is also attractive – it is a state we would all aspire to.

As is typical of the personal essay tradition, Stevenson makes constant reference to himself, his own feelings, experiences and contradictions and this increases in the essays of the 1880s.⁸¹ The confidentiality that accompanies this discourse of the self also contributes to creating a link with the reader – as does the mischievous impudence with which he pretends to hide and then reveals himself as the subject of anecdotes, together with all the other techniques, discussed in the section on 'playfulness', of involving the reader in a relationship of complicity and collaboration in experiencing the text. Such collaboration not only helps to create a perceived relationship with the writer but also focuses the reader on the act of reading. Although all literature can be viewed as performance (by the writer) and event (by the reader),⁸² certain works will make us more aware of this than oth-





ers. The personal essay as genre is a case in point, thanks to its brevity, formlessness, and its changes of direction. The essayistic 'ramble' enforces 'receptiveness to "the objects around". Paying attention, working the mind on whatever comes into its ambit'.⁸³ And as Arthur Symons says, 'Reading Stevenson is like setting out on a journey where 'Anything may happen, or nothing; the air is full of the gaiety of possible chances'.⁸⁴

The essays of Stevenson, in particular, underline the temporal experience of reading through their linguistic patterning and meaning-making, and their involvement of the reader in playful surprises, unexpected juxtapositions and temporary 'knots' to understanding. Notice how Stevenson himself emphasises temporal sequence to understanding in his theory of how 'each sentence, by successive phrases, shall first come into a kind of knot, and then, after a moment of suspended meaning, solve and clear itself', so that the reader is 'led to foresee, to expect, and then to welcome the successive phrases'.⁸⁵

The suspended meaning may involve not only syntactical sequences ('successive phrases') but also the interpretation of single unusual words. The resolution of the moment of difficulty here will involve not only language knowledge (the conventional meanings of words and the context of use) but also knowledge of the world, in order to understand what phenomenon is being represented. If this process is successful, we get an impression of vividness and rightness – an impression of words and things corresponding with unexpected exactness. The vividness and rightness probably derive from the reader's search in memory to identify and 'see' the phenomena that the language could refer to.⁸⁶

Playfulness, surprise and the effort made to 'translate' unusual language-choices all heighten the reader's awareness of the reading experience. The striking phrases that result from this technique, combining original use of language and original world-view, create heightened consciousness in the reader and





also pleasure, a sense of pleasant disorientation and wonder, as frequently attested by early readers. Janet Newton-Robinson in 1893 says that Stevenson has 'an absurd felicity of expression which leaves us in doubt whether to laugh or cry aloud with pleasure';⁸⁷ Richard Le Gallienne in 1892 says that Stevenson is capable of 'stirring one's heart' by groups of simple words, wherein one seeks in vain for the secret of the magic'.⁸⁸ Even Swinnerton, while criticising Stevenson's 'fondness for phrase', confesses that, though his typical inventive phrases now seem empty, they 'at first drew and held us breathless with a sense of wonder'.⁸⁹

John Jay Chapman (intending the comment as criticism) says Stevenson 'conceived of himself as "an artist" and of his writings as performances'.⁹⁰ Leslie Stephen seems to be feeling in this direction when he accepts the weakness of Stevenson's aphorisms, but goes on to say that this is not the point: in reading Stevenson we are not impressed, as in reading Bacon, 'by aphorisms in which the wisdom of a lifetime seems to be concentrated' but by 'the quick feeling, the dexterity and nimbleness of intellect'.⁹¹

Stevenson's frequent changes of subject, shifting of focus between the general and the particular, his foregrounding of individual words and phrases, his changeable playful relationship with the reader, his shifts in viewpoint – all these contribute to the overall effect in reading Stevenson of 'a lot going on': these are not essays with a clear and single 'voice' and smooth transitions of personal, temporal and spatial focus, but performances of constantly-changing focus, of 'breaks and turns', unexpected juxtapositions and 'moving images'.⁹²

The idea of Stevenson's style as essentially complex, of 'a lot going on', is found in Stevenson's idea of the 'knot', which is not only a slight delay in understanding ('a moment of suspended meaning') but also a meeting-place of strands, a point of greater complexity ('the true business of the literary artist is to plait or weave his meaning, involving it around itself'). We may remember that Stevenson studied mathematics under P. G. Tait, who





investigated the topology of mathematical 'knots', which are not tangles or *impasses* but more like plaited and interwoven Celtic 'knots'.⁹³ Another indication of Stevenson's idea of the complex dynamic structure of prose comes in a letter of 1879: 'Writing is a habit like fencing; but a little harder, because there are more passes possible, and more parries and returns. It is fencing with a hundred rapiers at once' (L2: 296). The enigmatic note 'style and etching' added at the end of a list of chapter headings for his unpublished and unfinished 'On the Art of Literature'⁹⁴ could possibly allude to this very complexity, and specifically to the technique of 'hatching': the complex criss-crossing lines that build up a picture, the meaning that is created by complex formal patterns.

The many factors of variety and shifting focus in Stevenson's style all contribute to an experience of his essays as a performance in time by the mercurial, ever-changing artist and as an event in which the reader actively participates. Comparisons of his works to talk, music, song, wine and flavour underline this aspect of his works as mutable events in time.⁹⁵ Leslie Stephen, using the word 'charm' once more, compares his essays to a dextrous musical performance:

We admire the quick feeling, the dexterity and nimbleness of intellect. The thought of 'Crabbed Age and Youth' is obvious enough, but the performance reminds us of Robin Oig in *Kidnapped*. Robin repeated the air played by Alan Breck, but 'with such ingenuity and sentiment, with so odd a fancy and so quick a knack in the grace-notes that I was amazed to hear him.' Stevenson's 'grace-notes' give fresh charm to the old theme.⁹⁶

The half a dozen descriptive labels we have chosen to characterize Stevenson's essay style (*lightness*, *enthusiasm*, *vari-ousness*, *playfulness*, *strangeness* and 'charm') are, as we have





noted from time to time, interestingly interconnected: one can imagine them as six points around the circumference of a circle, each point connected by lines to most of the others. They may not be enough to map a style accurately, but they help us understand an elusive and mobile set of features, and explain why reading the essays may be such a source of pleasure, where playful, various, unexpected form is interwoven in a web with an equally-mobile play of thought. For on the level of the thought, too, there is 'a lot going on' in Stevenson's essays and the same sense of surprise as in the form: 'executed with communicative ardour',⁹⁷ each paragraph is keenly thought-through, no mere diffuse and inoffensive succession of ideas or observations. Form collaborates with meaning in the exploration of a world that has no centre, no essence, no pre-established order, where language is mobile, malleable, changing, with reader and writer in play together. If the reader stays with the writer, made aware of reading as an event in time, accepting the shifting rules of the game, it is possible to share in a *jouissance* that involves both language and meaning, 'zest and amusement and [...] the excitement of a new discovery that gives pleasure'.⁹⁸[97] Stevenson's essays, I would argue, should not be seen merely a quarry for studies of his narrative fiction, but as works of great value in themselves – indeed, as memorable reading-experiences that are original, interesting, elusive, fascinating.

NOTES

Quotations from Stevenson's works are cited, in the text unless inconvenient, by 'Tus.' –Tusitala Edition (London: Heinemann, 1924) followed by volume number: page number.

Quotations from Stevenson's letters, ed. by Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Meheew (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) by 'L' with volume and page number.

Quotations from Paul Maixner's collection of reviews – Robert Louis Stevenson *The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981) are cited by 'Maixner' and the page number.





- 1 Many thanks to the Yahoo discussion group <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ReadingRLS/> for the chance to air some of the points in this essay over the last few years and thanks to the other members of the group, especially Robert-Louis Abrahamson, Lesley Graham, Neil Brown and Olive Classe, for their contributions, some of which have been incorporated here.
- 2 Henley's letter, is reprinted in Maixner: 76; William Archer, *Time* Nov. 1885, extracts in Maixner: 160-69; Henry James, 'Robert Louis Stevenson', *Century Magazine* April 1888, in *Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson: A Record of Friendship and Criticism*, ed. by Janet Adam-Smith (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1948), p. 126. Other typical remarks are: 'Mr Stevenson is known for a master of style' (*Times* review of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, 1886, Maixner: 207); 'he has certainly acquired a distinct and notable style of his own. There is no doubt about it, Mr Stevenson is one of the stylists of English literature – perhaps even one of the great stylists' (Review of *Across the Plains*, *Scottish Leader*, 1892, Maixner: 382); 'A strong individuality of style and feeling pervades all the essays' – H. Bellyse Baildon, *Robert Louis Stevenson: A Life Study in Criticism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1901), p. 81; '[his style] will always remain the most prominent feature of Stevenson's work' – H. G. Rawlinson, *Selected Essays of Robert Louis Stevenson* (London: Oxford University Press Humphrey Milford, 1929)], p. xxi.
- 3 G. M. Hopkins, Letter to Robert Bridges 28 October 1886, and Maixner: 230. In the letter, Hopkins discusses *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and says he has not read *Treasure Island*; Richard Le Gallienne, 'The Dethroning of Stevenson', in *Sleeping Beauty and Other Prose Fantasies* (London and New York: The Bodley Head, 1900), p. 159.
- 4 Stephen Gwynn, 'Mr Robert Louis Stevenson: A Critical Study', *Fortnightly Review* 56 (Dec. 1894), pp. 783-4; F. C. Riedel, 'A Classical Rhetorical Analysis of Some Aspects of Stevenson's Style', *Style* 3 (1969), pp. 182-191. Janetta Newton-Robinson, also comments on his 'exquisite ear for prose rhythms' – 'Some Aspects of the Work of Mr Robert Louis Stevenson', *Westminster Review* 139 (Jan. 1893), p. 605.
- 5 Alice D. Snyder, 'Paradox and Antithesis in Stevenson's Essays: A Structural Study', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 19 (1920): p. 558.





- 6 Travis R. Merritt, 'Taste, Opinion and Theory in the Rise of Victorian Prose Stylism', in *The Art of Victorian Prose*, ed. by George Levine and William Madden, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 4.
- 7 See John Jay Chapman, 'Robert Louis Stevenson', in *Emerson and Other Essays* (New York: Scribner's, 1898), pp. 217-47. Max Beerbohm said 'the compositors of all our high-toned newspapers keep the phrase set up in type always, so constantly does it come tripping off the pens of all high-toned reviewers' ('Note' to *A Christmas Garland* [London: Heinemann, 1912]). Chapman's attack was probably what led Graham Balfour to add the equivocally apologetic and defensive remarks at the end of the second volume of his 1901 biography. On one hand, he admits 'the chameleon-like nature' of Stevenson's style, yet on the other he says 'His works are "signed all over" [...] few consecutive sentences on any page of his could have been written by any other person' (*The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson* [London: Methuen, 1901], v. 2, pp. 165-66). His 'Appendix G.' (pp. 224-27, given a title in the table of contents only: 'Influences affecting Stevenson's Style') collects nine extracts from RLS mixed (all unidentified) with three from 'his originals' (Hawthorne and the essayists Hazlitt and Thoreau), though he says that any similarities are often just 'sudden glimpse of an author' and 'the best passages are the most individual'.
- 8 Ibid. p. 246. Chapman's observation is intended as a criticism, and he continues 'As a consequence, there is an undertone of insincerity in almost everything which he has written'.
- 9 Walter Raleigh, *Robert Louis Stevenson* (London: Edward Arnold, 1895), p. 34
- 10 A 'key words' comparison of word-lists for essays up to 1879 and those written afterwards, using Wordsmith Tools (OUP), reveals the following words as significantly more frequent in the later essays: 'books', 'prose', 'characters', 'incident', 'writer', 'artist' and 'art'.
- 11 'The literary attribute that most immediately comes to mind when thinking about the essay [...] is a certain concern with style. The essay [...] is considered to be literary first and foremost by virtue of being well or elegantly written', Claire De Obaldia, *The Essayistic Spirit. Literature, Modern Criticism, and the Essay* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 8. For Michael Hamburger 'the essay is a style rather than a form' (ibid., p. 23n).





- 12 Graham Good, 'Preface', in *The Encyclopedia of the Essay*, ed. by Tracy Chevalier (London and Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997), p. xx.
- 13 Six of the 30 Tusitala volumes (excluding the five volumes of letters) are dedicated to essays; another 2 volumes contain the travel books (excluding the late and generically different *In the South Seas*). Sixteen volumes (just over 50%) are devoted to prose narrative.
- 14 William James Dawson, *The Makers of English Fiction* (New York: Revell, 1905), p. 245; Raleigh 1895, pp. 34-35; Leslie Cope Cornford, *Robert Louis Stevenson* (Edinburgh/London: Blackwood, 1899), pp. 188-90. Of the nine passages offered by Balfour to illustrate Stevenson's typical style (see note 6 above), six are from essays or essay-like early travel books.
- 15 Theresa Werner, 'Personal Essay', in *The Encyclopedia of the Essay*.
- 16 These features and others listed in the rest of the paragraph come from Lopate, 1994, pp. xxiv-xlv.
- 17 'On Essays and Essay-Writing', in *Dreamthorp* (Portland, Maine: Thomas Bird Mosher, 1913), p. 31.
- 18 'It was [...] most unlucky that they [the *Edinburgh Review* and the *Quarterly*] came to be looked on as models [of essay-writing]', and their influence was not broken 'till the advent of [...] Mr Andrew Lang and the late R. L. Stevenson' ('P.', 'Old and New Essayists', *Academy* 6 Aug. 1898, p. 131).
- 19 Maixner: 161.
- 20 *Travels with a Donkey* and *An Inland Voyage* have 'the self-same light and graceful touch' (Grant Allen, 1879; Maixner: 65); Stevenson is 'a stylist of wonderful lightness and grace' (Anon., *Scottish Leader* 1892; Maixner: 382); 'The quality which everyone will agree in conceding to Stevenson is lightness of touch' (Chapman 1898, p. 220).
- 21 Italo Calvino, *Saggi* (Milano: Mondadori [i Meridiani]): pp. 969, 42, 1328-9. Claudio Magris also centres his centenary essay on Stevenson around his 'leggerezza' see 'Il guardiano del faro. Nel centenario di Stevenson', in *Utopia e disincanto. Saggi 1974-1998* (Milano: Garzanti, 1999).
- 22 'un alleggerimento del linguaggio per cui i significati vengono convogliati su un tessuto verbale come senza peso' (in Patrick Creagh's translation, 'meaning is conveyed through a verbal





- texture that seems weightless'; *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press], p. 16); 'il peso, lo spessore, la concretezza delle cose'; 'una leggerezza della pensosità'; Italo Calvino, *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio* (Milano: Garzanti, 1988), pp. 17, 16, 12.
- 23 'inseguimento perpetuo delle cose, adeguamento alla loro varietà infinità'.
- 24 'Life which disappears once and for all, which does not return is like a shadow, without weight' (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being* [New York: Harper & Row, 1984], p. 3).
- 25 Newton-Robinson 1893, p. 606.
- 26 'The lightness with which he moves in the presence alike of the grim and the gay' (John Franklin Genung, *Stevenson's Attitude to Life: With Readings from His Essays and Letters* [New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1901], p. 33).
- 27 Sarah Bakewell, *How to Live. A Life of Montaigne in one question and twenty attempts at an answer* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2010), pp. 123-33.
- 28 Stevenson's description of the conversation of 'Spring-Heel'd Jack' in 'Talk and Talkers' (Tus. 29: 76-78).
- 29 Maixner: 87; other reviewers also felt uneasy at this practice: 'There is an unpleasant affectation of laying down the law running through all these pages [*Familiar Studies*], which would make not a few readers inclined to quarrel with him out of sheer weariness at his eternal swagger' (*Westminster Review* July 1882, Maixner: 103). Henry James suggests the same technique in an approving way when he says 'he will carry off a pretty paradox without so much as a scuffle' (Adam-Smith 1948, p. 127).
- 30 Archer opposes 'lightness of touch' to 'emphasis', which he claims is 'foreign [...] to Mr Stevenson's manner' (Maixner: 165).
- 31 Guido Almansi, 'Introduzione', *L'isola del romanzo* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1987), p. 11.
- 32 Robert-Louis Abrahamson, 'Living in a Book: RLS as an Engaged Reader', in *Robert Louis Stevenson: Writer of Boundaries*, ed. by Richard Ambrosini and Richard Dury (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), pp. 15-16.
- 33 Leslie Stephen, *Studies of a Biographer* vol 4 (London: Duckworth, 1902), pp. 210, 229. Cf. also 'light hearted and full of youthful





joy' (Jas. Barratt. 'The Essays of Robert Louis Stevenson', *New Century Review* 7 (Jan 1900), p. 56). Enthusiasm can also be linked to 'boyishness', another common quality remarked on: 'Perhaps the first quality in Mr Stevenson's works [...] is the buoyancy, the survival of the child in him' (Andrew Lang, 'Mr Stevenson's Works', in *Essays in Little* [London: Henry & Co., 1891], p. 24; 'the attitude of his mind towards his work remained unaltered from boyhood till death' (Chapman 1898, p. 234); 'His outlook on life was boyishly genial and free' (A. H. Japp, *Robert Louis Stevenson: A Record, an Estimate, a Memorial* [London: Laurie, 1905], p. 54).

34 Chapman 1898, p. 231.

35 'whatever she did, she did it with the same verve and gusto' ('Notes on the Movement of Young Children', Tus. 25: 197); 'If I know gusto in painting when I see it, this canvas was painted with rare enjoyment' ('Some Portraits by Raeburn', Tus. 25: 101), 'the finer lineaments of Hamlet is redeemed by gusto, breadth, and a headlong unity' ('Salvini's Macbeth', Tus. 28: 148); 'all have been imagined with the same clearness, all written of with equal gusto and precision' ('Bagster's *Pilgrim's Progress*', Tus. 28: 156), 'a great unity of gusto' ('A Penny Plain and Twopence Coloured', Tus. 29: 107); '[Pepys] preserved till nearly forty the headlong gusto of a boy', 'but he must exclaim, with breathless gusto [...] ' ('Samuel Pepys', Tus. 27: 183, 189, cf. also p. 193); 'the artist writes with more gusto and effect of those things which he has only wished to do' ('A Humble Remonstrance', Tus. 29: 138); 'These verbal puppets [...] dwell in [...] technical gusto' ('Some Gentlemen in Fiction', Tus. 26: 110).

36 'for vivacity and vividness there is nothing like it elsewhere in English prose', Joseph Jacobs, 'Mr Robert Louis Stevenson', *Athenaeum* 22 Dec. 1894, p. 863.

37 'François Villon', Tus. 27: 140, 'Samuel Pepys', Tus. 27: 187; 'Walt Whitman', Tus. 27: 76; 'Thomas Stevenson', Tus. 29: 70.

38 Uvedale Price, *Essays on the Picturesque* (1810), vol I, pp. 341-43, qu. Alexander Ross, *The Imprint of the Picturesque on Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1986), p. 38.

39 'Stevenson and the Davos Winter Landscape', in, *European Stevenson*, ed. by Richard Ambrosini and Richard Dury (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), p. 62-63. On the 'knot', see below in the section on 'charm'.





- 40 *Urn Burial* V, italics added.
- 41 This trait of Stevenson's style is noted by David Daiches (*Robert Louis Stevenson* [Glasgow: McLellan, 1947], p. 152): 'frequently the last clause of these sentences begins with the conjunction "and", the end of the sentence providing a sort of illustrative supplement to the point made in the first part', though Daiches criticises the too frequent use of the rhetorical scheme.
- 42 *The Complete Works*, ed. by Donald M. Frame (New York: Knopf [Everyman's Library], 2003), p. 74. Montaigne is included in Stevenson's 'Catalogus Librorum Carissimorum' (Yale B 6073) dating from 1871 or 2.
- 43 Lopate 1994, pp. xl-xli.
- 44 Caroline McCracken-Flesher remarks on the same stylistic trait (using second instead of first person) in 'Edinburgh: Picturesque Notes', which 'oddly connects us to the narrator' ('Travel Writing', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Penny Fielding (Edinburgh: EUP), p. 90.
- 45 Vernon Lee [Violet Paget] (1923), 'The Handling of Words. Stevenson', in *The Handling of Words and Other Studies in Literary Psychology* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head; repr. University of Nebraska Press, 1968), p. 215. The quotation is: 'There must have been near a score of us at dinner by eleven before noon; and after I had eaten and drunken, and sat writing up my journal, I suppose as many more came dropping in one after another, or by twos and threes' (Tus. 17: 218).
- 46 Lee 1923, p. 216; italics in the original.
- 47 *Scottish Leader* 14 April 1892, Maixner: 382. Other notable examples of shifting viewpoint are found in *Edinburgh Picturesque Notes*, in chapters VI, VIII and X.
- 48 Jean-Pierre Naugrette, 'Postface', in Robert Louis Stevenson, *Jardin de poèmes enfantins* (Belval: Circé, 2006), pp. 160-63; Penny Fielding, 'Stevenson's Poetry', *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson*, pp. 111, 112-15.
- 49 Lee 1923, p. 221. Some further attestations of clarity: 'Stevenson deserves praise for most admirable clarity. There is no difficulty of style. It is easy to read, because it has so much grace ; but it is also easy to understand, because it is in a high degree explicit' – Frank Swinnerton, *Robert Louis Stevenson: A Critical Study* (London:





Martin Secker, 1914), p. 189; Stevenson's stylistic aim was 'above all, an elaborate and studied simplicity' (Rawlinson 1929, p. xxi). John Jay Chapman links clarity to the praised 'lightness': 'The quality which every one will agree in conceding to Stevenson is lightness of touch. This quality is a result of his extreme lucidity, not only of thought, but of intention. We know what he means, and we are sure that we grasp his whole meaning at the first reading.' (Chapman 1898, p. 220).

- 50 Matthew Kaiser's brilliant essay on 'Mapping Stevenson's rhetorics of play' (*Journal of Stevenson Studies* 6 (2009), pp. 5-22) explores Stevenson's view of 'play' as a dominant in the human condition, and does not touch on his own playful style or practice.
- 51 E.g. 'Time which antiquates antiquities' (Sir Thomas Browne, *Urn-Burial* III): cf. Stuart Robinson, 'Sir Thomas Browne and R. L. Stevenson', *Journal of English and German Philology* 20, p. 381.
- 52 Another example of a playful forcing of the reader to make a distinction of sound is the pronunciation of 'cleanly' (where we are half-expecting 'clean', with its different vowel) in 'Precision, clarity, the cleanly and crafty employment of material' (Tus. 30: 103).
- 53 'In the Latin Quarter: I. A Ball at Mr Elsinare's', in Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Lantern-Bearers and Other Essays*, ed. by Jeremy Treglown (New York: Cooper Square Press, , 1999), p. 51.
- 54 Cf. Richard Dury, 'Strange Language of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*', *Journal of Stevenson Studies* 2 (2005), pp. 40-41.
- 55 Colvin wanted to change 'vim' in 'Pulvis et Umbra' to vigour, but Stevenson insisted it was 'a word always used in my family – and I suspect always used in Scotland – and is in consequence familiar and dear to my ears' (L8: 384). For Jacques Meunier Stevenson is 'plus sensible à la parole qu'au discours, amoureux de l'ellipse, de l'allusion, de la litote' ('Stevenson et ses "brownies". *Le Monde/Le Monde des Livres* 1 juin 2001: p. I), stressing Stevenson's attention to the reader's experience at the level of the word and the phrase.
- 56 'His prose is enchantingly phrased and modulated. The words are chosen with curious and, sometimes, quaint felicity, and sentences of most pleasingly unforeseen turn abound in his best work', George Sampson, in a note to 'A Penny Plain', in *Nineteenth Century Essays*, ed. by George Sampson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), p. 225; cf. also 'the phrases [...] are freshly minted, and have a special turn or modification to exactly adapt them to the occasion'





- (Newton-Robinson 1893, p. 605); 'He uses words in unexpected applications' (Francis Watt, *R.L.S.* [London: Methuen, 1916], p. 295).
- 57 The MS has 'forsworn'; the *New Quarterly* text has 'foresworn', but in *Familiar Studies*, and later versions, the spelling reverts to the earlier form. A Google N-gram search for 'forsworn, foresworn' shows that that latter (a form not mentioned in the OED) was an alternative (minority) spelling for the former, found in printed works throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
- 58 Richard Le Gallienne calls the phrase 'delightful' (*Academy* 14 May 1892; Maixner: 391).
- 59 David M. Lewis, qu. in Rosaline Masson, *I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson*. (Edinburgh and London: Chambers, 1922), p. 23.
- 60 Newton-Robinson 1893, p. 605; Stephen 1902, p. 215; Arthur Symons, 'Robert Louis Stevenson', *Studies in Prose and Verse* (London: Dent, 1904), p. 80; G. K. Chesterton, *Robert Louis Stevenson* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1927; repr. London: House of Stratus, 2000), pp. 45, 48.
- 61 *Edinburgh Picturesque Notes* (Tus. 26: 152). Other examples are 'dainty equilibrium' ('Ordered South', Tus. 25: 62), 'tearing divines' ('Æs Triplex', *ibid.*: 77), and 'the deliberate seasons' ('Virginibus Puerisque I.', *ibid.*: 10). The dates of these examples suggest that the technique may be especially characteristic of the 1870s essays.
- 62 The identical expression appears in *Kidnapped* ch. 25 and *St Ives* ch. 18. It is taken up by Charles Watts Whistler in *Havelock the Dane* (1900), ch 14.
- 63 Testified from 1598; John Simpson, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).
- 64 Dury 2005, pp. 36-37.
- 65 'Racy Saxon monosyllables, close to us as touch and sight, he [the literary artist] will intermix readily with those long, savoursome Latin words, rich in "second intention"' ('Style', *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style* (London: Macmillan, 1889), p. 13). Pater would have influenced by example not by this precept, which was published after Stevenson had virtually abandoned essay-writing.
- 66 'Here one is thankful for the strong word "subsequential"; it fills with such dignity its central place in this commanding sentence that no-one would care to challenge the innovation' (Stephen Gwynn, 'Mr Robert Louis Stevenson. A Critical Study'. *Fortnightly Review* 1 Dec.





- 1894, p. 785.)
- 67 Richard Le Gallienne (1892; Maixner: 390) talks of 'The strong reminiscence of the style of Sir Thomas Browne in [...] "Pulvis et Umbra" [...] blent with Mr. Stevenson's own individual style' and says that this essay, 'the Lantern-Bearers' and 'similar essays in *Virginibus Puerisque*' 'reminds us of the old prose masters' 'in [...] their Latinisation', as well as in an elusive magical solemnity of 'groups of simple words'.
- 68 [Hugh l'Anson Fausset], *Times Literary Supplement* 4 Dec. 1919, p. 1.
- 69 In the following examples the word under discussion has been italicised.
- 70 See also Dury 2005, pp. 34-35.
- 71 The 'priem ostranenie', or 'making strange', which Viktor Shklovsky saw as an essential element of all art.
- 72 *A Short Biographical Dictionary of English Literature* (London: Dent, 1910), p. 301.
- 73 Letter to the *Times*, 18 April 1922.
- 74 'A Note on Realism', Tus. 28: 74; the phrase 'significance and charm' is used four times in Stevenson's letter on aesthetics to Bob Stevenson of September 1883, including 'the significance and charm of art which are its essence' (L4: 169-70), as well as in 'Fontainebleau' (finished May 1883), Tus 30, p. 102.
- 75 'Mais les imitations s'attachent à des traits extérieurs et en apparence essentiels ont si invariablement négligé un charme à vrai dire impossible à imiter et même difficile à apercevoir, que quand nous nous trouvons en présence de l'œuvre même c'est ce charme-là, que nous étions a cent lieues de penser y trouver qui nous frappe plus que tout le reste et nous enchante de sa nouveauté. Nous croyons savoir par les livres de critique et quelques morceaux ce que c'est que Chateaubriand, que Gluck, que Racine, que Gérard de Nerval, que Saint-Simon. Un jour nous nous trouvons en présence de l'œuvre, [...] et les traits conventionnels [...] tombent comme un masque et nous nous trouvons en présence de quelque chose d'étrange [...] qui ne pouvait s'imiter puisque c'était un charme et un génie et qu'il eût fallu avoir le génie de ces écrivains pour l'imiter' *A la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris: Gallimard [Bibliothèque de la Pléiade], 1988) vol 3, p. 987 ('Esquisse VIII').





- 76 Le Gallienne 1892 (Maixner: 391); Raleigh 1895, p. 78. Cf. also 'It came naturally to him to talk frankly and easily of himself, and thus, by his self-revealing and sensitive versatility, to create that irresistible fascination which made so many friends among all sorts and conditions of men' (Barratt 1900, p. 48); 'The admiration of readers remotest in the flesh had a tinge of friendship' (Stephen 1902, p. 206).
- 77 Lopate 1994, p. xxiii.
- 78 Especially frequent in the earlier essays: about one question mark to every fifteen full stops in the essays written before 1880; one to over thirty for the later essays.
- 79 'Roads', 'Ordered South', 'Child's Play' from the 1870s, and the later 'A Chapter on Dreams' and 'Letter to a Young Gentleman'.
- 80 Elsewhere, as in 'Lay Morals', insistent questions recall the sermon, which indeed can be seen as one precursor of the essay.
- 81 Lopate 1994, pp. xxxi-xxxii; 'It amused him to write in a strain of "consistent egotism"' (Barratt 1900, p. 48).
- 82 This (as far as the reader is concerned) is the thesis of Stanley Fish's 'Literature and the Reader: Affective Stylistics', *New Literary History* 2 (Autumn 1970), pp. 123-62. Fish proposes an analysis that abandons the idea of the text as fixed and self-contained artefact and focuses on 'the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time' (pp. 126-27). Seeing reading as an event 'recognizes the fluidity "the movingness," of the meaning experience' (p. 141). Derek Attridge masterfully develops this approach in *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), adding the idea of performance for the writer and combining it with the idea of literature as confrontation with alterity (notice how Proust, too, in the passage quoted above, associates charm with feeling in the presence of newness and strangeness).
- 83 Lydia Fakundiny, 'Introduction', *The Art of the Essay* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), p. 16.
- 84 Symons 1904, p. 77.
- 85 'On Some Technical Elements of Style in Literature', Tus. 28: 36. The importance for Stevenson of 'the perception of immanent process' in reading, the 'immersion in textual experience', is also explored in an unpublished paper given by Scott Hames in Bergamo in 2008 ('Style after theory: Stevenson and new/old aestheticism', especially in the





section 'Stevenson and theory: Barthes and the spectacle of craft'). Hames links Stevenson's style encouraging this approach to reading with his theory of romance and its 'onrush of fresh experience', placing 'the mobile and provisional at the centre of readerly perception. (My thanks to Scott Hames for allowing me to see the manuscript of his talk.) Hames also cites Glenda Norquay, *Robert Louis Stevenson and Theories of Reading* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), on how for Stevenson 'the pleasure of reading [...] lay in the experiencing moment and not in the message that could be taken from the text' (p. 89).

86 A early commentator is clearly struggling to describe this effect when he comments on 'mottled pallor' (in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*) as 'an exact and vivid description, bringing up the face before you', and says that the description of a milk-churn in *Travels with a Donkey* as a 'great amphora of hammered brass' is 'quaint and makes you smile, but it places the object before you' (Watt 1916, pp. 296, 298.). G. K. Chesterton, too, seems to be near this point when he talks of how Stevenson 'pick[s] the words that make the picture that he particularly wants to make' and of his 'quite exceptional power of putting what he really means into the words that really convey it', and the way 'he sought (and found) the right words for a real object' (Chesterton 1927/2000, pp. 46, 48).

87 Newton-Robinson 1893, p. 605. Cf. also 'felicities that cause a thrill of pleasure to the reader' (Raleigh 1895, p. 34).

88 Le Gallienne 1892 (Maixner: 390). Le Gallienne's 'stirring one's heart' may be the effect of the Stevensonian 'knot', producing not only delay and surprise but also encouraging an appropriate emotional response, in a way similar to the irregularities of musical performance: Daniel J. Levitin's research suggests that what really communicates emotion in music may be moments when musicians make subtle changes to the musical patterns: 'the more surprising moments in a piece, the more emotion listeners perceive – if those moments seem logical in context.' (Pam Belluc, 'To Tug Hearts, Music First Must Tickle the Neurons', *New York Times* 18 April 2011).

89 Swinnerton 1914, p. 77.

90 Chapman 1898, p. 225. Chapman's criticism is that Stevenson is merely performing, not being sincere, not focussed on 'truth'.

91 Stephen 1902, p. 231.





- 92 'Then came a volume or two of essays [...] By this time there could be no doubt Mr Stevenson has a style of his own [...] with original breaks and turns, with delicate freakishness' (Lang 1891, pp. 26-27); 'By means of the artful juxtaposition of words, these phrases [...] reflect, like crystals, beams and colours from all sorts of moving images, from the dust beneath our feet, to the vault of heaven and the remotest constellations' (Cornford 1899, p. 190, referring to examples pp. 189-90).
- 93 For RLS's study under Tait, see 'Some College Memories' (Tus. 29: 14); for Tait and knots, see C. G. Knott, *Life and Scientific Work of Peter Guthrie Tait* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), pp. 106-109.
- 94 Roger G. Swearingen, 'On the Art of Literature – a reading text', *Journal of Stevenson Studies* 7 (2010), p. 142.
- 95 Arthur Symons (1904, p. 81) compares reading Stevenson to 'wine and song to us for a festive evening'; Janetta Newton-Robinson underlines spontaneity of the essays and their resemblance to conversation: 'weaving a web of interest out of the spontaneous effervescence of an active brain. [...] This writer's essays will survive as specimens of the best talk of his generation' (Newton-Robinson 1893, p. 606); Chapman (1898, p. 243) says as we finish reading Stevenson 'we can recall nothing but a series of flavors'; for Jens Christian Bay, much of Stevenson's writing reaches us 'in a wordless way, just like music or the scent of flowers' (*Echoes of Robert Louis Stevenson* [Chicago: Walter M. Hill, 1920], p. 10).
- 96 Stephen 1902, pp. 231-32.
- 97 'A Note on Realism', Tus. 28: 74.
- 98 See note 33 above.







Stevenson in the *Magazine of Art*

Richard J. Hill

In October 1881, the poet and journalist William Ernest Henley accepted the editorship of a conservative monthly publication called the *Magazine of Art*. Henley was a surprising appointment to this position: as Jerome Hamilton Buckley and Leila Greiman have commented, the *Magazine* traditionally championed the English artistic establishment and their outdated tastes in narrative painting.¹ Although initially established in 1858, the *Magazine* received real public attention following the success of the 1878 Paris International Exhibition. Cassell and Co. recognised the strong public reaction to this exhibition, and responded by addressing the market for a 'serious magazine to be devoted to Art' for a middle-class readership with tastes to be shaped and money to burn. The tone of the *Magazine*, which combined impressive reproductions of prints and original works of art with critical commentary, was shaped by the editor, and in 1878 Cassell's appointed a former civil servant, the government's Department of Art and Science, Sir Arthur J. R. Trendell. Under Trendell's editorship, the *Magazine* employed writers almost exclusively trained in the academies, and the result was an overall tone that was 'insular and rigidly conservative', and 'smugly moral'.² Henley's appointment would change the direction of the *Magazine* entirely, and for the subsequent five years that he was in charge, it became a significant force for change in British tastes towards contemporary trends in art, particularly as it related to new and foreign developments in painting, printing and sculpture. Henley appointed a fresh set of writers, generally younger, and certainly more progressive, who were not necessarily tied to the philosophies of the Royal Academy; these included





most famously Andrew Lang, George Saintsbury, Francis Watt, Edward Tyas Cook, Cosmo Monkhouse, and Robert Louis Stevenson.

Stevenson wrote six essays for the *Magazine* for Henley between 1882 and 1884, a significant period of artistic development and discovery during which he was forming and refining his own understanding of both literature and the pictorial arts. His critical *Magazine* pieces appear to be disparate in nature and subject matter, but a closer analysis demonstrates a consistency and clarity of artistic vision. In these essays, Stevenson critiques book illustrations in 'Byways of Book Illustration: Bagster's Pilgrim's Progress' and 'Byways of Book Illustration: Two Japanese Romances'; he writes travel pieces about San Francisco and an artists' colony at Fontainebleau in 'A Modern Cosmopolis' and 'Fontainebleau: Village Communities of Painters'; and analyzes the contemporary obsession with 'realism' as an artistic mode of representation in 'A Note on Realism'. He also discusses the effects of childhood toys and pass-times on his creative imagination in 'A Penny Plain and Twopence Coloured'. As diverse in subject matter and purpose as these essays appear to be, they have several themes in common, which this paper will attempt to trace. The thread that connects them is the relationship of contemporary visual arts and literature, and the various ways in which they could interrelate. Stevenson demonstrates a highly refined critical sense of the equivalences and affinities of the sister arts, and how new modes of representation, such as contemporary French painting or the newly encountered art of Japan, could enrich outdated trends of both painting and writing. One of Stevenson's interests in these essays is the artistic merit of an appropriately illustrated text, and the potential pitfalls of such a multi-media collaboration. All of the essays, except 'A Note on Realism', were published with illustrations in the *Magazine*, and





analysis of these essays reveals Stevenson's conception of how image and text could function as a unified work of art.

On book-illustration

Stevenson wrote two essays for the *Magazine* dealing directly with the art of book illustration, an artistic form that he would explore with several of his own projects, including *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped*, and *Island Nights Entertainments*. The first, 'Byways of Book Illustration: Bagster's Pilgrim's Progress', was written and published in 1882, the year of the first appearance of *Treasure Island* in *Young Folks Magazine*.³ I have argued elsewhere that Stevenson conceived much of his creative work with potential illustration in mind, and in the early 1880s was forming theories about how image could relate to text in an illustrated work. He had even experimented with the form, in a self-penned and illustrated collection of poems that would be published posthumously as *Moral Emblems*.⁴ With these poems, he had come to conclusions about the artistic potential of illustration in enriching a literary work, and also about his own limitations as a pictorial artist. Produced with the help of a young Lloyd Osbourne in early 1881, the booklet consists of crude woodcuts created on a child's play set, for which Stevenson then composed poems to accompany the images. It is the poems rather than the images that perform the illustrative function. In fact, the poems and pictures are inseparable, because the poems refer to the pictures, and the pictures make no sense without the poems: text and image combine to form a unified self-referential work of art. Stevenson was proud of his efforts and sent copies to many of his close friends, including Henley, but admitted in a letter of February 1883 that despite his desire to illustrate his own work, his talents were limited: 'Ah, if I could only draw! I see the blame thing so clearly in outline; and if I try to put it down





– but you have, ahem! seen my work’ (Letters 4: 73). However, this experiment did provide Stevenson with an understanding of the potential of imagery in enhancing narrative (and vice versa), and also provided him with first-hand experience of the craft of the literary illustrator.

It was after this experience that he undertook a critique of an illustrated edition of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* published by Samuel Bagster and Sons. It seems it was Stevenson’s suggestion to review the book, writing to Henley on 20 October 1881:

Now, look here:

Art in Youth:

I. An illustrated *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

II. ha! – Skelt – ha!ha!

You will reproduce in little a scene or maybe two and a whole sheet of characters which I shall choose for you; then your artist might make quite a pretty woodcut of the kids working a theatre if you wanted more; and dear boy, it will be written!!

(Letters 3: 240)

‘Skelt’ would become ‘A Penny Plain and Twopence Coloured’ published in the *Magazine* in April 1884, discussed below. It is interesting to note that he is picking specific illustrated texts and images to review; this is partly because the *Magazine* naturally focused primarily on pictorial forms of representation, or on literature that related to imagery. However, it also coincided with the creative projects he was considering, including the illustration of *A Child’s Garden of Verses* (which was not ultimately illustrated in its first editions) and an illustrated book version of *Treasure Island*.⁵ His observations on the illustrations are therefore pertinent to his own craft. Bagster’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* had





been first published in 1845, and had clearly made an impression on a young Stevenson. He writes that

[w]hoever he was, the author of these wonderful little pictures may lay claim to be the best illustrator of Bunyan. They are not only good illustrations, like so many others; but they are like so few, good illustrations of Bunyan. Their spirit, in defect and quality, is still the same as his own.⁶

The illustrations themselves are economical in style and detail, small woodcuts punctuating and woven into the text, and it is this sparseness that Stevenson admires; it avoids the mistake of imbuing a metaphorical tale with detail that doesn't appear in the text, and further of distracting the reader from the primary textual source. He applauds that the illustrator displays narrative continuity to match textual progression: 'He loves, also, to show us the same event twice over, and to repeat his instantaneous photographs at the interval of but a moment' (p. 173). Such techniques, Stevenson considers, help to drive narrative and weave together moments of the plot (see figure 1 as an example). However, his last word on the art of illustration is the most pertinent:

Through no art beside the art of words can the kindness of a man's affections be expressed. In the cuts you shall find faithfully parodied the quaintness and the power, the triviality and the surprising freshness of the author's fancy; there you shall find him outstripped in ready symbolism, and the art of bringing things essentially invisible before the eyes; but to feel the contact of essential goodness, to be made in love with piety, the book must be read and not the prints examined. (p. 174)





Despite Stevenson's admiration for the prints, they only help narrative; emotional and moral meaning, he suggests, can only be conveyed by the text. Only the written word can communicate the nuances of the human experience as Bunyan intended. It was the prints, though, that Stevenson admits stuck in his imagination and helped bring Bunyan to life as a child. Indeed, Stevenson first mentions his copy of Bagster's edition in a November 1868 letter to his cousin Bob, when Louis was barely 18, and Roger Swearingen notes that according to the copy he owned, it was inscribed 'Robert L. Stevenson. From Pappa and Mamma, Jan. 1, 1858', meaning he received it at the age of seven.⁷ His essay on this book therefore becomes a personal reflection on the power of an illustrated text to impress a young imagination, while also critiquing the illustrations from a professional perspective. He closes the essay by saying, '[f]arewell should not be taken with a grudge; nor can I dismiss in any other words than those of gratitude a series of pictures which have, to one at least, been the visible embodiment of Bunyan from childhood up' (p. 174). Imagery – paintings, prints, toy theatres, book illustrations – is constantly cited in these *Magazine of Art* essays as intrinsically linked to memories of childhood and his adult creative imagination.

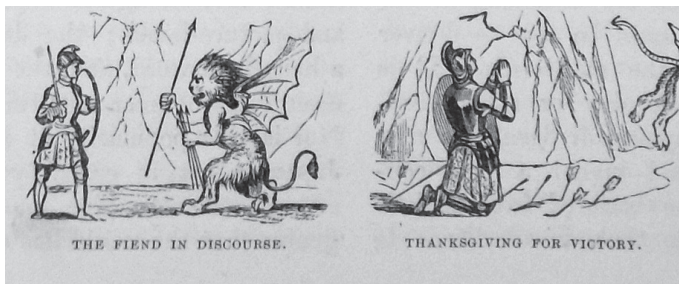


Fig. 1: Eunice Bagster illustrations for Samuel Bagster's *Pilgrim's Progress*





Henley and Stevenson had some trouble identifying who Bagster's illustrator actually was (noted as 'he' in the essay), but Henley ascertained that the woodcuts, for the first 1845 edition, were completed by Bagster's daughter, Eunice, who had recently died. Charles Scribner later discovered from Bagster's firm that the publisher's brother, Jonathan, had completed the illustration of the fight with Apollyon.⁸ Some of the illustrations are reproduced so that the reader can see what is referred to in the text. In a letter of 11 December 1881 to Henley, Stevenson requested the reproduction of specific illustrations: 'I should suggest the party 'Whispering Blasphemies' almost immediately after the combat with Apollyon; the outset of Christiana, Mercy and the family, the women speaking together, the kids following' (Letters 3: 260). When the final piece was published in the February 1882 edition of the *Magazine*, it only contained one of the pieces Stevenson had suggested ('Whispering Blasphemies'). In early February 1882, Stevenson wrote to Henley in apparent frustration, 'You must have got the plates of some surely' (Letters 3: 273). Stevenson writes in semi-playful anger following the publication of his essay that Henley's 'printers' had ignored one of Stevenson's corrections. In the same letter, he writes, '[w]hy the hell did you or your printers – a lousy lot whom I abominate – pass over a correction of mine and send me sprawling down to posterity as an ignoramus who thought the Ill-Favoured Ones were in the first part; when I was nine years old, I knew better than that' (Letters 3: 273). This attack on Henley's printers could be interpreted as an indirect attack on Henley himself; Henley, after all, was the editor. Stevenson's remarks here articulate a certain tension that existed in their friendship, and that is played out in correspondence and critical opinions expressed by both men in the *Magazine*.

Stevenson also comments on the art of a very different type





of illustration: Japanese narrative prints. Stevenson (like many contemporary painters such as Monet, Manet, and Van Gogh) was enthusiastic about this style, which presented new non-realistic forms of representation that foregrounded formal patterning and design. When married to texts, Japanese-style illustrations suggested new narrative possibilities to Stevenson. Published in November 1882, his piece 'Byways of Book Illustration: Two Japanese Romances' is a review of two recently published illustrated versions of the heroic Japanese story, 'Chiushingura, or the Loyal League'; one was a translation by Frederick Dickins, and the other was 'Les Fidèles Rônins', a French translation of an American edition. The essay becomes a more general comment on Japanese art than on the specific illustrations provided by Henley. Stevenson's admiration of Japanese art is too large a subject for discussion here, but of interest are his comments on the strengths of these new modes of representation made towards the end of the essay.⁹ The most impressive aspect of Japanese imagery for Stevenson was its effective economy of style. He writes, 'The eye of the Japanese is as quick to single out, as his hand is dexterous to reproduce, the truly pictorial features of a landscape of an incident. But with these features he appears to rest content'.¹⁰ This efficiency and clarity is a refreshing change from conservative Western style that Stevenson felt often emphasised pedantic observational detail over imaginative truth:

The mass of incidental information which goes to the making of a modern European landscape – the difference of planes, the intricacy of outline, the patient effort after a combination of local and general colour – contrasts strikingly indeed with the few, learned touches by which a Japanese will represent a moun-





tain or a city. The Oriental addresses himself singly to the eye, seeking at the same time the maximum of effect and the minimum of detail. (p. 14)

Despite the obvious differences between the styles of illustration in both versions of the romance, Stevenson identifies consistent qualities that mark them out as effective book illustration. Both sets are woodcut illustrations, a style that emphasises a sparse linearity of design, depicting characters and moments of action that require explanation from the text, while resisting the temptation to ‘fill in’ detail that doesn’t exist. His comments on these illustrations echo observations he makes to his cousin Bob Stevenson in 1874 regarding Japanese art. In this letter, Stevenson identifies the narrative qualities of Japanese prints:

[T]his art is above all others in two points. First, in that it tells its story, not for the story’s sake only, but so as to produce always a magnificent decorative design. I have here before me, for instance, a picture in which an army is crossing an arm of the sea by night [...] (the colour you know is never imitative, never what you call realistic, always quite imaginative) [...] if you could see the pattern, the splendid hurly burly of bright colours and strange forms that they have thus thrown out against the dark background, you would see what imaginative truth we sacrifice, to say nothing of decorative effect, by our limping, semi-scientific way of seeing things. Second. The colours are really fun. (Letters 2: 64)

For Stevenson, the Japanese style lent itself to new expressions of ‘imaginative truth’. Its style also suited literary illustration, because of its natural ability to communicate narrative: the





images depict characters in moments of dramatic tension, drawing the reader's eye to exciting moments of action or intriguing settings through 'imaginative' design and pattern. This is how they achieve 'maximum of effect and the minimum of detail'.

On foreign lands

In keeping with the spirit of new imagery from foreign lands, Stevenson wrote two travel pieces for the *Magazine*. The first was 'A Modern Cosmopolis' for the May 1883 issue, which would later become known as 'San Francisco'. The second was a picturesque reminiscence on his time as a member of the artists' colony in France, called 'Fontainebleau: Village Communities of Painters', published in two parts in the May and June issues for 1884. Both these pieces were illustrated, although the manner in which each came to their final presentation was very different. Given that they were written for an illustrated publication, it is interesting to note that the many times these pieces have been reproduced, it has been *without* any of the original illustrations. Indeed, on reading Stevenson's prose, readers realise they really do not need illustrations. The essays aim to paint pictures with words. These two essays keep true to the spirit of the *Magazine* not because of their physical presentation, but because Stevenson uses the opportunity to apply his skill at creating strong visual imagery through an economically suggestive style of description.

The subject of 'A Modern Cosmopolis' may seem to be incongruous in a publication that was devoted to the study and criticism of art, but once read, it is clear that Stevenson was engaged in a visually creative project of his own. His phrasing in itself is playful and visually evocative: the mountain of Tamalpais 'springs' and 'over-plumbs' the narrow entrance of the bay; '[t]he air is fresh and salt as if you were at sea'; 'a forest of masts bristles like bulrushes about its feet'; and 'hill after hill is crowded





and crowned' with the homes of the wealthy.¹¹ However, the style Stevenson employs in this essay makes illustration difficult; this is best exemplified in his description of Chinatown.

Of all romantic places for a boy to loiter in, that Chinese quarter is the most romantic. There, on a half-holiday, three doors from home, he may visit an actual foreign land, foreign in people, language, things, and customs. The very barber of the *Arabian Nights* shall be at work before him, shaving heads; he shall see Aladdin playing on the streets; who knows, but among those nameless vegetables, the fruit of the nose-tree itself may be exposed for sale? And the interest is heightened with a chill of horror. Below, you hear, the cellars are alive with mystery; opium dens, where the smokers lie one above another, shelf above shelf, close-packed and grovelling in deadly stupor; the seats of unknown vices and cruelties, the prisons of unacknowledged slaves and the secret lazarettos of disease.¹²

As a glance at the accompanying picture demonstrates, description such as this discourages illustration (fig. 2). The lack of specific description is the first obstacle ('foreign land, foreign in people, language, things and customs'); the reference to the *Arabian Nights* roots the description in exotic romance motifs, which resist topographical or observational illustration ('he shall see Aladdin playing on the streets'); and the suggestiveness of the mysterious noises from 'below' actually defies visual representation, since Stevenson only describes what is heard in order for the reader to imagine what is happening. The description of Chinatown here is abstracted and suggestive, making the very literal observational illustration that accompanies it seem



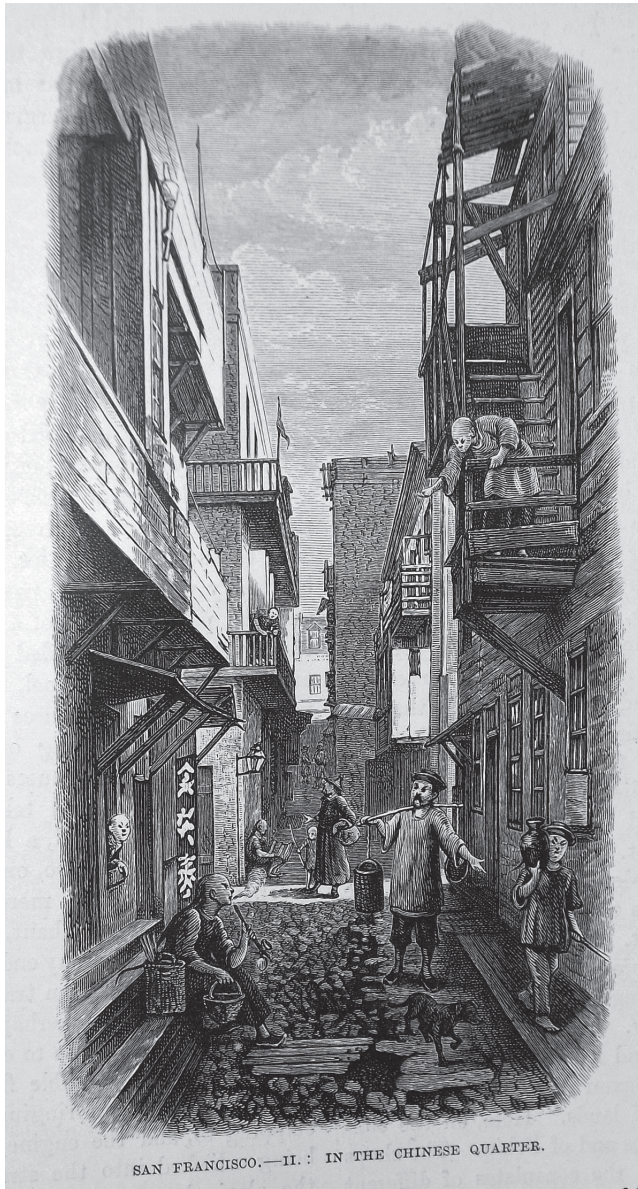


Fig. 2: 'In the Chinese Quarter'





incongruous to the spirit of the text.

'A Modern Cosmopolis' paints small pictures in prose, which come together to create a composite image of the city that exists in the readers' imagination. Illustration here actually undermines the suggestiveness of Stevenson's prose, robbing it of its allegorical qualities. The images provide broad, literal perspectives of the city that bear the loosest relation to the text, providing irrelevant and distracting detail: they compete with, rather than enrich, the text. This is exemplified in figure 3, loosely (almost contemptuously) named 'Outlying bits'.

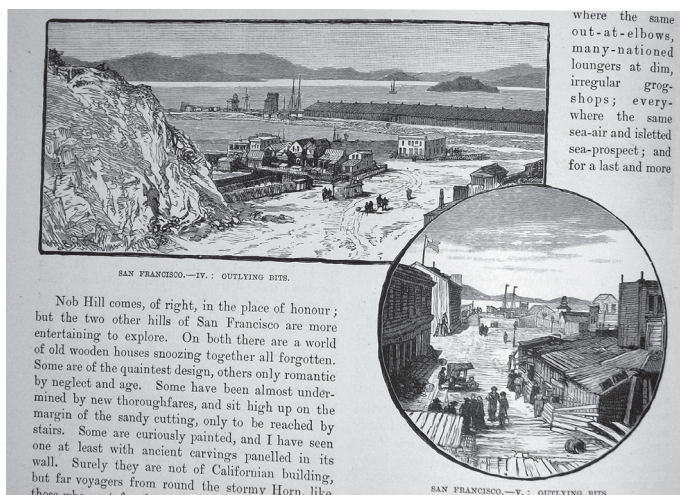


Fig. 3: 'San Francisco - Outlying Bits'

Stevenson's correspondence with Henley reveals an interesting fact about the writing process for this essay, which may account for the nature of the illustrations. In a letter of February 1883, he writes 'I'll try and give you the article. It should as you say be easy; but when am I to find time and strength: but I'll try.





I have the pictures, and dam [sic] bad they are' (Letters 4: 72). The 'pictures' mentioned here were most likely photographs of San Francisco sent to him by Henley, from which he was to create his essay; this is revealed in a letter of 30 April, in which he comments on the photographs *and* the illustrations. He writes, "The engravings are worse than the photographs, less pictorial and weaker in tone: it is another example of the evil of the modern, copying-clerk affair" (Letters 4: 108). This suggests that the illustrations were not artistic interpretations of the scenes, but were rather engraved directly from the photographs Stevenson had seen. Therefore, it appears that the writing process for this essay was as follows: Stevenson wrote the piece using photographs that were sent to him by Henley; once the essay was written, the photographs were engraved as illustrations. This would explain the literal, figurative style of the illustrations, which grate against the impressionist style of the text. It is interesting, therefore, that Stevenson's style ultimately resists illustrative treatment: although he used the photographs to structure the essay, moving from scene to scene, he has written from memory of his travels there, rather than from the visual cues. In this way the photographs, and therefore the illustrations, become almost irrelevant to the text.

'Fontainebleau' by contrast was written with the intention of illustration. Stevenson suggests to Henley in June 1883 that the artists' colony in Fontainebleau would make a good subject for the *Magazine*; it would be 'picturesque, artistic'. He had written on this subject previously, an essay called 'Forest Notes' for the *Cornhill* in May 1876, but he tells Henley that he would 'treat it differently, with an eye to artistic education in particular'. He adds that 'I could let you have a pretty early communication of what I should require for illustration' (Letters 4: 130). His re-working of the subject was therefore undertaken with illustration in mind,





as he writes to Henley a few days later that 'I have had the devil's trouble to make a place for Anthony's pictures, not being in the least in a descriptive mood; but I've elbow room enough for him now; I'll send a list for him to choose from' (Letters 4: 135). This is a different writing process to 'Cosmopolis'; Stevenson is writing with an eye to providing scenery for an illustrator. It is clear from a comment he makes to Henley on 18 July 1883 that he felt this was a much more appropriate arrangement for the creation of an illustrated text: 'the idea that because a thing is a picter book, all the writing should be on the wrong tack is *triste* but widespread [...] The writer should write, and not illustrate pictures: else its bosh' (Letters 4: 142). Stevenson suggests here that writers are making a mistake in such publications by writing *for* the pictures. A writer's art should be writing; it is an illustrator's job to illustrate *to* the primary source, the text. This is the arrangement that is followed with 'Fontainebleau', although Stevenson is ambivalent about the results. On 1 May 1884, the month of its publication, Stevenson writes to Henley that 'The Fontainebleaus, the Menzels, the *Stryge*, the Houdons (above all, Gluck) make a first-rate number' (Letters 4: 286). The 'Fontainebleaus' refers to seven of the illustrations done by Anthony Warton Henley mentioned above, a brother of William, for the first part of the essay (the second was published the following month in June with a further six illustrations by A. W. H.).¹³ Unlike those for 'A Modern Cosmopolis', they are referenced within the body of the text. The illustrations have been numbered, and W. E. Henley as editor has inserted the numerical references into the text so that the reader can match Stevenson's descriptions to the illustrations. For example, Stevenson writes 'there is no sure mile without some special character and charm. Such quarters, for instance, as the Long Rocher, the Bas- Bréau (II.), and the Reine Blanche (I.)'.¹⁴ The illustrations, while depicting specific scenes





from the text, do so without becoming documentary, depicting either broad landscape scenes or dense forest foliage. One image, 'The Plain of Bière', almost anticipates Monet's *Haystacks* paintings which were begun in 1885, while others like 'The Bas-Bréau' and 'A Wilderness' recall the style of Corot.

However, it seems that Stevenson's positive comments to Henley that the 'Fontainebleaus' help produce a 'first-rate number' do not represent his appreciation of the pictures as illustrations. Despite his positive comment to W. E. H. that he liked Anthony's illustrations, he closes the second part of 'Fontainebleau' with a somewhat cutting critique of the same images. I reproduce the paragraph in full, because in subsequent anthologies it is omitted along with the illustrations:

I must add a note upon the illustrations, not to criticise, for they are all graceful, and the Bridge of Gretz (XII.) a little triumph, but to explain that, in the views of the Bas-Bréau (II.), the Reine Blanche (I.), and the Paris Road (VII.), Mr. Henley has, unfortunately – perhaps inevitably, for no two men see with the same pair of eyes – not found the point of view referred to in my text. Thus, with regard to the first, I described the appearance of the great central grove about the Bouquet de l'Empereur; Mr. Henley, on the other hand, has drawn the thicket either by the *bornage* or the road to the Carrefour de l'Épine – both rightly enough portions of the Bas-Bréau, but portions of a great dissemblance [see fig. 4]. In the Reine Blanche, again, the peculiar character referred to in the text, of great trees overshadowing boulders, has not found illustration in the cut. Mr. Henley and the writer, both good Barbizonians, and both studious of fidelity, have each followed his own taste and given different readings. (p. 345)





Fig. 4: 'Fontainebleau. — II.: The Bas-Bréau'





This apparently contradictory critique of the same illustrations (they contribute to a ‘first-rate number’ in his letter to Henley, but come under attack in this paragraph) is difficult to explain, and could have several different reasons. One is that Stevenson’s comments here might constitute another indirect attack on W. E. H.’s perceived editorial tyranny over his work. However, a more likely possibility is a difference Stevenson draws between the ‘number’ – the entire instalment of the *Magazine of Art* as an aesthetic object, a beautifully illustrated text – and the artistic merit of these specific illustrations to his text. The *Magazine* is a beautiful publication to leaf through, but this can be to overlook the artistic qualities of each specific piece it contains. This seems to be what Stevenson takes issue with: as a number, it’s an aesthetically beautiful production, but in ‘Fontainebleau’, Anthony Henley has undermined the author’s authority. Stevenson’s criticism here derives from the fact that some of the images do not illustrate the text; rather, the artist has undertaken to depict views that are roughly congruous but not specific to the text he is illustrating, and the result is imagery that deviates from textual authority. In doing so, it potentially confuses or misguides the reader. The artist in these cases has ‘followed his own taste’, but this is not the role of an illustrator; illustration should work symbiotically with the text, the one augmenting the other, in order to enhance the reader’s imaginative experience.

This final paragraph has been omitted in subsequent published versions because without it ‘Fontainebleau’ can be published and perfectly understood as a complete work without the need to reproduce the illustrations. The rest of Stevenson’s text does not directly reference the illustrations, preferring instead to create imagery through prose as in ‘A Modern Cosmopolis’. While Stevenson wrote ‘Fontainebleau’ knowing it would be illustrated, the essay has been written without specific reference





to the images that were published with them (other than this final paragraph): the images and their references were inserted after the fact by the editor. Stevenson has concentrated on his own craft, writing, as he suggests writers should do in his letter to Henley. For this reason, text becomes the dominant medium; it is a self-contained work that any illustration then has to adhere to.

Memory and romance writing

Another of Stevenson's *Magazine* essays that was written for imagery was 'A Penny Plain and Twopence Coloured', and like 'Bagster's *Pilgrim's Progress*' the illustrations pre-existed the text. Published in the April 1884 issue, the essay is a reflection on his childhood theatre play-set, Skelt's Juvenile Drama, although like the other essays commonly reproduced here, it has never been reproduced with the illustrations that Henley supplied for its initial publication. The illustrations, of course, come from Skelt's Juvenile Drama itself, but like 'Fontainebleau', they were omitted in its republished form in *Memories and Portraits*, as was the entire paragraph that directly references them. This paragraph is too long to quote here, but in it he offers 'for auld lang syne, a sheet or two of Skelt diminished'. Stevenson lists several of the cut-outs that are faithfully reproduced by Henley, and referenced numerically as they are in 'Fontainebleau': "Miller and his Men" is put to contribution – even to Ravina the terrible (1), to Riber's corpse (10), to a group of "Robbers asleep" (14), to a trio of millers singing (12), to that terrific abduction piece (9), in which I call upon you to admire the extreme imbecility of the heroine's legs'.¹⁵ The last image here (fig. 5) is reproduced by Henley as number (9), and Stevenson is indeed correct in pointing out the legs of the abductee, which are comically disproportionate in relation to the rest of her body, while Grindoff's right leg seems comically





long.

However, as the essay points out, artistic quality in child's theatre is less important than the impression it leaves on the imagination, which is then taken subconsciously into adulthood: 'If, at the ripe age of fourteen years, I bought a certain cudgel, got a friend to load it, and thence-forward walked the tame ways of the earth mine own ideal, radiating pure romance – still I was but a puppet in the hand of Skelt [. . .]. What am I? what are life, art, letters, the world, but what my Skelt has made them?' (p. 230). Indeed, in some of the cuts, we see 'Robbers Carousing', 'Riber's Corpse', and "'Combat": Sailors and Smugglers', images which could, with little adjusting, be directly transferred to the illustration of *Treasure Island* (published the year before in 1882) or *Kidnapped* (1886). Stevenson's essay draws a teleological line between childhood imagery, his creative imagination, and the romance adventures he would write as an adult.

Stevenson had written – and would later write – about the 'pictorial' nature of romance writing in other essays, particularly 'A Humble Remonstrance' and 'A Gossip on Romance'. The latter essay, published in *Longman's Magazine* in 1882, emphasises the genre's reliance on strong imagery, which is ultimately what stays with a reader once the novel or poem has been put aside. Comparing the experience of reading Richardson's *Clarissa* against Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, he argues that for all the former's technical brilliance, it is the latter's images that the reader retains in later life: 'Crusoe recoiling from the footprint, Achilles shouting over against the Trojans, Ulysses bending the great bow, Christian running with his fingers in his ears, these are each culminating moments in the legend, and each has been printed on the mind's eye for ever'.¹⁶ Of course, Stevenson himself created many such lasting images himself during his writing career: Jim Hawkins defending himself from Israel Hands on the





Fig. 5: 'That Terrific Abduction Piece.'

mast of the *Hispaniola*; David Balfour narrowly avoiding plunging to his death on the stairs; Jekyll's shock at seeing Hyde's hand instead of his own; and any scene containing Long John Silver (incidentally based loosely on Henley). What matters to Stevenson in 'A Penny Plain' are not the images themselves, but





the memory of them from his childhood. For the child, it is not the story that catches the eye first, but the image, which then suggests narrative possibilities through play. The illustrations produced in the *Magazine* provide an invaluable insight into the creative imagination of an author who would channel these memories into his own vision, and express the experiences of childhood play to a new generation. Most importantly for my discussion, however, is that this essay was always meant to be published *with* the illustrations: this is at least part of the point of the work. It is interesting for scholars and Stevenson enthusiasts alike to be able to see the imagery that so fired his imagination as a boy, to bear witness to part of the vibrant visual culture that shaped his literary imagination in later life. The essay itself is a meditation on this process, and the importance of childhood fascination with romance imagery in producing literature that resonated with adults.

The only one of Stevenson's essays for the *Magazine of Art* to be published without any illustrations was 'A Note on Realism', for the November 1883 issue. This may seem out of step with the rest of his *Magazine* input, until the reader realises it addresses themes and motifs that appear in the other essays. This essay seems to summarise the qualities he identifies as good art in all the other papers for the *Magazine*, whether painting or literature. He discusses style, control, the sacrifices and discipline required to produce a true work of art, and the pitfalls of those who over-emphasise style over purpose. His comments on the contemporary trend of self-professed realists to overwhelm readers and viewers with irrelevant detail are reminiscent of his comments about European painting in 'Two Japanese Romances', which is inundated with a 'mass of incidental information' (p. 14). In 'A Note on Realism', he warns against mistaking realism's occasional emphasis on observational detail with artistic merit:





‘what [...] particularly interests the artist is the tendency of the extreme of detail, when followed as a principle, to degenerate into mere *feux-de-joie* of literary tricking. The other day even M. Daudet was to be heard babbling of audible colours and visible sounds’ (p. 26). Like the ‘European artists’, literary realists occasionally confuse themselves with unnecessary details and display. Technical method should be mastered by the artist (writer or painter), Stevenson argues, but not at the cost of meaning or clarity of purpose. Later, he writes, ‘A photographic exactitude in dialogue is now the exclusive fashion; but even in the ablest hands it tells us no more – I think it even tells us less – than Molière, wielding his artificial medium, has told to us and to all time of Alceste or Orgon, Dorine or Chsyle’.¹⁷ The purpose for the artist is to communicate ‘truth to the conditions of man’s nature and the conditions of man’s life’; style and technique are essential means of communicating these truths, but not the ends in themselves. The essay concludes with a comment that encapsulates views expressed in his other *Magazine* essays:

We talk of bad and good. Everything, indeed, is good which is conceived with honesty and executed with communicative ardour. But though on neither side is dogmatism fitting, and though in every case the artist must decide for himself [...] yet one thing may be generally said, that we of the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century, breathing as we do the intellectual atmosphere of our age, are more apt to err upon the side of realism than to sin in quest of the ideal. Upon that theory it may be well to watch and correct our own decisions, always holding back the hand from the least appearance of irrelevant dexterity, and resolutely fixed to begin no work that is not philosophical, passionate, dignified, happily mirthful, or at the last and





least, romantic in design. (p. 28)

An artist must work hard at achieving style, but style taken to its extreme tends to denigrate into trickery, or *'feux-de-joie'*. By contrast, Eunice Bagster's illustrations, while perhaps not technically as strong as an Academy-trained draughtsman's, achieve their purpose through their truth to the 'spirit' of the subject. In a similar vein, Japanese artists like Hokusai and Hiroshige achieve 'truth to the conditions of man's nature' through style, partly because their style avoids the pitfalls of over-emphasis on naturalistic detail or distracting visual trickery.

Stevenson's own contributions to the *Magazine of Art*, as diverse as they first appear, demonstrate an evolving philosophy towards literature and the visual arts; his philosophy was shaped by his memories of popular visual culture from childhood, by his travels to new places, by his time in Fontainebleau and his exposure to avant-garde trends in painting, and his love affair with the romance genre. Each subject for criticism becomes an opportunity to reflect more broadly on the role of the artist and the state of contemporary artistic trends. Moreover, we see in the *Magazine* essays an artist practising and reflecting on his own craft as it relates to other media. The essays demonstrate a consistency regarding the artist's craft and responsibility, about the relationship of literature and painting, about the possibilities and pitfalls of the illustrated text, and about the importance of childhood memories and imagination in the creative process. The essays for the *Magazine of Art* are not as often read as his more famous pieces for the *Cornhill* and *Longman's*, but they present a very important body of work when we remember that they were being written during the period that Stevenson was writing some of his most popular work. *New Arabian Nights*, *Treasure Island* and *The Black Arrow* were either being written or published



at the same time as these essays, and Stevenson intended all of them to be illustrated (although they were not illustrated according to Stevenson's wishes in their first editions); the *Magazine* essays therefore demonstrate that Stevenson clearly understood what he expected from illustration, and that he saw an illustrated text as a potentially dynamic artistic form.

NOTES

- 1 See Jerome Hamilton, *William Ernest Henley: A Study in the 'Counter-Decadence' of the 'Nineties* (New York: Octagon Books, 1971), and Leila Greiman, 'William Ernest Henley and the *Magazine of Art*', *Victorian Periodical Review*, 16.2 (Summer 1983), pp. 53-64.
- 2 Greiman 1983, p. 54.
- 3 The numbers of the *Magazine* in which these pieces were first published are quoted from Roger Swearingen's *The Prose Writings of Robert Louis Stevenson: A Guide* (Connecticut: Archon Books, 1980); however, this essay takes all its quotations from the collected annual editions of the *Magazine*, which change the year of some of the entries. For example, 'Byways of Book Illustration: Two Japanese Romances' was published in the November 1882 number, but then reproduced in the 1883 annual anthology. Also, 'A Note on Realism' was published in the November 1883 edition, but reproduced in the 1884 annual.
- 4 For a more detailed discussion of Stevenson's experiments in and theories of illustration, see Richard J. Hill, 'Robert Louis Stevenson's Davos studio: author and art in 1882', *Scottish Literary Review*, 2, no. 2 (Glasgow: 2011).
- 5 In November 1881, Stevenson wrote to Henley about *Treasure Island*, which was being published serially in *Young Folks*, 'It will be from 75 to 80,000 words; and with anything like half good pictures, it should sell. I suppose I may at least hope for eight pic's? I aspire after ten or twelve' (Robert Louis Stevenson, *Letters*, 8 vols, 3:229). The first illustrated edition appeared in America in 1884, published by Boston Brothers, and the first edition with illustrations in Britain was published the following year by Cassell and Co.
- 6 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Byways of Book Illustration: Bagster's





- Pilgrim's Progress*, 'Magazine of Art' (London: Cassell & Co., 1882), p. 169.
- 7 Roger Swearingen, *The Prose Writings of Robert Louis Stevenson*, p. 72.
- 8 Robert Louis Stevenson, *Letters and Miscellanies of Robert Louis Stevenson: Sketches, Criticisms, &c*, ed. by Charles Scribner (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898), p. 213n.
- 9 See Hill 2011, pp. 71-77.
- 10 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Byways of Book Illustration: Two Japanese Romances,' *Magazine of Art* (London: Cassell & Co., 1883), p. 14.
- 11 Also here are phrases, motifs and images that would make their way into later stories from the Pacific. San Francisco is a 'boyish playground' that brings to life childhood 'enchantment of the Arabian Nights', the stories which inspired two of his later Pacific works, 'The Bottle Imp' and 'The Isle of Voices'. A phrase here, 'the palaces' is a phrase that recurs in 'The Bottle Imp' as Keawe visits the same city; and later Stevenson refers to Aladdin, the *Arabian Nights* tale that he emulates with this story.
- 12 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'A Modern Cosmopolis', *The Magazine of Art* (London: Cassell & Co., 1883), 274-5.
- 13 The 'Menzels' here refer to those done by the German artist Adolf Menzel; *Le Styrgie* was an etching by Charles Meryon of a gargoyle on Notre Dame; and the 'Houdons' refers to the illustrations of Houdon's busts of Molière, Gluck and his statue of Voltaire. The *Dictionary of National Biography* for 1912 lists Anthony Warton Henley as a landscape painter, and one of five brothers (ed. Sir Sidney Lee, New York: The MacMillan Company, 1912, vol II) pp. 242-3.
- 14 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Fontainebleau: Village Community of Painters', *Magazine of Art* (London: Cassell & Co., 1884), p. 269.
- 15 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'A Penny Plain and Twopence Coloured', *Magazine of Art* (London: Cassell & Co., 1884), p. 231.
- 16 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'A Gossip on Romance', *The Lantern-Bearers and Other Essays*, ed. by Jeremy Treglown (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1999), p. 175.
- 17 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'A Note on Realism', *Magazine of Art* (London: Cassell & Co., 1884), p. 26.





Familiar style in *Memories and Portraits*

Alex Thomson

Dedicating the book to his mother ‘in the name of past joy and present sorrow’, Stevenson describes *Memories and Portraits* in his prefatory Note as accidentally autobiographical.¹ The collection that would eventually bear this title had been under discussion for two years prior to its eventual British publication on 21st November 1887, and the illness and death of Stevenson’s father early that year made the period during which *Memories and Portraits* was assembled an unsettled and unsettling one.² Indeed, at first sight the preoccupation of the collection with personal and national pasts is striking: *Memories and Portraits* seems a troubled farewell to his Edinburgh youth, his family, and many of his friendships.

Moreover, the circumstances of the book’s final production span his final Atlantic crossing; for its reader, as perhaps for its author, the volume can become emblematic of the closure of one phase of Stevenson’s life and work. Writing to his publisher shortly before setting out from Bournemouth to London in August 1887, Stevenson stresses how ‘anxious’ he is ‘to have the proofs with me on the voyage’ (L5: 441). He made landfall in New York in September; proofs of *Memories and Portraits* were returned to London, then the printed sheets made their way back across the Atlantic for near-simultaneous publication of the American edition. The dedication to Stevenson’s mother was completed on the voyage, and is signed as from ‘SS. “Ludgate Hill”, within the sight of Cape Race’. ‘Cape Race’ in Newfoundland was typically the first landfall of an Atlantic crossing, so the location is significant. The dedication, last element of the volume to be completed, frames *Memories and Portraits* as a set of backward glances at a passing world Stevenson would not rejoin in his lifetime.

Yet the value of an essay stands on its ability to transcend any





revelation of self. The personal is the occasion of the familiar essay, but if this serves to dramatise the relationship between author and reader as one of intimacy, it should not be seen as the final end or purpose of the form. The familiar style, given its central critical definition in the English tradition by Hazlitt, is a complex form whose success depends upon such artful disavowal of its designs upon the reader. The preparation of *Memories and Portraits* underlines Stevenson's awareness of such generic attributes. Originally conceived as a companion volume to *Virginibus Puerisque*, it would feature essays published in magazines since *Virginibus* had appeared in 1881. The sole exception was 'An Old Scotch Gardener', the only essay to receive significant editorial attention, revised from its 1871 appearance in the Edinburgh University Magazine. The deal with Chatto was for *Virginibus* to be republished alongside the new volume, so that the two books might be sold in identical formats, and for a while they were slated to appear as twin volumes of 'Familiar Essays'.³ This generic marker is significant. Those essays from the period that Stevenson chooses to leave out are too technical ('On Style in Literature: Its Technical Elements'), too political ('The Day After To-morrow') or too much a critical study (the two essays for *The Magazine of Art* on 'The Byways of Book Illustration') to adequately fit the definition.

In the case of his essays, the general critical neglect of Stevenson in the twentieth century is compounded by the decline of the familiar essay as a central literary genre.⁴ Our assumption that the essay must be a subsidiary literary form to the novel, verse or drama is a recent one. As Graham Good puts it, the essay is 'the "invisible genre" in literature, commonly used but rarely analyzed in itself'.⁵ This reflects one of the fundamental problems of critical reading. Both writer and critic work against a complex set of changing background assumptions about particular genres. Those genres and styles bring with them sets of attitudes that may prescribe the tonal range of the work, suitable style and





appropriate subject matter. Moreover they define the conventions against which stylistic innovation is deployed. The case for generic criticism is that it helps us isolate and understand the attitudes that we can ascribe to the writer, as distinct from those embodied in the form they choose. Commenting on Stevenson's approach to biography, Liz Farr argues that he 'draws upon recent psychological models to eschew objective judgements and focus on the ways in which the subjective discriminating mind might treat the world as a resource through which it should quest after pleasurable impressions'.⁶ But it is just as plausible that Stevenson's use of the familiar essay form actually brings with it this subjective approach, for the essay has been associated with the subjective and personal response to experience, and hence with a scepticism about objectivity, since Montaigne.

My aim in this article is to explore the strong presence of such conventions of the familiar essay in *Memories and Portraits*. In the first section I will discuss the history of the familiar essay, drawing attention to three points of contact between that tradition and Stevenson's own use of the form, and illustrating this generic argument with evidence from the volume. In the second section I will examine the structure and themes of the volume at greater length, paying particular attention to the essays 'Old Mortality', 'Pastoral' and 'The Manse'. The conjunction in the title of 'memories' with 'portraits' hints at both an autobiographical and biographical dimension. Indeed, almost every essay is both a portrait and a memory, as Stevenson lends an immediacy to his memories, and qualifies the tendency towards solipsism of the essayist, through specific, if fleeting, engagement with the lives and characters of others. It is precisely through his mobilisation and qualification of their autobiographical dimension, and in the subjection of reminiscence to the strictures of reflexive self-criticism, that the distinctiveness of Stevenson's familiar essays can be understood, and I will conclude with a short comparison between these essays and less self-critical contemporary modes





of Scottish literary reminiscence.

I

There are two distinctive characteristic features of the familiar essay that are particularly helpful for understanding Stevenson's use of the genre in *Memories and Portraits*. The first is the association of the essay, since its inception in Montaigne's writing, with scepticism and humanism; the second is the stabilising of the familiar style in the early nineteenth century around the idea of conversational form. Finally, these features taken together shed light on the relationship between Stevenson's prose and what literary historians have seen as the late nineteenth century revival of a self-conscious interest in the concept of style, especially visible in the familiar essay and in the writing of a stylistically distinguished prose.⁷ In this section I will explore each point in turn.

As Montaigne characterises his technique in 'On Experience', his introspective method is linked to a sense of the limitations of human knowledge: 'I who make no other profession but getting to know myself find in me such boundless depths and variety that my apprenticeship bears no other fruit than to make me know how much there remains to learn. [...] It is from my own experience that I emphasize human ignorance which is, in my own judgement, the most certain faction in the school of the world'.⁸ In Stevenson's time the same equation of the perspective of the essayist and the limited knowledge gained from experience holds, and it can be confirmed in the commonplace identification of Montaigne with both the form of the essay and the sceptic disposition. Hazlitt had identified Montaigne (and identified with him) as having the 'courage' to throw off dogma and prejudice, and to write not to persuade others of his beliefs, but to 'satisfy his own mind of the truth of things';⁹ for Emerson he is the exemplary Skeptic, 'the considerer, the prudent, taking in sail, counting stock, husbanding his means';¹⁰ for Pater he is





‘representative essayist because representative doubter’ in an age which is ‘the commencement of our own’.¹¹

Pater bears citation in this context not only as he is often classed with Stevenson as a progenitor of the late-Victorian revival of style in prose, but also as exemplary of a larger nineteenth century interest in scepticism and what has more recently been called relativity.¹² In his 1866 essay on Coleridge, he had explicitly linked modern science, philosophy and experience: the relative spirit, characteristic of the modern as opposed to the ancient world, has spread from observational sciences into moral philosophy. This passage is worth quoting at length because it captures a set of issues that fascinate Stevenson:

Hard and abstract moralities are yielding to a more exact estimate of the subtlety and complexity of our life. Always, as an organism increases in perfection the conditions of its life become more complex. Man is the most complex of the products of nature. Character merges into temperament; the nervous system refines itself into intellect. His physical organism is played upon not only by the physical conditions about it, but by remote laws of inheritance, the vibrations of long past acts reaching him in the midst of the new order of things in which he lives. When we have estimated these conditions he is not yet simple and isolated; for the mind of the race, the character of the age, sway him this way or that through the medium of language and ideas. It seems as if the most opposite statements about him were alike true; he is so receptive, all the influences of the world ceaselessly playing upon him, so that every hour in his life is unique, touched altogether by a stray word, or glance, or touch. The truth of these relations experience gives us; not the truth of eternal outlines effected once and for all, but a world of fine gradations and subtly linked conditions, shifting intricately as we





ourselves change; and bids us by constant clearing of the organs of observation and perfecting of analysis to make what we can of these.¹³

Pater's argument suggests a revival of humanism, combining scepticism towards the authority of rationalist philosophy, with tolerance and acceptance of the conclusions of modern science, not as a substitute for more traditional moral teaching, but as pointing to the difference and difficulty of moral philosophy because of the complexity of human experience. What is distinctively nineteenth century is the emphasis not on human nature, but on 'remote laws of inheritance'. The material flux of existence revealed by modern scientific philosophy has been generalised to the realm of culture, and it will never be clear whether that knowledge invalidates or makes more urgent the work of interpretation, the traditional arts of historical understanding and 'analysis'.

Stevenson is better considered as a contemporary rather than a follower of Pater, and commentary on Pater's technique in his own 'portrait' essays suggest that his interests are more strongly focused on the artistic mediation and expression of these difficulties. Pater's 'portraits' develop from the Victorian tradition on which Stevenson's critical and character studies in *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* also draw, and in them his 'purpose [is] a tentative, personal, synoptic view of the artistic personality, conveyed dialogically through a mixture of imaginative and discursive features'.¹⁴ For Stevenson's familiar essays, on the other hand, our impressions are fleeting, transient and incomplete, but that need not bring us to an impasse of the sort that requires empathy rather than imagination. The currency of this sort of view can be shown through comparison with an essay by Fleeming Jenkin. Stevenson reviewed the text of 'Fragment on Truth' while writing his *Memoir of Fleeming Jenkin*, and passed it on to Colvin for the collection of Jenkin's works (L5: 344-5). In





the essay, Jenkin takes it as axiomatic that:

Words can express no truth wholly, and again no impression corresponds wholly with the fact; and again we may say that no man can honestly say that which is untrue, for if he says that which he believes, his words express that which he perceives or conceives. [...] So again we may say that our senses never deceive us, for given all the circumstances, the impression must be that which it is. We might desire to leave out some of the circumstances, as in trying to spear a fish we might desire to leave out the refractive power of water, but our senses tell us all the fact. They even tell us their own imperfection, the impression made being partly the result of the fact and partly the result of our own organism. In this sense every impression is true, being the inevitable result of the whole complex circumstances.¹⁵

Jenkin here testifies to the continued presence of Scottish Common Sense principles in Victorian science.¹⁶ Our impressions are the starting point for scientific or philosophical enquiry, and the question of the existence or otherwise of reality can be ruled out as metaphysical or absurd. The limited knowledge of reality we acquire through the senses is a sound enough basis for further experiment and doesn't as such require theoretical underpinning; while the theories we build through abstraction or simplification from the complexity of reality are not confirmed through their correspondence to natural fact, but tested by their effectiveness in its manipulation (as when we try to 'spear a fish'). As in Pater, so for the scientist we see an emphasis on complexity, a frank admission that we know reality only through impressions, which does not contravene the authority of applied and natural sciences in their own proper fields.¹⁷

For Stevenson, in *Memories and Portraits*, as in many of





his earlier and later essays the world's complexity is axiomatic, emerging most clearly when he contrasts life and art in the concluding essay 'A Humble Remonstrance': 'Life goes before us, infinite in complication' (p. 281); to make a kind of provisional sense of the world 'Man's one method, whether he reasons or creates, is to half-shut his eyes against the dazzle and confusion of reality' (p. 283). Our experience is of 'the welter of impressions, all forcible but all discreet which life presents' (p. 284); 'Life is monstrous, infinite, illogical, abrupt and poignant' (p. 285). This complexity is implicit from the opening of the volume: 'The Foreigner at Home' equally throws us amidst diversity, of 'local custom and prejudice, even local religion and local law' (p. 3), of language, and of landscape. The appropriate response is not to hunker down with our limited range of vision. Both a wider range of experience and a strong sense of the limits of that experience are required to rescue our thinking from small-mindedness, 'pride and ignorance' (pp. 3-4); and rather than 'partial, parochial', our vision should be 'raised to the horizon' (p. 5).

Despite Montaigne's longstanding association with the form, the familiar essay had undergone a recognisable generic shift by Stevenson's time. In a recent study exploring this tradition in nineteenth-century Britain, Uttara Natarajan argues that conversation becomes 'the defining model of the familiar essay'. She identifies Hazlitt as the key figure in the formation of this mode: 'What Hazlitt provides us is a theoretical context for understanding a genre of which he is the primary, but not the only practitioner'.¹⁸ Indeed, we know of Stevenson's admiration for Hazlitt – from his 1871-2 list 'Catalogus Librorum Carissimorum' (Yale B 6073), to his instructions to Baxter in 1880 concerning the books from his library not to be sold (L3: 49), to his 1887 essay 'Books Which Have Influenced Me' (where he says that Hazlitt's essay 'On the Spirit of Obligations' 'was a turning-point in my life') – and his acknowledged sedulous exercises in imitation of him ('A College Magazine'). However, the larger point is





not to identify a specific debt, as the association goes beyond the English romantic essayists. Adorno, whose focus in his famous 'The Essay as Form' is much more on the European tradition, identifies Sainte-Beuve as the writer 'from whom the genre of the modern essay derives'.¹⁹ Sainte-Beuve also derives the essayistic from the conversational:

There are two literatures: an official written literature, conventional, professional, Ciceronian, laudatory; and the other – oral, talks by the fireside, anecdotic, mocking, irreverent, correcting and often undoing the first, and sometimes scarcely surviving contemporary life.²⁰

An essay is not confession or soliloquy, but one side of a conversation; it presumes and requires not an audience but an addressee.

The connection of the familiar essay with the idea of conversation might draw our attention to the two papers on 'Talk and Talkers', first published in *The Cornhill* and reprinted in *Memories and Portraits*. In the first, itself recognised as a model of style, if the response in *The Spectator* is to be trusted: 'a paper which a century since would, by itself, have made a literary reputation',²¹ Stevenson makes a similar distinction to that of Sainte-Beuve, but the contrast he draws is between the stasis fostered by the solitude of the writer and the fixity of the written text, and the dynamic mutual correction and stimulation of conversation:

Literature in many of its branches is no other than the shadow of good talk; but the imitation falls far short of the original in life, freedom and effect. There are always two to a talk, giving and taking, comparing experience and according conclusions. Talk is fluid, tentative, continually 'in further search and progress;' while written words remain fixed, become idols even to the writer, found wooden dogmatisms, and preserve flies of obvious error





in the amber of the truth. (p. 145)

Here Stevenson associates the informality and mobility of talk with a search for truth, with echoes of Hazlitt's response to Montaigne, hinting at the possible appeal of a form that might allow him to join the common sense tradition of his Edinburgh upbringing to admired French stylistic models.

The priority of talk in the worldview of Stevenson's essays suggests the limits of his scepticism. Custom and social experience guarantee what reason alone cannot provide. In 'The Foreigner at Home' Stevenson had posed the question of the Shorter Catechism: 'What is the chief end of man?' (p. 15). In 'Talk and Talkers' we get his own answer: 'the first duty of a man is to speak; that is his chief business in this world' (p. 146). Through conversation we enlarge our stock of experience; we test, challenge and develop new ways of shaping and generalising from our experience.

Masses of experience, anecdote, incident, cross-lights, quotation, historical instances, the whole flotsam and jetsam of two minds forced in and in upon the matter in hand from every point of the compass, and from every degree of mental elevation and abasement – these are the material with which talk is fortified, the food on which the talkers thrive. (pp. 150-1)

Here Stevenson's Edinburgh ancestry is showing – a tradition in which the moderating force of sociability counters religious enthusiasm, and in which the problem of scepticism is a challenge only to metaphysics, and not necessarily to common life. This exchange of 'flotsam and jetsam' is generative; it is not committed to the discovery of truth, but the production of fresh experience. A social virtue is the appropriate counter to metaphysical perplexity.





Both Pater and Stevenson can be situated within the self-conscious revival of an essayistic style drawing on the legacy of the Romantic familiar essay.²² That is to say, both have an investment in the essay as a specifically literary form, and hence to be found at a certain distance from the communication of information or opinion. Each is prepared to risk the sense of artificiality that comes with heightened style, as part of a deliberate intervention into a culture that seems to be neglecting the specific difference that defines literary writing. Linda Dowling, who has traced the connections of this prose style revival with contemporary attitudes towards literary and cultural history, cites Newman: ‘why may not language be wrought as well as the clay of the modeller? why may not words be worked up as well as colours?’.²³ Whatever their own cultural politics, for the inheritors of Sainte-Beuve a self-consciousness about style identifies the writer in contradistinction to the dominant forces of the age. This struggle is to be fought out within the very citadel of what Hugh Miller called ‘periodicalism’, what he saw as the ‘dissipating effect’ on culture of the fact that the magazine essay had become ‘the main vehicle for directly communicating new ideas in nineteenth-century Britain’.²⁴ These are the terms in which George Saintsbury responded to Stevenson’s non-fiction, noting ‘a style sometimes curiously “tormented,” never entirely free from labour, but always of the most ambitious kind, and constantly on the verge of success, from which it was only debarred by the prominence of struggle and reminiscence’.²⁵ This imputes a kind of vulgarity to conspicuous struggle, at odds both with Stevenson’s habitual vocabulary for moral experience – the word ‘battle’ is repeatedly associated with life in Stevenson’s essays – and his frank confession in ‘Some College Memories’ of the years of imitative rehearsal on the basis of which his own stylistic achievement is founded.

The traditional formal features of the familiar essay allow for a comparison with modern lyric poetry on a number of grounds:





reflexive concern with the experience of self in its apprehension of the external world; detachment from any expectation of narrative development; dramatisation of the relationship between reader and writer through the marked presence of an authorial persona. Aspects of this parallel were certainly recognised in Stevenson's time, although the personal lyric had not yet acquired the dominance it would in the twentieth century.²⁶ Alexander Smith, in an essay much cited in the period and described in 1915 as 'one the best essays on the art every written', suggests that the essay 'resembles the lyric, in so far as it is moulded by some central mood – whimsical, serious, or satirical. Give the mood, and the essay, from the first sentence to the last, grows around it as the cocoon grows around the silkworm [...] the essay should be pure literature as the poem is pure literature'.²⁷ While this idea of tonal unity as a compositional principle is undoubtedly evident in Stevenson's essays, it is hard to imagine the latter reaching for the idealist vocabulary of 'pure literature' in place of the more practical sense of good writing. The comparison with lyric is misleading if it leads us to think of the familiar essay as a conciliatory mode in which a redemptive power is found in reflection on the commonplace. Instead, we might consider that the lyric reflexivity of the modern essay constitutes it as a critical form: engaged not simply with the representation of experience, but with reflection on the limits of experience, and implicitly contesting more naïve ways of orienting ourselves within the social world. Susan Stewart suggests: 'lyric specifically both produces and reflects upon conditions of subjectivity'.²⁸ Clifford Siskin has argued further that the 'conjuncture' between criticism and lyric is a definitive feature of the modern evolution of the generic system and comments on 'the capacity of the lyric – as a mixed genre – to be used as an experimental form'. He concludes: 'the experimental functioning of the lyric and the essay helped to occasion related forms of differentiation: the division of writing into the literary versus the nonliterary; and the accompanying division [...] of





eighteenth-century moral philosophy into, on the one hand, the cultural domain of the arts – including the deep narratives of aesthetics and English – and, on the other, the social scientific deep narratives first generated within political economy’.²⁹

The concern of the familiar essayist with his or her own self is not then simply a matter of biographical interest; rather it is the effort to conduct an experiment on one’s self, the attempt to press towards the limit of possible knowledge, and hence to seek to demarcate of the knowable from the unknowable. What can be easily caricatured as the indulgence of self should in fact be considered the opposite – the emphasis on the transformation of the self over time and the consequent partial impenetrability of our past experience to our present self is fundamental to the essay as a mode.

II

The purpose of the preceding section was to establish a sense of those attributes of the familiar style that Stevenson inherits. The conscious experimentation and scepticism of the early essay have become, by the late nineteenth century, attributes of the familiar essay more narrowly defined. Its craft and poise marks the familiar essay off from the mass of periodical journalism that acts to shape the general social and intellectual climate of the time. In this section I offer a partial reading of *Memories and Portraits* that aims to isolate one of the ways in which the essays do put into play something like a critical technique towards aspects of the larger culture of the age.

With the exception of ‘An Old Scotch Gardener’, those essays in *Memories and Portraits* that had been previously published remain largely identical to their magazine form. But in composing new material during the period of the volume’s assembly, Stevenson has an eye not only for the thematic unity of the volume, but also for its developmental sequence. The collection of a set of essays together represents a form of prestige for the essay-





ist, signalling a permanence and interest beyond the ephemeral transaction of the periodical marketplace; but here at least it also adds an additional layer of artistic intentionality – the essays chosen, their arrangement and any linguistic, thematic or stylistic connections we can find between them, all signal a further layer of complexity.

In thinking about the collection as a whole, the choice of 'Foreigner at Home' to introduce the collection might be considered significant; the positioning of 'Penny Plain, Twopence Coloured' at the crucial point of transition, or at least at a change of emphasis between the more biographical and the more critical essays, could also be of interest. The arrangement of an earlier cluster of essays around Stevenson's university days is equally marked. However the most revealing essays for my purposes are those composed shortly before publication: 'The Manse', 'Pastoral' and 'Memoirs of an Islet'. It seems reasonable to suppose that these were drafted once the themes of the volume as a whole had become apparent to its scrupulous arranger. Highly elaborate in themselves, each could be considered the nascent element of a larger constellation in a manner that might seem counterfactual in relation to essays composed much earlier in the 1880s.

In his prefatory note, written on board the S.S. Ludgate Hill, Stevenson suggests that we 'read through from the beginning' (p. v) – that there is a single trajectory plotted through the sequence of essays. This seems to offer us a straight autobiographical reading of the text. To some extent this is the burden of the volume's narrative structure, as successive essays pick up incidents and episodes in the life of the writer. The argument of 'Foreigner at Home' depends for its exemplary force on the memory of childhood impressions of a strange country, and thus on the opening of the possibility of comparison between different cultural environments. The cluster of essays around Stevenson's University days, with 'Old Mortality' at their centre, explicitly depicts the





established ‘man of letters’ (Stevenson’s own phrase in ‘The Manse’) looking back on his formative years with a critical eye. The youth’s literary ambitions are gently ironised in the light of two factors: the forging of manly attitudes in the crucible of friendship and loss; and the subsequent accomplishment of the man of letters, assumed by the persona of the familiar essayist, but also demonstrated through the artful and effective use of the personal essay itself.

Read attentively, Stevenson’s prefatory note is itself complex. Stevenson writes that a thread of memory binds the essays – but binding can be tight or loose; it can be simply what holds a set of essays together at the spine of the volume, suggesting a connection at one end, but not a consistent pattern throughout, as the leaves fan out from the point where they are bound together. The autobiographical elements of the essays are used anecdotally – they are vignettes – and the familiar style is quite distinct from forms of autobiography in the period. There is little sense of teleology – past and present selves are distinct, but this is not subsumed into a fuller narrative development, and there is no temporal fulfilment of the earlier time in the later. There is no biblical or religious narrative available within which to organise experience, and the constant use of evolutionary metaphors places the life of the individual within a cosmic scale. There is a Wordsworthian quality to a number of scenes – these are idle moments, moments of absorption in nature, to which the grown self returns as to the sources of its own imaginative power – but characteristically these moments of self-absorption are swiftly followed by the drawing of a portrait, a return to the social world which always qualifies the inwardness of the essayist.

It is also true that weaving requires more than one thread, and two other themes also make prominent contributions to the thematic coherence of the volume. The first is the connection between a memory and a memorial. A number of the essays seek to commemorate the lost – ‘those who have gone before us in the





battle' (p. vii) – and it is tempting to see the centre of gravity of the volume lying in the short and formal obituary for his father Thomas Stevenson, written for *The Contemporary Review*, a relatively heavyweight intellectual magazine. Mourning was much on Stevenson's mind as the book was planned. He was also working on his memoir of Fleeming Jenkin, friend to both Louis and Thomas, and carried on an extensive correspondence with Jenkin's widow, Anne. Jenkin had been one of the pseudonymous 'Talkers' of the *Cornhill* essay; now deceased, he was identified in a footnote to the republished essay. The title of the volume links memories to portraits, and the memories in a number of the essays become most vivid when they linger on specific named individuals: not just contemporaries drawn from his Edinburgh social world, professional men and amateur literati like his father, Jenkin, and Walter Ferrier, but figures who stand closer to the land, such as the shepherd Robert Young and the gardener John Todd, or to a passing world such as Sheriff Robert Hunter, for whom 'Scott was too new' (p. 120), and Old Lindsay, P. G. Tait's laboratory assistant: 'when he went, a link snapped with the last century' (p. 28).

'Old Mortality' is an example of the way the autobiographical and memorial themes are closely linked. The essay was written closely after the death of his friend Walter Ferrier and deals explicitly with the question of the legacy we leave behind us. This is not just a theme of the essay, but something Stevenson was acutely conscious of in the period leading up to publication. At the time of writing he had been aware of the risk of reminding readers of the fall and not the recovery; a letter from Ferrier's sister reassured him that the essay was printable. The essay is also an example of how the familiar form might be deployed to stabilise and manage the experience of personal loss, since the drift of the form towards balance and poise leads not to acceptance or reconciliation, which risks entombing the absent friend beneath the successful execution of the prose elegy, but to the





dramatisation of the conflicting claims of the memories of the fallen and the life that has to be lived in their absence.

In 'Old Mortality' Stevenson juxtaposes his memories of Ferrier with a recollection of his own younger self, and the essay is structured in terms of the return of the experienced self upon youthful inexperience. Stevenson portrays his younger self as a mawkish haunter of graveyards. He turns to books, but it is his observation of people that brings him out of himself. The essay passes sharp judgement on the author's younger self – 'the ground of all youth's suffering, solitude, hysteria and haunting of the grave, is nothing else than naked, ignorant selfishness' (p. 48). The most decisive factor in the transition from solipsism to a more sympathetic relationship with the social world is the company of friends: 'they stand between us and our own contempt, believe in our best [...] they weave us in and in with the fabric of contemporary life' (p. 49). Framed within the play of Stevenson's view back at his adolescent self, Ferrier is also seen in terms that contrast youthful promise with the subsequent disappointment of his friends' hopes. The further twist of the essay's structure is that it is only through his fall that his real character comes to be revealed.

The wise view from experience is that life is a 'difficult but not desperate' struggle (p. 55). Our sense of this comes not from the 'foolish monuments' but from our living memories of the dead (p. 55). Whereas the young Stevenson aspires to the immortality of renown, and sees most of the monuments as attesting to a futile attempt to live on in the public record, the elder man understands that each tomb reflects an individual struggle, still alive in memory for those who knew the life. What is important is not the survival of one's name after death, but the example of one's conduct in life. That example will be forgotten; but to those for whom it matters, it will indeed matter, while it lasts. The essay gives a vivid demonstration of what is stated elsewhere in the volume as the essential nature of historical flux – 'A thousand





interests spring up in the process of the ages, and a thousand perish; that is now an eccentricity or a lost art which was once the fashion of the empire; and those only are perennial matters that rouse us to-day, and that roused men in all epochs of the past' (p. 103).

Aspects of this set of problems recur throughout the book. Our partiality for our own pasts is neatly dramatised in 'Some College Memories', which also makes play of the solipsism of the essay form in relation to the vanity of young men and flaunts the reputed egocentricity of the essayist. Stevenson implies that the distortion of memory we call nostalgia may in fact be a constitutive condition of our access to the past: 'I had the very last of the very best of *Alma Mater*; the same thing, I hear (which makes it more strange) had previously happened to my father; and if they are good and do not die, something not at all unsimilar will be found in time to have befallen my successors of today' (p. 26). With his own departure, the interest of the institution fades. Stevenson's openness about the distortion of memory allows the essay to become a reflection on, and hence a moderation of, our partiality towards our own experience. Just as Stevenson does not see the younger self as replaced by the older – each holds its own place in time – so the younger cannot fully be said to be superseded by the elder. We cannot escape the selfishness of our younger selves, and something of this moral danger haunts the volume, as Stevenson's essays revolve again and again on the allure of memories stored up in deep childhood. The recurrent reference to the 'charm' of these images suggests both their attraction, but also their hold over us. The consequence is that the way Stevenson deploys these images in *Memories and Portraits* must also reckon with the force of this pull, but without giving in to it.

The centrality of commemoration, the point at which public and private memory intersect, to the volume as a whole is signalled in a dense passage in 'A College Magazine', also written





specifically for the volume, as an introduction to ‘Old Scotch Gardener’ and its companion piece ‘Pastoral’. The essay follows ‘Old Mortality’ and remarks this continuity with a reference to Ferrier, ‘Of the death of [whom], you have just been reading what I had to say’ (p. 66). Remembering a conversation held within the rooms of the Speculative Society beneath ‘the mural tablet that records the virtues of Macbean, the former secretary’, Stevenson records his own complacency and that of his friends – ‘we would often smile at that ineloquent memorial, and thought it a poor thing to come into the world at all and have no more behind one than Macbean’ (pp. 70-1). This prompts Stevenson to remark that ‘this book may alone preserve a memory of James Walter Ferrier and Robert Glasgow Brown’ (p. 71). Ferrier certainly haunts the volume in more allusive ways. The following reflection in ‘A Gossip on a Novel of Dumas’ must call him to mind for the reader who has, as Stevenson requests, read straight through: ‘Honour can survive a wound; it can live and thrive without a member. The man rebounds from his disgrace; he begins fresh foundations on the ruins of the old; and when his sword is broken, he will do valiantly with his dagger’ (p. 242). Yet the gesture must remain ambiguous – like Macbean’s tablet, the tribute paid by *Memories and Portraits* will only be eloquent to those who also knew his friends.

The third theme, which might be said both to overlay and conflict with the autobiographical and memorial strands, is that of modern evolutionary thinking. ‘Pastoral’, and ‘The Manse’, significant here because composed last and so exemplary of how Stevenson sees the volume as a whole, both return repeatedly to the challenges posed to our evaluation of memory (itself already placed in question by the action of time and forgetting) by the possibility of ancestral or trans-individual memories. While Stevenson’s participation in the general intellectual response to evolution has often been emphasised, what these essays show clearly is the concern of his work not simply to confirm





or underwrite the scientific hypothesis, but to explore what this theory might mean in practice for our moral engagements. The fact that his work was published in the same journals in which these matters were debated (and that the history of this discussion goes back two decades before the publication of *Memories and Portraits*) again prompts us to ask about the difference a choice of genre makes, and how the familiar style assumes a different response from its imagined audience than the rhetoric used in the interest not merely of communicating the latest ideas, but of proselytising for the value of a scientific education. The familiar style, with its heightened conversational tone enlivened by constant variation of diction and syntax, and its characteristic exploitation of antithesis and balance, suggests something more like a play of ideas. The essay dramatises but does not exhort; ultimately it appeals to those values of patience, attention and care that it takes to read the essays, and thus affirms the combination of pleasure and instruction to be found in the essay as a form.

'Pastoral' frames its central 'portrait' of John Todd, the Swanston shepherd, between attempts to bring the speculations of the anthropologist and natural scientist about the descent of man into a more human scale. If we had to extract an argument from the essay, we might begin with the closing of the portrait, and the comment that 'A trade that touches nature, one that lies at the foundation of life, in which we have all had ancestors employed, so that on a hint of it ancestral memories revive, lends itself to literary use, vocal or written' (p. 102). Stepping back from the realm of personal reminiscence, the essayist exposes the significance of what he has just written to the largest possible scale. A portrait of a shepherd must bring us into contact with the origins of the race; hence its literary interest. Concomitantly, literature itself becomes not the summit, but merely the latest form of culture to exploit these associations. This shifts the implication of the title 'Pastoral' from a generic description to a statement





of the essay's topic – not just a work of pastoral, this is about the survival and persistence of the pastoral mode. We also get a fragmentary hint of the larger thesis being worked up through the volume as a whole, that the power of narrative art in particular derives from, and hence revives, age-old preoccupations whose origins in our lives may not be easily identifiable, handed on as they are in direct experience, written or oral narration, or even 'inherited experience', that is passed on in the blood: those matters ('fighting, sailing, adventure, death or child-birth' – p. 102) are the tropes of romance.

The first sentences of 'Pastoral' are an excellent example of the texture of Stevenson's prose, and his full exploitation of the of characteristics of the familiar style:

To leave home in early life is to be stunned and quickened with novelties; but when years have come, it only casts a more endearing light upon the past. As in those composite photographs of Mr. Galton's, the image of each new sitter brings out more clearly the central features of the race; when once youth has flown, each new impression only deepens the sense of nationality and the desire of native places. (p. 90)

The sententious opening, with its conspicuous balance of parallel clauses recalls the early modern origins of the essay in rhetorical exercises. By contrast, the second sentence brings in a contemporary reference point shared between the essayist and a reader assumed to be familiar with the very latest innovations, implying a shared modernity of vision. In both sentences temporal reference is forward (the stunned encounter with the new; a succession of images laid on top of each other) and backwards (a softening light cast upon the past; the accretion of the new gives depth to our appreciation of the old). The grammatical ambiguity of 'desire of native places' (our desire for native places, or





the desire stemming from, belonging to native places) works to underscore the sense of the passage as a whole, that the temporal predicament of the self is not resolved but intensified with the passing of time. The remainder of the paragraph develops this dynamic into universal statement – the rivers of home are dear in particular to all men (p. 91) before offering an example of the individual experience by which we confirm this. Of course, this example confirms not the authority of the statement, but the possibility of our own partiality, hence unreliability: ‘the streams of Scotland are incomparable in themselves – or I am only the more Scottish to suppose so’ (p. 91). So comparability itself is drawn into the play of the essay. The passage throws out suggestions and possibilities, some of which are picked up later in the essay, some of which chime with earlier essays – ‘The Foreigner at Home’ – and some with later – ‘the exquisite cunning of dogs’ points us to the ‘Character of Dogs’. When at the end of ‘The Manse’ our unconscious memories are compared to ‘undeveloped negatives’ (p. 119) the shock of associating the ancestral with the modern technological image is exploited again.

This echo of ‘Pastoral’ in ‘The Manse’ seems deliberate, and the two essays interlock conspicuously, albeit awkwardly. When read in the volume the first line of the latter refers directly (‘I have named...’ p. 106) to the list of rivers in the opening of the former; perhaps because this will appear a non-sequitur without the context provided by the previous essay, ‘The Manse’ was given the subtitle ‘A Fragment’ on first magazine publication. But if for that reason ‘The Manse’ must come second, the introduction of ‘Probably Arboreal’, Stevenson’s name for the ur-human, perched at the top of the race’s ancestral tree, seems to be in the wrong place. Used twice as a proper name in ‘Pastoral’, the derivation of the phrase only becomes clear in the subsequent essay.

Like ‘Pastoral’, ‘The Manse’ is concerned with the perspectival problems implied if we were to take seriously the question of the inheritance of characteristics from one’s family. Beginning from





his grandfather's house beside the Water of Leith, Stevenson allows his imagination to play over the possible interactions between ancestors on both sides of his family in earlier times; but if his empathy expands the range of experience to which he can lay claim ('I have shaken a spear in the Debateable Land' – p. 117) it also dissolves any sense of the priority of his own conscious experience, and even of present experience: 'our conscious years are but a moment in the history of the elements that build us' (p. 117). The consequence of this is to dissolve, not only our own sense of self, but also the power of the evolutionary account to do more than reconfirm the scepticism we have already discussed about the limits of both our knowledge and our presumption to hold a prominent place in the world. So the thread of memory that 'binds' the essays becomes finally supplanted by the image of 'the threads that make me up' which 'can be traced by fancy into the bosoms of thousands and millions of ascendants' (p. 118). This is a comic vision, 'ascendants' exposing the complacency of our habitual metaphors of descent and ancestry in contrast with the imagined struggle to climb back up the family tree.

We've already begun to pick away at the complexity of Stevenson's prefatory note. Glancing at the interweaving of these three themes in the volume – the autobiographical, the memorial and the evolutionary – confirms this. Time in *Memories and Portraits* accompanies the growth of the child into the man, a movement accomplished at least in part through the exercise of our memory in recollection; equally our memories themselves exert a compulsion or charm on our present, which we cannot outgrow and whose extent and depth we cannot fully fathom. In his prefatory note, Stevenson suggests that taken together, the essays may reveal more than he has intended: 'My grandfather the pious child, my father the idle eager sentimental youth, I have thus unconsciously exposed' (p. viii). He has written about his grandfather, and about his father; but also about his own childhood and youth. Re-reading, Stevenson retraces his own growth





forwards, but also travels backwards into a past that is not his alone, but that of his family, and ultimately of his species. Both his familial and developmental experiences may be said to have been formative, but by collapsing one into the other, he reminds us that the growth of the child's mind is – like the Scotsman's partiality for the rivers of his homeland – both the most unique and the most common thing.

The inevitable partiality for our own self leads us to a moral crux. In exposing the solipsism of youth in 'Some College Memories' and 'Old Mortality', Stevenson entertains the charge most often made against the personal essayist: the passage from adolescent narcissist to mature writer suggests the difference between the merely self-indulgent and the successful familiar essay. This transition cannot be a renunciation of self, as the intimacy and charm of the personal reminiscence authorises the lightness of touch with which the familiar essayist can handle demanding themes. Yet when he remarks in the preface that 'my own young face' 'is a face of the dead also' (p. vii) Stevenson sets these two aspects of the genre against each other: pitting the self-reflection of the essayist against the tribute he wishes to pay to his subjects. Our sense of propriety tells us that the merely metaphorical death of one's younger self must be less grave a matter than the deaths of his father, Ferrier and the other lives memorialised in the volume. Stevenson here seems to deliberately court offence: which ought to remind us that the characteristic dynamism of his essays stems not only from the syntactical and semantic balancing of antithetical clauses at the level of form, but also from the competing moral demands that this must put into play within the shared social world presupposed by the fiction of conversation between reader and essayist. Rather than seek to resolve the interplay between past and present, between the charm of nostalgia and the resolution required to face present struggles, Stevenson dramatises it. We might also conclude that the essays in *Memories and Portraits* refuse to finally decide on





the moral implications of the form itself, caught between reflection on one's self and concern for the other: as if memories and portraits cannot be linked as easily as the title promises.

III

Consideration of the genre and reflexivity of *Memories and Portraits* has some bearing on one of the persistent historiographical problems of reading the Scottish nineteenth century. In 1844 Henry Cockburn linked the decline of spoken Scots amongst the upper and professional tiers of society to the loss of a distinctively Scottish experience. Subsequently the association of changing social conditions and altering habits of mind with the spread of spoken and written English has been a commonplace. Cockburn's *Memorials* record historical experience, but their form dramatises historical time largely in terms of the effort to hold on to that which stands out for its apparent obsolescence. The recurrence of this structure can be seen in another classic of the genre, Dean Ramsay's *Reminiscences of Scottish Life and Character*, first published in 1857, and reissued successfully throughout the rest of the century. Ramsay claims: 'Causes are at work which must ere long produce still greater changes, and it is impossible to foresee what will be the future picture of Scottish life, as it will probably be now becoming each year less and less distinguished from the rest of the world'.³⁰ In this light, national character resembles Stevenson's childhood impressions – that which we perceive as characterful is that which stands out in our experience as threatened with decay, or as belonging to the passing of time.

While at first sight *Memories and Portraits* bears comparison to these classics of what Karl Miller has called 'anecdotal biography', the most conspicuous non-fictional genre of Scottish Victorian prose, there is a more self-critical reflection on the experience of memory and its relationship to cultural history in Stevenson than there is in Cockburn or Ramsay.³¹ Rather than





relating passing experience to a historical narrative framework, Stevenson knows that such a narrative is itself merely one of many possible generic forms within which our sense-making can take place. His use of the form of the familiar essay to qualify our natural partiality for the native, and hence for the national, suggests that he is also alive to the danger represented by the charm of early experience. The temptation to see change as national decline becomes only one of the strands in the cultural environment that Stevenson describes; his essays acquire a critical force by juxtaposing the experience of specific felt loss in relation not to history, but to the general flux and mutability of temporal life.

The value of the essay as opposed to reminiscence is not simply the foregrounding of the remembering self, and hence the activity of remembering, but the critical distance it creates from second-order reflection on, rather than mere presentation of, one's memories. This is a practical rather than a theoretical lesson. It bears comparison with the Aristotelian emphasis on judgement and phronesis – intelligence understood not as the disinterested contemplation of the world but as manifest through decision-making in concrete situations – and also with the orientation of philosophy to experience to be found in the phenomenological and hermeneutical traditions in twentieth century philosophy. As Gadamer notes in *Truth and Method*, 'real experience is that in which man becomes aware of his finiteness. In it are discovered the limits of the power and the self-knowledge of his planning reason. [...] Thus true experience is that of one's own historicity'.³²

NOTES

Quotations from Stevenson's letters, ed. by Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Meheew (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) are cited in the text by 'L' followed by 'volume number: page number'.

- 1 Dedication, p. v; note, p. vii. All subsequent page references to *Memories and Portraits* will be given parenthetically in the text, and





- are to the first edition (London: Chatto, 1887).
- 2 See L5: 156.
 - 3 Stevenson refers to 'both volumes of the *Familiar Essays*' in a letter to Chatto of August 1887 (L5: 437).
 - 4 See Leslie Graham elsewhere in this volume.
 - 5 Graham Good, *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. ix.
 - 6 Liz Farr, 'Stevenson and the (Un)familiar: The Aesthetics of Late Nineteenth-Century Biography', in *Robert Louis Stevenson: Writer of Boundaries*, ed. by Richard Ambrosini and Richard Dury (University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), pp. 36-47 (p. 42).
 - 7 On prose 'stylism' in Pater, Stevenson and George Saintsbury, see Travis Merritt, 'Theory, Taste and Opinion in Victorian Prose Stylism', in *The Art of Victorian Prose*, ed. by George Levine and William Madden (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 3-38. The judgement that English prose style declines in the period before a conscious revival towards the turn of the century can already be found in Saintsbury; it is renewed in recent histories such as that of Alastair Fowler, *A History of English Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), p. 284.
 - 8 Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003), pp. 1220-21.
 - 9 'The Periodical Essayists', excerpt in *Essayists on the Essay*, ed. by Carl H. Klaus & Ned Stuckey-French (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), pp.15-18 (p. 17).
 - 10 'Montaigne; Or, the Skeptic', in *Selected Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 313-336 (p. 320).
 - 11 Walter Pater, *Plato and Platonism*, excerpt in *Essayists on the Essay*, pp. 29-31 (p. 30).
 - 12 On relativity see Christopher Herbert, *Victorian Relativity: Radical Thought and Scientific Discovery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). Herbert stresses the contribution of the Scottish Common Sense thinker Sir William Hamilton, now neglected but one of the major philosophers of the century. For cogent and informed reservations about Herbert's argument see the comments by Suzy Anger and Bernard Lightman in *Victorian Studies*, 45 (3), Spring 2003, pp. 485-511.





- 13 Walter Pater, 'Coleridge's Writings', *Westminster Review*, 84, Jan 1886, pp. 48-60 (p. 49).
- 14 Ed Block Jr., 'Walter Pater, Arthur Symonds, W. B. Yeats, and the Fortunes of the Literary Portrait', *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 26 (4), Autumn 1986, pp. 759-776 (p. 767).
- 15 Fleeming Jenkin, 'A Fragment on Truth', *Papers Literary and Scientific* (London: Longman, 1887), vol I, pp. 264-8 (p. 266).
- 16 For more detailed discussion of this intellectual history, see Richard Olson, *Scottish Philosophy and British Physics, 1750-1880* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).
- 17 On science and the religious culture of nineteenth-century Scotland, see Crosbie Smith, *The Science of Energy: A Cultural History of Energy Physics in Victorian Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); for a discussion of the political implications of similar arguments, see Anthony Quinton, *The Politics of Imperfection* (London: Faber, 1978) and chapter 5 of Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
- 18 'The Veil of Familiarity: Romantic Philosophy and the Familiar Essay', *Studies in Romanticism*, 42 (1), Spring 2003, pp. 27-44.
- 19 'The Essay as Form', in *Notes To Literature. Vol 1*, trans. Shierry Weber NicholSEN (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 3-23, p. 5.
- 20 Cited A. G. Lehman, *Sainte-Beuve* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 287.
- 21 'The Restfulness of Talk', unsigned essay in *The Spectator*, 2805, 1 April 1882, pp. 420-1: 420.
- 22 See Merritt, 'Theory, Taste and Opinion in Victorian Prose Stylistm', in *The Art of Victorian Prose*, and Fowler, *A History of English Literature*, pp. 248-9.
- 23 Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 116.
- 24 Hilary Fraser and Daniel Brown, *English Prose of the Nineteenth Century* (Harlow: Longman, 1997), p. 6, Hugh Miller quote from p. 12.
- 25 *A Short History of English Literature* [1898] (London: Macmillan, 1937), p. 756.





- 26 'Lyric poetry has stood for the power of art in a way that other genres have not' notes Robert von Hallberg, *Lyric Powers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 6. For a partial historical account of this development in relation to the literary field see Marjorie Perloff, 'Postmodernism and the Impasse of Lyric' in *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1985), pp. 172-200.
- 27 Alexander Smith, 'On the Writing of Essays', *Dreamthorp* (Andrew Melrose: London, 1906), pp. 20-43, p. 24. Smith's publishers used an abridged version of this essay as the introduction to their anthology *The English Essayists* (Nimmo, Hay & Mitchell: Edinburgh, 1885). The praise for Smith's essay comes from Hugh Walker, *The English Essay and Essayists* (London: J.M. Dent, 1915), p. 3.
- 28 Susan Stewart, 'Preface to a Lyric History' in *The Uses of Literary History*, ed. by Marshall Brown (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 199-218 (p. 200).
- 29 Clifford Siskin, *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain, 1700-1830* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 138, 139, 140. On the origin of the essay as a mixture of earlier genres see also Alastair Fowler: 'the essay assembled elements of the treatise, the colloquy, the adage, the exemplum or sentential collection, the encyclopedic gathering of authorities and the Humanistic letter of informal instruction', *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1982), p. 157.
- 30 Dean E. B. Ramsay, *Reminiscences of Scottish Life and Character* (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1862), p. 474.
- 31 Karl Miller, *Cockburn's Millennium* (London: Duckworth, 1975), p. 274. See also Ian Campbell, 'Nineteenth Century Non-Fictional Prose', *History of Scottish Literature, Vol 3 Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Douglas Gifford (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988), pp. 169-188.
- 32 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1979), pp. 380-1.







Stevenson in *Scribner's*: ethics and romance in the literary marketplace

Dewi Evans

This article will examine the series of essays that Robert Louis Stevenson wrote for *Scribner's Magazine* in 1888.¹ These cover a diverse range of subject matter, but can be broadly divided into three categories: ethical themes, aesthetic themes (including literary composition) and memories of travel and childhood. There is, of course, some overlap. In 'The Lantern Bearers', the initial memories of Stevenson's coastal holidays develop into a vehicle for critiquing realism on both moral and aesthetic grounds. Similarly, 'Beggars' mixes memories with ethics, while 'A Chapter on Dreams' mixes memories with aesthetics. While such a mixture of thematic concerns is not new in Stevenson's essays (nor, indeed, in the essay form generally) it is my contention that the *Scribner's* series offers the fullest synthesis, in Stevenson's career, of the ethical and aesthetic concerns already present in his previous work.² I treat the *Scribner's* series as a consistent body, outlining some of the ways in which they represent a development in Stevenson's thought – particularly in terms of the artist's role in the literary marketplace.

Sojourning at Saranac Lake in the winter of 1887-8, the nature of the professional author's vocation was something that Stevenson had cause to contemplate. After the success of *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), he had secured an avid American readership – something Edward L. Burlingame, editor of *Scribner's*, hoped to exploit by offering a lucrative contract of £720 for twelve essays to appear in that publication across the coming year.³ Stevenson's acceptance led to accusations of 'selling out' from his London friends, with whom relations were increasingly fraught, finally culminating in a bitter quarrel with W. E. Henley.⁴ S. S. McClure's even more lucrative offer of





£2000 a year to write a weekly article for the *New York World* was turned down by Stevenson after some hesitation, revealing the extent of his own trepidation regarding his new status as an author in a competitive marketplace.

Stevenson's stepson, Lloyd Osbourne, who had then embarked on his own writing career, would provide further cause for concern. Although Stevenson offered his support, he harboured private reservations. As the final essays in the *Scribner's* series appeared, Stevenson was busy reworking Osbourne's *The Wrong Box* for publication. Stevenson's willingness to collaborate under his own name certainly indicates his intrinsic confidence in the work at hand. Indeed, he wrote to John Addington Symonds, that the work was 'not without merit and promise' (Letters 6: 65) and other letters written around this time testify to his having found the tale genuinely humorous. Yet the need felt to intervene also implies a concomitant lack of confidence in the results that Osbourne was currently capable of producing independently. A trace of what was to become full-blown scepticism about Lloyd's ability can be found in the understated ambivalence of Stevenson's comment to W. E. Henley that Lloyd possessed 'genuine talent *of a kind*' (Letters 6: 125; my emphasis).⁵

Indeed, the *Scribner's* essays revisit issues regarding the responsibilities facing artists generally and writers in particular, with which Stevenson had frequently dealt in previous works. Throughout his career, not only as an essayist, but also as an author of fiction, he had defended and theorised the idea of the writer for hire: a figure whose muse must not only serve popular demand, but whose very success also depended (financially and aesthetically) upon an ability to meet those demands. Yet the *Scribner's* essays also revisit broader ethical themes, reiterating concerns about the way in which one might reasonably expect to exert an influence over others (particularly the young) and challenging ideas of absolute ethical 'truth' posed by encounters with individuals whose life experiences, morality and culture dif-





fer from one's own. They contain Stevenson's fullest consistent discussion of his vision for the professional author as simultaneously an artist and a tradesman. At the same time, they confront uncomfortable dilemmas arising from the ethical essayist's commitment to the complexity of individual lived experience and the professional writer's commitment to the communal desires of a mass-audience – apparently incompatible aims, whose contradictions the *Scribner's* essays acknowledge and negotiate.

From 'sedulous ape' to the 'career of art': the literary tradesman

The *Scribner's* series develops some of the aesthetic arguments that Stevenson had formulated in previous essays. In 'Fontainebleau' (1884), Stevenson admired the singularity of focus offered by this 'purely artistic society', so conducive to –

that stage of education [...] when a man is too much occupied with style to be aware of the necessity for any matter'. Since the English 'intelligent bourgeois' are apt to 'ruin' a young man with their insistence upon 'the lofty aims and moral influence of art', it does the young English artist good to 'work grossly at the trade, [...] to think of his material and nothing else. (Tus 28: 102)

Here, Stevenson's insistence that 'art is, first of all and last of all, a trade' – a set of rules that must be assiduously appropriated and practised – is a pre-echo of his characterisation of himself, in 'A College Magazine' (1887), as a 'sedulous ape' consciously imitating work in which he detected 'some conspicuous force or some happy distinction in the style' (Tus 29: 29). Here, Stevenson identified for writing the kind of apprenticeship that, in 'Fontainebleau', he saw as necessary for painting:

Before he can tell what cadences he truly prefers, the stu-





dent should have tried all that are possible; before he can choose and preserve the fitting key of words, he should long have practised the literary scales (Tus 28: 45)

The musical metaphor of an original composition born of established tonal rules foregrounds Stevenson's style-centric view of writing – an original deployment of pre-existing techniques that allows new matter to be born of old books. The writer's experience, distilled in his output, is portrayed as always intertextual, born not of the 'lofty aims and moral influence' of bourgeois society, but of a drive to perfect the purely stylistic effects of the writers he admired.

In 'A Gossip on Romance' (1882), Stevenson explained how this might work in practice in romance narrative. Drawing on an argument made in the earlier 'Child's Play' (1878), he asserted that '[f]iction is to the grown man what play is to the child; it is there that he changes the atmosphere and tenor of his life' (Tus 29: 129). The 'Gossip' develops this claim, implying that childhood imagining is linked to childhood reading, and that there is thus a connection between the stylistic mode of certain kinds of texts and the particular response elicited in a particular child-reader. In childhood, writes Stevenson, 'we read story-books [...] not for eloquence or character or thought, but for some quality of the brute incident' which allows the tale to be appropriated and imitated – to 'repeat itself in a thousand coloured pictures to the eye' (120, 119). Romance is defined as a distillation of this elusive 'quality' so enjoyed by the child-reader. The 'change' in its 'atmosphere and tenor', which fiction can effect for the life of the 'grown man', is actually the evocation of the emotions associated not only with childhood play but also with a child's mode of reading. It follows that the response of the child-reader can be rekindled in the adult simply by perfecting and repeating this stylistic quality.

Hence, when *Treasure Island* first appeared in book form in





1883 it was prefaced by a poem, 'To the Hesitating Purchaser', offering the novel not as an original production, but as an 'old romance, retold / Exactly in the ancient way'. The author promises 'Storm and adventure, heat and cold, / ... schooners, islands, and maroons, / And buccaneers, and buried gold', elements which, he hopes, may 'please, as me they pleased of old'. Not only is the text announced from the outset as entirely conventional, but the narrative's conventional nature is also held up to be the very thing that will most appeal to the potential buyer – the buyer who recognizes the pleasures encoded in the elements of the plot here enumerated and who has already read the works of Ballantyne, Kingston and Cooper, mentioned by name as a point of comparison. The poem alerts the readers to the book's generic heritage, setting up the terms (the rules) of the game about to be played and enshrining the book within a mimetic framework informed not by 'the lofty aims and moral influence' required by the 'intelligent bourgeois', but by the generic rules that underlie the romance tradition, effectively cutting off the romance from lived experience and placing it firmly in the realms of aesthetic effect.

In the *Scribner's* essays 'Popular Authors' and 'A Letter to a Young Gentleman Who Proposes to Embrace the Career of Art' Stevenson undertakes a fuller exposition of the sentiments that 'Fontainebleau' had already made explicit. In doing so, however, an ambiguity arises concerning the idea of literature as a 'trade' in Stevenson's writings. In 'Fontainebleau', the meaning is clearly that which Stevenson elaborates in his 'College Magazine' formulation – literature is a 'trade' in the sense that it is a series of learned practices building up to a skill that becomes a profession. The emphasis is upon literature as a technical art that has to be learned by patient practice, eschewing the idealistic and moral programme of 'intelligent bourgeois' society. This is also present in the *Scribner's* essays – most obviously in the reference to art as a legitimate 'career'. Yet while 'Fontainebleau' centres upon





the artist learning his craft in isolation, 'Popular Authors' and the 'Letter' centre upon the fact that the professional literary artist will inevitably have to engage with the marketplace on which professional success ultimately depends.

As with any tradesman, writes Stevenson in the 'Letter', it is the artist's responsibility to produce the desired commodity as dictated not by personal dedication to technical perfection (the focus of his earlier essays), but by consumer demand:

It is doubtless tempting to exclaim against the ignorant bourgeois; yet it should not be forgotten, it is he who is to pay us, and that (surely on the face of it) for services that he shall desire to have performed. (Tus 28: 7)

This notion of the artist-as-tradesman foregrounds the author's task not as one of composition, but of production – a practice governed not by an ability to tap into some essential literary genius, but by the rules of supply and demand. If this appears mercenary, it is also, in a biographical sense, unsurprising given Stevenson's concerns about Lloyd's choice of vocation and his quarrel with his London friends (not to mention his own inner qualms) about the amount of money he himself was now earning. This might also inform Stevenson's argument, in 'Popular Authors', that the ability successfully to meet consumer demand is itself a species of literary genius.

Between them, 'Popular Authors' and 'A Letter to a Young Gentleman' make explicit the economic position that is only implicit in 'To the Hesitating Purchaser' and totally absent from 'Fontainebleau' – namely, that the writer-as-professional must perfect his literary craft whilst keeping one eye on his role as a tradesman. This is not to suggest, however, that the *Scribner's* essays signal an about-turn in Stevenson's thought. On the contrary, in suggesting that the key to economic success was an assiduous attention to what readers dreamed, and that the





perfection of that 'dream' lay in the careful emulation of qualities that Stevenson admired in romance as a literary genre, 'Popular Authors' and 'A Letter' suggest that pleasing the audience may overlap with the investigation of shared dreams and the use of conventions to create epical romance. Hence the definition of an author evolved in 'A Letter to a Young Gentleman' – a tradesman attentive to readerly 'delight' (Tus 28: 8).

In fact, Stevenson understood that when a work of fiction is offered for sale the saleable commodity is not the reading material itself but rather the kind of pleasure attendant in a particular reading *experience*. Thus, while the 'Letter' suggests that art, as a career, 'consists only in the tasting and recording of experience', in 'Popular Authors' that 'experience' is as much previous *reading* experiences – of literary genres as well as of life. Stevenson celebrates the achievements of 'Popular Authors' on the basis that they fulfilled successfully the reader's expectations not of life but of literature. Their productions are, quite literally, such stuff as dreams are made on:

Such tales as a man, such rather as a boy, tells himself at night, not without smiling, as he drops asleep; such, with the same exhilarating range of incident and the same trifling ingenuities, with no more truth to experience and scarcely more cohesion, HAYWARD told. (Tus 28: 21)

As with the earlier 'Gossip on Romance', such a passage is not a critique, but a definition, of the kind of fiction Hayward set out to write. At the same time, it develops the aesthetic point of the 'Gossip' to include the idea of the romance-writer as a producer in a marketplace. At once a definition of the special aesthetic qualities that the romance writer sedulously imitates and perfects, it is also offered as part of a larger quest to determine the pleasures craved by the reader, and successfully provided by Hayward. Such tales are 'not true to what men see', but rather 'to what the





readers dreamed' – indeed, to what the readers have already read. Thus is the audience to be reached. As a result, while the romance-writer as artist is theorised and defended on aesthetic grounds, these are themselves difficult to separate totally from the basis of their popular success as producers in a marketplace.

Such an attitude had been indicated in the earlier poem-preface to *Treasure Island*. In 'Popular Authors', Stevenson admits to having failed to reach his own intended audience with the publication of *Treasure Island* in a penny paper, but 'To the Hesitating Purchaser' shows that he clearly hoped to secure a wider audience with the tale in volume form by explicitly alerting the book's readers to the literary precedents that informed its production – not only as a literary narrative, but as a literary commodity intended purely for the delight of a reader suitably groomed by romantic tradition. The poem alerts the 'Hesitating Purchaser' to the kind of narrative he can look forward to, highlighting its congruity with previous works in the same genre. Referencing Ballantyne, Kingston and Cooper is akin to stating the text's generic rules beforehand, so that the reader knows precisely the terms on which he purchases the book. The poem alerts us to Stevenson's attempts to write in a certain generic tradition, whilst also exposing the aesthetic craft of composition for what, in the marketplace, it must inevitably be: a textual exercise anticipating and fulfilling, for the reader, 'services he desires to have performed' ('Letter', Tus 28: 7). In alerting the potential buyer to the conditions upon which the novel, as a tradesman's commodity, is offered for sale, the poem suggests (by attempting to persuade 'the Hesitating Purchaser') that its narrative has not only an aesthetic, but also an economic, purpose.

In so doing, however, the poem also differentiates Stevenson's romance from its antecedents by emphasising the self-consciousness of the text as a performance in a pre-defined marketplace. Foregrounding the author as a self-conscious imitator, it invites readers to be equally self-conscious of the generic recognition that





underpins their consumption of text. By asking the purchaser to recognise the roles of the author and the consumer as reciprocal positions already provided by the literary marketplace in which both operate, *Treasure Island's* preface announces the novel as a new kind of romance – one that, in the self-consciousness of its adherence to generic precept, defines itself by its need to fulfil the demands of the reader as consumer.

With the 'Gossip', 'To the Hesitating Purchaser' foreshadows what the 'Letter' and 'Popular Authors' would consolidate. If the 'Gossip' outlined the type of poetic and generic conventions that Stevenson, as a writer of romances, hoped to imitate, then his *Scribner's* essays clarify how such imitation was not only the basis of good art, but also of sound economic practice. They develop the idea of the writer as artist in a manner that explicitly connects the artist with the tradesman.

The *Scribner's* series also complicates Stevenson's ideas regarding the nature of literary mimesis. Written in response to Henry James's 'The Art of Fiction' (1884), Stevenson's 'A Humble Remonstrance' (1884) had cast doubt upon the ability of narrative prose, not even historical narrative, finally to be realistic at all: '[n]o art – to use the daring phrase of Mr James – can successfully "compete with life"'. On the contrary, the method of art involves simplification and abstraction to such an extent that 'truth' becomes a word 'of very debatable propriety':

Man's one method, whether he reasons or creates, is to half-shut his eyes against the dazzle and confusion of reality. The arts, like arithmetic and geometry, turn away their eyes from the gross, coloured and mobile nature at our feet, and regard instead a certain figmentary abstraction.
(Tus 29: 134, 135)

Stevenson objected to the 'realistic' depiction of life not because such an endeavour was always undesirable, but because





it was always illusory. In fact, romantic conventions could represent certain aspects of human existence just as 'truly' as allegedly realist ones. His defence of romance does not rest upon a diametric opposition between romance and realism. Rather, it rests on the inescapable disjunction between the 'abstraction' of fiction and the complexity of lived experience – a disjunction that neither romance nor realism could ultimately overcome. Because literature is always *necessarily* governed by existing aesthetic conventions, the heightened conventionality of romance serves only to emphasise and carry to extremes the inadequacy inherent in all narratives, both historical and fictional. Prose narrative (literature or history) is always 'a simplification of some side or point of life'. It is absurd either to expect anything more from it or to judge it in terms other than the dexterity with which its 'phantom reproductions of experience' have been constructed (p. 135). As an artwork, it is not to be measured against reality, but is 'to stand or fall by its significant simplicity' (p. 142). After all, the essay insists, romances, 'even at their most acute, convey decided pleasure; while experience itself, in the cockpit of life, can torture and slay' (p. 135).

In the 'Remonstrance', Stevenson again presents the romance as a vehicle for a stylistic re-presentation of events that is 'true' to what readers dreamed, rather than a reflection of what is likely to befall in lived experience. In the 'Letter to a Young Gentleman' and 'Popular Authors', it is the reader's pleasure (and not the artist's) that must be fiction's *raison d'être*. The defence of romance, the fiction of readerly pleasure, thus becomes compatible with recognition of romance as a commodity in a marketplace. Hence, in these essays, the romance is successfully formulated as the space in which the idea of the 'writer for hire' becomes reconciled with the aesthetic integrity of the artist through the particular pleasures of the romantic text.





The ethical dimension: romance, realism and lived experience

While Stevenson's aesthetic essays insist on the romance genre as one that thrives on the deployment of generic convention, however, his ethical essays urge, conversely, the negation of 'convention' in morality. The *Scribner's* series develops and consolidates Stevenson's thoughts on ethics by bringing to bear upon them some of the concerns of his unpublished *Lay Morals* (1879, 1883). At the same time however, they both expose and address a potentially troubling discrepancy that obtains between the aesthetic essay's insistence upon the significant pleasures of generic precept in art and the ethical essays' rejection of moral precept as the governor of lived experience. In fact, Stevenson's ethical writings exhibit a profound distrust of 'precept', which seems to run counter to his embrace of 'convention' or genre as the one thing needful to a successful writer of romances.

The fallacy that fictional narrative can ever tell the whole truth about experience, emphasised in 'A Humble Remonstrance', is paralleled in Stevenson's essays by the rejection of the idea that there is, in ethics, one 'truth' that will hold good in every case. This is most especially emphasised in his unpublished *Lay Morals*, with its distrust of established 'precept':

[I]t is case law at the best which can be learned by precept.
The letter is not only dead, but killing; the spirit which
underlies, and cannot be uttered, alone is true and help-
ful. (Tus 26: 10)

In other words the example of past individual experience ('case law') cannot ever apply to every possible future experience and thus can never be universally true. If we believe that, we are in danger of 'killing' the unique vision to which individual experience gives rise, since applying the abstract, inflexible 'letter' of 'precept' silences any other modes of experience that deviate





from it. Moral judgement, which depends upon a too-literal view of the 'letter' of experience, ignores the incommunicable 'spirit' in which different actions or events can be perceived. At the same time, however, '[e]very generation has to educate another which it has brought upon the stage'. One generation's experiences will not serve the next. It is 'case law' only: as individual experience made precept, it does not enshrine transcendent moral truth, but simply *re-presents* one version of literal experience to the detriment of the underlying 'spirit', which varies from case to case – one version which, nevertheless, is relayed to the next generation as the only 'true' version of legitimate practice.

'The Morality of the Profession of Letters' (1881) extends Stevenson's argument about precept to literature. 'The total of a nation's reading' forms a not insignificant element of the 'educational medium of youth' (Tus 28: 54), and it is the writer's duty 'to see that each man's knowledge is, as near as they can make it, answerable to the facts of life': 'he shall not suppose himself an angel or a monster; nor take this world for a hell; nor be suffered to imagine that all rights are concentrated in his own caste or country, or all veracities in his own parochial creed' (p. 55).

Here, Stevenson applies to the 'letter' of precept in literature the same lack of absolute moral value he attaches to ethical precepts in *Lay Morals*, proposing that the writer should avoid the narrowness of morality as a 'parochial creed'. He evokes the 'facts of life', subversively to overturn the idea that life can ever be reduced to 'facts' at all. The only plain 'fact' in evidence here is that things are rarely one way or another – one caste does not hold 'all the rights' and no man is either an 'angel or a monster'. The author is still to provide his youthful charges with a formative reading experience, but one that provides a negation of the cohesion of self-evident 'facts' in favour of a negotiation *between* them. Morality, in letters, is defined as the ability to demonstrate that a 'fact' is always susceptible to complication when placed alongside other facts, helping the young person to learn, in its





totality, the complications of 'this world as it is', rather than let him or herself be mesmerised by the deceptive ideal of 'a world made easy by educational suppressions'. After all, it is in a world free of such suppressions 'that he must win his way to shame or glory' (p. 56).

Several entries in the *Scribner's* series similarly contend that morality is not a matter of pre-existing ethical creeds. Instead, morality is presented as, fundamentally, a subjective affair. In 'Pulvis et Umbra', the infinite relativity of 'right' and 'wrong' as concepts renders morality a matter of navigation between self-questioning based on personal experience and the cultural conditions in which one is raised:

[Right and wrong] change with every climate, and [there is] no country where some action is not honoured for a virtue and none where it is not branded for a vice; and we look in our experience, and find no vital congruity in the wisest rules, but at the best a municipal fitness. (Tus 26: 60)

In 'A Christmas Sermon', the last of the *Scribner's* series, ethical principles are to be worked out and worked through, by the individual self – the '[o]ne person I have to make good' – and cannot be imported wholesale from self-proclaimed authorities. It behoves the individual to engage seriously with moral questions in order to work out a system by which they can live in all conscience; one's ethical duty to others is not to preach the 'truth' about right and wrong, but only 'to make [them] happy – if I may' (Tus 26: 71). If 'A Christmas Sermon' itself constitutes the preaching of a personal creed, therefore, it is nevertheless one in which the individual experiences of others – the subjectivity of their happiness – is taken into account. With 'Pulvis et Umbra', 'A Christmas Sermon' presents morality as, itself, a kind of representation.





In the *Scribner's* essays, the disjunction between fiction and lived experience is developed into an ethical point about the inseparability of truth from representation which, if overlooked, leads to a failure to comprehend the infinite variety of life as it is experienced. 'Pulvis et Umbra', for example, echoes the terminology of 'A Humble Remonstrance', claiming that science provides only 'figures of abstraction, NH₃ and H₂O' and urging us to look at 'the Kosmos [...] as our senses give it us' (Tus 26: 61). In 'The Lantern Bearers', Stevenson's earlier arguments about the inherent falsity of literary mimesis are developed into a similar point about the inevitable subjectivity of representation. Initially, the essay appears to consist of a picturesque childhood memory, reconstructing the joy the young Stevenson and his friends experienced during their nocturnal lantern-lit meetings:

To the eye of the observer they are wet and cold and drearily surrounded; but ask themselves, and they are in the heaven of recondite pleasure, the ground of which is an ill-smelling lantern. (Tus 30: 38)

It transpires, however, that this memory has been introduced as a critique of allegedly 'realistic' modes of representation. The apparently objective 'eye of the observer' who wishes to present a 'true' representation of this scene would, Stevenson suggests, be likely to dwell too much on external detail, little realising the pleasure such details might hold for those directly caught up in the events described. The lantern, held close to the body beneath the boy's overcoat, becomes a motif for 'the unplumbed childishness of man's imagination' and its power to transform, for the individual, an apparently dreary existence:

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; for as dark as his pathway





seems to the observer, he will have some kind of bull's-eye at his belt. (p. 34)

Like 'Pulvis et Umbra', 'The Lantern Bearers' contends that the 'figures of abstraction' offered by realism are inadequate to express the moral life of man, reaching the physical reality but not the 'grosser faith' which makes that reality meaningful: the distinction, made several times in *Lay Morals*, between the *letter* and the *spirit*. It underlines the fact that the apparently insoluble *aesthetic* problem of how to represent the world as it really is – discussed in 'A Humble Remonstrance' – actually constitutes an equally thorny *ethical* problem. To represent the world only in terms of what is most obvious to the naked eye is to falsify how life is actually experienced by those who live it.

Similar themes unite Stevenson's moral and his aesthetic essays, therefore; most obviously, an insistence that lived experience is so personal and many-sided that no one representation can hope to convey it in its totality. The *Scribner's* essays constitute a more explicit linking of the aesthetic and the ethical strands of Stevenson's thought by bringing some of the central tenets of the unpublished *Lay Morals* to bear upon ideas expressed in his aesthetic writings. In essays like 'The Lantern Bearers', ideas about literary representation that Stevenson had propounded in the 'Gossip' and the 'Humble Remonstrance' become part of a wider examination of the way in which human understanding of the world tends towards a series of imaginative reflections as infinitely variable as they are infinitely subjective. Not just literary realism, but also ethical best practice, is portrayed as a means of *re-presenting* the world in a new way – not of *representing* it as it is apparently experienced by everyone. 'A Christmas Sermon' suggests that one's duty is not to make one's neighbours good, but to make them happy. 'A Letter to a Young Gentleman' argues similarly that to ensure the reader's happiness is the very distillation of the author's trade. Unlike the realist, he is to offer works





that reflect the readers' desires concerning experience as it is idealised in dreams and fantasy. Both essays recognise, with 'The Lantern Bearers', not only an ethical duty to 'make men happy', but also that an acknowledgement of 'the unplumbed childishness of man's imagination' is central to achieving that aim.

In 'Gentlemen' too, the distance between the literary imagination (of reader and writer alike) and lived experience is put forward as the key to the gentleman's integrity. The conventional idea of the gentleman as one who 'in every circumstance of life, knows what to do and how to do it gracefully' (Tus 26: 100) is only possible 'in a very stiff society, where much of our action is prescribed' (p. 101). Out of his comfort zone – overseas or amongst a different class – it is a different matter. Here, with no knowledge of local custom, 'the man must invent an attitude' and the gentleman is redefined not as one who can best accrue to inherited custom, but one whose 'tact simulates knowledge [...] [so that] you would think he had been through it all before' (p. 102). Stevenson's essay presents the 'gentleman' as someone who acknowledges the non-definitive nature of his own experiences as a guide to thought and behaviour and is prepared to extrapolate imaginatively the performance appropriate for the audience in which he finds himself – falling back not upon apparently objective 'fact', but upon the transformative effects of imagination. In this sense, the author who is most able to give his readers what they desire is not only aesthetically, but morally correct – not only a successful tradesman, but also a successful gentleman, able to adapt in order to make men happy and himself 'good'.

If the *Scribner's* series consolidates some of the major strands of thought expressed in Stevenson's earlier essays, however, they also foreground a potential contradiction between his ethical and aesthetic thought. The aesthetic essays emphasise as central, not only to artistic training but also to success in the marketplace, the imitation and perfection of already-traditional stylistic and generic devices – an idea that uncomfortably recalls the adher-





ence to precept that his moral essays consistently denounce. The insistence, in 'Morality of the Profession of Letters', that the writer should convey the flexible, mutable and plural nature of lived experience, is not immediately reconcilable with Stevenson's insistence, in his aesthetic writings, that the successful writer – especially the successful writer in the marketplace – must inevitably allow aesthetic precepts to govern his work. Ultimately, Stevenson's recognition of such a tension leads him, in the *Scribner's* series, to emphasise not only the validity of literature's capacity to offer the reader an escape from the vagaries of the real, but also the necessary temporality of such an escape. As I will argue in the final section of this essay, his distrust of ethical precept ensures that a self-conscious emphasis on the generic conventionality of the romantic text – such as that undertaken in his aesthetic essays – becomes, for Stevenson, an ethical necessity.

Stevenson in *Scribner's*: the story of a contradiction?

In the *Scribner's* essays, Stevenson seems fully to take up the ethical thread he had begun in the 'Morality' and *Lay Morals*. 'The Lantern Bearers', 'A Christmas Sermon', 'Pulvis et Umbra' and 'Gentlemen' all quite explicitly express an anxiety regarding the damaging formative effect of enforcing as true one narrow way of experiencing the world. The *Scribner's* series also attempts, however, not only to expose but also explicitly to confront the problems this might pose for a writer who admires the romance's dependence on established narrative tradition, but distrusts the baleful influence of such 'figmentary abstractions' upon the young mind.

The problem is most clearly raised in 'Popular Authors'. On the one hand, the essay celebrates the pleasure to be found in the self-evidently preposterous tales of Stephens Hayward, true to the familiar conventions of the penny adventure serial and 'the Cheap Press', but hardly a probable account of the adventures





likely to be encountered by most readers (Tus 28: 22). On the other hand, such tales as these, though fit for emulation by the author who wishes to entertain, also exert, by dint of that very power, a potent influence over the reader – an influence whose consideration is of ‘grave importance’ (ibid.). One young sailor, whose meeting with Stevenson forms the occasion for the essay, has become so immersed in the story of Tom Holt that a mistaken belief in the veracity of its plot has changed his life forever by influencing his decision to take to the seas:

It is not [his own life] that he considers in his rare hours of rumination, but that other life, which was all lit up for him, by the humble talent of a Hayward – that other life which, God knows, perhaps he still believes that he is leading – the life of Tom Holt. (p. 32)

The case of *Tom Holt's Log* demonstrates the difficulties posed for one such as Stevenson, who enthusiastically both consumed and produced escapist stories of adventure. The romance presents the reader with worlds and lives governed by recognisable conventions – by precept – in a manner that fundamentally differentiates them from lived experience. If, as commodities, this is their most significant selling point, it is also renders morally dubious the professional production of such texts – in offering a ‘figmentary abstraction’ for the reader’s enjoyment, romance succeeds not in imitating but in nefariously influencing the reader’s beliefs about the world. The celebratory tone of ‘Popular Authors’ is thus underscored by the same anxiety of influence that underlies the distrust of precept expressed in the ethical essays.

Arguably, of course, this needn’t be seen as a contradiction at all. An aesthetic or literary tradition is not necessarily the same as an ethical or moral one – something that is especially true when considering the romance as the fiction of amoral-





ity which, in Stevenson's hands, it becomes. In 'A Gossip on Romance', Stevenson argues that '[t]here is a vast deal in life and letters both which is not immoral, but simply a-moral; [...] where the interest turns, not upon what a man shall choose to do, but on how he manages to do it' (Tus 29: 120-21). This 'poetry of circumstance' is the essence of romance – it deals with the human will 'in obvious and healthy relations' (ibid.), but elides any detailed consideration of the morality or otherwise of the action, in order to focus upon the action itself. This is the nature of the 'significant simplicity' that the romance can be expected to supply ('Remonstrance', p. 142). Fictional and lived experiences are not to be judged by the same standards. Indeed, in romantic fiction, experience is not morally to be judged at all, serving only to exhilarate the reader.

Crucially, however, Stevenson's literary essays implicitly endorse the validity of such an escape (and such a simplification) as fundamentally a temporary expedient. The problem arises when fiction *intended* as an escape from the complexities of the real becomes mistaken for a viable substitution for the infinitely more complex real it only appears to resemble. In this sense, the dangerously influential effect of *Tom Holt's Log* upon a particular young man's choice of profession lends the romance narrative's striven-for simplicity a more baleful significance. Moreover, it undermines, ethically, the professional author's moral obligation to provide readers with texts that will make them happy.

In particular, the 'Letter to a Young Gentleman' would appear to contradict strongly an earlier, unpublished ethical essay of Stevenson's: 'On the Choice of a Profession'.⁶ Despite its title, the essay is actually an exposition of the social forces that render 'choice' a bitterly ironic term for the progress of a young man's career. It gives the history of a hypothetical 'fellow' who is 'hardly in trousers before they whipped him into school; hardly done with school before they smuggle him into an office; it is ten to one they have had him married into the bargain; and all this before he





has had time to imagine that there may be any other practicable course' (Tus 28: 14). As with the oracles that govern the young man's 'choices', romance is in danger of replacing the vagaries of life as it is lived with pre-conceived ideas of life as others have decided it might ideally be, creating a false and reductive image:

It will probably not much matter what you decide upon doing; for most men seem to sink at length to the degree of stupor necessary for contentment in their different estates.... I wish you may [...] soon sink into apathy, and be long spared in a state of respectable somnambulism, from the grave to which we haste. (p. 19)

Although Lloyd Osbourne's assertion that the 'Letter' was written as a hurried replacement for the 'Choice of a Profession' has since turned out to be false, the contrast between the two essays is striking and troubling. In the 'Choice', received wisdom is the process by which 'any other practicable course' is rejected in favour of a course chosen by others and forcibly thrust upon one. It is likened to a taming process, a flattening of possibility by which 'the wild ass's colt is broken in' (pp. 14-15). Yet, in the literary essay that replaces it ('Letter to a Young Gentleman'), received wisdom is portrayed as being in art the one thing conducive to readerly delight. In 'Popular Authors', too, readerly delight is located within a species of text in which the complexity of experience is conspicuously escaped – in which the reader can indulge in a kind of 'somnambulism' that the 'Choice of a Profession' so forcefully disdains.

The result is an apparent conflict between the idea of convention as the essential feature of a text's capacity to entertain and convention as the tyrannical ruler of lived experience. The simplification facilitated by the romance's heightened conventionality – the familiarity of its rules – forms the basis of a particular kind of literary enjoyment. At the same time, however, this very qual-





ity is also in danger of deceiving the impressionable reader with a simplification that is as false as it is aesthetically 'significant'.

If the *Scribner's* essays, mixing aesthetic with moral discussions, emphasise a disjunction that pervades Stevenson's career as an essayist, they also point towards the literary marketplace as a sphere in which the problem is potentially resolved. Their emphasis upon the romance as both literary art and market commodity, underlines the ease with which Stevenson now views himself as a vendor of escapism – and escapism as a commercial product. His writings emphasise that such a commodity is offered with the express aim of fulfilling the purchaser's desires as both reader and consumer. As with any financial transaction, however, terms and conditions apply, and the *Scribner's* essays, emphatically reiterating the point that art is always the work of a diligent craftsman who transforms the world according to the image of previous texts, emphasises the most important of these conditions – it is only a partial reality, artfully simplified. Stevenson had justified at length in his aesthetic essays an immersion in such a reality – an escape from the stinging complexity of life into the comforting precepts of the romantic tradition. In the *Scribner's* series, however, the insistence upon art as a commodity emphasises its status as manufactured, reminding readers that the proffered escape is justifiable only to the extent that it remains temporary – that it is conditional upon their recognition of the text as a closed system, whose covers must one day be shut, returning the reader to 'the dazzle and confusion of reality'.

NOTES

Quotations from Stevenson's works are cited, in the text unless inconvenient, by 'Tus.' –Tusitala Edition (London: Heinemann, 1924) followed by volume number: page number.

Quotations from Stevenson's letters, ed. by Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Meheew (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) by 'Letters' with volume and page number.





- 1 These are: 'A Chapter on Dreams', 'The Lantern Bearers', 'Beggars', 'Pulvis et Umbra', 'Gentlemen', 'Some Gentlemen in Fiction', 'Popular Authors', 'Epilogue to "An Inland Voyage"', 'A Letter to a Young Gentleman Who Proposes to Embrace the Career of Art', 'Contributions to the History of Fife: Random Memories', 'The Education of an Engineer: More Random Memories' and 'A Christmas Sermon'.
- 2 Space has necessitated selectivity. For Stevenson's ethical concerns, I have focused upon *Lay Morals* (1879, 1883) and 'The Morality of the Profession of Letters' (1881); for his aesthetic concerns, I have taken 'A Gossip on Romance' (1882), 'Fontainebleau' (1884) and 'A Humble Remonstrance' (1884) as representative.
- 3 About ten times the rate per hundred words that he had received in London. (There was no word-limit in the *Scribner's* offer.)
- 4 The quarrel, sparked by the accusations of plagiarism levelled by Henley at Stevenson's wife Fanny, was also possibly the result of a resentment that Henley may have harboured at Stevenson's success – together with anti-American prejudice, also shared by others of his circle. See Clare Harman's sensitive account in *Robert Louis Stevenson: A Biography* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), pp. 339-50.
- 5 By Lloyd's third attempt at novel-writing ('The Pearlfisher', begun in 1889 and later rewritten as the collaborative *The Ebb-Tide*) it was clear this talent had, for Stevenson, failed fully to materialise and he wrote to Sidney Colvin, doubting that the lad would 'ever be very much of a stylist' (Letters 6: 293).
- 6 In a note to the *Tusitala* edition, Lloyd Osbourne explains that this essay had been written in Saranac in 1887-88, but had been suppressed because '[i]t had been adjudged too cynical, too sombre in tone, too out of keeping with the helpful philosophy always associated with R.L.S. Instead of assisting the Young Gentleman it was thought to be only too likely to discourage and depress him' (Tus 28: 12). Actually it had been written in 1879 and was rejected by the *Cornhill*. It was not offered to *Scribner's* in 1888 – but it did eventually appear in that magazine in 1915.





Had their day: Robert Louis Stevenson's 'Popular Authors'

Neil Macara Brown

This paper proposes to chart Robert Louis Stevenson's exposure to penny papers from childhood and amplify his biographical and bibliographical remarks about penny pressmen, thereby assaying their standing and popularity. In conclusion are offered some suggested influences of penny papers and popular authors upon his art.

'Popular Authors' was written at Saranac in early 1888;¹ however, the title was not among the six papers RLS had proposed in October 1887 (L6: 31). Later that month, he asked for 'any popular book' of Mrs E. D. E. N. Southworth and sought two titles by Pierce Egan. 'I am well up in Hayward, Errym, Viles, J. F. Smith; and know all I want to know of E. P. Roe, Hemming [sic] and Reynolds', he said (L6: 40).² Already he had separated his wheat from the chaff, which he winnowed further in his paper:

J. F. SMITH was a man of undeniable talent, ERRYM and HAYWARD have a certain spirit, and even in EGAN the very tender might recognise the rudiments of a sort of literary gift; but the cases on the other side are quite conclusive. Take Hemming, or the dull ruffian Reynolds, or Sylvanus Cobb [...] they seem not to have the talents of a rabbit, and why one should read them is a thing that passes wonder.³

RLS's paper is a more balanced account than those patronisingly crafted by Margaret Oliphant and Wilkie Collins exactly thirty years before.⁴ Oliphant express false surprise at the commercial success of 'reading for the million' (VPM, p. 199.); Collins even pleads ignorance of the 'all pervading specimens' of this





'new species of literary production' – as none of the gentlemen who guided his taste in literary matters had ever informed him of these 'mysterious publications' (p. 208). In contrast, RLS admits reading penny papers for pleasure as well as for professional considerations, telling plainly how he, as 'an upper-class author, bound and criticised', would 'long for the penny number and the weekly woodcut!' (PA, p. 25). Collins' 1858 revelation of the 'Unknown Public' was recalled in 1881 by the novelist James Payn in his 'Penny Fiction'.⁵ Payn notes that the growth of this 'class of literature' luxuriant then, had since become 'tropical'.⁶ Even he, though, shows ignorance of the penny format in stating wrongly that penny stories were never published later (in fact occasionally even before) in book form.⁷

What prompted 'Popular Authors' is uncertain, but in February 1888 RLS had begun reworking *The Wrong Box* originally drafted by his stepson Lloyd Osbourne;⁸ the completed farce notably contains allusions to both 'high' and 'low' press journals, as well as some popular authors.⁹ During March and April, after a visit to Saranac by Robert Bonner, proprietor of the *New York Ledger*, both RLS and Lloyd Osbourne began writing a tale for that paper, for which they were to receive the 'rather handsome' sum of £1000.¹⁰ At first 'Fighting in the Ring', also begun by Osbourne, was deemed to fit the requirements of Bonner 'who wishe[d] to raise the literary tone' of the *Ledger*, a sort of American *London Journal* of a highly moral order'.¹¹ However – plainly with an eye to the market – study of the *Ledger* convinced RLS that 'Fighting the Ring' 'would not do', and so a new and 'more sensational' tale, 'The Gaol Bird' was hurriedly designed. This satisfied the moral imperative: 'Tis the correct *Ledger* subject of a noble criminal, who returns to prove his innocence', but RLS also remarked that the story seemed 'picturesquely designed, and we flatter ourselves that the relations between the criminal and the man whom he suspects [...] are essentially original, and should quite blind all but the most experienced' (L6: 148). The story itself was





never completed, but the possibility of the *Ledger* first publishing *The Pearl Fisher*, which Osbourne began at Honolulu in 1889, and which RLS eventually produced as *The Ebb Tide* in 1893, was long entertained. 'The *Pearl Fisher* is for the *New York Ledger*: the yarn is a kind of Monte Cristo one', RLS wrote at the end of September 1889 (L6: 328).

For much of the 1880s RLS had enjoyed a fruitful relationship with one of the better houses of the cheap press; *Treasure Island*, *The Black Arrow* and *Kidnapped* were all serialised in *Young Folks*, albeit with varying success.¹² In 'Popular Authors' he confesses the failure of *Treasure Island* to capture readers' imaginations in this 'penny paper of a high class'; the tale was 'coldly looked upon', he says, when judged by the 'delicate test of the correspondence column' – where indeed he saw he was 'far to leeward' (PA, p. 25).¹³ *Treasure Island* was too much of a 'slow-burner' for the expectations of young readers of such periodicals at the time; not until part three – once the island is eventually reached – does the longed-for action come into play in 'My Shore Adventure'. Even then, young Jim, in remaining, literally, too much beyond the pale, is unable to forcibly occupy the foreground, where he is overshadowed by the adults, notably, of course, Long John Silver – whose ambiguities could not be grasped by readers in thrall to black and white characterisation. However, one surveyor of the whole 'dreadful' business claimed that the 'immense interest aroused' by *Treasure Island* in *Young Folks*, 'created a demand for similar stories, with the result that quite a crop of "Treasure Stories" appeared' in the magazine.¹⁴

RLS also felt overshadowed in *Young Folks* by another writer, a 'giant' with 'some talent', who it was 'in vain to rival' (PA, p. 25). This was Arthur R. Phillips, author of 'Don Zalva the Brave', a very popular story, which ran concurrently with *Treasure Island*.¹⁵ Nevertheless, while writing *Treasure Island* in September 1881, he had proposed enthusiastically to follow it 'at proper intervals' with other stories, like *Jerry Abershaw*, a highwayman tale,





which came to nothing.¹⁶ He listed this and two others, *The Leading Light* and *The Squaw Men* as the first of a series of 'instructive and entertaining works' – words precisely the ethos of many juvenile papers. 'I love writing boy's books. This first is only an experiment: wait till you see what I can make 'em with my hand in. I'll/ be/ the/ Harrison/ Ainsworth/ of/ the/ Future./ and a chalk better [...] or at least as good', he said, declaring the writing a '[d]_d sight gayer than Mudie-ing'; that is in providing three volume reading fodder for the middle class subscribers to Mudie's Circulating Library (L3: 230).¹⁷ Yet, in November, despite all this enthusiasm, he would make fun of *Young Folks*: 'Twig the editorial style: it is incredible; we are all left PANTING IN THE REAR. [...] it's like buttermilk and blacking; it sings and hums away [...] like a great old kettle full of bilge water. You know: none of us could do it, boy' (L3: 246).¹⁸ However, RLS would, in 1883, produce *The Black Arrow: A Tale of Tunstall Forest* – 'Tushery by the mass! [...] a whole tale of tushery [...] a poor thing!' he called it – after James Henderson at *Young Folks* had begged him for 'another Butcher's Boy' (L4: 128-29).

During summer 1886, by accident or design, RLS revisited penny serials read to him in childhood by his nurse, Alison Cunningham (L5: 291-92).¹⁹ He told 'Cummy': 'The story [...] was one you read to me in *Cassell's Family Paper* long ago when it came out. It was astonishing how clearly I remembered it all, pictures, characters and incidents, though [...] I had not in the least the hang of the story' (L5: 307). The tale in question was J. F. Smith's 'Smiles and Tears' (1857-8), which he found 'by no means a bad story' (L5: 296).²⁰ He also teased her about 'Custaloga', a Red Indian yarn of 1854 (ibid.).²¹ In 'Memoirs of Himself', written 1880, he mentions Smith's 'Soldier of Fortune' (1855), of which he only heard some of the early parts as Cummy feared it would turn out "a regular novel", and dutifully, he 'foreswore it then and there'.²² 'So instead of something healthy about battles', he continued to have his mind 'defiled with Brainerd,





M'Cheyne, and Mrs Winslow, and a whole crowd of dismal and morbid devotees'.²³ He and Cummy were not completely faithful to their renunciation, though, and each Saturday would study the stationer's window and 'try to fish out of subsequent woodcuts and their legends, the further adventures of our favourites'.²⁴ In yet another antidote to Calvinism, Smith's 'Stepmother' was probably read to him in 1860-1.²⁵ From the evidence, then, it seems likely that RLS was read, or read the *Family Paper*, albeit perhaps intermittently, for at least seven or eight years during childhood.

'All this while I would never buy on my own account; pence were scarce, conscience busy', RLS says; 'and I would study the pictures and dip into the exposed columns, but not buy' (PA, p. 27). Then, as a youth, he rejected the *Family Paper* in favour of more sensational fare. His 'fall' from grace happened in 1864, he confesses, after a chance find of some numbers of *Black Bess* while on holiday at Peebles. In these highwayman tales, he first encountered the 'art' of Edward Viles, from whom he 'passed on' to the works of Malcolm J. Errym, author of his favourite *The Mystery in Scarlet*. In turn he 'passed on' to Pierce Egan, but 'never enjoyed' him as he did Errym, although this was possibly 'a want of taste'. He reached the pit bottom when a schoolfellow, 'acquainted' with his 'debasing tastes', fed him G. E. M. Reynold's *Mysteries of London*, from which he 'fell back revolted' (PA, p. 27-8). From childhood then, he kept faith with the genre, charting his successive favourites in the paper itself: 'J. F. SMITH when I was a child, ERRYM when I was a boy, HAYWARD when I had attained man's estate, these I read for pleasure; the others, down to SYLVANUS COBB, I have made it my business to know [...] from a sincere interest in human nature and letters' (PA, p. 28).

Indeed, while walking round Edinburgh in late September 1881, with the journalist J. Wilson McLaren, RLS told him that he 'still had a hankering to write for the "penny-bloods"';²⁶ a confession seemingly induced by their visit to an atmospheric shooting





gallery, where they had fired off six shots each. McLaren, then contributing 'pirate yarns' to *The Boys of London and New York*, says stories like 'Sweeney Todd', 'Three-fingered Jack', 'Dick Turpin', 'David Haggart', 'Jack Harkaway', and 'Tom Wildrake' were all then 'very popular among youthful readers'; he adds that the current hero in boys' fiction was 'Cornelius Dabber', a 'timber-legged character much addicted to drinking rum', claiming that, when *Treasure Island* was published in *Young Folks*, he recognised 'the prototype of John Silver' as 'Cornelius turned into a buccaneer'. Dabber was introduced part way through the long-running 'Tom Wildrake's Schooldays' during 1871.²⁷ If RLS did indeed know of this able seaman, it can be said that his interest in, if not reading of, popular serial fiction continued at least into early adulthood, prior to his first published works. His letter to James Henderson of *Young Folks* agreeing publication of *Treasure Island* followed soon after his meeting McLaren, but his mind must have been already made up, and he was probably keen to clear matters before his departure to Davos (L3: 234).

Even before RLS began publishing fiction, his predilection for penny papers can be glimpsed. Indeed in 1879 it seems RLS had been unable to resist borrowing a highwayman tale, *Edith the Captive*, from the Advocates' Library, admittedly perhaps for relief after its worthy French Camisard histories of the Cevennes.²⁸ 'I want no thoughtful works today; show me "Sixteen String Jack the Footpad", or "Black Bill the Buccaneer",' he supposedly later said, when rejecting the choicest current titles in a Sydney bookshop.²⁹ Later that year, RLS seems to have had his first idea of the possible interest of studying the popular press. While on board the *Devonia* for America, a sailor had recommended *Tom Holt's Log* as a true portrayal of life at sea, and RLS wagers the reader the work would prove to be 'either excellent or downright penny trash'.³⁰ There seems to be 'no medium in the tastes of the unliterary class; mediocrity must tremble for its judgment; either strong, lively matter, strongly handled, or mere





ink and banditti, forms its literary diet,' he says (p. 80). This nautical encounter opens 'Popular Authors', and so, at the start of his paper, he draws a vignette, a verbal version of that 'weekly wood-cut' encapsulating each episode in issues of, say, *Cassell's Family Paper* or *The London Journal*. From his description – 'the deck of an Atlantic liner, close by the doors of an ashpit, where it is warm: 'the time, night: the persons, an emigrant of an enquiring turn of mind and a deck hand'- the reader's imagination takes over, imagining the light and shade, the contrasting elements of the scene. (One might even imagine the obligatory, upper case caption – THE EMIGRANT MAKES A STARTLING DISCOVERY – or suchlike.) The discovery is that neither category posed by the emigrant encompassed *Tom Holt's Log*; rather, 'it was something unique, a work by STEPHENS HAYWARD', he says. Hayward is the first-named of his 'poor dogs', whose 'day is past', and who 'begin swiftly to be forgotten'. The entire penny press pack, bar the 'dull-ruffian', Reynolds – the only one savaged by RLS outright – have 'not much hope of durable renown', and consequently are paraded – like the advertisements for their forthcoming stories – in capitals (PA, p. 20). They are tolerantly viewed 'poor dogs' who had had their day, indeed some of them were no longer alive. They were not all, however, whatever their literary pretensions, poor in either their social origins or remunerations, as will be seen.

'The land of penny numbers'

RLS's popular authors are a mongrel breed, of mixed character and origins, but show some fine points nevertheless; their life stories have long been subject to speculation.

None of the pack started out as a writer of popular serial fiction. Only Pierce Egan, son of the sports journalist and best-selling author of the same name, had literature bred in his bones, and even he, Royal Academy trained, first worked as an illustrator.³¹ Some literary pedigree can be claimed for John Frederick





Smith, whose father and grandfather were actor/managers; quotations from Shakespeare and other writers banner his serial chapters.³² Constrained by in-house style, Smith's literary gifts were undoubtedly never fully realised in the penny format, but his sense of drama was so great it was said of him at the *London Journal*: 'So cleverly did [he] pile on excitement towards the end of the stories [...] the [...] weekly circulation used to increase by as many as 50,000, when the denouement came'.³³

Before writing serials, both Egan and Smith first published standard novels. Egan's first, *Quintin Matsys*, in 1839, was followed by other works mostly of the Middle Ages; *Clifton Grey*, however, was topically set in the Crimean War.³⁴ These brought him early success, and were frequently reprinted: in the paper, RLS, leaving Fleet Street in 1881, spies the 'Office for the sale of the works of Pierce Egan', reminding him that Egan (then dead), like Bracebridge Hemyng, 'had once revelled in three volumes' (PA, p. 24).

The single triple-decker of 'the great J. F. Smith', the 'heavy' man of his father's Norwich theatre troupe, was stillborn; published in 1832, the anonymous and un-reviewed, autobiographical work, *The Jesuit*, in effect rejected his early education, which had been entrusted to a Jesuit priest by his great-uncle, Dr. Powell, Master of St. John's, Cambridge, and Archdeacon of Colchester.³⁵ In 1840, another unsuccessful, two-volume novel, *The Prelate*, followed; by then Smith was a professor of English in France.³⁶ He had already visited Russia, lived a Bohemian life in Germany, and twice wintered in Rome, there receiving the Order of St. Gregory from the Pope; his time abroad was later put to good effect in staging serial scenes there, notably in Italy.³⁷ Financial straits probably made him send copy to the *London Journal* in 1849. Success came immediately with a three-part historical extravaganza, 'Stanfield Hall', which ran to great acclaim until late 1850.³⁸ Smith became the mainspring of the *Journal*, contributing in the next five years an almost unbroken





run of serials: the most popular was 'Minnigrey', a Peninsular War tale of pressgangs and kidnapping, which raised circulation to over 500,000 copies a week.³⁹

Egan worked as an editor from 1849, firstly for *The Home Circle*; his famed association, both as editor and writer, with the *London Journal* lasted, apart from two short interludes, from 1857 to his death in 1880. The first hiatus came early on, in July 1857, when a new proprietor replaced him with the novelist, Charles Reade, whose high-brow 'White Lies' – as RLS says – 'very nearly wrecked that valuable property', and sales dived (PA, p. 25). Egan had been brought to steady matters at the *Journal* after a difficult spell, following the defection in 1855 of J. F. Smith for better terms to the rival *Cassell's Illustrated Family Paper*.⁴⁰ Smith had been editor in all but name at the *Journal*, contributing at least half of the content each week through his various serials, both fictional and factual.⁴¹ At the *Family Paper*, Smith's stories were rarely off its front page for a decade until 1864, the period when RLS heard or read his string of, albeit catchall and formulaic, stories cleverly contriving intercourse between high and low society: gems like 'Dick Tarleton', 'Milly Moyne', and of course RLS's favourite, 'Smiles and Tears' (1857-8).⁴²

Remarkable for its innovative, up-to-date scenes in India during the Mutiny, 'Smiles and Tears' appeared in the *Family Paper* alongside reports of the terrible event itself; perhaps doubly endearing the tale to RLS, whose uncle, John Balfour, was serving on the sub-continent as a military surgeon. The story ran at the same time as Pierce Egan's very popular 'Flower of the Flock' was revitalising the *London Journal*; given most of the supposed readership, Egan cleverly focused on female characters, and its circulation revived.⁴³ Smith's celebrity is appreciated half-way through 'Smiles and Tears', where an editorial eulogy – with a portrait of the author – declares the story has 'excited such universal sympathy, that it has been generally pronounced the most successful work of his prolific pen [...] The high moral tone of this





gentleman's compositions is a marked and honourable feature'.⁴⁴ (No doubt Cummy was re-assured it would not turn out a 'regular novel'!) Universally popular amongst all classes, his stories were much translated abroad. 'He is now, we believe, employed in some ecclesiastical seminary in Paris', said the anonymous writer of 'Penny Novels' in *Macmillan's Magazine* in 1866.⁴⁵ From about 1870, however, Smith eked out an existence in the *New York Ledger*; he died in America in 1890, his passing lamented in the *New York Times*.⁴⁶

A decade earlier, in 1880, the *New York Times* front page had proclaimed 'Pierce Egan Dead', an indication of his high standing in America (NYT, 8 July 1880). The issue of *The Flower of the Flock* in three volumes in 1866 had prompted 'Penny Novels', itself somewhat reminiscent of RLS's paper in declaring Egan 'a mighty potentate in England [...] whose realm is nearly as unknown as a few years ago was the district of Victoria Nyanza'. The anonymous reviewer suggests that though many fancy they know English literature, and think Dickens and Tennyson the most popular living authors, they should be 'aroused' from such a 'fond delusion'. Pierce Egan's works sell by the half million, he states: 'What living author can compare with him? [...] how many educated men and women in this country know of [his] existence [...]?' He also doubts whether anyone had ever thought of studying the literary tastes of the people for whom Egan catered, even although broadsides and ballads were once similarly despised. The writers of penny stories are 'a class by themselves', he concludes; their 'productions' seldom reach circulating libraries. His exception is M. E. Braddon, whose *Lady Audley's Secret* 'amused millions' in the *London Journal*, before riveting West End readers; but even she does not moralise enough to sustain the regular readership of such journals, he finds, instructing readers that penny papers are no longer host to the tales of 'seduction, adultery, forgery, and murder' that defiled them some twelve to fifteen years before. There is 'no lack of crime and dallying with





things forbidden' in them, he adds, but as in Richardson's novels, the writers always profess 'to show a crime [...] that we may see what a hideous thing it is, and may have our moral principles strengthened'. This moral phenomenon in penny papers he likens to the theatre, where the 'boxes and stalls give their hands to fine acting; the gods [...] applaud moral sayings. They like nothing half so well as a few words in praise of honesty or industry, good heart or a brave spirit. A bad actor who will say something nice and round in praise of virtue will get more clapping of hands from these dwellers aloft than a good actor who has to defend any wrongdoing'. This 'high moral feeling is very evident' in novels of Egan and Smith, who, with Reynolds, are 'the most popular among the classes that patronise the penny journals' (*MM*, pp. 96-7).

The 'unutterable' **George William McArthur Reynolds** – whom RLS denies capitals – was one of the most influential, but quarrelsome, writer/proprietors of the penny press; a survivor of many self-inflicted bankruptcies, he died in luxury in Woburn Square (PA, p. 25).⁴⁷ The Guernsey-born son of a Royal Navy captain, his army career ended in 1830, when he was 'removed by his friends' from the Royal Military Academy, for excessive gambling, an incident referred to in the *Mysteries of London*.⁴⁸ His writing career was possibly inspired by the clandestine activities of his godfather and guardian, Duncan McArthur, surgeon at Walmer: in the *Mysteries*, the 'Resurrection Man' from there is likely based on McArthur. However, his first book was a 'Deist' work, *The Errors of the Christian Religion Exposed* (1832), spurning the Church of England and espousing the radicalism of Tom Paine.⁴⁹ A sojourn in Paris followed in 1833, when both his literary and business projects failed. From 1837, Reynolds reversed the fortunes of the failing *Monthly Magazine*, but his employers eventually disliked his racy stories. He served time in the Queen's prison for debt in 1839.

In 1840, after publicly pledging tee-totalism in an act of self-





promotion, Reynolds joined the London United Temperance Association; as editor of its *Tee-Totaler*, he included in it fictional diatribes against drink. A spell as political correspondent of the *Chartist Weekly Dispatch* followed, but in 1844 he began the *Mysteries of London*, the sensational work for which he is now remembered. Modelled on the 1843 *Mystères de Paris* by Eugene Sue, the *Mysteries* was the best seller of its day for years among the London working classes; another sensation, the *Mysteries of the Court of London*, followed. *Reynolds's Miscellany*, launched in 1846 with his shocker, 'Wagner: The Wehr-Wolf', was a huge success, enabling him to attract writers like 'Malcolm J. Errym'.⁵⁰

In the *Mysteries* Reynolds purveyed the fag-end of what one contemporary observer in the *Eclectic Review* in 1845 calls 'The Jack Sheppard School' of Harrison Ainsworth, which 'soon gave way to the healthier novel tone of the Dickens school', later represented in penny papers by both Smith and Egan.⁵¹ Lamenting this 'French inoculation of immorality and false sentiment', which he trusts will be temporary, this observer declares: 'The unhealthy appetite for murder, and for the ghastly spectacle of the gallows, has within these few months been pandered to, and promoted, with a diabolical fervour of sordid assiduity, that has been revolting' – precisely RLS's reaction as a boy (PA, p. 28).⁵² The inoculation was anything but temporary: another commentator in the same journal, a generation later in 1868, notes Reynolds as a writer 'evidently possessing some power and some literary skill, but who, for many years, has deliberately chosen to exercise them in producing works calculated to foster anything rather than purity of morals, and purity of imagination'. His sensational works still sold extensively among the poorer classes, having been reprinted again and again, 'but success is no guarantee for the worth of a book'.⁵³

Not sold just among the poorer classes it seems: an even stronger condemnation – some of it applicable to the young RLS – came from novelist James Greenwood, in 1869:





How is it that in quiet suburban neighbourhoods, far removed from the stews of London, and the pernicious atmosphere they engender; in serene and peaceful semi-country towns where genteel boarding schools flourish, there may almost invariably be found some small shopkeeper who accommodatingly receives consignments of 'Blue-skin' and the 'Mysteries of London,' and unobtrusively supplies his well-dressed little customer with these full-flavoured articles? Granted, my dear sir, that our young Jack, or my twelve years old Robert, have minds too pure either to seek out or crave after literature of the sort in question, but not un-frequently it is found without seeking. It is a contagious disease, just as cholera and typhus and the plague are contagious, and as everybody is aware, it needs not personal contact with a body stricken to convey either of these frightful maladies to the hale and hearty. A tainted scrap of rag has been known to spread plague and death through an entire village, just as a stray leaf of 'Panther Bill,' or 'Tyburn Tree' may sow the seeds of immorality amongst as many boys as a town can produce.⁵⁴

Malcolm J. Errym's *Mystery in Scarlet*, RLS says, 'runs in my mind to this day' (PA, p. 27). After receiving the book in answer to his appeal in the essay, he declared in a letter that he had, 'in this poor old favourite' of his boyhood, discovered 'a real (murdered) literary talent' (L6: 248).⁵⁵ So much so, that he intended, when he had 'breathing space', to do 'a sort of addendum' to 'Popular Authors', a project never accomplished (L6: 248). The name 'Malcolm J. Errym' suggested 'an anagram on Merry' to RLS, but how he would have rejoiced to know both were pseudonyms of James Malcolm Rymer, the son of an Edinburgh engraver who moved to London (PA, p. 27).⁵⁶ Raised in colourful Clerkenwell, the district haunted by Dickens, Rymer became a civil engineer,





patenting 'certain improvements for castors for furniture' from an upmarket address in Covent Garden in 1840.⁵⁷ He filed for bankruptcy in 1848; whether from engineering or writing ventures is unknown.⁵⁸ Success followed and in later life Rymer owned a seaside hotel, where he retired after a long career – at one time 'writing ten serials simultaneously [...] at his death his estate was £8000'.⁵⁹

Before penning his hundred-plus serials, though, Rymer had edited his *Queen's Magazine*. In it, his 'Popular Writing' in 1842 forms the first discussion of the cheap press serialised stories, one in which he pushes back the start of popular writing beyond the Byron phenomenon and gothic excess as far as the picaresque of Smollett and Fielding.⁶⁰ He observes just how ephemeral 'popular' can be: 'The arbitrary changes of fashion in garments are mild and gradual in comparison with the sudden popular freaks with regard to popular writing' (VPM, p. 171). He is also at pains to point out the then relative novelty of 'imaginative' texts: 'Imaginative literature is [...] but of recent growth; it is a sort of parasitical plant, hanging round the huge oak of classicity' (ibid.). In doing so, he was apparently already studying form with a view to the burgeoning market: 'If an author [...] wishes to become popular [...] to be read by the majority, and praised and feted, he should, ere he begins to write, study well the animals for whom he is about to cater,' he declares (VPM, p. 172). His stance seems one of cultural superiority: 'Is the superstitious terror of a nursery maid, who reads by her allowance of rushlight with indescribable dismay, "The Blood Spangled Monk, or the Inhuman Shriek," to be called a love of imaginative literature?' and 'There are millions of minds that have no resource between vapid sentimentality, and the ridiculous spectra of the nursery' (VPM, p. 173). Such opinions come surprisingly from the future author of blood-curdling tales such as 'Varney the Vampyre' and 'The Black Monk'. These are unashamedly gothic in style and it appears that Rymer followed his own analysis of popular writing:





‘The Castle of Otranto is exceedingly popular,’ and ‘The Mysteries of Udolpho comprises every department of popular writing’ (VPM, pp. 170, 171). Indeed, his advice to ‘a young author who pants for “popularity” if he ‘sicken at pointless dialogue and silly adventures’, is to do ‘a little of the haunted castle and midnight murder business’ to attain his object – ‘never mind ridicule; the ridicule of a fastidious minority’ (VPM, p. 173). Rymer wrote his first serial, ‘Ada the Betrayed; or, The Murder at the Old Smithy’ the following year.⁶¹

Rymer wrote ‘Varney’ and ‘The Black Monk’, as well as other shockers for Edward Lloyd’s publications from 1842 to 1853.⁶² He penned ‘Edith the Captive’, among other highwayman tales, at John Dicks publishing house during the next five years. From 1858 to 1864 he was at *Reynolds’s Miscellany*, where his stories like ‘The Golden Heart’ relied more on domestic mystery.⁶³ *The Mystery in Scarlet* created a ‘mild sensation’ in the *London Miscellany* in 1866.⁶⁴ His time with Lloyd is remarkable for his legend of Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber, in ‘The String of Pearls’, first printed in 1846.⁶⁵ Rymer also wrote women well, creating several acclaimed leading characters in serials like ‘Jane Brightwell’ and ‘Ada the Betrayed’ – which because of his success became his nickname among writing colleagues in the trade!⁶⁶

RLS’s was better informed about Edward Henry Viles, ‘editor and author of general literature’, and son of the Southwark-based ‘author and publisher’, Henry Viles; but it is doubtful that he knew in what grand style Edward lived at Pendryl Hall, Codsall Wood, Staffordshire.⁶⁷ Through the authority of RLS the authorship of ‘Black Bess’ is accredited to Viles (PA, p. 27). How came about the attribution of this Turpin tale to someone otherwise a Shakespearean scholar, whose name does not appear on the title page?⁶⁸

When poking fun at *Young Folks* in his letter to Edmund Gosse, RLS directs him to its page apologising for the immediate discontinuation of ‘Sir Claude the Conqueror’ (L3: 247). He





tells him that the story was ‘a last chance’ given to its ‘drunken’ author, Walter Villiers. Villiers was a pseudonym for Viles, he says, ‘brother to my old boyhood’s guide, philosopher and friend, Edward Viles, author of *Black Bess* and *Blueskin; a Romance*.⁶⁹ There is a byway of literary history for you; and in its poor way a tragedy also’. Soon after, in his letter to James Henderson of *Young Folks* RLS commiserates with him about his ‘poor friend Viles or Villiers’ having come to grief (L3: 249). From his connections at the magazine, therefore, it seems likely that RLS heard of Edward Viles writing *Black Bess* – but in the hurried world of unsigned, hydra-headed stories was his information correct?

Doubts about Viles writing *Black Bess* and its sequel, *The Black Highwayman*, have long been raised.⁷⁰ Recently, however, comparison of *Blueskin* with some works by James Malcolm Rymer has convinced one expert that Rymer was the author of both *Blueskin* and *The Black Highwayman* – ‘even although he had already covered the story of *Blueskin* in his masterful [...] *Edith the Captive*’.⁷¹ The same critic points out that the only work securely attributable to Viles, *Gentleman Clifford*, another Turpin tale, has such ‘wretched writing even by penny dreadful standards’ and ‘bears [such] little resemblance to the style of *Black Bess*,’ that he can be excluded as its author.⁷²

The story – if true – that Viles was offered *Treasure Island* and wished to purchase it, ‘to be rewritten by a more competent hand’, as the old man did not think much of the stuff, must refer not to Edward, but his father Henry, aged 65 on the 1881 census (Jay).

The most disreputable of RLS’s kennel, **William Stephens Hayward** comes to light in the *Times* in 1857, accused of the rape of a maidservant at his lodgings. Apparently of no business or profession, during 1858, he served time in both the Debtors’ and Queen’s prisons.⁷³ That year, Hayward too, like Rymer, made a foray into the often gimcrack world of Victorian patents, when as ‘Gentleman of Wittenham House’ (he was a son of a wealthy





Berkshire farmer), he registered an improved substance used in manufacturing paper and cleaning textiles. Hayward took up writing soon after marriage; his earliest known novel, *Hunted to Death*, introducing Captain George, a pro-Confederate English adventurer, appeared in 1862; in 1863 his adventures continued in *The Black Angel*, the first of four set in the American Civil War, with which Hayward was one of the first novelists to engage.⁷⁴ A reviewer for *The Era* recorded: 'The hero [...] is singularly oblivious of either religious or civil law, and his language is anything but refined [...] Mr. Hayward endeavours to make his readers believe him irresistible and fascinating'.⁷⁵ This gung-ho characterisation continued when he began contributing to boys' papers in 1864; that year, 'The Cloud King' in the *Boys Journal* astonished readers by featuring both the aeroplane and submarine; he was a mainstay of, respectively, *Young Englishman's Journal*, *Boys of England* and *Young Gentlemen of Britain*.⁷⁶ Hayward's many fast-paced novels achieved high sales, continuing to appear in his name for commercial reasons long after his death; however 'hare-brained', they made their mark (PA, p. 24).

The Diamond Necklace, or the Twenty Captains, which RLS describes with such galloping gusto in the paper, is untraced, but as Hayward often wrote about diamonds, RLS's title may well refer to one of these other works. Hayward's publisher, C. H. Clarke, was the 'very affable gentleman', with whom RLS describes having an interview in 'a very small office in a shady court off Fleet Street'; where he hears how one of these 'great men' (Hayward) of the penny press 'had demanded an advance upon a novel, had laid out the sum (apparently on spirituous drinks) and refused to finish the work', which had to be handed over to Bracebridge Hemyng, that 'most reliable author' (PA, p. 23-4). This seemingly refers to an incident shortly before Hayward's death, when he was ill with alcoholism in the late 1860s, and Hemyng had to complete his *Lord Scatterbrain*. Hayward's obituary in *Sons of Britannia*, then running his story, 'Idol's Eye', claimed he had





‘died in harness’ (Holland, ‘Bear Alley’). However, the real state of affairs was supposedly revealed in *The Ruin of Fleet Street* (1882), where Hayward, who was ‘clever’ and ‘could write well’, is branded “Fireater” – ‘having been a traveller in savage lands and for the general pugnacity of his disposition’.⁷⁷ According to this account, Hayward, having returned rambling incoherency in response to a demand for his late copy, was found dead at a seaside house where he had gone to recuperate from his illness.

The best bred of RLS’s ‘dogs’, the Eton-educated **Samuel Bracebridge Hemyng**, began his novel writing career in 1862, but only after having unsuccessfully followed his father to the bar; he published fifty novels in the next twenty-five years.⁷⁸ However, his name is now only recalled because it became inseparable from that of his best-known character, his boy hero ‘Jack Harkaway’; the long-running and frequently reprinted series of adventures began in 1871 with ‘Jack Harkaway’s Schooldays’ in Edwin Brett’s *Boys of England*, then the most popular boy’s penny paper.⁷⁹ In 1873, during ‘Jack Harkaway Among the Brigands’, Hemyng suddenly left Brett for America to write exclusively – at \$10,000 a year – for Frank Leslie’s *Boys’ and Girls’ Weekly*, which had pirated ‘Harkaway’ stories to great success. Hemyng immediately wrote ‘Jack Harkaway in America’ to satisfy the demand. He lived in grand style in New York on Staten Island, but had, by 1884, returned to Britain, re-married, re-embraced the law, and resumed writing ‘Harkaway’ stories – at comparatively miserly rates – for Brett’s journals. By the 1890s, his bulldog brand of violence, bigotry and jingoism began to lose its appeal, however, and even the specially branded *Jack Harkaway’s Journal* folded after a few months in 1893. Hemyng died almost penniless in London; the *New York Times* reported belatedly in 1904: ‘With his name passes that of an idol of our youth. “Jack” was the “Tom Brown” without what we Yankees consider “side”’.⁸⁰

RLS recalls Hemyng’s *The Bondage of Brandon* as typical of those upstart reprinted penny tales, which ‘fleered at in the





critical press [...] lie quite unread in circulating libraries'.⁸¹ In late 1881, he excitedly remarked: 'It's the devil and all for drollery. There is a Superior (sic) of the Jesuits, straight out of Skelt. Bracebridge has never been in a real house with servants – no [...] not even of an errand. This is clearly proved in his work' (L3: 247-48). *Brandon* is an engaging tale of incident, though, even if the writing is wooden and predictable: 'It was the hour when the spotted snake leaves its hole in the ground, and basks in the sunshine, darting out its forked tongue, like a thing of evil, on the approach of a stranger' is followed shortly after by beautiful but evil Mimi, finding, while eavesdropping on Blanche and Reginald's conversation on the island of Island Lake, 'something cold and clammy upon her wrist [...] a small snake peculiar to that part of the country'.⁸²

The other top 'dogs' named – **Sylvanus Cobb, Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth** and Edward Payson Roe (left out of the reckoning in the paper) were American.⁸³ Southworth, however, worked as an editor and wrote many of her then universally popular domestic dramas, like 'Brandon of Brandon' and 'The Double Marriage', for British journals. First published in the *New York Ledger*, she started writing after her husband deserted her in 1844; she became – like her friend Harriet Beecher Stowe – one of several popular American female authors with enormous standing in Britain during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Cobb first served in the U. S. Navy, but from 1850 manufactured some thousand short novels and stories, and countless newspaper columns, for the *New York Ledger* from 1856. Quantity crushed quality, leaving his work largely devoid of any literary value. Cobb was presumably read by RLS in America, but some of his stories also appeared in British magazines.

Romancing alone

What effect had penny papers on RLS's literary art? There is evidence that scenes lodged in his imagination, finding expres-





sion in his own narratives. Two scenes accompanied by illustrations in 'Smiles and Tears' suggest ones in *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*.⁸⁴ Early on in Smith's tale, young Jack Manders hides in St. James's Park. He witnesses his wicked uncle, Andrew Silex, meeting Lady Boothroyd; the former is taking delivery of Lillian, around whose inheritance the tale revolves, when she is conveyed there after her kidnapping in the West Country. This transaction is seen and heard from behind 'the largest of the butts or counters on which the vendors of milk and whey arrange their pans and bowls during the summer season' (S&T, p. 114). Jack is in a similar position to Jim Hawkins in the apple barrel on the *Hispaniola*, overhearing the treacherous intents of Long John Silver, the incident from which the rest of *Treasure Island* unfolds. In the other, Jack is lured to the 'Blue Peter' at Chatham docks by a second wicked uncle, Mike Silex (p. 132). There, 'felled senseless', he is 'artfully trepanned' aboard the *Caradoc* of Captain Gall (a man as rough and brutal as Hoseason), and 'placed under hatches' (pp. 133, 193, 133). The similarities with the plight of David Balfour and his uncle cajoling him to the Hawes Inn, and his being tricked on board the brig *Covenant* are obvious – he too 'fell senseless' from a blow, and came to, 'lying somewhere bound in the belly of that unlucky ship' (Tus. 6: 40-41). RLS's original plan had been to have David 'decoyed on board the brig [...] instead of being knocked on the head on the pier at Queensferry', even closer to the action in 'Smiles and Tears' (L5: 180). Later on board the *Covenant* David also uses the close fog as concealment, enabling him to draw near enough on deck to overhear the conversation of Riach and Hoseason as they plan to 'come at' Alan Breck (Tus. 6: 58-59).

This is not to suggest that there was any conscious imitation, or plagiarising, however – even although *Kidnapped* was being finally revised in mid 1886, close to the time of RLS's reading of 'Smiles and Tears'. Nevertheless, his creative imagination was undoubtedly influenced by memories of such striking scenes





read, or indeed heard before. Other examples, close to scenes in *Kidnapped*, are some Skelt-like, 'picturesque' illustrations in *Black Bess*, such as when 'SIXTEEN-STRING JACK AND CLAUDE DUVAL ARE ATTACKED BY THE BOAT'S CREW'. or 'THE YOUNG PRETENDER AND HIS FRIENDS ARE SHIPWRECKED ON THE COAST OF BARRA'. That many of these woodcuts of highwayman derring-do, such as, notably, 'THE LADY IN THE COACH MAKES AN APPEAL TO DICK TURPIN' could lie behind the road scenes in *St. Ives*, seems unnecessary to demonstrate further here.⁸⁵

Another interesting example relating to *Treasure Island* can be offered. In 1860 the *Family Paper* serialised 'Captain Brand; Or, The Pirate Schooner', a yarn memorable for Don Ignacio, 'an ancient mariner with one eye', reminding us of 'a seafaring man with one leg'.⁸⁶ Another character in the story is Bill Gibbs, a pirate with a wooden leg (CB, p. 22). The pirate chief, Captain Brand of the *Centipede*, has a mistress, 'Baba', or Babette, 'a powerfully-made negro-woman', who keeps house for him at his West Indian island redoubt (CB, p. 23). If RLS ever heard or read this story is unknown, but no source, other than his own imagination, has ever been suggested for either Silver's prosthesis, or his 'old negress', his wife, 'a woman of colour' whom he left 'to manage the inn' while on the voyage of the *Hispaniola*, as Squire Trelawney's letter says (Tus. 2: 45). The mention, too, in 'Captain Brand', of the 'chart of the Isle of Pines', with its tricky anchorage at 'the old hole' is notable; the pines are a marked feature in the landscape of *Treasure Island* (CB, p. 38).

The imaginative appeal of such works for RLS can be seen in 'A Gossip on Romance', where he declares: 'Give me a highwayman and I was full to the brim; a Jacobite would do, but the highwayman was my favourite dish' (Tus. 29: 119). In this he expatiates on how, '[t]he words, if the book be eloquent, should run thenceforward, in our ears like the noise of breakers, and the story, if it be story, repeat itself in a thousand coloured pictures to the





eye' (ibid.). In childhood reading, the importance of eloquence, character, and thought are nought, he says, compared to 'some quality of the brute incident' – which is 'not mere bloodshed or wonder' (p. 120).

In support he cites four passages with various incidents, which he recalls hearing in childhood his elders read aloud. Of these four, only the source of the first mentioned, the opening of *What will he do with it*, by Edward Bulwer Lytton (1859), was then known to him. The fourth passage was later identified by readers of *Longman's Magazine* as being from *Two Years Ago* (1857) by Charles Kingsley, as RLS himself then notes in the first edition of *Memories and Portraits* (1887).

The present writer has now been able to identify the second and third passages: from respectively, 'Old Jack', by John Stedman (1852), and *Home and the World* by Mrs. W. Rives (1857). 'They all have a touch of the romantic', RLS observes (Tus. 29: 120).⁸⁷ Notably three of them also depend for their dramatic effect upon lights at night:

I can still remember four different passages which I heard before I was ten, with the same keen and lasting pleasure. One I discovered long afterwards to be the admirable opening of *What will he Do with It*: it was no wonder I was pleased with that. The other three still remain unidentified. One is a little vague; it was about a tall dark house at night, and people groping on the stairs by the light that escaped from the open door of a sick-room. In another, a lover left a ball, and went walking in a cool, dewy park, whence he could watch the lighted windows and the dancers as they moved. [...] In the last, a poet who had been tragically wrangling with his wife, walked forth on the sea-beach on a tempestuous night and witnessed the horrors of a wreck. (Tus. 29: 120)





However, in remembering two of these passages, RLS in fact conflates events from more than one scene – albeit with enough detail from him to allow their identification. Suffice to say that in the first of these, his ‘dark, tall house at night’ is not the same place where ‘people are groping on the stairs’ (p. 120) The house of the eponymous ‘Old Jack’, ‘as maritime nomenclature designated him’, is described eerily by the narrator in an earlier part of the story as –

a large and straggling edifice, with massive walls and narrow windows, to which shutters, perpetually closed, imparted the most dismal appearance. [...] It can hardly be supposed that a grim chateau like this, hard by a barren cliff, on the verge of the desert wave, could fail of acquiring a sinister fame and ghostly reputation among the sailor-occupants of the neighbourhood. (OJ, p. 232)

Later the narrator remarks: ‘The dreary mansion occupied my thoughts [...] why should I not take a nearer view of the **dark** scene?’ (OJ, 232). RLS’s recall of the incidents on the stairs concerns a father (the narrator) of an unwell girl, who, locked out of his own house at night, enters by a window, and unable to find a light, is shot by her, as an intruder, about half-way upstairs. ‘I was only enabled to see her by the light of a candle which issued from her room just opposite the staircase’ (c.f. RLS: ‘the light that escaped from the open door of a sickroom’), the father relates, and later, after recovering consciousness, says he ‘could then recollect nothing but groping my way upstairs’ (OJ, p. 351).

In the second example, RLS’s youthful imagination takes over completely, for nowhere does this passage from the novel, *Home and the World*, actually refer to the ‘lover’ who left the ball, ‘watching’, as RLS says, ‘the lighted windows and the figures of the dancers as they moved’ (Tus. 29: 120). The ‘lover’ had indeed left ‘the melting glories of the ball-room’ and joined the walking





party in the park – and no doubt the figures of dancers could have been seen through lighted windows, had any character in the story cared to observe them (HW, p. 283). The dancers are not described so, however; RLS apparently conflates them with the guests returning from their rambles to the ball-room – ‘their gossamer dresses, and bright scarfs, and transparent hats, with light plumes fluttering, appearing and disappearing, among the trees and shrubbery, and giving added life and beauty to their natural charms’ (p. 282). Indeed, he mixes them together with this last and the next extract: ‘A few coloured lamps glittered among the foliage, and served rather to ornament, than to illuminate, the walks of the garden, giving a mysterious light that heightened the illusion of the long imaginary existence to which they extended’ (p. 283).

These confluences bear out RLS’s advice at the beginning of ‘Gossip’: ‘we should gloat over a book, be rapt clean out of ourselves, and rise from the perusal, our mind filled with the busiest, kaleidoscopic dance of images, incapable of sleep or continuous thought’ (Tus. 29: 119). Indeed, as he told Cummy in his third letter about ‘Smiles and Tears’, the ‘incidents’ have also become ‘a little mixed’ (L3: 307). This, too is the effect which he conjures up from his earliest memories of being read to in the first part of ‘Random Memories: Rosa Quo Locorum’ – when he says that ‘the child thinks much in images, words are very live to him, phrases that imply a picture eloquent beyond their value’ (Tus. 30: 2). Striking words (their sounds even) and ‘pleasing imagery’, described or suggested, can for him combine to create a picture, which although it in itself may appear ‘arbitrary’, he can ‘trace every detail to its source’ (pp. 2-3). The examples he gives of this are amalgams, deriving from the 23rd Psalm, invested on actual scenes near his early home, but incorporating parts of illustrations from books – Billings’s *Antiquities* and Bagster’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Being read to, because of the long time spent in ‘that weary prison of the sick-chamber’, assumes an added importance





for him: 'The remainder of my childish recollections are 'all of the matter of what was read to me, and not of any manner in the words [...] I listened for delightful plots that I might re-enact in play, and romantic scenes and circumstances that I might call up before me, with closed eyes' (p. 4). Here he cites *Robinson Crusoe*, and 'some of the books of that cheerful, ingenious, romantic soul, Mayne Reid' – himself no stranger in boys' papers. These, with *Paul Blake*, and later *The Swiss Family Robinson*, comprised his 'strongest impressions' he remembered of reading, or being read to, in childhood. 'At these I played, conjured up their scenes, and delighted to hear them rehearsed unto seventy-times seven' (p. 4). Here he is 'wallowing in the raw stuff of story books', the joy he recalls of Skelt's Toy Theatre productions in the stationery shop in 'A Penny Plain and Twopence Coloured', when '[e]very sheet we fingered was another lightning glance into an obscure delicious story'; the same imaginative leap as made by him with Cummy, looking at the penny paper woodcuts displayed in the stationer's window (Tus. 29: 104).

A work 'rather gruesome and bloody for a child, but very picturesque', *Paul Blake* is significant in that RLS is unsure whether or not it came into his life after he could read, a skill which he acquired late (Tus. 30: 4).⁸⁸ The book was published in 1859, by when he should have mastered reading. (He first went to school for a weeks only in late 1857 and did not return through ill-health until 1859.) Reading this work conjures scenes from *Treasure Island* for the present writer. Paul, descended from Admiral Blake and steeped in *Robinson Crusoe*, drifts unconscious after an accident on a solo sailing excursion from Leghorn, and is picked up by a felucca with a rough-looking crew, bound for Monte Cristo. Befriended by the ship's cook, who attends to his injury, while on deck he overhears a hushed conversation between two *signori*, who have financed the contraband cargo of weapons being run to the island; he is standing to windward of them hidden in the shade. Concealment and conversation yet again – the position





RLS himself as a child would undoubtedly have been in many times in drawing rooms, behind the sofa 'hunting blawboks' Mayne Reid-style,⁸⁹ or whatever, while his elders read aloud. Paul is put ashore with the cargo, the *signori*, and the crew at a rude hut to await another ship, which will ferry the cargo and him to the mainland. The crew mutiny, then nose out the one case of brandy, and spend the night in drunken revelry. In the morning, when two make off in a small boat, Paul tracks them, and climbs to the highest point to watch their movements. On his explorations, he finds a grotto – but no 'Man of the Woods' – and, like Crusoe, kills a kid, carrying it on his shoulder. Returning, he hears shots and, from his vantage point, sees one of the *signori* shooting mercilessly at the men in the boat, which is holed and sunk, and, as he thinks, both men killed. Like Jim Hawkins, Paul realises the dilemma that he is in; that his salvation lies with these wicked *signori*:

I must perforce go with them, as it is my only chance of escape from this solitary place. Ah, Robinson Crusoe! Like you I have been very charmed with my island till my *savages* have come; but now, like you again, I would willingly give up all its wild life and independence even for prosy old Pisa. (PB, pp. 110-11)

The story concludes on Corsica among forest bandits, but the first part stays memorable for similarities to *Treasure Island*.

Something of the *Nights*

In conclusion it must be asked what in penny stories continually attracted RLS? When writing about his reading in 'Popular Authors' and elsewhere, he often alludes to the *Arabian Nights*.⁹⁰ Their structural and other similarities to penny stories – particularly their quality of oral narratives – likely endeared the latter to him (PA, p. 21). While penny tales lack the surprising and





cumulative marvels of the *Nights*, they too must ever work wonders to astonish and addictively enthrall the listener or reader. In the *Nights* the life of the narrator, Shahrazad, depends on her continually whetting the appetite of the Sultan for stories. Consequently, she, to delay the inevitable as long as possible, conjures the most unlikely situations, coincidences and exaggerations, which occur in an illogical or arbitrary manner as a means of lengthening the resolution of particular plot threads, thereby delaying indefinitely any end. The same can be said for the recurrent, long-drawn out plots and character situations found in penny serials. Their familiar formula, in which RLS sees the 'instinctive sympathy' of their authors with the 'popular mind', affords listeners or readers comforting character identification within the story; they retreat into it, becoming fellow travellers, wandering '[w]here they will' in their own imaginations towards a heightened denouement, episodically delayed, where all the knotted ends of the various stories within the story are untied. Such reading was vital for RLS. While recovering his health in San Francisco, after nearly dying at Monterey, he wrote:

When I suffer in my mind, stories are my refuge; I take them like opium; and I consider one who writes them a sort of doctor of the mind. [...] it is not Shakespeare we take to, when we are in a hot corner; nor, certainly, George Eliot – no, nor even Balzac. It is Charles Reade, or old Dumas, or the *Arabian Nights*, or the best of Walter Scott; it is stories we want, not the high poetic function which represents the world; we are like the Asiatic with his improvasitore or the middle-agee with his trouvere. We want incident, interest, action: to the devil with your philosophy. (L3: 61)

Not without good reason in *The Wrong Box* does RLS make Joseph Finsbury say 'pens and paper and the productions of the





popular press are to me as important as food and drink' (Tus. 11: 103).

NOTES

Quotations from Stevenson's works are cited, in the text unless inconvenient, by 'Tus.' –Tusitala Edition (London: Heinemann, 1924) followed by volume number: page number.

Quotations from Stevenson's letters, ed. by Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Mehew (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) by 'L' with volume and page number.

- 1 'In February or March, possibly earlier'. Roger G. Swearingen, *The Prose Writings of Robert Louis Stevenson: A Guide* (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 123, henceforth cited in text as Swearingen.
- 2 Emma Dorothy Eliza Nevitte Southworth (1819-99); Pierce Egan 'the younger' (1814-80); William Stephen(s) Hayward (1835-70); 'J. Malcolm Errym' (pseud. James Malcolm Rymer (1814-84); Edward Henry Viles (1841-91); John Frederick Smith (1804/5-90), Edward Payson Roe (1838-88); Samuel Bracebridge Hemyng (1841-91); George William McArthur Reynolds (1814-79); Sylvanus J. Cobb, Jnr. (1823-87)
- 3 'Popular Authors', Tus. 28: 28 (henceforth, PA).
- 4 Anon. [Margaret Oliphant], 'The Byways of Literature: Reading for the Million', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 84 (Aug 1858), pp. 200-16; Anon. [Wilkie Collins], 'The Unknown Public', *Household Words*, 18, (21 Aug 1858), pp. 217-22. Both reprinted in 'Investing the Popular' in *Victorian Print Media*, ed. by Andrew King and John Plunkett (Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 196-216, henceforth VPM.
- 5 James Payn, 'Penny Fiction', *The Nineteenth Century* (Jan 1881), pp. 145-54, henceforth Payn. RLS calls Payn 'the ingenious dog' (L3: 245).
- 6 Payn, p. 145. 'The population of readers must be dense indeed in more than one sense that can support such a crop', he scorns.
- 7 Payn, p. 152. The most obvious rebuff here is Pierce Egan: *The Flower of the Flock* serialised in the *London Journal*, 1857-8; 3 vols (London: W. S. Johnson & Co., 1865).





- 8 Swearingen, p. 125.
- 9 *The Wrong Box* (Tus. 28: 11, 27, 40, 150, 173); authors, Walter Besant, James Payn, Rider Haggard, and 'some judicious thinker (possibly J. F. Smith)', are all invoked.
- 10 Swearingen, p. 184. From Saranac, RLS asked Will H. Low to send him 'half-a-dozen consecutive numbers of the *New York Ledger*' in mid-October, 1887 (L6: 36).
- 11 Margaret Isabella Stevenson to Charles Baxter [Saranac Lake, end of March 1888], *R.L.S.: Stevenson's Letters to Charles Baxter*, ed. by DeLancey Ferguson and Marshall Waingrow (London: Geoffrey Cumberledge, Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 199.
- 12 Swearingen, pp. 63, 66, 83 & 104.
- 13 Correspondence columns carried questions from children who used 'pseudonyms taken from the various stories of the day' ('Prefatory Note', *The Black Arrow*, Tus. 9: viii).
- 14 Frank Jay, 'James Henderson's Publications – "The Young Folks' Weekly Budget"', *Peeps into the Past; being a History of Oldtime [sic] Periodicals, Journals and Books*, orig. published in *Spare Moments* [London], August 21, 1920. Per online form by Justin Gilbert, 2007, henceforth Jay – N.B. no pagination.
- 15 Roland Quiz (ed.), *The Garland*, Nov. 28, 1896 (quoted in Jay); he also claims RLS 'admired, almost envied his popularity with readers'. 'Don Zalva the Brave, or The Fortune Favoured Young Knight of Andalusia' took page precedence to *Treasure Island*.
- 16 RLS demanded from W. E. Henley in February 1881 a copy of the sensational *Newgate Calendar* for *Jerry Abershaw: A Tale of Putney Heath* (L3: 284).
- 17 William Harrison Ainsworth (1805-82), successful novelist and editor of *Bentley's Miscellany*, *Ainsworth's*, and *New Monthly Magazine*; his first novel *Rookwood* (1834) had Dick Turpin as its main character; his famed *Jack Sheppard*, serialised 1839-40, then set in 3 vols, and dramatised, was followed by *Guy Fawkes* and *The Tower of London*, both serialised 1840.
- 18 Note the use of upper case as in penny paper captions and advertisements.
- 19 Richard Dixon Galpin of Cassell's, publishing *Kidnapped*, loaned him 'all the old volumes'.





- 20 J. F. Smith, 'Smiles and Tears: A Tale of Our Own Times', *Cassell's Illustrated Family Paper*, vol I, no. 1 – vol II, no. 52 (5 December 1857 – 27 November 1858), henceforth *CIFP*.
- 21 Percy Bolingbroke St. John, 'Amy Moss; or, The Banks of the Ohio', *CIFP*, vol I (13 May – 14 October 1854). The hero, 'Custaloga', was an Indian brave who RLS noted 'in the last chapter, very obligingly washed the paint off his face and became Sir Reginald Somebody-or-other; a trick I never forgave him' (*Across the Plains*, Tus. 18: 88).
- 22 Tus. 29: 154. J. F. Smith: 'The Soldier of Fortune: A Tale of the War', *CIFP*, vol II, no. 68-105 (April-29 December 1855), written at the end of Crimean War.
- 23 Tus. 29: 155. David Brainerd (1718-47), missionary to Delaware Indians, whose devotion inspired many Christians; Rev. Robert Murray McCheyne (1813-43), Church of Scotland minister, whose *Memoir and Remains* (1844) affected evangelical Christianity worldwide; *Remains of Catherine Winslow, a member of the American Mission at Madras, India* (1851). RLS re-iterates in 'Random Memories: Rosa Quo Locorum': 'I can find in these earliest volumes of my autobiography no mention of anything but nursery rhymes, the Bible, and Mr. McCheyne' (Tus. 30: 5).
- 24 Tus. 28: 26. RLS reminded Cummy of their 'weekly excursion to Mrs. Hogg's after that precious journal' (L5: 307). RLS's woodcuts (PA, p. 26) are untraced excepting his last, presumably in Pierce Egan, 'Fair Lilies', *London Journal*, 1865.
- 25 J. F. Smith, 'Who is to Win?: Or, The Stepmother', *CIFP* n.s., vol VI, no. 136 – vol VII no. 168 (7 July 1860 – 16 Feb 1861). Contrary to RLS's contention (PA, p. 29), there is no 'pair of old maids' in Smith's story, though Miss Mendel, has enough character for two. G. P. R. James, *The Step Mother; or, Evil Doings* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1846) has 'Misses Martin', 'somewhat past their prime, but very respectable women in their way' (p. 6).
- 26 J. Wilson McLaren, *Edinburgh Memories and Some Worthies* (London / Edinburgh: W. & R. Chambers, 1926), pp. 26-7. McLaren's reminiscences of RLS also appear in J. A. Steuart, *Robert Louis Stevenson: Man and Writer*, 2 vols (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., Ltd., 1924), vol I, pp. 333-5.
- 27 Cornelius Dabber, able seaman first featured in George Emmet (completed by E. Harcourt Burrage), 'Tom Wildrake's Schooldays', *Sons of Britannia* (1870-2).





- 28 'Advocates Library Borrowing Records: Mr Robert Louis Stevenson', transcribed by Glenda Norquay, 2000 (copy typescript in my possession, kindly supplied by the transcriber), [p. 2] FR278 1876-82, p. 617: Malcolm J. Errym (J. Malcolm Rymer) *Edith the Captive; or, The Robbers of Epping Forest*, 2 vols. (London: John Dicks, 1861-2). Volume 1 only was borrowed from 30 April to 25 June 1879.
- 29 Sir James Barrie, 'To Wallasey High School for Girls, Town Hall, February 26, 1924', *McConnachie and J. M. B.: Speeches* (London: Peter Davies, London, 1938), p. 63. Barrie claims the incident was related in a letter to him from RLS from Samoa many years ago.
- 30 *The Amateur Emigrant, with Some First Impressions of America*, ed. by Roger G. Swearingen, 2 vols (Ashland: Lewis Osborne, 1976), 'Part One: The Emigrant Ship', p. 80; *From Scotland to Silverado*, ed. by James Hart (Cambridge: Harvard, 1966), p. 75.
- 31 Pierce Egan, the elder, was author of *Boxiana*, (1812) and *Life in London* (1821). The younger prepared the woodcuts for the elder's *Pilgrims of the Thames* (1838).
- 32 Jay, 'John Frederick Smith'. Andrew King, *The London Journal, 1845-83* (Ashgate, 2004), Part 3 (henceforth King).
- 33 Henry Vizitelly, *Glances back through Seventy Years*, 2 vols (London: Kegan Paul & Co., 1893), vol 2, p. 12.
- 34 *Quintin Matsys, the Blacksmith of Antwerp* (London: [1839]). *Clifton Grey; or Love and War: A Tale of the Present Day* (London: W. S. Johnson, 1854).
- 35 Jay, quoting from 'Notes and Queries' in *Spare Moments. The Jesuit*, 3 vols (London: Saunders and Otley, 1832) – 'later on repudiated by him' (Jay).
- 36 *The Prelate*, 2 vols (London: Newby, 1840) – reprinted Ward Lock's Shilling Library (1860) – received a 'lukewarm' review in the *Athenaeum* (King, p. 103). The title page of Smith's *Handbook up the Seine* (1840) states 'Professor of the Royal College of Bayeux, Officer of the University of France' (King, p. 102); Jay suggests he was 'English professor for rather more than a couple of years at the Abbey of the Grande Scinde' before joining the *Journal*.
- 37 Jay – e.g. Leghorn (Livorno) features in 'Sowing and Reaping/Gathering' [title changed after first few weeks], *CIFP* 183 – 215 (1 June 1861 – 11 January 1862).
- 38 'Stanfield Hall', *London Journal*, vol 9 –10 (19 May – 16 November





- 1850).
- 39 Jay, 'Minnigrey', *London Journal*, vols 14 – 16, nos. 346 – 397 (11 October 1851 – 2 October 1852) 'read by all classes', and mentioned 'approvingly' in House of Commons.
- 40 King, p. 103 says that before going to *CIFP* Smith earned £10 per instalment at the *Journal*, approximately £500 per year.
- 41 Jay suggests Smith was taken on after the proprietor dispensed with editor John Wilson Ross, in early 1849 and persuaded to try his hand as a writer of 'sensational romances'.
- 42 'Dick Tarleton; or Lessons of Life', *CIFP*, vol 3 (1855-6); 'Milly Moynes; or, Broken at Last', *CIFP*, vol 4, no. 79 – vol 5, no. 15, (4 June 1859 – 11 February 1860).
- 43 'The Flower of the Flock', *London Journal*, vol 26, nos. 667 – 89; (5 December 1857 – 1 May 1858).
- 44 *CIFP* n.s., vol I, no. 25, pp. 385-6.
- 45 *Macmillan's Magazine*, vol XIV, (May – October, 1866), p. 102 (henceforth *MM*).
- 46 *New York Times*, 8 May 1890 – per online archive, henceforth *NYT*.
- 47 Dick Collins, 'George William McArthur Reynolds' online at www.victorianlondon.org/mysteries/mysteries-00-introduction.htm – from which most of Reynolds' biographical details below are drawn.
- 48 George W. M. Reynolds, *The Mysteries of London*, First Series, 2 vols (London: George Vickers, 1846), p. 8.
- 49 *The Errors of the Christian Religion Exposed by a Comparison of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (London: Richard Carlile, 1832).
- 50 *The Mysteries of Paris from the French of Eugene Sue* was published by W. Dugdale, in 60 nos. in 1844. 'Wagner: The Wehr-Wolf', *Reynolds's Miscellany*, vol I, no. 1 – vol 2. no. 38 (7 November 1846 – 24 July 1847).
- 51 Anon., 'New and Cheap Forms of Popular Literature', *Eclectic Review*, n.s., vol XVIII (July – December 1845), p. 82, henceforth *ER*.
- 52 *ER*, vol XVIII (July – December 1845), p. 81. William Harrison Ainsworth, *Jack Sheppard. A Romance*, 3 vols, (London: Bentley, 1839).
- 53 Anon. 'Some Aspects of the Literature for the Poor', *ER* n.s., vol XIV (January – June 1868), p. 163.





- 54 James Greenwood, *The Seven Curses of London* (London: S. Rivers, [1869]).
- 55 Malcolm J. Errym, 'The Mystery in Scarlet', *The London Miscellany*, (1866).
- 56 B.M.D., per Family Search online. Malcolm Rymer married at St. Clement Danes, Westminster, on 3 January 1811. James Rymer, engraver, Luckenbooths [St. Giles] (*Williamson's Directory, 1774-75*); 11 Parliament Close (Directory for Edinburgh, 1800).
- 57 John Adcock, 'The Boys from Clerkenwell', online at 'Yesterday's Papers' (john-adcock.blogspot.com/), 2011. henceforth JA/YP. Much of the information about Rymer is indebted to this source. See also Dick Collins, 'The Pirates of Salisbury Square: Two Dreadful Writers and an Appalling Publisher', also online. *Castors for furniture; applicable to other purposes. Being British Patent Number: 8485* (London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1850).
- 58 Court of Bankruptcy details appear in *The Jurist*, vol 11, pt. 2 (1848): 'Jas Malcolm Rymer, Retreat, Haverstock Hill, Hampstead-road, Middlesex, author, Jan. 28 at 11'.
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- 60 The Editor [J. Malcolm Rymer], 'Popular Writing', *Queen's Magazine: A Monthly Miscellany of Literature and Art*, 1 (1842), pp. 99-103 – as printed in King, VPM, pp. 170-5.
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- 62 *Varney the Vampire; or, The Feast of Blood and The Black Monk; or, The Secret of the Grey Turret. A Romance* (both London: E. Lloyd, 1843 and 1844 resp.).
- 63 'The Golden Heart. A Tale for Christmas', *Reynolds's Miscellany*, vol XXXIV (1864-5).
- 64 Jay, 'The London Miscellany'.
- 65 'The String of Pearls, a Romance', *The People's Periodical*, nos. 7-24 (21 November 1866 – 20 March 1847), includes elements from *The Dog of Montargis*, 1814 (JA/YP).
- 66 George Augustus Sala, *London Up to Date* (London: A. & C. Black, 1894), pp. 287-8.





- 67 1881 Census per Family Search.
- 68 Viles co-edited John Awdley, *The Fraternitie of Vacabondes* 1575 ed. for the Early English Text Society (1869), reprinted *The Rogues and Vagabonds of Shakespeare's Youth*, 1880.
- 69 *Black Bess; or, The Knight of the Road. A Romance. A Tale of the Good Old Times and Blueskin; a Romance of the Last Century* (both London: E. Harrison, 1863-8 and 1866-7).
- 70 *The Black Highwayman, the Second Series of Black Bess* (London: E. Harrison, 1868-9).
- 71 JA/YP, 'Author of Black Bess', 2010.
- 72 *Gentleman Clifford and his White Mare Brilliant; or, The Ladies' Highwayman* (London: E. Harrison, 1864).
- 73 Steve Holland, 'William Stephens Hayward, 2007, at bearalley.blogspot.com, henceforth Holland, 'Bear Alley'. JA/YP, 'William Stephens Hayward (1835-1870)'. These biographical details are indebted to both.
- 74 *Hunted to Death, or Life in Two Hemispheres: a Tale of Love and Adventure* (London: n.p., 1862). *The Black Angel: A Tale of the American Civil War*, (London: Ward Lock, 1863).
- 75 *The Era*, 11 May 1862, as quoted by Holland, 'Bear Alley'.
- 76 *Lord Scatterbrain; or The Rough Diamond Polished* (London: C. H. Clarke, 1873).
- 77 [E. Harcourt Burrage], *The Ruin of Fleet Street* (London: E. W. Allen, [1882]), p. 41.
- 78 Steve Holland, 'Who wrote Jack Harkaway?' 2009 at bearalley.blogspot.com. Albert Johannsen, 'Bracebridge Hemmyng', www.ulib.niu.edu/badndp/hemyng_bracebridge.html on the site of the 'Beadle and Adams Dime Novel Digitization Project' (Northern Illinois University Libraries). To both biographical details are indebted.
- 79 Hardly a role model, Jack burns down his school before being sent to sea.
- 80 Henry Llewellyn Williams, 'Writers for Boys' [Review of Books/From Readers], *New York Times*, 16 January 1904 proclaims belatedly 'Bracebridge Hemmyng is dead.
- 81 British Library reprinted (n.d.), vol 2 *The Bondage of Brandon: A Novel* [Reprinted from 'The London Reader'], 3 vols (London: John and Robert Maxwell, n. d. [1884?]), henceforth *BB*.





- 82 *BB*, pp. 2-3, 31-2 (the latter in a chapter headed 'THE SNAKE' for emphasis!).
- 83 Roe was a Presbyterian pastor, who wrote some twenty novels of strong moral purpose.
- 84 *CIFP*, vol I, no. 8, pp. 113-15; vol I, no. 9, pp. 132-33 and no. 13, pp. 193-95 (henceforth S&T in text). This first suggestion does not deny the story of RLS's father as a boy in the apple barrel aboard the *Regent* overhearing Captain Soutar (see Tus. 19:194). The woodcuts are entitled 'JACK PLAYS THE LISTENER TO SOME PURPOSE', p. 113; 'JACK MANDERS ON BOARD THE CARADOC', p. 193.
- 85 *BB* no. 19, p. 145; no. 38, p.297; no. 44, p. 345.
- 86 'Captain Brand; or, The Pirate Schooner. A Tale of the Sea', *CIFP* n.s., vol 5, no. 129 – vol 6, no. 152 (19 May – 26 October 1860), henceforth CB in text. Don Ignacio appears vol 6, no. 133, p. 37. Later published as *Captain Brand of the "Centipede"* by Harry Gringo [Henry Augustus Wise, U.S.N.], (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1864).
- 87 The three passages then unknown to RLS are from John Stedman B.A., 'Old Jack', *Ainsworth's Magazine: A Miscellany of Romance, General Literature and Art*, vol XXXII (London: Chapman and Hall, 1852), 2 pts., pp. 232-8, 349-54, henceforth OJ in text; [Mrs. W. Rives], *Home and the World* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1857), UK edition, (London: 1857), henceforth HW in text; and Charles Kingsley, *Two Years Ago*, 3 vols (Cambridge: Macmillan and Co., 1857), where the 'poet, who had been tragically wrangling with his wife, walked forth on the sea-beach on a tempestuous night and witnessed the horrors of a wreck' ('Gossip', Tus. 29: 120), is Elsley Vavasour (pp. 65 ff.).
- 88 Alfred Elwes, *Paul Blake; or The Story of a Boy's Perils in the Islands of Corsica and Monte Cristo*, ill. H. Anelay (London: Griffith & Farran, 1859), henceforth PB in text.
- 89 His response, age 6, when asked why he was 'crouching behind a bush in the garden', Diary of M. I. Stevenson in 'Miscellanea', *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, vol 26 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925).
- 90 See e.g., 'A Penny Plain and Twopence Coloured', Tus. 19: 105.







‘Long for the penny number and weekly woodcut’: Stevenson on reading and writing popular romance

Marie Léger-St-Jean

‘The world was plain before I knew him, a poor penny world; but soon it was all coloured with romance.’¹

Robert Louis Stevenson never made a secret of his boyhood love for highwaymen literature. He longed ‘for the penny number and weekly woodcut’ both as a reader, eagerly awaiting the next instalment, and as a writer, hoping that he would one day know their ‘glory’, and the ensuing popularity.² Penny print is mentioned in a number of his 1880s periodical essays, but is specifically the subject of ‘Popular Authors’, published in the July 1888 issue of *Scribner’s Magazine*. Glenda Norquay describes Stevenson’s discourse in the article as ‘double-voiced’ in both his capacities as reader and writer.³ In his first role, he in turn performs a ‘passionate re-enact[ion] of his early enthusiasms’ and acts as ‘an older and wiser critic of them’ (Norquay, p. 176). From the second perspective, ‘he articulates the dynamics of the marketplace but presents himself above [...] ephemeral hacks [...] who were more fully constrained by it’ (p. 175). Norquay concentrates on Stevenson’s autobiographical account and successfully analyses a shifting stance towards popular literature, but Stevenson’s essay also offers an understanding of the relationship, within the low-brow cultural field, between ordinary readers and writers.

In the present paper, after an assessment of the mediating context of *Scribner’s*, the adjective ‘popular’ is problematised through an examination of its different meanings in Stevenson’s essay, in a recent scholarly article by Richard Ambrosini, and an 1842 essay by James Malcolm Rymer. With the aid of a comparative analysis of Rymer and Stevenson we then explore the





ambiguous symbiosis Stevenson discerns within the conflicting power relations between readers and writers of popular fiction – authors must ‘please’ their readers, who in turn rely upon authors to escape their ‘narrow prison’ (PA, pp. 126, 127). His assessment is further complicated by his own strategies for reading cheap literature, an approach that places a great emphasis on illustrations. Finally returning to earlier essays, I will argue that Stevenson’s consistent view of life, truth, dreams, and play in essays explains the commitment of Stevenson the storyteller to romance, a mode he reveres especially for its pictoriality, its capacity to produce vivid images in the reader’s mind.

Before diving deep into close reading, the literary scholar is wise to acknowledge the literary market which mediates any account: in this case, that of the American popular periodical press. The American monthly *Scribner’s* commissioned Stevenson to produce twelve essays in 1888, which Richard Ambrosini distinguishes from his earlier periodical writing. Publishing on the other side of the Atlantic, the Scottish writer is ‘addressing a new public’ for which ‘he constructed a new essayistic persona’, argues Ambrosini.⁴ He describes the Stevenson of the *Scribner’s* essays as forgoing ‘all literary decorum’ to freely ‘express his dissatisfaction with his past achievements, his unease at the kind of success they had brought him, and his impatience’ with ‘the reviewers back home who were lambasting him for allegedly currying favour with the American popular press with details of his personal life’.⁵ The essays do indeed offer up intimate autobiographical tit-bits passed for second-hand accounts, such as the opening anecdotes in *A Chapter on Dreams* and *Popular Authors*.

Despite the new setting and novel ‘essayistic persona’, the views Stevenson expresses on life, truth, and dreams are perfectly consistent with those expounded at least as far back as ‘Æs Triplex’ (1878), published in the *Cornhill Magazine* a decade earlier. The following year, his journey from Liverpool to California changed his aesthetic perspective. Interviewing





emigrants, he rediscovers his youthful interest in ‘pleasure-inducing stories’ and abandons ‘the aestheticising stylistic he had engaged in throughout the 1870s’, explains Ambrosini.⁶ ‘I’ll stick to stories’, Stevenson writes to Sidney Colvin, his literary adviser, in 1880 after the experience of writing *The Amateur Emigrant*, which ‘bored’ him so ‘hellishly’ and only led to posthumous publication (L3: 59–60). He might just be siding with his friend’s advice, who deemed the work ‘unworthy of him’, but the result was nonetheless that one year after he had returned to Scotland, the author breached the ‘boundary between elegant essayist and purveyor of adventure yarns’ and started writing ‘Treasure Island’ (L3: 38; Ambrosini, p. 26). He was now both critic and storyteller. This additional role did not alter his intermingled conceptions of dreams, truth, and fiction: I will be reading the *Scribner’s* essays alongside his earlier non-fiction efforts to reconstruct these intertwined notions.

Writing in ‘commercial subgenres’ such as sea adventures had turned Stevenson into ‘a valuable commodity’ for periodicals (Ambrosini, p. 30). The ‘love of gain’ was at first his only motive in writing for Charles Scribner, as the author confided in a letter from Christmas 1887 (L6: 90). By the following spring, he is gladly ‘get[ting] along better than [he] expected’, as he informs his good friend Edmund Gosse, though ‘it is difficult [...] to vary the matter’ (L6:142). Accordingly, seven of the *Scribner’s* essays ‘regist[er] the perplexities of an upper-class British writer caught in the mechanism of the American popular press’, as Ambrosini perceptively remarks (p. 30).

‘Popular’: a quantitative mise au point

At this point it is important to note that critical discourse tends to label both middle-class and lower-class cultures as ‘popular’. Yet *Scribner’s*, with its monthly numbers costing 25¢ (1 shilling) for 132 beautifully illustrated pages, was aimed at a middle-class readership, very different from the assumed readers of penny





numbers. Since cheap books were not sold in instalments in the USA, the American lower classes had to save up the equivalent of five weeks worth of penny numbers to buy a dime novel. Spanning around a hundred pages, dime novels did offer better money's worth than eight-page penny numbers (2.5 times more reading material), but were closer in unit price to middle-class literature than in Britain. In contrast with Ambrosini's use of the adjective 'popular' in conjunction with middle-class magazines, Stevenson situates 'Popular Authors' in the realm of penny numbers, and emphatically not in middle-class circulating libraries.

The lords of 'the land of penny numbers,' for once dignified by the use of capital letters, are set in explicit contrast to the 'bound and criticised' writers found in circulating libraries, 'the parish of three volumes' (PA, pp. 127, 124, 127). The geographical metaphor opposing 'land' and 'parish' gestures to a fact Victorianists tend to ignore: triple-deckers never reached as large an audience as penny numbers. Another resuscitator of the 'great men of the dust' and chronicler of book collecting, William Roberts, sets the record straight in the *Times Literary Supplement* on Christmas Day, 1930 as to which mid-Victorian novelist could claim the largest number of readers. One would expect the correct answer to be Charles Dickens, but 'at least two rivals could be cited against Dickens – G. W. M. Reynolds (1814-79) and John Frederick Smith (1804/5-90).'⁷ Stevenson refers to both 'the great J. F. Smith' and 'the unutterable Reynolds' in 'Popular Authors', perhaps denying the latter capitals because he ended up in annual uniform cloth-bound volumes priced at 6s. 6d. each (PA, p. 124).⁸ Both of these *London Journal* writers numbered ten times more buyers and even more readers than Dickens.

Although hard facts are difficult to find for British circulation figures, researchers such as socio-literary historian Nigel Cross, Charles Dickens biographer Edgar Johnson, and media scholar Andrew King have found precise indications in a variety of more or less reliable sources, including the publisher's own





claims (most likely inflated to ease the sale of advertising space).⁹ From these tentative figures, one can trace over two decades, the 1830s and 1840s, the growth of the fiction reading public due to serialization and cheap prices. In the 1830s, a novel published by the Minerva Press, best known for its contributions to the Gothic genre, but also present in sentimental and political genres, sold on average a thousand copies or less.¹⁰ The recourse to part publication raised circulation to the tens of thousands. Hannah Maria Jones reports that her domestic romance *Emily Moreland* sold 20,000 copies in numbers as early as 1829.¹¹ Seriality affords a deferred payment plan: consumers do not only read their novels monthly or weekly, they also pay for them monthly or weekly. A decade later, Charles Dickens was selling 2 to 2.5 times more: 40,000 copies of *Pickwick Papers* per issue at the time Part 15 appeared and 50,000 copies of *Nicholas Nickleby* throughout its serialization.¹²

Penny number weeklies soon brought circulation figures into the hundred thousands. The *London Journal* claimed a circulation of 100,000 in its 'Notices to Correspondents' on 29 August 1846. Penny periodicals thrived below the level of perception of middle-class twopenny weeklies like Dickens's *Household Words*. Wilkie Collins bravely descended into the recesses of cheap print and explored penny fiction for the benefit of middle-class readers in 'The Unknown Public' (published in the pages on his friend's aforementioned magazine, 1858).¹³ Penny romances were published in two serial formats: as 'continued in our next' stories included in periodicals like the *London Journal* and in 8- to 16-page stand-alone weekly instalments headed by a woodcut.¹⁴ Cheapness and seriality ensured the largest reading audiences of the time.

Rymer on 'Popular Writing' (1842)

Interestingly, at the dawn of the penny number revolution of cheap fiction, James Malcolm Rymer, in 'Popular Writing'





(published in his short-lived sixpenny *Queens' Magazine*, 1842), still scornfully defines popular literature, 'that which everybody reads', but then, surprisingly, defines this as the province of circulating libraries, only briefly mentioning cheaper publication formats as falling short of the middle classes' standard of respectability.¹⁵ 'Everybody' evidently formed a much wealthier class for Rymer than for Stevenson, forty years later, and a much more despised one. Ironically, Rymer is the 'MALCOLM J. ERRYM' to which Stevenson refers in 'Popular Authors' (p. 126). Indeed, he was to become, under various pseudonyms, one of the most prolific authors of early penny fiction. His survey of the imaginative literature market in 1842 covers a much broader spectrum of writing than Stevenson's account, describing four types of imaginative literature, three types of writers, and three types of readers.¹⁶

Rymer is allegedly prompted into discussing 'popular writing' by a letter in which an anonymous writer offers his or her services to the editor, emphasizing 'My style is strictly *popular*' (PW, p. 99, emphasis original). The essayist then enlists eighteenth-century authors to tell him what is 'popular writing' (PW, p. 99). An imaginary conversation ensues and Walpole and Radcliffe reply with stock Gothic features: a larger-than-life 'old helmet' and 'defunct warrior' are *The Castle of Otranto's* contributions whilst 'The Mysteries of Udolpho comprises every department of popular writing' (PW, p. 99). Smollett suggests instead 'real life'. Content, not format, defines Rymer's popular literature, in contrast with Stevenson's penny number with woodcut.

Amongst the types discussed, one does not qualify as popular: intellectually challenging works written by those 'who despise public opinion', and read by a tenth of a percent of the population because nobody else understands (PW, p. 101). Indeed, Rymer's entire typology is organized around the premise that readers dislike being 'alarmed with anything far above their comprehension' (PW, p. 100). Since 999 out of 1000 are 'fools', only works





that are easily understood can become popular (PW, p. 100n). The only reason the general public might read something they do not understand is because they would be 'ashamed' to display their incomprehension after the leaders of the 'herd' have approved of the book (PW, p. 101). Initially therefore Rymer's essay distinguishes three types of works: those the majority will understand, those they will not, and those they would not dare to confess they do not understand. Rymer contends that the peer-pressure is so great that only fashion (i.e. reviewers) compels the public to read some of the most canonical novelists of the early nineteenth century. Indeed, couched behind the adoration is the mass audience's perception of Scott as 'rather dry'; ordinary readers are 'tired of' Ainsworth; 'they did not at all understand' Bulwer; and Dickens 'fairly bothered them' (PW, pp. 103, 104). Rymer accuses the last two respectively of 'transcendentalism' and 'pathos' (PW, p. 103). Should literary historians accept Rymer's claim as true, a reception history based on reviews no longer appears to be a trustworthy approximation of most readers' appreciation.

Whilst it was 'beneficial' that Scott enter the field of imaginative literature and induce 'writers of all grades and conditions' to follow him given the enormous profits he brought to the industry, Rymer surmises that readers probably found the change unpleasant (PW, p. 101). The type of literature that had circulated respectably in libraries was pushed into cheaper formats of dubious respectability, which many consumers in consequence refrained from patronising. Rymer does not mention that it was now reaching new lower-class audiences. The chief characteristic of different forms of popularity is not class, but their consideration for respectability and fashion. When content similar to that in Minerva novels reappeared 'Phoenix-like' in the circulating libraries, the material form of the book had changed from the earlier 'five or seven small volumes, printed in soot and water, on thin cartridge paper' into an imitation of the 'respectable' aspect of the three-volume Waverley novels (PW, p. 102).





Rymer distinguishes between true popularity, i.e. that of works the public would choose to read for pleasure, and that created by the 'new class of readers' that had, before Scott, 'repudiated all novel reading as waste of time' (PW, p. 102). The latter group's tastes apparently set trends, for Rymer is indirectly arguing that reviewers prompted the mass audience to replace the pleasure of reading with that of being fashionable: 'a still larger class [...] would read them [Minerva-Press-type novels] if they dared, but [...] prefer being bewildered with what they can't understand, for fashion's sake' (PW, p. 100). Stevenson similarly opposes fabricated popularity to broader appeal.

The Scottish *fin-de-siècle* writer speaks tenderly of the 'great men of the dust' who wrote penny-issued novels while dreaming of authoring triple-deckers (PA, p. 124). Labouring under the contrary impulse, Stevenson expresses his envy at their far-reaching celebrity. Addressing directly these 'Popular Authors' in the essay of the same title, he exclaims: 'Your butcher, the landlady at your seaside lodgings – if you can afford that indulgence, the barmaid whom you doubtless court, even the Rates and Taxes that besiege your door, have actually read your tales and actually know your names' (PA, p. 124). Whilst bringing to their attention how tangible and almost morally superior their popularity is in contrast with that of authors culturally legitimised by critics like himself, Stevenson registers that his material situation is more advantageous than theirs. They might not be able to afford seaside lodgings, they are actually more likely to be in debt. However, their popularity is of the true kind, not the sort 'made by hack journalists and countersigned by yawning girls' and associated with volumes, which Rymer relates to the entrance of a respectable middle-class corps into the novel-reading audience following Scott's success (PA, p. 124). Exclusive critical approval (whose marketing power Rymer brands as fashion) is in both cases opposed to widespread genuine delight.

Taken in its context within Stevenson's article, the longing 'for





the penny number and the weekly woodcut' is that of the writer's for the power to captivate the large audiences that only penny authors reach. The Scottish champion of romance also discusses, further in the essay, the reader's longing for the next instalment inherent to serial publication from the Victorian era onwards, a gap that can be filled with much imaginative speculation.¹⁷ Stevenson's yearning is perhaps less that of reaching a specific market than that of being grasped in a specific manner: passionate absorption. In an 1891 letter to a Sydney University student, Stevenson writes: 'I only care to be read by young men; they alone can read. [...] some years ago I read with the greed and gusto of a pig, sucking up some of the very paper (you would think) into my brain. And that is the only kind of reading for which it is worth while to support the pains of writing' (L7: 82). It is on that account that he considers he failed in his own attempt at 'the penny number and weekly woodcut': 'Treasure Island', serialised in *Young Folks*. One of his maids would proudly come up to him to announce that she had finished reading a chapter. It was a chore, 'that any pleasure should attend the exercise never crossed her thoughts', sadly reports Stevenson (PA, p. 124). Pleasure was at the centre of Stevenson's theory of reading.¹⁸

The wholesome pre-Waverley form of literary popularity based on pleasure that Rymer envisages with regards to novel reading finds echo in Stevenson's 'English Admirals' (1878). He suggests forms of popularity that reach across the class divide, but these are bestowed upon men and their lives, not men and their works. Indeed, he submits admirals and boxers as objects of broad-based admiration. Boxing brought together 'all ranks of society' in the end of the eighteenth century up until the beginning of the nineteenth.¹⁹ Afterwards, popular pride in 'the exploits of the Admirals' united the nation in a similar way, inspiring not only combatants, but simple 'merchant clerks with more heart and spirit to their book-keeping by double entry' (Admirals, pp. 38, 41). Indeed, beyond the impossibility for all to 'take pleasure





in *Paradise Lost*, there are 'certain common sentiments' within a nation leading every individual to 'admire' in these men's lives 'a sort of apotheosis' of one's self (p. 38). Stevenson deems their 'bracing moral influence' greater than that of 'the virtues of a curate-and-tea-party novel' (p. 41). The 'stories of sea-captains' infuse every Englishman with 'heart and spirit' (p. 41). Stevenson concludes, the English must be thankful that their 'admirals were not only great-hearted but big-spoken' (p. 43). The change of register, from 'great' to 'big', is notable. The grandness of the admirals' lives is of more use, Stevenson's 'Benthamite arithmetician' could doubtless calculate, if relayed in a language to which all can relate (p. 43). Stevenson commends these heroes' capacity to offer a heightened sense of self to an audience through bold gestures and language.

Returning to Rymer's literary typology, beyond incomprehensible works and those both unavoidable and unenjoyable, Rymer delineates two truly popular genres, and their readers, through their formulaic content: the insipidly sentimental aristocratic drama, heir of the epistolary novel which morphed into the personal fashionable novel in the 1830s, and horror tales, inherited from the Gothic and leading to 'the stirring and alarming adventurous novel, in which each page contains a striking incident' (PW, p. 103). Stevenson's 'Popular Authors' deals with only the latter in any detail. Explaining why each of these two genres remain ever popular, Rymer just as much describes their narrative conventions as he characterises their readers. A class-divide, and not a gender-divide, as one might expect, appears.

Rymer exposes the epistolary novel's formula in the form of stock characters and events. The cast normally includes 'a young lady – her guardian – [...] Captain B., her lover – Lady C., her confidant – an ignorant waiting-maid [...] who carries notes and messages, and in the funniest manner in the world mispronounces all "hard words"', as did Mrs Malaprop in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775), to much greater comic





effect suggests Rymer (PW, p. 99). The catalogue of inevitable incidents includes a duel, a visit to a pleasure garden (Vauxhall in Kennington, on the South Bank, or Ranelagh in Chelsea), 'a quantity of small miseries and petty misconceptions, all ending in a marriage' (PW, p. 99). The style, at least that of the concluding letter, is nauseatingly 'incoherent', with the heroine-narrator 'talking of rapture and tears, point-lace, and sighs' (PW, p. 99). After Scott, the 'old friends' reappear in 'new dresses' and dancing has moved to Almack's, the Hanover Square Rooms and the Concert Room of the Opera (PW, p. 102). The epistolary novel has become the fashionable novel, but the plot is virtually unchanged.

This particular strand of popular literature was once more descending into a cheaper format, lent for a pence by the 'woman at the tobacconist's', when a new development rescued its higher-class popularity: libel (PW, p. 102). An anonymous reviewer of *Jack Sheppard* in the *British and Foreign Review* blames both the journalist and the novelist's attraction to banter for the spreading of an appetite for scandal. Within literature –

Next in popularity to the inimitable romances of Scott, came novels of modern life and manners for the use of the genteel, in which not current customs, but living characters were purported to be displayed, – not merely the heartless and headless exclusivism of Almack's, but the intrigues of Lady—, and the terrible and mysterious infidelities of Lord—, and the ridiculous displays of wealthy vanity made by Mrs—. ²⁰

The anonymous reviewer stresses that the distinctive trait of the personal fashionable novel is not that it represents 'current customs', as opposed to Scott's historical romances: the evil rather lies in the representation of 'living characters', of real men and women and their defects. Novels henceforth have become extended versions of crim. con. sheets, nurturing an appetite





for scandal.²¹ In a parallel development, coteries 'each more mercenary and more unscrupulous than its predecessor' have turned criticism into a 'great arena' (p. 242). As a consequence, the moral sense of the public was so profoundly affected that only 'the broad, the farcical, the grimly real, or the grossly personal' attracted its attention (ibid.). The reviewer attributes the unbearable representation of naked reality in both fiction (e.g. *Jack Sheppard* and Mrs Trollope's *Michael Armstrong: the Factory Boy*) and non-fiction ('late biographies and "reminiscences"') to previous debasement in literary criticism (ibid.).

Whilst Rymer agrees that the 'mixed career of the fashionable and personal novel [...] appeal[ed] to the most universal of all passions, the love of slander and detraction', he places it in the context of a longer history of 'vapid sentimentality' (PW, p. 103). Thence, more generally, the essayist contends that silver-fork novels are popular because their consumers understand no reality but their own, one in which strange incidents induce great anxiety: a dinner wearing one's boots because one's servant was absent when one was meant to change, for instance, or coiffure-related drama destabilising a young lady as a country dance sets into motion. Self-identification is only possible for readers of a very privileged background.

Rymer's discussion of the second strand of popular literature is comparatively superficial. The explanation regarding the popularity of 'spook stories' is equally despising, but much less persuasive in its attempt to portray readers as unimaginative. 'It's the privilege of the ignorant and the weak to love superstition', he writes, adding that '[t]he only strong mental sensation they are capable of is fear' (PW, p. 101). The typical reader appears to be nursemaids, who then scare their infant charges with analogous personages to those found in the novels they read.²² Horror literature has such a distinctive power over working-class imagination that it appears to Rymer as foreign to regular literary enjoyment: 'Is the superstitious terror of a nursery maid [...] to be called a





love of imaginative literature?’ (PW, p. 101). Ironically, Rymer is now well known for his gruesome creations published anonymously by Edward Lloyd. Indeed, scholars well trained in the field of penny bloods such as Helen R. Smith recognise his tales by their ‘macabre and morbid subjects’.²³ Varney the Vampire and Sweeney Todd are both the offspring of his imagination.

The penny publication audience sits in an ambiguous position in ‘Popular Authors’. The ‘simple people’ is also the ‘mighty public’, granted the power to bestow the true popularity discussed above (PA, pp. 122, 126). Stevenson grants it the power to elect literary representatives ‘[b]y spontaneous public vote’, disregarding those the critics’ appointed, but also refuses to invest it with the creative power required to dress up their fancies (PA, p. 126). Indeed, ‘uneducated readers’ are powerless to give shape to their dreams and aspirations, able only to adopt, not to create (PA, p. 127). Contrastingly, Stevenson’s own personal method of consumption relies on the audience’s power to produce its own text with the help of illustrations. Nonetheless, he never invokes it as a widespread tactic, only a very personal one, perhaps that of an upper-class writer reading lower-class fiction. We will return to Stevenson’s views after having addressed Rymer’s typology of writers.

In contrast with those ‘who despise public opinion’, two types of writers strive to produce popular literature: ‘those who value the world’s opinion as the breath of life’ and those, like penny-number hacks, ‘who, as well as living to write, must likewise write to live’ (PW, p. 101). In the late eighteenth century, the latter category comprised ‘disappointed governesses, cashiered ladies maids, and small literary men’ (PW, p. 102). After Scott increased the profitability of novel writing, men and women of higher social rank took to the pen: ‘Every needy gentleman and dowager in difficulties commenced novelist’ (PW, p. 102). To both types of writers, the not-yet-but-soon-to-become-popular Rymer advises to ‘study well the animals for whom he is about to cater’ in order





to identify effectively their 'capacities', unless one is limited to the same faculties (PW, p. 101). A writer of the latter sort can write his or her best and still be 'a very popular writer' (PW, p. 101). He can then hope to be 'read by the majority, and praised and fêted' for some 'eight to ten years', since reading fashions are short-lived (PW, pp. 101, 100). According to both Rymer and Stevenson, popular authors owe their celebrity to their readers, not their talent.

Stevenson on 'Popular Authors' (1888)

Rymer's essay, presented in counterpoint, usefully illuminates Stevenson's. On the one hand, the two pieces offer complementary and contrasting descriptions of what constitutes popular literature. On the other hand, both men appear to mirror one another as in a chiasma. First, Rymer was hoping to find his place as a middle-class author with his sixpence monthly *Queens' Magazine*, but failed and had to return to (very successful) penny hack writing for his previous publisher, Lloyd. In contrast, Stevenson claimed to aspire to the blessing of a penny author's popularity, but only found success as a middle-class writer. Secondly, Rymer believes a popular writer must despise his readers whereas Stevenson has a much more ambivalent view of popular fiction consumers.

For Stevenson, the writer supplies the imagination that produces an embodiment for the readers' 'nameless longings' ('Penny Plain', p. 230), for their 'naked fancies' regarding 'ardently but impotently preconceived' changed situations (PA, p. 127). He (for Stevenson lists no woman) invites 'autobiographical romancing' (PA, p. 127) by describing 'a trivial but desirable incident, such as we love to prefigure for ourselves'.²⁴ Norquay labels reading's capacity to 'create aspirations, produce false expectations or offer imaginary fulfilment' as the 'nature of textual desire'.²⁵ The adjectives 'false' and 'imaginary' suggest a negative, almost treacherous power that fiction holds. Though the circumstances





Stevenson describes might be interpreted as deceitful, as Norquay does, he does not argue that texts instigate desire, but that readers rely on them to fulfil pre-existing ambitions. The desire is not textual; it is its fulfilment that is textual, when gratification can be found neither in reality nor in dreams.

Interested in 'the primordial mechanisms of storytelling', Stevenson invests popular authors with the power to produce imaginative works that give shape to the aspirations of their readers (Ambrosini, p. 30). He asserts in 'A Gossip on Romance' (1882) that the 'demand for fit and striking incident' is as fundamental as the 'desire for knowledge' ('Gossip', p. 72). The former stems from the need to leave aside our lives for a moment and try on another one. Romance offers the required incident: 'some situation, that we have long dallied with in fancy, is realised in the story with enticing and appropriate details' (p. 77). Incident must be 'epically conceived, fitly embodying a crisis' (p. 73). It need not have as much 'material importance' as dealings 'with strong and deadly elements, banditti, pirates, war, and murder': even as 'trifling' an incident as Joseph Haydn and Consuelo's trespass into grounds of the anonymous Canon on their way to Vienna in chapter LXXVI of George Sand's *Consuelo* conveys a 'fresh and stirring [...] impression of adventure' (p. 75). From then on, as readers, 'we forget the characters; then we push the hero aside; then we plunge into the tale in our own person and bathe in fresh experience' (p. 77). This readiness to role-play, 'to take an active part in fancy with the characters' is 'the triumph of storytelling' (p. 76). The reader of romance, according to Stevenson, is not a passive observer of the events recounted but an active participant.

Imagination is more than a mere palliative, it is 'a man's true life', that 'for which he consents to live', contends Stevenson in 'The Lantern-Bearers', published in *Scribner's* five months before 'Popular Authors'.²⁶ The anecdote framing the latter illustrates how a penny author can light up for his readers a parallel life,





one which they wish they were leading, one which they are truly leading, internally. He describes how a 'deck hand' confidently suggested Stephens Hayward's *Tom Holt's Log* (1868) as 'a true picture of a sailor's life' during his 1879 transatlantic trip aboard the *Devonia* (PA, p. 122). Though a most improbable tale, *Tom Holt's Log* is 'true to what the readers dreamed' (PA, p. 127). In the central anecdote from 'The Lantern-Bearers', Stevenson is no longer the observer but the subject. He tells of a game involving lanterns that he played as a boy in September on holiday in North Berwick: 'To the eye of the observer they [the boys] are wet and cold and drearily surrounded; but ask themselves, and they are in the heaven of a recondite pleasure, the ground of which is an ill-smelling lantern' (LB, p. 255). Fiction embodying dreams represents for all classes, like child-play, an inner life truer than the empirical reality external observers can grasp. Stevenson is categorical – 'no man lives in the external truth' – and gives three examples, none of which is an urban working-class reader deluded by cheap literature: 'The clergyman, in his spare hours, may be winning battles, the farmer sailing ships, the banker reaping triumph in the arts' (LB, pp. 256, 255). A 'critical attitude, whether to books or life', is exceptional (PA, p. 127). If, according to Stevenson, '[f]iction is to the grown man what play is to the child', romance is fiction brought to the point where 'the game so chimes with his fancy that he [...] loves to recall it and dwells upon its recollection with entire delight' ('Gossip', p. 77). One's true life is not available for others to observe.

The reflection of an individual's formless aspirations can in turn shape his or her external life. Indeed, Stevenson suggests in a rhetorical question that *Tom Holt's Log* had been 'the means of sending [the aforementioned] mariner to sea' (PA, p. 127). Such a formative (not merely stimulating or reflective) influence also affected the essayist himself in his youth, yet in a pictorial rather than verbal medium. Indeed, he asks in 'A Penny Plain and Twopence Coloured' (1884), speaking of a juvenile drama





series: 'What am I? what are life, art, letters, the world, but what my Skelt has made them?'.²⁷ 'A Gossip on Romance' stresses the pictoriality of romance: the chief identification test is that 'after we have flung the book aside, the scenery and adventures remain present to the mind' ('Gossip', p. 77). Stevenson lists the qualities of Richardson's *Clarissa*: 'it contains wit, character, passion, plot, conversations full of spirit and insight, letters sparkling with unstrained humanity' ('Gossip', p. 73). What is missing is 'pictorial, or picture-making romance' ('Gossip', p. 74). Stevenson defines this 'plastic part of literature' as the capacity 'to embody character, thought, or emotion in some act or attitude that shall be remarkably striking to the mind's eye' ('Gossip', p. 72). Romance produces mental images, as do illustrations, which are so true that the audience strives to bring reality in line with them.

Also striking to the mind's eye are dreams. 'A Chapter on Dreams', the first *Scribner's* essay, equates them with the past. Indeed, it 'is lost for ever', he writes, 'brought down to the same faint residuum as a last night's dream, to some incontinuous images, and an echo in the chambers of the brain'.²⁸ Ten years earlier, in his 1878 *Cornhill* essay 'Æs Triplex', Stevenson relates dreams to an understanding of life when he claims literature's continuing aim is to bring readers 'to rise from the consideration of living to the Definition of Life' and that its most satisfactory attempts have pronounced life 'a vapour, or a show, or made out of the same stuff with dreams'.²⁹ Both pictorial romance and dreams visually colonise the mind.

Whilst the dreams which visit one at night correspond to life, daydreams match fiction. Books can be 'divine daydreams, written and printed and bound [...] to be bought for money and enjoyed at pleasure' ('Gossip', p. 74). 'A Gossip on Romance' arranges daydreaming on a continuum with creative writing: 'the great creative writer shows us the realisation and the apotheosis of the daydreams of common men' (p. 72). Admirals' lives are the apotheosis of one's self whilst great fiction, poetry, and drama is





the apotheosis of one's daydreams. There are 'ideal laws' to day-dreaming, which stories must 'obey', even if they be 'nourished with the realities of life' ('Gossip', p. 72). Daydreams are not only an indication of desirable incidents but also of effective style: their 'crystallization' teaches the artist 'the selective criterion', as Stevenson writes to his art critic cousin Bob (L4: 170). The notion of omission is consistent with the definition of style detailed in 'A Note on Realism' (1883):³⁰

What to put in and what to leave out; whether some particular fact be organically necessary or purely ornamental; whether, if it be purely ornamental, it may not weaken or obscure the general design; and finally whether, if we decide to use it, we should do so grossly and notably, or in some conventional disguise.³¹

Daydreams offer creative writing a stylistic template that contrasts favourably with that of the Victorian realist novel (where facts become ornamental and obscure the general design).

The term 'parish', which launched a quantitative comparison above, also suggests a narrow-mindedness – perhaps due to realist imperatives – that vanishes in the vast expanses that the expression 'land of penny numbers' conjures. Indeed, the admirer of highwaymen complained in 'A Note on Realism' that a certain hue of realism had grown into a moral obligation within the novel form. He explains that detail was by then 'bound like a duty on the novelist', following its inauguration by 'the romantic' Walter Scott ('Realism', p. 26). During the intervening half century, detail was taken up by 'the semi-romantic' Honoré de Balzac, 'and his more or less wholly unromantic followers', explains Stevenson (p. 26). Stephen Arata rightly equates 'detail' with 'the naturalistic "fact"'.³² The realist imperatives are those of realism understood in an increasingly restrictive sense over the course of the nineteenth century. In the decades between Rymer's and





Stevenson's essays on the 'Popular', public consciousness of penny literature led to moral panics; at the same time, the tendency to restrict serious fiction to sordid realism forced authors writing for the middle classes into the narrow 'parish' of contemporary and local conditions.³³ Stevenson laments the loss of the historical novel, now 'forgotten', as if 'truth to the conditions of man's nature and the conditions of man's life, the truth of literary art' were bound to the present ('Realism', p. 26). This 'truth' he defines transcendently, 'free of the ages', and as readily told 'in a carpet comedy, in a novel of adventure, or a fairy tale' as in more respectable or serious reading matter (p. 26). Similarly, realism describes an art work's 'technical method' (effectively, its choice of details) and has no bearing on its 'fundamental truth': 'Be as ideal or as abstract as you please, you will be none the less veracious' (p. 26). For Stevenson, truth is neither the prerogative of high art nor of the nineteenth-century fad for realism.³⁴

Truth is bound to neither realism nor written literature as a whole. In the first essay of 'Byways of Book Illustration', Stevenson praises the illustrator of an edition of *Pilgrim's Progress* for having 'dreamed a dream, as literal, as quaint, and almost as apposite as Bunyan's', so that 'text and pictures make but the two sides of the same homespun yet impassioned story'.³⁵ In his unpublished review of the illustrated *Treasure Island* which might have been intended as a third instalment of the aforementioned series, Stevenson explains that illustrations in a storybook are more than 'mere pretty picture[s]': they 'should be the handmaiden of the text, competing with it upon equal terms, telling the same story in all its typical moments, with another accent and the stamp of a different mind'.³⁶ Illustrations are powerful, they enable readers to skim a story, 'swift as a racer', to seize the tale's 'marrow' in 'five living minutes instead of in the tedium of several hours of study' (Carpenter, p. 324). Indeed, reading pictures is a 'living' process compared to reading words: 'to turn to the text is but to hear [the story] in a sister dialect,





and much diluted' (p. 323). The first reading, whether pictorial or textual, becomes the 'true perusal' and creates an ever-lasting impression (p. 324). When a story is encountered first through illustrations, these generate high expectations: no matter how skilled a writer Ainsworth might have been, the Jonathan Wild in his *Jack Sheppard* 'was nothing, he was not [Stevenson's] old love, he was not that startling figure with the bludgeon that stood in the prints' (p. 324). Interestingly, the prints Stevenson revelled in are likely to have been brought out after Ainsworth's novel. It is the order of consumption, not production, which counts.

Stevenson recounts two circumstances in which nothing but illustrations was available to yield the story. In both 'A Penny Plain and Twopence Coloured' and 'Popular Authors', he recalls the 'inexpensive pleasure' from his childhood consisting in window-shopping for respectively juvenile drama and gruesome penny-number fiction (PA, p. 125). The former article was published in his friend William Ernest Henley's *Magazine of Art*. In it, he describes, full of nostalgia, the stationer's shop on a corner of Leith Walk, in his native Edinburgh, which 'displayed a [miniature] theatre in working order, with a forest "set," and "combat" and a few "robbers carousing" in the slides; and below and about, dearer tenfold to [him]! the plays themselves, those budgets of romance, lay tumbled one upon another' ('Penny Plain', p. 227). The sheets were more precious in his view than the theatre because he was only concerned with the illustrations, which he read as one would an illustrated book. In 'Popular Authors', Stevenson recounts how he would stroll 'from one newsvender's [sic] window to another's' in a quest to absorb the continuations of last Saturday's 'weekly gallery' (PA, p. 125). The analogy with a 'gallery' is apt, for it is through 'subsequent woodcuts and their legends' that young Stevenson would 'try to fish out' the novel adventures of his heroes after his nanny suspended the purchase of the text (PA, p. 125). Sir Walter Scott's youthful encounter with bishop Thomas Percy's *Reliques* 'beneath a huge platanus tree in





the ruins of what had been intended for an old fashioned harbour' contrasts with Stevenson's description of the urban setting of his first literary hunts.³⁷ Whilst for Scott '[t]o read and to remember' had been one and 'the same thing' on that occasion, the author of 'Treasure Island' started his career (re)constructing serial narratives from the interaction between illustration and its caption, completely by-passing the body of the text (ibid.).

Nonetheless, illustrations cannot be read on their own: they require legends: 'how – if the name by chance were hidden – I would wonder in what play he figured, and what immortal legend justified his attitude and strange apparel!' ('Penny Plain', p. 227). Stevenson refers to the printed captions that accompany each vignette 'however trivial the event recorded' in 'Bagster's *Pilgrim's Progress*'.³⁸ The way Stevenson refers to legends when discussing illustrations – it can also be found in his unpublished article on the illustrated *Treasure Island* – suggests that he prefers to read illustrations with its short explanatory text. Readers thereby have the power to disregard the author's text and replace it by that offered by the illustrator, the engraver, and the editor responsible for the legends, a reading method which requires much more interpretive, and therefore imaginative, capabilities.

Readers of illustrations and illustrated texts are masters of the text and 'act as [their] own artists' (PA, p. 125). In the stationer's shop as an 'intended purchaser', the young Stevenson could flip through the plays: 'Every sheet we fingered was another lightning glance into obscure, delicious story; it was like wallowing in the raw stuff of story-books' ('Penny Plain', p. 228). Note the lack of article before 'story': Stevenson saw neither 'an obscure, delicious story' nor 'obscure, delicious stories', but 'obscure, delicious story', indicating in part the generalised meaning of story: 'Traditional, poetic, or romantic legend or history' (OED, 5b), as in 'famous in story', but also suggesting 'story' as an uncountable substance or abstraction, on the same level with opposing 'reality'. Illustrations might be the 'raw stuff of story-books', but their





substance is 'story'. 'A Gossip on Romance' offers a stunningly asymmetrical parallelism: 'The words, if the book be eloquent, should run thenceforward in our ears like the noise of breakers, or the story, if it be a story [i.e. story-book], repeat itself in a thousand coloured pictures to the eye' ('Gossip', p. 69). Hence, a 'book' can be 'eloquent', in which case its fabric is that of 'words', but a story-book has no components, is nothing more than a 'story'. Story occupies the same ontological space as words, the former appealing to the eye and the latter to the ears. Stevenson does not mention illustration and text as components of the story-book because story, to him, cannot be broken down into, on the one side, pictures and, on the other side, words. These are but a story's material expression: it itself remains whole.

Stevenson's essays express a world-view split into an external and an internal life. One's internal life is not to be confused with rational judgement or moral character. It is all built of imagination, composed of dreams (both of the day and night-time sorts), of play, and of fiction. Only the external life is available to the realistic novelist, yet the internal life is the true one. Hence it is that the realist novel is untrue. Romance produces images in the reader's mind that he or she can revisit afterwards, as one relives one's childhood memories or dips in and out of one's dreams. Popular romance, since it is the genre that sells the most, does so for the largest portion of the population. It thus nearly reaches the 'universal effectiveness' Stevenson sought.³⁹





I would like to thank especially Richard Dury, special co-editor of this issue, for his careful probing, conscientious editing, and expert knowledge of Stevenson.

NOTES

Quotations from Stevenson's letters, ed. by Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Meheew (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) by 'L' with volume and page number.

- 1 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'A Penny Plain and Twopence Coloured', *Magazine of Art*, 1884, 227-232 (p. 230), henceforth cited in the text as 'Penny Plain'.
- 2 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Popular Authors', *Scribner's Magazine*, 1888, 122-128 (p. 124), henceforth cited in the text as PA.
- 3 Glenda Norquay, *Robert Louis Stevenson and Theories of Reading: The Reader as Vagabond* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 175.
- 4 Richard Ambrosini, 'Stevenson's Self-portrait as a Popular Author in the *Scribner's Essays* and *The Wrong Box*', *Journal of Stevenson Studies*, 4 (2007), 151-167 (p. 154).
- 5 Ambrosini 2007, pp. 165, 153.
- 6 Richard Ambrosini, 'The Four Boundary-Crossings of R. L. Stevenson, Novelist and Anthropologist', in *Robert Louis Stevenson: Writer of Boundaries*, ed. by Richard Ambrosini and Richard Dury (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), pp. 23-35 (p. 29), henceforth cited in the text as Ambrosini.
- 7 W. Roberts, 'A Victorian Best Seller: J. F. Smith', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 1930, p. 1104.
- 8 Graham Law, 'Reynolds's "memoirs" series and "the literature of the kitchen"', in *G. W. M. Reynolds: Nineteenth-Century Fiction, Politics, and the Press*, ed. by Anne Humpherys and Louis James (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 199-210 (p. 202).
- 9 Print runs at least are much more readily available in France, thanks to the *brevets d'imprimeur*. See David Bellos, 'The *Bibliographie de la France* and Its Sources', *The Library*, 5th series, 28 (1973), 64-67. St Clair advises caution when presented with British circulation figures submitted by authors or publishers because the number of





- copies said to be sold was often exaggerated, especially when the actual sales were unusually high, William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 25.
- 10 Nigel Cross, *The Common Writer: Life in Nineteenth-Century Grub Street* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 176. For an illuminating discussion of the Minerva Press genres, see Hannah Doherty's upcoming dissertation at Stanford University.
 - 11 Royal Literary Fund archive, British Library, case file 553 (July 1839 letter, third page). Cross wrote his monograph after having archived all the records and the committee's minutes.
 - 12 Edgar Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, 2 vols (London: V. Gollancz, 1953) vol 1, pp. 149, 219, 249.
 - 13 Incidentally, he ridicules the strange habit of including 'Notices to Correspondents', which were not yet to be found in middle-class periodicals. He deems it 'the most interesting page in the penny journals' because in asking very private questions to the editor, the correspondents appear 'utterly impervious to the senses of ridicule and shame'. Wilkie Collins, 'The Unknown Public', *Household Words*, 1858, 217-222 (p. 219). This section of the penny papers included announcements from the editor, answers to readers' enquiries, and disguised marketing.
 - 14 For more information on penny literature until 1860, visit my *Price One Penny: A Database of Cheap Literature, 1837-1860*, [<http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/pop/index.php>].
 - 15 James Malcolm Rymer, 'Popular Writing', *Queens' Magazine*, 1.3 (June 1842), 99-103 (p. 99), henceforth cited in the text as PW. See also Neil Macara Brown in this journal.
 - 16 'Imaginative literature' was opposed to 'useful knowledge' during the Copyright debates of 1837-1842, therefore very topical. According to Chris Vanden Bossche, '[t]he question was whether a special privilege was to be granted to "imaginative literature" or whether the public's need for "useful knowledge" should be considered primary', see 'The Value of Literature: Representations of Print Culture in the Copyright Debate of 1837-1842', *Victorian Studies*, 38 (1994): 41.
 - 17 Previously, serialization only involved slicing a book into equal gatherings for sale at a more accessible price. The break-down did not follow any narrative imperative; in fact, it is sometimes





- impossible to tell where instalments started or ended unless one consults a copy with parts still in their paper covers. For the pre-Victorian history of seriality, see Roy McKeen Wiles, *Serial Publication in England Before 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1957).
- 18 See the chapter “‘Whores of the mind’: the analysis of pleasure’ in Norquay 2007 for a detailed discussion.
 - 19 Stevenson, ‘The English Admirals’, *Cornhill Magazine*, 1878, 36-43 (p. 39), henceforth cited in the text as Admirals.
 - 20 ‘Popular Literature of the Day’, *British and Foreign Review; or, European Quarterly Journal*, 10.19 (January 1840), 223-246 (p. 241).
 - 21 crim. con. – ‘criminal conversation’: the legal term for a common law action brought by a husband claiming damages against an adulterer.
 - 22 The commingling of the working classes and youth in the popular reading public reappears in ‘Popular Authors’, see p. 127.
 - 23 Helen R. Smith, *New Light on Sweeney Todd*, Thomas Peckett Prest, James Malcolm Rymer and Elizabeth Caroline Grey (Bloomsbury: Jarndyce, 2002), p. 19.
 - 24 Stevenson, ‘A Gossip on Romance’, *Longman’s Magazine*, 1882, 69-79 (p. 75), henceforth cited in the text as ‘Gossip’.
 - 25 Norquay 2007, p. 176.
 - 26 Stevenson, ‘The Lantern-Bearers’, *Scribner’s Magazine*, 1888, 251-256 (p. 255), henceforth cited in the text as LB.
 - 27 ‘Penny Plain’, p. 230. These interrogative sentences immediately precede the affirmative sentence extracted as an epigraph for this article. For this idea of ‘formative influence’, I would like to thank Richard Dury. For more on juvenile drama, see George Speaight, *The History of the English Toy Theatre*, revised ed. (London: Studio Vista, 1969).
 - 28 Stevenson, ‘A Chapter on Dreams’, *Scribner’s Magazine*, 1888, 122-128 (p. 122).
 - 29 Stevenson, ‘Æs Triplex’, *Cornhill Magazine*, 1878, 432-437 (p. 434).
 - 30 See Stephen Arata, ‘Stevenson Reading’, *Journal of Stevenson Studies*, 1 (2004), 192-200.
 - 31 Stevenson, ‘A Note On Realism’, *Magazine of Art*, 1883, pp. 24-28 (p. 25), henceforth cited in the text as ‘Realism’.





- 32 Arata, p. 195.
- 33 For the moral panics induced by penny bloods and penny dreadfuls, see John Springhall, *Youth, Popular Culture and Moral Panics: Penny Gaffs to Gangsta-Rap, 1830-1996* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998).
- 34 For more on the realism debate, see Norquay 2007, 66-75.
- 35 Stevenson, 'Byways of Book Illustration. Bagster's *Pilgrim's Progress*', *Magazine of Art*, 1882, pp. 169-174 (pp. 169-170).
- 36 Kevin Carpenter, 'R. L. Stevenson on the Treasure Island Illustrations', *Notes and Queries*, 29 (1982), 322-325 (p. 323), henceforth cited in the text as Carpenter.
- 37 *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott*, 12 vols, 1833-1834, vol 4, p. 53.
- 38 'Byways of Book Illustration. Bagster's *Pilgrim's Progress*', p. 171.
- 39 Ambrosini, p. 29.





‘The Foreigner at Home’: the travel essays of Robert Louis Stevenson

Jennifer Hayward

Although he spent most of his adult life far from his homeland, Robert Louis Stevenson always retained what he called ‘a strong Scotch accent of the mind’.¹ Wherever he wandered – through England, Europe, North America and the Pacific – Stevenson developed metaphors to capture the uneasy coexistence of familiarity and alienation in his everyday life: ‘foreigner at home’, ‘stranger in my own house,’ ‘strangers in the land of Egypt’.² To what extent did Stevenson’s sense of estrangement, trained on the observation of new landscapes and cultures, shape his development as a writer? Stevenson’s early travel writings test boundaries, both national and generic; as a result, the author develops from a self-consciously bohemian essayist, uncertain of the direction his talents should take, to a mature writer with strong views on national as well as generic limitations. As his friend Henry James affirmed, ‘It is just because he has no specialty that Mr. Stevenson is an individual, and because his curiosity is the only receipt by which he produces. Each of his books is an independent effort – a window opened to a different view’.³

The best travel writing introduces readers not only to new vistas, but also to new possibilities of perceiving both others and ourselves. Stevenson’s many ‘windows opened to a different view’ speak to the ways that his biographical border crossings shaped literary experimentation – and vice versa – in a pattern emphasised in recent critical studies of the writer.⁴ Both generically and thematically, Stevenson’s texts defy traditional boundaries: his travel tales sketch characters as memorable as those inhabiting his fiction; his novels not only delineate plot and character but also capture specific, well-loved places; his neo-Gothic psychological tale *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and*





Mr Hyde incorporates elements of nonfiction genres like the case history.⁵

Stevenson's explorations of national and individual identity, as well as his depiction of his own identity as shifting and contingent, have been amply demonstrated in recent criticism. However, apart from Roslyn Jolly's *Robert Louis Stevenson in the Pacific*, Oliver S. Buckton's *Cruising with Robert Louis Stevenson*, and Caroline McCracken-Flesher's chapter 'Travel Writing' in the *Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson*,⁶ little sustained critical attention has been paid to Stevenson's travel writing.

In this essay, I will help to fill the gap by exploring the ways that Stevenson's California texts set the stage for his later border crossings, particularly by spurring development of his ideas on Scottish and American identity as well as on broader questions of race and nation. Tracing the stylistic, generic, thematic, and philosophical transitions evident in the work of this 'foreigner at home', I will first explore Stevenson's early travel writings. After this introductory framework, the essay will focus on Stevenson's travels to and within California in 1879-80 and some of the texts that resulted: the essays 'The Old Pacific Capital'; 'A Modern Cosmopolis'; his longer, paired travel narratives *The Amateur Emigrant* (which traces his shipboard journey to the New World) and its sequel *Across the Plains* (which charts his train journey to California); and *The Silverado Squatters*.⁷



Long before he became famous as a novelist, Stevenson first polished his style and aesthetics in nonfictional essays that helped him to stake out his territory within the literary culture of his day. Today, the style of his early essays is criticised, as Penny Fielding reminds us, 'for its highly self-conscious literary artifice and for the author's apparent relish for archaic syntax and wilful indirection in contrast with the transparent prose of his adventure stories. But Stevenson's style as an essayist marks





the way he works through some serious issues about ethics and aesthetics'.⁸ Developing an aesthetic theory in these early pieces, Stevenson emphasises the interdependence of literary style and moral vision.

Just one of Stevenson's interventions in his era's ongoing debate on the function of literature came in 1881 following his return from California, when his essay 'The Morality of the Profession of Letters'⁹ claims a crucial role for writers: they can 'do great harm or great good' because of 'that remarkable art of words which, because it is the dialect of life, comes home so easily and powerfully to the minds of men'.¹⁰ He drives home the importance of literary work in concluding, 'We [writers] contribute [...] to build up the sum of sentiments and appreciations which goes by the name of Public Opinion or Public Feeling. The total of a nation's reading, in these days of daily papers, greatly modifies the total of the nation's speech; and the speech and reading, taken together, form the efficient educational medium of youth'.¹¹

In this essay, Stevenson claims a crucial role for print media: that writings in the popular press can actively shape the future of a nation. In this he anticipates Benedict Anderson's concept of the imagined community: a national citizenry consolidated by a common discourse. For Anderson, the rise of print media spurred the development of national identities in both the New World and Europe.¹² After his experience in the United States, Stevenson is able to bear witness to the power of textual representation in producing ideas of national identity. He had internalised strong stereotypes about America in his childhood through representations in the popular press – but when confronted by the very different perspectives, histories and landscapes he encountered when he experienced the country firsthand, he was forced to question the idealised 'New World' he had absorbed through avid reading. His views on both North American and British national identities were transformed as a





result.

Just before making the difficult journey to California, Stevenson cut himself off from his family, a symbolic act with serious financial repercussions. This alienation from his home, his homeland, and his class, combined with his exposure to an entirely new landscape and culture, forced a process of self-invention that would end in his move to the Pacific – and into a new genre, the adventure story. In the process, Stevenson modifies the familiar travel essay form to work through shifting views of national identity and to experiment with techniques he would later adapt for fiction.

Even before his departure for the New World, Stevenson had begun expanding the existing conventions of the travel narrative by emphasizing the inward journey of meditation on selected themes and ideas, as was then characteristic of an essay (though travel writing today has followed Laurence Sterne as well as Stevenson in re-blurring the genres). Peter Hinchcliffe notes that ‘Stevenson’s essays and fiction share each other’s conspicuous characteristics. The essays are filled with narrative and with fictive images of military action and adventure; the stories are marked by passages of sententious meditation’.¹³ As his career progressed, Stevenson continued to adapt the conventions of the literary essay, travel writing, and fiction as suited his purpose. His California travel tales mark the beginnings of this process, which enabled Stevenson to expand the borders of all three genres.

Across the nineteenth century, many factors combined to build popular demand for travel narratives, including new technologies of travel as well as the increasing pace of colonization and emigration.¹⁴ As a popular and often profitable genre in the British publishing industry, travel writing was an obvious choice for a young writer in the 1870s, when Stevenson began seeking to place essays. Roslyn Jolly explains that ‘Travel writing was Stevenson’s path to authorship, and his early travel literature,





influenced by eighteenth-century models of the sentimental journey, established his reputation as a writer of charm and imagination'.¹⁵ While flexible enough to suit his needs, the travel genre also provided the young writer with a readymade scaffolding on which to build his narrative: the motif of the journey.

The first essay for which Stevenson was paid, 'Roads' (1873), is a meditation on the lure of the horizon and its effect on the traveller.¹⁶ 'Roads' concludes with the following observation:

the line of the road leads the eye forth with the vague sense of desire up to the green limit of the horizon. Travel is brought home to us [...] *Sehnsucht* – the passion for what is ever beyond – is livingly expressed in that white riband of possible travel that severs the uneven country [...] The road is already there – we shall not be long behind'.¹⁷

Already in this early piece, Stevenson introduces themes that he would develop more fully in his California narratives and later still in his fiction: the allure of the unknown, the uncanny duality within the self, the thin line of possibility that 'severs' known from unknown, familiar from unfamiliar.

Stevenson refined his voice and style in his first published book, *An Inland Voyage* (1878), a travel tale that solidified his reputation as a charming writer despite critique of Stevenson's occasionally mannered prose. These first travel essays often introduce a rather bohemian narrator and focus less on the locations visited than on the narrator's reactions to them. James D. Hart quotes an early passage from *An Inland Voyage* as exemplifying Stevenson's 'high self-conscious' mode: 'we lunched on a meadow inside a parallelogram of poplars. The leaves danced and prattled in the wind all round about us. The river hurried on meanwhile, and seemed to chide at our delay. Little we cared. The river knew where it was going; not so we; the less our hurry'.¹⁸ Here we see the stylistic tics of which the early Stevenson can be accused: the





alliteration he praised in his essay 'On Some Technical Elements of Style in Literature'; the anthropomorphism he sometimes pushed to an extreme; the sentimentality carried over from Dickens and others; the aesthete's pose of aimless leisure.¹⁹ As we will see, Stevenson's travels in the New World would demand a more straightforward style.

Stevenson's early essays also explore the power of conventional representations to shape one's experience of a particular place. 'On the Enjoyment of Unpleasant Places' (1874) reminds readers that a predisposition to admire a location can positively affect one's perception of it.²⁰ But this essay does not yet emphasise the impact of such preconceptions on concepts of national identity; that too would come later, when Stevenson confronted the gap between Old World imaginings and New World actualities.

Reader response to Stevenson's first travel tales was positive but muted, with a contemporary review of *An Inland Voyage* observing that Stevenson's narrative persona hearkens back to the eighteenth-century ideal of the sentimental traveller – 'we have travellers a-many, but since the days of Laurence Sterne we have had no such travellers as this'.²¹ A reviewer of *Travels with a Donkey* also compared Stevenson to Sterne. Stevenson's contemporaries generally agreed that his first travel writings were delightful, but insubstantial and sometimes affected.²² And 20th century readers initially concurred. Alex Clunas notes that even the influential critic David Daiches (who did perhaps more than anyone else to revive Stevenson's reputation) believed that 'critical discourse is justifiably silent before [the early travel writings] because they are superficial and immature works'.²³

By contrast, recent critics find much more substance in these early travel writings than might be imagined from Stevenson's own protestations that 'I travel not to go anywhere, but to go. I travel for travel's sake. The great affair is to move'.²⁴ As is apparent in this passage, Stevenson in his early essays occasionally echoed the imperatives of the Aesthetic movement, advocating





what Stephen Arata has characterised as a paradoxically productive idleness.²⁵ Similarly, Clunas reads Stevenson's claim to 'travel for travel's sake' as a deliberate echo of that *cri du coeur* of French aestheticism, 'art for art's sake', and argues that Stevenson's concern with the aesthetic possibilities of the journey motif enabled parallels between the teleology of travel and of narrative that strengthened the architecture of his essays. Given the cultural context of the Aesthetic movement, too, the aesthetic theories Stevenson worked through in these early pieces invoke, not the languid indifference they may seem to profess on the surface, but a quite radical re-examination of identity itself.²⁶

Recent critics have also identified modernist concerns in Stevenson's travel writing.²⁷ As Caroline McCracken-Flesher observes, in his early travel essays 'we see Stevenson gradually learning that travel writing is at its most challenging, but also its most interesting, when it maps not the landscape, but the way the landscape is perceived by a complex, unpredictable and self-critical viewer'.²⁸ Interior travels merge with or even supersede journeys through unfamiliar spaces, allowing Stevenson the freedom to experiment with new literary forms, reconfiguring the eighteenth-century picturesque and breaking the boundaries of the traditional travel essay. And formal experimentation worked in tandem with development of themes that would haunt Stevenson throughout his career: dualities, boundaries breached or breaking, the power of narrative to shape experience.

Stevenson would take the lessons he learned in these first years of publication – lessons about the aesthetic dimensions of morality, the narrative contours of place, and the permeable boundaries between exterior and interior worlds – and apply them to his next challenge: communicating the shock, struggles, and transformational surprise of his journey to the New World. Critics note that Stevenson's California writings benefit from a leaner, sparer style and a radical shift in subject matter; James Hart, for example, asserts that Stevenson's gritty shipboard





life seems to have prompted more direct engagement with fellow travellers as well as deeper reflection on the way the writer himself is changed by the journey, with a consequent emphasis on content and social critique rather than aesthetic effects. The California essays begin, then, to chart the development of a voice, style, sensibility, and sense of moral and aesthetic purpose that would allow Stevenson to move towards the new thematic complexity that dominates his later works.



In what follows, I will explore Stevenson's writings on North America. Stevenson's expectation that America would be 'a kind of paradise' was produced by popular representations of the New World; his American writings underscore the strength of extant representations while exposing their falsity and thus emptying them of meaning.²⁹

When Stevenson travelled to California in 1879, the state was still a virtual *terra incognita* – hence the dismay of Stevenson's friends and family when he took off for the West. The region did not become part of United States' territory until 1848 and did not achieve official statehood until 1850, after the Mexican-American War. As late as 1870, when the first tourists began to visit the coast, the state still catered to fortune-seekers rather than casual visitors; even a decade later the few who did venture all the way to the Pacific coast tended to have specific needs (a cure for tuberculosis, for example) or goals (scientific exploration, what we would today call 'adventure tourism', etcetera), as indicated in the following titles: *Eureka! the new sanitarium: Las Vegas Hot Springs, New Mexico* (1879); *Beyond the Sierras, or, Observations on the Pacific Coast* (1877); or *Over foot trails and bridle paths to Yo-Semite* (1876).

Beginning in the 1870s, too, emigrant manuals had become popular as they provided practical information for prospective settlers. Guides to the North American frontier were heavily marketed for British (especially Scottish and Irish) readers.





Those published in 1879-80 included Thomas Spence's not-so-concisely titled *The prairie lands of Canada presented to the world as a new and inviting field of enterprise for the capitalist, and new superior attractions and advantages as a home for immigrants compared with the western prairies of the United States: the elements of our future greatness and prosperity* as well as Bronson Keeler's blunter *Where to go to become rich: farmer's, miners' and tourists' guide to Kansas, New Mexico, Arizona and Colorado*. This flurry of publications reflects both the dire economic conditions in the Old World, and the hyperbolic expectations of wealth and success in the New.

Stevenson had certainly read some of the better-known accounts the American West, for instance Isabella Bird's *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* (1879); he mentions receiving 'Miss Bird' in a letter to his good friend and mentor Sidney Colvin (Letters 3: 83), and in his essay 'The Foreigner at Home', first published in *Cornhill Magazine* in the summer of 1882, he refers to 'Miss Bird' as 'an authoress with whom I profess myself in love.' He was probably also familiar with landscape artists like Henry Chapman Ford and Albert Bierstadt, who popularised idealised, sublime portraits of the California missions as well as the region's mountains, canyons, waterfalls and coast.

By the time Stevenson travelled to California in 1879, the 'Debate of the New World' had shaped public opinion for over a hundred years.³⁰ Briefly, this debate divided representations of the Americas into polarised camps: the New World as an unimaginable expanse overflowing with life, opportunity, sublime vistas and vast riches; and the New World as an unmanageable wasteland teeming with disease, degeneracy, and spiritual as well as material poverty. These representations of the Americas, popularised in the Scottish Enlightenment historian William Robertson's hugely influential *History of America* (1777), had crystallised in paradoxical images of the continent as simultaneously primitive and unprecedented, hellish and utopian. It is no





wonder that readers eagerly consumed travel writers' accounts of this protean space.

One American region that particularly inflamed public imagination was the 'Wild West', particularly in the wake of the Gold Rush. Although the West was still considered a virtually unsettled frontier by Europeans when Stevenson arrived in 1879, its history was much more complex: while Native Americans had inhabited the West Coast for perhaps 14,000 years, Spanish settlers began to colonise the coast only towards the end of the 17th century. In 1821, with the fall of the Spanish empire, the colonised region became the Mexican states of Alta and Baja California. But as the United States rose in power, the territory was increasingly contested, and ultimately ceded to the United States with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. From this point on – and particularly in the wake of the Gold Rush of 1848–55 – the state changed rapidly. The transcontinental railroad connecting East to West was completed in 1869, leading to a dramatic surge in population: from about 380,000 in 1860 to 864,694 by 1880.

But this surge disguises the devastating impact of new arrivals on the indigenous population. The Spanish presence – and particularly the coastal missions founded by Franciscans, Jesuits and Dominicans – sharply impacted the Native American population, since missionaries both converted Indians and coerced them into labour. United States' Westward expansion encroached still further on California natives. Ultimately, the Native American population was decimated, falling from roughly 300,000 when the Spanish arrived in 1697 to just 30,000 by 1860.

Stevenson addresses the complex racial history of California, observing – and regretting – the passing of what he sees as a grander era of Spanish missions, Spanish culture, and California Indians even as he waxes nostalgic over the crumbling remains of Gold Rush hopes. His disarmingly affectionate, optimistic, and honest portraits of Northern California's early years of statehood recorded key years in the state's history – and as among the





best portraits of this early period, they are still justly honoured in the region. He captures the paradoxes of the rapidly changing Californian culture: the state still seems virtually uninhabited and ‘uncivilised’ to his European eyes, accustomed to a more crowded canvas, but he also describes a rapidly developing infrastructure, including agricultural advances like ventures into winemaking.³¹

Underlying Stevenson’s concerns with race and modernization, however, we can still see traces of the traditional preoccupations of Europeans in the New World: the beauty, variety, and immensity of Nature’s creations, contrasted against the unsightliness, degeneration, and insignificance of human manufacture; the sublime glory of an Edenic, unspoiled nature, contrasted against the competing hopes and fears as to the future of this ‘New’ civilization. Stevenson’s writings on California bear witness to the mysterious and enduring power of New World imaginings.



Stevenson first set out for America in order to marry Fanny Van de Grift Osbourne, whom he had met in an artist’s colony in France. A decade older than he, she was married and had two surviving children. When he followed her to California without notifying his parents, still less obtaining their consent, they were horrified. His father wrote to Stevenson’s mentor Colvin: ‘For God’s sake use your influence. Is it fair that we should be half murdered by his conduct? I am unable to write more about this sinful mad business [. . .] I see nothing but destruction to himself as well as to all of us’.³²

For Stevenson, this journey West became a rite of passage. *The Amateur Emigrant* (1895) charts his first venture beyond the limits of his father’s consent – and, not incidentally, his financial support. Because Stevenson left home without his family’s knowledge, he did not cross the Atlantic in a first class cabin, as one of his class would have been expected to do; instead, and characteristically, he turned his temporary poverty into an





opportunity for social research by making the journey in the second-class cabin of an emigrant ship.³³ Given the only marginally greater comfort of second class over steerage, Stevenson's experience was almost identical to that of the typical Scottish or Irish emigrant.³⁴

In tracing this very American experience, Stevenson deconstructs the idealization of emigration and empire on which he had been raised. He first establishes the stereotype of emigrants as young, able-bodied men setting out for Empire full of hope and with a bright future ahead of them:

The abstract idea [of emigration], as conceived at home, is hopeful and adventurous. A young man, you fancy, scorning restraints and helpers, issues forth into life, that great battle, to fight for his own hand [...] For in emigration the young men enter direct and by the shipload on their heritage of work; empty continents swarm, as at the bo's'un's whistle, with industrious hands, and whole new empires are domesticated to the service of man. (pp. 10-11)

Stevenson here appropriates the figurative language of the imperial mission, establishing the ideal of emigration as 'hopeful and adventurous', and the ideal emigrant as a 'young man' eager to conquer new territories. This 'abstract idea' of Empire is loaded with metaphors that construct other nations as passive 'empty continents' that, paradoxically, seem to swarm with synecdochal 'hands' just waiting to work for the British masters who will establish commercial societies.

Having floated these grand illusions of empire, though, Stevenson proceeds to collapse them. Working his artistic alchemy, he transforms abstract statistics into living scenes brought home to the readers' minds:

As I walked the deck and looked round upon my fellow-





passengers, thus curiously assorted from all northern Europe, I began for the first time to understand the nature of emigration [...] Emigration, from a word of the most cheerful import, came to sound most dismally in my ear. There is nothing more agreeable to picture and nothing more pathetic to behold. [...] In a word, I was not taking part in an impetuous and conquering sally, such as swept over Mexico or Siberia, but found myself, like Marmion, 'in the lost battle, borne down by the flying.'

With this reference to the Battle of Flodden Field as described Sir Walter Scott's 1808 epic poem *Marmion*, Stevenson invokes the spectre of Scottish subordination to the English (a subject he develops at more length, as we will see shortly). He then counters idealized depictions of emigration by describing his 'pathetic', disillusioned and near-hopeless fellow emigrants: 'family men broken by adversity, elderly youths who had failed to place themselves in life, and people who had seen better days.'³⁵ His fellow-emigrants were, then, essentially the detritus of industrial society, and he brings each type to life by means of affectionate descriptions: in subsequent chapters, 'Steerage Scenes' and 'Steerage Types', we meet individuals who displace stereotypes.

After dismantling the illusions of empire in this way, Stevenson goes on to expose the dire realities underlying the surge of emigration from economically stagnant regions:

Labouring mankind had in the last years, and throughout Great Britain, sustained a prolonged and crushing series of defeats. I had heard vaguely of these reverses; of whole streets of houses standing deserted by the Tyne, the cellardoors broken and removed for firewood; of homeless men loitering at the street-corners of Glasgow with their chests beside them; of closed factories, useless strikes, and starving girls. (p. 11)





Here, Stevenson locates industrial decay very close to home indeed: in the heart of Scotland, through specific references to the River Tyne and to Glasgow. And he reinforces the personal relevance of these political events by ending the passage with a self-reflexive confession: that before seeing these actual emigrants, 'I had never taken them home to me or represented these distresses livingly to my imagination.' Stevenson here foreshadows what would, as we have seen, become a theme in his essays on the art of writing: the power of the author to do good in the world by engaging readers' empathy. Throughout the narrative, Stevenson positions himself as a kind of Everyman echoing the common belief in the ideological promise of the New World; his own disillusionment once he experiences the dark realities of emigration may stand in for the reader's.

The book's final chapter deepens its earlier deconstruction of the myth of the young, hopeful emigrant. Describing the ship's arrival in New York, Stevenson sets up – and then evacuates – the idealised images of the New World that had long drawn him to America:

For many years America was to me a sort of promised land; 'westward the march of empire holds its way' [...] To these States, therefore, yet undeveloped, full of dark possibilities [...] the minds of young men in England turn naturally at a certain hopeful period of their age. It will be hard for an American to understand the spirit. But let him imagine a young man, who shall have grown up in an old and rigid circle, following bygone fashions and taught to distrust his own fresh instincts, and who now suddenly hears of a family of cousins, all about his own age, who keep house together by themselves and live far from restraint and tradition; let him imagine this, and he will have some imperfect notion of the sentiment with which spirited English youths turn to the thought of the





American Republic. It seems to them as if, out west, the war of life was still conducted in the open air, and on free barbaric terms. (pp. 89-90)

Lauric Guillard sees Stevenson as working with the 'myth of the Wilderness' – casting the New World as a site of symbolic spiritual trials-by-fire and of 'sublime barbarity' – in his writings on North America, particularly in *The Amateur Emigrant* and the American scenes of *The Master of Ballantrae*.³⁶ By contrast, I argue that Stevenson is, rather, invoking the dominant perspectives of the 'Debate of the New World' outlined above, which continued to circulate throughout the nineteenth century: the Stevenson goes on to demystify both the glorification and the denigration of America, injecting historical complexity and human individuality into an oversimplified binary opposition.

Not content with deflating readers' illusions of Empire in *The Amateur Emigrant*, Stevenson also subverts the belief that class distinctions are innate – and he does so by using himself as a kind of experiment in (downward) social mobility. To his dismay, Stevenson found that his education, accent, manners, clothing and other supposed markers of superior status became empty signifiers to people for whom identity was constructed by social location. On shipboard, social location was mapped by spatial hierarchy: steerage passengers inhabited the lower cabins, first-class passengers the upper (and much more spacious) decks, so Stevenson's location in the steerage section determined his class status. Upper-class travellers often failed to see him at all:

My height seemed to decrease with every [upper-class] woman who passed me, for she passed me like a dog. This is one of the reasons for supposing that what are called the upper classes may sometimes produce a disagreeable impression in what are called the lower; and I wish some one would continue my experiment and find out exactly at





what stage of toilette a man becomes invisible to the well regulated female eye' (pp. 73-74).

In this passage, Stevenson explores the ramifications of the class-bound gaze as it classifies the relative importance of each individual on ship and polices behaviour accordingly. But even as he depicts himself as object of this dehumanizing gaze that controls his movements through physical space, Stevenson's own writerly gaze penetrates everywhere: he polices the behaviour not only of those in steerage but of the first-class passengers whose 'little gracious titters of indulgence' and 'swaying elegant superiority' makes the steerage passengers feel 'a sort of comical lower animal. Such a fine thing it is to have manners!' (pp. 27-28).

As Lawrence Phillips argues, in *The Amateur Emigrant* Stevenson mobilises some of the textual strategies identified by Mary Louise Pratt in her work on travellers in New World contact zones: his temporary geocultural displacement moves him into a 'contact zone' between class locations and thus enables cross-cultural exchanges between Stevenson and working-class passengers that would not normally be possible.³⁷ This is not to say, however, that Stevenson abandons conventional notions of class. Instead, as Phillips demonstrates, he inhabits a liminal position, simultaneously seeking closer connection with the working classes whilst periodically reasserting his middle-class 'respectability' and distinction from them. Although he begins the narrative with a quite radical class critique, pinning the blame for the emigrants' dire economic position squarely on policies of industrial capitalism that disproportionately benefit the wealthy, he ultimately maps class differences onto colonial race relations when he implies that the working classes may innately lack the character or capacity to rise above their poverty.

Despite the closing conservatism of his portrait of class relations, Stevenson's account of the mutability of class and nation in *The Amateur Emigrant* was radical for his time. In the book,





Stevenson realises one of the moral goals he claims for literature: he brings individual emigrants home to us and represents their distresses livingly to our imagination. This is evidence for the great – the moral – power of storytelling that Stevenson asserts: after reading Stevenson's account, readers could no longer see emigration as an imperial adventure, nor the emigrants themselves as either heroes or the Great Unwashed.

Unfortunately his contemporaries were not given the chance to be challenged by Stevenson's account of emigration: the manuscript so shocked Stevenson's publisher, family and friends that his father paid the publishers £100 to halt production and withdraw already printed copies.³⁸ As a result, the story of his Atlantic crossing was not published in any form until 1895, a year after Stevenson's death, and the text was not published in full until the 1960s.³⁹



Stevenson's less controversial sequel to *The Amateur Emigrant* first ran in *Longman's Magazine* in two serial parts that trace his unsettling journey from East to West on an emigrant train.⁴⁰ The persona of *Across the Plains* departs radically in tone and voice from the earlier light, ironic *flaneur* of Stevenson's earlier travel narratives: this account of an emigrant's journey is unrelievedly grim, charting a gruelling voyage across the flat, dry, barren and landlocked plains of North America. Chapter after chapter offers few signs of life; even when Stevenson does describe the landscape of states like Nebraska, he imagines it as a wasteland, 'a world almost without a feature; an empty sky, an empty earth'. This traversal was Stevenson's first experience of America. Like most of his contemporaries coming of age in the boom years of the periodical press, Stevenson had been inspired, not only by the polarised depictions of the New World discussed above, but also by popular fictions like the Wild West serials he read as a child. In *Across the Plains*, Stevenson captures the stunned disillusionment he felt when he finally saw Ohio. As he explains, the





American frontier –

had early been a favourite home of my imagination; I have played at being in Ohio by the week, and enjoyed some capital sport there with a dummy gun, my person being still unbreeched. My preference was founded on a work which appeared in *Cassell's Family Paper*, and was read aloud to me by my nurse. It narrated the doings of one Custaloga, an Indian brave, who, in the last chapter, very obligingly washed the paint off his face and became Sir Reginald Somebody-or-other; a trick I never forgave him. [...] But Ohio was not at all as I had pictured it [...] It was a sort of flat paradise; but, I am afraid, not unfrequented by the devil (pp. 108-09).

The devil came in the form of a brutal chill at dawn – a sudden drop in temperature that Stevenson, already ill and soon to break down entirely, could not ignore.

Leaving aside the apparent paradox, in Stevenson's post-Romantic age, of a 'flat paradise', this first confrontation with the prosaic landscape so often depicted as a rugged scene of adventure is a shock. Stevenson here confronts us with a visceral manifestation of a phenomenon that, as we have seen, he first raised in early travel essays like 'On the Enjoyment of Unpleasant Places': the power of the mind to shape perception. In this first encounter with the Ohio of cold fact, which contrasts so sharply with the Ohio of frontier fantasy, Stevenson emphasises the concrete: the landscape is 'flat' and exhales 'such a freezing chill as I have rarely felt [...] as it struck home upon the heart and seemed to travel with the blood'. Already, then, as Stevenson first encounters the American frontier, we see his perspective on travel beginning to shift. Although he continues to explore the ways that pre-established opinions can shape the traveller's perception of a new landscape, he simultaneously insists upon the





landscape's autonomous existence as a material fact – and one that has considerable power to shape this traveller in its turn, not only psychologically but also physically as it strikes home upon his heart and travels with his blood.

As the train traverses the continent, the immigrants heading to California are confronted by a horde of emigrants returning from the West. Like doomed doppelgangers, these returnees had ventured out into uncharted territory and found that the 'Promised Land' fell as far short of their dreams as Ohio had done for Stevenson himself. He depicts them as calling, enigmatically, 'Come back!' to their expectant doubles still heading West towards El Dorado. But in Stevenson's symbolic portrait –

it was still westward that they ran. Hunger, you would have thought, came out of the east like the sun, and the evening was made of edible gold. And, meantime, in the car in front of me, were there not half a hundred emigrants from the opposite quarter? Hungry Europe and hungry China, each pouring from their gates in search of provender, had here come face to face. The two waves had met; east and west had alike failed; the whole round world had been prospected and condemned; there was no El Dorado anywhere; and till one could emigrate to the moon, it seemed as well to stay patiently at home. (p. 137)

Through a featureless landscape, Stevenson's emigrant 'train toiled over this infinity like a snail; and being the one thing moving, it was wonderful what huge proportions it began to assume in our regard' (p. 123). So Stevenson represents the steam train as an organic entity that looms disproportionately in an alien and blank New World landscape – an ironic depiction since this living, moving train is simultaneously a harbinger of industrial change and of encroaching humanity.

Imagining the lives of some settlers he encounters in Nebraska,





Stevenson again conveys their experience through images of absence: they had 'no landmark but that unattainable evening sun for which they steered, and which daily fled them by an equal stride. They had nothing, it would seem, to overtake; nothing by which to reckon their advance; no sight for repose or for encouragement' (p. 124). Stevenson can imagine these alien beings' lives only by describing them as, metaphorically, sailors crossing a blank and empty sea; interestingly, Stevenson's accumulating negatives and images of absence anticipate postcolonial writers' figuration of the in-between or the liminal.⁴¹

With the empathy he developed on the emigrant ship, however, Stevenson has learned to distrust his first impression that prairie settlers inhabited purely negative spaces. Describing a woman who seems happy with her life in Nebraska, Stevenson notes –

It would have been fatuous arrogance to pity such a woman. Yet the place where she lived was to me almost ghastly [...] This extreme newness, above all in so naked and flat a country, gives a strong impression of artificiality. With none of the litter and discoloration of human life; with the paths unworn, and the houses still sweating from the axe, such a settlement as this seems purely scenic. The mind is loth to accept it as a piece of reality; and it seems incredible that life can go on with so few properties, or the great child, man, find entertainment in so bare a play-room. (p. 123)

Although this passage continues to accumulate images of absence, blankness, and raw newness, Stevenson also acknowledges the failure of his own mind to encompass what is – despite his inability to see it as such – clearly 'a piece of reality'. Here he wrestles with the seemingly unbridgeable gap between nature and civilization and between objective and subjective landscapes,





a theme he would return to repeatedly in his writing. He also begins to acknowledge the limits of his own ability to understand the space of the Other.

The conclusion of *Across the Plains*, when Stevenson depicts the train's arrival in California, contrasts sharply with the conclusion of *The Amateur Emigrant* and thus neatly encapsulates the impact the author's American experiences had already made on both his style and his substance. In the book's final pages, Stevenson abruptly and deliberately shifts from the images of desolation and emptiness dominating the preceding chapters to a lyrical tone – a striking disjunction that forces readers' attention to the gap between the realism of the journey itself and the symbolism of its end. He describes waking in the forests of the coastal mountains and then descending to the San Francisco bay in a passage worth quoting at length:

suddenly we shot into an open[ing. . .] I had one glimpse of a huge pine-forested ravine upon my left, a foaming river, and a sky already coloured with the fires of dawn. I am usually very calm over the displays of nature; but you will scarce believe how my heart leaped at this [...] not I only, but all of the passengers on board, threw off their sense of dirt and heat and weariness, and bawled like schoolboys, and thronged with shining eyes upon the platform and became new creatures within and without [...] At every turn we could see farther into the land and our own happy futures. At every town the cocks were tossing their clear notes into the golden air, and crowing for the new day and the new country [...] The day was breaking as we crossed the ferry; the fog was rising over the citted hills of San Francisco; the bay was perfect – not a ripple, scarce a stain, upon its blue expanse; everything was waiting, breathless, for the sun. A spot of cloudy gold lit first upon the head of Tamalpais, and then widened downward on its





shapely shoulder; the air seemed to awaken, and began to sparkle; and suddenly [...] the city of San Francisco, and the bay of gold and corn, were lit from end to end with summer daylight. (pp. 146-47)

Contrasted with the empty, flat Midwestern plains, Stevenson's California teems with life and detail: into the confined space of a few sentences, Stevenson condenses livestock, crops, river, sky, bay, mountains, and city. Sound and sensation compete with sight to increase the sensory impact of the passage, which nevertheless conveys harmony rather than chaos. Parallel structure builds a sense of unity coexisting with plenitude.

Wendy Katz persuasively traces the dawns and daybreaks that punctuate Stevenson's American books to the influence of Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau, where similar images serve as 'literary shorthand for American optimism'.⁴² While Stevenson acknowledged the influence of both Whitman and Thoreau and certainly intended to convey optimism,⁴³ the abrupt stylistic shift into the passage above signals a broader thematic and philosophical transformation in Stevenson's perspective on America. Earlier, he had exposed the disjunction between conventional imaginings of the New World as a space of boundless opportunity and fecund nature – a kind of second Eden – and the gritty discomfort of actual travel across an America figured as an empty and desolate space. But in crossing the mountainous border from the stylistically sparse plains into the rich and crowded canvas of California, Stevenson sharply distinguishes between the blank plains and the glorious coast. California, he signals, is a space apart from the rest of the United States: a New World indeed.

To accentuate this break, Stevenson uses multiple time-honoured metaphors for new beginnings, including cocks crowing to celebrate the train's arrival during one of the dawns highlighted by Katz: a new day breaks just as the train crosses the Sierras,





and another upon entry into San Francisco (coming back-to-back as they do, these symbolic daybreaks seem an unlikely serendipity of steam-train timing). The hardened emigrants are figuratively transformed first into bright ‘new creatures’ and then into schoolboys imagining hopeful futures. The landscape, too, is newly clean and bursting with life: ‘a bay of gold and corn’. This unspoiled nature coexists harmoniously with the brand-new city of San Francisco, which itself merges with the natural landscape in a way reminiscent of William Wordsworth’s ‘Composed Upon Westminster Bridge’. Like Wordsworth’s London, Stevenson’s San Francisco is personified as a benevolent and paradoxically natural cityscape; all elements, from the cocks to the bay to the sparkling air itself, unite to celebrate the ‘new day and the new country’.



In Stevenson’s first glimpse of the American West, then, California becomes – both structurally and figuratively – the Light contrasted against the Dark of America’s betrayed promise. He would continue this metaphorical linking of San Francisco to new hope in his essay ‘A Modern Cosmopolis’ (1883) – but with a difference. In the essay, Stevenson returns to conventional representations of the ‘newness’ of America as tainted with shades of the geologically primitive: ‘Here, indeed, all is new, nature as well as towns. The very hills of California have an unfinished look; the rains and the streams have not yet carved them to their perfect shape’. This paradoxical representation of California as both ancient and new will continue in his opening portrait of Mount Saint Helena in *The Silverado Squatters*: ‘around the foot of that mountain the silence of nature reigns in a great measure unbroken, and the people of hill and valley go sauntering about their business as in the days before the flood’. Stevenson then reinforces the temporal instability he has invoked by adding, ‘It must be remembered that we are here in a land of stage-drivers and highwaymen: a land, in that sense, like England a hundred





years ago' (p. 192, p. 196). In the contradictory images that multiply in his California writings, Stevenson draws on binaries long established through the Debate of the New World: California is at once impossibly fresh and new, and representative of earlier stages of human development.

But Stevenson's California texts also depict the region in more original ways as his understanding becomes more nuanced. Stevenson's 1880 essay on Monterey, 'The Old Pacific Capital', seems to encourage us to trace the deepening understanding of its author: the essay moves from the superficial physical appearance of the region to its deeper cultural complexity. Its first section, 'The Woods and the Pacific', provides typically exultant descriptions of the beauty and luxuriant nature of the New World and emphasises the influence of topography on the character of Monterey. By contrast, the second section, 'Mexicans, Americans, and Indians', invokes the rise and fall of empires, emphasizing the imperial cycles that have shaped California's past and may yet determine its future. After contrasting the silence of a deserted seaside resort with the 'bustle' of a (destroyed and fossilised) Pompeii, Stevensons predicts that although 'California has been a land of promise in its time, like Palestine [...] if the woods continue so swiftly to perish, it may become, like Palestine, a land of desolation' (p. 155).

Also in 'The Old Pacific Capital', as he did in *Across the Plains*, Stevenson meditates on the mixture of races that produced the New World. He emphasises the fundamentally Spanish character of Californian culture and links the town's rise and fall to the broader status of Mexicans in California; describing the inhabitants as they gallop about on horseback, he claims, 'the type of face and character of bearing are surprisingly un-American. The first ranged from something like the pure Spanish, to something, in its sad fixity, not unlike the pure Indian, although I do not suppose there was one pure blood of either race in all the country. As for the second, it was a matter of perpetual surprise to find, in





that world of absolutely mannerless Americans, a people full of deportment, solemnly courteous, and doing all things with grace and decorum' (p. 159). Stevenson here invokes stereotypes: the 'noble savage,' a construct heavily satirised by Charles Dickens and others by the mid-nineteenth century, and a passing reference to the mannerless Americans depicted perhaps most notoriously in Frances Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832).

But Stevenson simultaneously, and more profoundly, challenges readers' easy assumptions. He subverts conventional British stereotypes of greedy Catholics and morally upright Protestants by contrasting the beneficence of the Catholic missions of the Pacific coast with the rapaciousness of what he calls 'Anglo-Saxon Protestantism'. Still more surprisingly, he casually and quietly asserts the cultural superiority of two subordinate ethnic groups, the Mexicans and the Native Americans, over the Anglo-Saxon Americans. Concluding these meditations on the future character of the California coast, Stevenson muses poignantly that, although Mexicans had long been the dominant class and Spanish the essential language in Monterey, nonetheless Americans now owned most of the land and had begun to dominate the region economically, and therefore culturally.

Stevenson does not let the matter rest with this pessimistic prediction. Instead he broadens his analysis, moving outward to meditate upon the emergent national identity of the United States: 'Physically the Americans have triumphed; but it is not entirely seen how far they themselves have been morally conquered [...] In the older Eastern States, I think we may say that this hotch-potch of races is going to turn out English, or thereabout. But the problem is indefinitely varied in other zones' (p. 161). Strikingly (and presciently given current demographic realities in California), Stevenson refuses the easy temptation of asserting Anglo-Saxon racial dominance. In California, local and national identities wrestle for dominance, a slippage that uncan-





nily echoes the vexed relationship between Scotland and Great Britain.

Stevenson concludes his remarkable meditation on the fast-changing identity of the California coast with a prescient forecast: 'All that I say in this paper is in a paulo-past tense. The Monterey of last year exists no longer [...] Monterey is advertised in the newspapers [...] as a resort for wealth and fashion. Alas for the little town! it is not strong enough to resist the influence of the flaunting caravanserai, and the poor, quaint, penniless native gentlemen of Monterey must perish, like a lower race, before the millionaire vulgarians of the Big Bonanza' (p. 167). Here again, as he did in 'A Modern Cosmopolis' and *The Silverado Squatters*, Stevenson depicts the region as a palimpsest where the past is overwritten by the future with no time for consideration.

Because his experiences in California exposed him to landscapes, cultures, and even temporalities widely different from those of Europe, Stevenson meditated more deeply upon the slippery terms we use to characterise identity and the accidents of history that shape it. Stevenson had, of course, grappled with these issues before landing in the New World; for example, early letters reveal his serious considerations of Scottish versus English national character.⁴⁴ But in these short essays on California he begins to analyse national versus other types of allegiance more broadly and systematically. Strikingly for his time, he conceptualises race and nation in local, national and global contexts and demonstrates the relationships among these spheres of influence. Just as he inhabited a liminal space in *The Amateur Emigrant*, located between steerage and saloon and yet part of neither, so his perspective on California shifts depending on his own subject position at the time of writing: he depicts the state as, variously, a paradise, a purgatory, or a contact zone.

Stevenson's longest work on California, *The Silverado Squatters* (1883), opens with a familiar portrait of California as simultaneously new and primitive, again echoing the Debate of





the New World. As he did in ‘The Old Pacific Capital’, Stevenson explores California’s unique mix of Spanish, Native American, and immigrant cultures, noting that ‘The fame of Vasquez is still young’ in this country so recently part of the Spanish Empire (p. 196).

At times, Stevenson’s observations here might be read as echoing the worst of his era’s colonial callousness, as when he mourns the decimation of the Native American population while depicting these human beings as simply part of the Californian landscape: ‘for in this district all had already perished: redwoods and redskins, the two noblest indigenous living things, alike condemned’ (p. 201). Here, as in “The Old Pacific Capital,” Stevenson’s images recall stereotypes of the Noble (and not quite human) Savage. At the same time, however, as he did in the earlier essay Stevenson challenges our stereotypes, repeatedly questioning accepted ideals of imperial progress by advancing a proto-environmental protest against the annihilation of California’s indigenous inhabitants.

Like Stevenson’s other California texts, too, *The Silverado Squatters* meditates on national identity in the free-floating emigrant community of the 1880s. In the chapter ‘The Petrified Forest’, Stevenson introduces us to a chance acquaintance ‘who was a Swede, a Scot, and an American, acknowledging some kind allegiance to three lands. Mr. Wallace’s Scoto-Circassian will not fail to come before the reader⁴⁵ [...] But, indeed, I think we all belong to many countries. And perhaps this habit of much travel, and the engendering of scattered friendships, may prepare the euthanasia of ancient nations’ (p. 203). Here, Stevenson speaks to the high-imperial reality of a British diaspora – but substitutes for its unspoken but violent past the imagined possibility of a more harmonious future.

Stevenson’s difficult and almost deadly venture into the New World was just the first of a long series of exiles from his homeland; his travels forced an awareness of borders and boundaries





that would haunt him the rest of his life. His California writings also reflect his need to expand the boundaries of the traditional essay- and travel-writing forms to accommodate historical and ethnographic information as well as self-reflexive meditations on individual and national identity. Caroline McCracken-Flesher situates Stevenson's travel writing in the context of the genre's late-nineteenth-century conventions and circumscriptions, including the need to claim new territory within the already well-worn paths of British travel writing; 'As a Scot', she notes, 'Stevenson occupied an even more troubled literary space'.⁴⁶ At the same time, and for exactly the reason that he occupied an uneasy subject position, Stevenson's Scottish sense of otherness allowed him increased insight. He turned his own alienation and his liminal national identity to his advantage, writing his way into new literary territory in the process of developing stronger empathy for vexed or marginal individuals: the Scottish emigrants, Mexican and Indian settlers, Swedish Scotsmen and others he encountered in his travels in the New World, and later the wandering orphans, outcasts, fugitives and 'half-castes' who haunt his fiction.



Wendy Katz, among other critics, notes that Stevenson's American experiences 'altered not only the man but also his energy and pith'.⁴⁷ Stevenson himself commented several times, albeit obscurely, on a seismic shift not only in his writing but also in his thinking. For example, writing to Sidney Colvin from San Francisco (where he was recovering his health, waiting for Fanny's divorce to be finalised, and writing as much as he could manage), he explained, 'I know my mind is changing; I have been telling you so for long; and I suppose I am fumbling for the new vein. Well, I'll find it [...] I know I shall do better work than ever I have done before; but, mind you, it will not be like it. My sympathies and interests are changed' (Letters 3: 259). Not only Stevenson's sympathies and interests, but also his characteristic





themes, style, and literary form, were clearly transformed by his experiences in the New World. The old self-consciousness had gone. In its place, he revealed new sympathy for his characters, especially those marginalised by factors beyond their control. Race and national identity remained a strong theme in his writing for the rest of his life.

The reading public noticed the transformation too.⁴⁸ A reviewer of 'Across the Plains' in *Gentleman's Magazine* observes, 'Mr. Robert Louis Stevenson's pictures gain in colour and in truthfulness. There is a sincerity about them the charm of which is to me irresistible. I read his later writings with more pleasure even than the earlier [...] I do not know in [*Across the Plains*] which most to admire: the delicacy and fragrance of the pictures of Nature, good enough for Jefferies, the descriptions of squalid and dishonouring surroundings on the journey, or the digressions on subjects suggested during its course'.⁴⁹ A reviewer in *The Spectator* agrees while speculating on Stevenson's experimentation with multiple genres: 'It is a nice question whether Mr. Stevenson is at his best as a writer of romance, an essayist, or a writer of that peculiar form of didactic narrative which he has made his own in *With a Donkey in the Cevennes*, *An Inland Voyage*, and *Across the Plains*. Much as we like the essays and the stories, we are ourselves inclined to think that excels in what, to borrow a phrase from an American poet, we may call "singing the song of the open road." In his songs of the open road, Mr. Stevenson has opportunity to give scope to all his gifts'.⁵⁰ And he developed these gifts – of stylistic fluency as well as insight, sympathy, and wisdom – in travel narratives, which in turn expanded the range and power of his writing in other genres.⁵¹

Perhaps the strongest articulation of his still-developing views on national identity comes in the essay 'A Foreigner at Home', published after Stevenson's return from California in the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1882. Stevenson opens by mentioning recent books that may have prompted readers to consider 'the divisions of





‘races and nations’, and adds, ‘Such thoughts should arise with particular congruity and force to inhabitants of that United Kingdom’. Note the prescriptive ‘should’ here – an imperative he enforces by casually adding, ‘the race that has conquered so wide an empire has not yet managed to assimilate the islands whence she sprang’.

As proof that the English are startling ignorant of the ‘foreigners’ within their very borders, Stevenson offers an anecdote from his own experience. On a train journey one day, Stevenson sat with an Englishman ‘of plausible manners and good intelligence – a University man, as the phrase goes’. The Englishman mentioning a legal issue he had encountered, Stevenson then observed:

in my innocence that things were not so in Scotland. ‘I beg your pardon’, said he, ‘this is a matter of law’. He had never heard of the Scots law; nor did he choose to be informed. The law was the same for the whole country, he told me roundly; every child knew that. At last, to settle matters, I explained to him that I was a member of a Scottish legal body, and had stood the brunt of an examination in the very law in question. Thereupon he looked me for a moment full in the face and dropped the conversation. This is a monstrous instance, if you like, but it does not stand alone in the experience of Scots.⁵²

In an irony Stevenson would appreciate, he achieved new insight into what it means to be Scottish through his travels in the New World. And on his return, he turned the imperial gaze back on Britain.



As he wrote up his travels in the New World for consumption by a British audience, Robert Louis Stevenson developed a flexible travel-essay form that allowed him to communicate the complex-





ities of living as a stranger both at home and abroad. Stevenson's texts deliberately defy the border separating a safe 'British', upper-class, masculine and colonial self from the 'beyond' of the colonised. His narrative persona often inhabits the space of the *unhomely*, the uncanny location that Homi Bhabha has termed 'a paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition' produced by 'extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations'⁵³ and that Stevenson captures in his perfectly unhomely phrase, the 'foreigner at home'. As he first challenged and then crossed generic and national boundaries, Stevenson accommodated himself to this liminal position on the bridge between clearly-defined identities. Stevenson's travels in the New World, then, prepared the way for his future explorations of uncharted territory: the alienated wanderers, unfamiliar landscapes, and uncanny doubles of the novels to come.

NOTES

Quotations from Stevenson's Letters, ed. by Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Meheew (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), are cited in the text by 'Letters' followed by 'volume number: page number'.

- 1 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'The Foreigner at Home', in *Memories and Portraits* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904), p. 23.
- 2 The first is the title of an essay published in the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1882 and later anthologised in *Memories and Portraits* (1887); the second appears in the final chapter, 'Henry Jekyll's Full Statement of the Case' of *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*; the third concludes 'The Scot Abroad'.
- 3 'Robert Louis Stevenson', *Century Magazine* (1888). Quoted in Paul Maixner, *Robert Louis Stevenson The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 293.
- 4 Examples abound: his vexed position within the Victorian literary community, for example, which derived in part from what Richard Ambrosini has called the 'ongoing experimentation with literary forms and genres out of which his extraordinarily polygraphic output took shape' – 'The Four Boundary-Crossings of R. L. Stevenson,





Novelist and Anthropologist', in *Robert Louis Stevenson: Writer of Boundaries*, ed. by Richard Ambrosini and Richard Dury (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), p. 24. Considering Stevenson's experimentations, Oliver Buckton argues that the author should become central to our reassessment of late Victorian modes of literary production: 'his position is best understood not as a refutation of realism, as such, but as a rejection of the system of generic classifications' – *Cruising with Robert Louis Stevenson: travel, narrative, and the colonial body* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007), p. 38. Other critics have focused on his unusually complex and shifting perspectives on national identity, most notably Caroline McCracken-Flesher in 'Burking the Scottish Body' and Manfred Malzahn in 'Voices of the Scottish Empire', both in *Robert Louis Stevenson: Writer of Boundaries*.

- 5 Stevenson was not unique in this experimentation, of course; his major decade of literary productivity, the 1880s, was also a decade of great shifts in the publishing industry as distinctions among genres like the three-volume novel, the nonfictional essay, the literary review, and the travel text were muddled by a multitude of hybrid forms.
- 6 In Penny Fielding, ed., *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson* (Edinburgh University Press, 2010).
- 7 'The Old Pacific Capital' appeared in *Fraser's Magazine* 131 (Nov 1880). 'A Modern Cosmopolis' was published in *The Magazine of Art* 6 (May 1883). *The Amateur Emigrant* proved controversial enough to be withdrawn from publication during Stevenson's lifetime, but was finally published posthumously in 1895. *Across the Plains* was serialised in *Longman's Magazine* and *The Silverado Squatters in Century Magazine*, both in 1883.
- 8 Penny Fielding, 'Introduction', *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson*, p. 2.
- 9 Appearing in the *Fortnightly Review*, Stevenson's essay responded to, among other stimuli, the novelist and publisher James Payn's essay 'Penny Fiction' (*Nineteenth Century*, 1881), in which Payn discussed the extraordinary rise and profitability of penny serials. Payn satirises profitable penny fiction as empty-headed, poorly written stuff: 'The population of readers must be dense indeed', quips Payn snidely, 'which can support such a crop' (117).
- 10 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'The Morality of the Profession of Letters',





in *Essays in the Art of Writing* (electronic resource: South Bend, IN: Infomotions, 2001; 1st ed. 1919), pp. 14-15.

- 11 Stevenson, 'Morality', p. 14. Stevenson's determination to see both sides – moral and aesthetic – as coexistent rather than mutually exclusive foreshadows the fascination with duality, doubleness, and partial vision that would inform not only works of literature like *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *The Master of Ballantrae* but also his intervention in Samoan colonial politics: since each individual perspective is necessarily a partial one, each must remain open to new viewpoints, most especially those most different from one's own.
- 12 Although Anderson's concept helps to explain Stevenson's experiences in the New World, it is problematic when applied to Latin American nationalisms. Since Anderson's groundbreaking *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalisms* appeared in 1982, scholars have worked to fill significant gaps in his account of the Americas, demonstrating for example that locally-controlled print cultures did not exist during the independence movements and that distinct national identities in Anderson's sense were not developed in many American nations until the mid-19th century: see Sara Castro-Klären and John Charles Chasteen, eds, *Beyond Imagined Communities: Reading and Writing the Nation in 19th Century Latin America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).
- 13 'Stevenson, Robert Louis', in *Encyclopedia of the Essay*, ed. by Tracy Chevalier (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 817.
- 14 By the mid nineteenth century, most travel literature was intended for the popular reader or 'armchair traveller' (rather than, for example, a profession audience of naturalists or geologists). Even writers already known for their fiction jumped on the bandwagon; popular travel authors of the 1870s and 80s included Mark Twain (*Roughing It*, 1872; *A Tramp Abroad*, 1880); Annie Brassie (*Around the World in the Yacht 'Sunbeam,' Our Home on the Ocean for Eleven Months*, 1879; *In the trades, the tropics, & the roaring forties*, 1885); Isabella Bird (*A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*, 1879; *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*, 1881); Lady Florence Dixie (*Across Patagonia*, 1880); and Stevenson's friend Henry James (*A Little Tour in France*, 1884).
- 15 'Stevenson, Robert Louis'. In *Encyclopedia on the Literature of*





- Travel and Exploration*, ed. by Jennifer Speake (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2003), p. 1150.
- 16 I will follow Roger Cardinal and June Skinner Sawyer in considering both Stevenson's more traditional travel narratives and his meditations of place as 'travel writing'.
- 17 Stevenson, 'Roads', in *Dreams of Elsewhere*, ed. by June Skinner Sawyer (Glasgow: Neil Wilson, 2002), p. 69.
- 18 Quoted in *From Scotland to Silverado*, ed. by James D. Hart (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1966), p. xxxvii.
- 19 This pose, associated with the writers of the Aesthetic movement, had previously been satirised in a pseudo-travel piece by Dickens and Collins, *Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices*, first serialised in *Household Words*, 3-31 October 1857. And given Stevenson's tone in the essay, redolent of the aesthetic movement (at least as it was popularised in the press), it seems appropriate that Walter Crane, precursor of Art Nouveau, created the woodcut frontispiece for Stevenson's 1879 *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes*.
- 20 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'On the Enjoyment of Unpleasant Places', in *Dreams of Elsewhere*, ed. Skinner, *passim*.
- 21 Anonymous review, 'An Inland Voyage', in *London* (25 May 1878), pp. 403-4; quoted in Maixner: 48. This review was possibly written by Stevenson's good friend W. E. Henley.
- 22 The comparison to Sterne comes in an Anonymous review, 'Current Literature', in *Academy* (28 June, 1879), p. 563.
- 23 Daiches' perspective is summarised by Alex Clunas, "'Out of my country and myself I go": identity and writing in Stevenson's early travel books,' *Nineteenth-Century Prose* 23:1 (March 22, 1996): 54-73; p. 54. Clunas adds that even in later criticism, 'with the exception of some positive remarks in Bell's 1992 biography and Saposnik's astute, but brief, discussion of Stevenson's travel writing, this dismissive silence constitutes something of a critical consensus' (p. 58).
- 24 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Travels with a Donkey', in *The Travels of Robert Louis Stevenson* (Ware, Herts.: Wordsworth Editions, 2010), p. 43.
- 25 Stephen Arata, 'Stevenson, Morris, and the Value of Idleness', in *Robert Louis Stevenson, Writer of Boundaries*, pp. 3-12, p. 11.
- 26 Clunas, p. 59.





- 27 Stephen Arata connects the writer's expressed views on the importance of 'idleness' and pleasure to William Morris's aesthetic principles, thus situating Stevenson firmly in the aesthetic – and, therefore the political – debates of his day. Focusing on Stevenson's later travels, Roslyn Jolly establishes the transformative effect of Stevenson's life in the Pacific (excluding California) on the author's experiments with style and genre – *Robert Louis Stevenson in the Pacific. Travel, Empire, and the Author's Profession* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009). Oliver Buckton connects Stevenson's modes of travel to his development of newly fragmented and interrupted narrative forms – *Cruising with Robert Louis Stevenson: travel, narrative, and the colonial body* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 2007). And Catherine Jones sees Stevenson as primarily concerned with the psychological and bodily effects of travel; for him 'travel is crucially about disorientation; travel writing allows him to easily adopt the different personas, because it does not require a unifying perspective' – 'Travel Writing, 1707-1918', in Ian Brown et al. (eds.), *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature. Vol 2: Enlightenment, Britain and Empire (1707-1918)* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 277-285, pp. 283-5.
- 28 Caroline McCracken-Fletcher, 'Travel Writing,' p. 89.
- 29 Ironically, Stevenson's own essays would take their part in the canon of popular representations of America and would therefore shape public expectations in the future.
- 30 While Stevenson's perspective was certainly shaped by the travel texts discussed above, even more important influences were the Scottish Enlightenment historiography and political science that themselves had shaped eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travels in the Americas. But that is a topic for another essay.
- 31 Stevenson has not received enough credit for his foresight about the future California wine industry; in his chapter 'Napa Wine' in *The Silverado Squatters* (ed. Hart), he advances a number of predictions, including these: 'A nice point in human history falls to be decided by Californian and Australian wines. Wine in California is still in the experimental stage [. . .] Those lodes and pockets of earth, more precious than the precious ores, that yield inimitable fragrance and soft fire; those virtuous Bonanzas, where the soil has sublimated under sun and stars to something finer, and the wine is bottled poetry: these still lie undiscovered [...] [but] The smack of





- Californian earth shall linger on the palate of your grandson' (pp. 205-06).
- 32 Margaret Mackay, *The Violent Friend: The Story of Mrs. Robert Louis Stevenson* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1968), p. 91.
- 33 Stevenson had originally planned to travel in steerage class, but a friend persuaded him to pay the extra two guineas for the (very) slightly more comfortable accommodations of a second-class cabin so that he would be able to write during the journey.
- 34 Coincidentally, Stevenson made his journey in exactly the year – 1879 – that his fellow Scotsman and emigrant, Andrew Carnegie, returned from Pittsburgh to Britain and took a triumphal carriage tour through Scotland before endowing a free library and public recreation area in his home village of Dunfermline. In the museum now established in the tiny weaver's cottage where Carnegie grew up, Samuel Smiles' *Self Help* books figure prominently in the décor, signifying the ideals of hard work and opportunity that spurred Carnegie to success. The story of the poor boy made good was a narrative that Carnegie's own vast wealth then helped, in turn, to perpetuate.
- 35 Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Amateur Emigrant*, in *From Scotland to Silverado*, ed. Hart, p. 11; henceforth cited in the text.
- 36 Lauric Guillard, 'Stevenson, Doyle et le mythe de la wilderness', in Menegaldo, Gilles & Jean-Pierre Naugrette, eds., *R. L. Stevenson & A. Conan Doyle. Aventures de la Fiction* (Rennes: Terre de Brume, 2003), pp. 247-70.
- 37 Lawrence Phillips, 'Robert Louis Stevenson: Class and "Race" in *The Amateur Emigrant*', in *Race & Class* 46:iii (January-March 2005), 39-54.
- 38 Margaret Mackay, *The Violent Friend: The Story of Mrs. Robert Louis Stevenson* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1968), p. 16; Hart, *From Scotland to Silverado*, p. xiii. *The Amateur Emigrant* was written in 1879-80; in December 1879, Stevenson wrote Colvin from Monterey (where he was recuperating whilst struggling to finish several pieces in order to earn much-needed cash), "Today, my dear Colvin, I send you the first part of the *Amateur Emigrant*, 71 pp., by far the longest and the best of the whole. It is not a monument of eloquence; indeed, I have sought to be prosaic in view of the nature of the subject; but I almost think it





is interesting' (Letters 3: 29). But Colvin's low opinion crushed him and he began to denigrate poor *Emigrant* himself – at least in letters to Colvin.

- 39 In his essay 'My First Book: "Treasure Island"', which appeared in the *Idler* in August 1894, Stevenson notes wryly his discouragement with his writing career at the time when he began writing the novel: he was 31 years old and 'had lost my health; I had never yet paid my way, never yet made 200 pounds a year; my father had quite recently bought back and cancelled a book that was judged a failure: was this to be another and last fiasco?'
- 40 Serialised in *Longman's Magazine* (July and August 1883); interestingly, Stevenson's account of his gradual shedding of preconceptions of America and introduction to its racial complexities ran alongside Bret Harte's 'In the Carquinez Woods', a California novel about an American Indian botanist, a Mexican woman, and the daughter of a preacher.
- 41 For example, Stevenson's tone and imagery here anticipate Derek Walcott's poems 'Names' ('My race began as the sea began/with no nouns, and with no horizon') and 'A Latin Primer' ('I had nothing against which/to notch the growth of my work/but the horizon, no language/but the shallows in my long walk').
- 42 Wendy Katz, 'Whitman and Thoreau as Literary Stowaways in Stevenson's American Writings,' in *Robert Louis Stevenson, Writer of Boundaries*, p. 329.
- 43 In his preface to *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1889), Stevenson notes, 'Upon me this pure, narrow, sunnily-ascetic Thoreau had exercised a great charm. I have scarce written ten sentences since I was introduced to him, but his influence might be somewhere detected by a close observer' (p. xix).
- 44 See his early letter to his mother, in which he is startled to realise that not only is he unable to understand the speech of his romanticised countrymen the Highlanders, but that they cannot understand him either (Letters 1: 141; discussed in McCracken-Fletcher, 'Travel Writing', p. 89); or a letter to Mrs Sitwell in which he relates a philosophical debate he enjoyed with a well-informed and thoughtful Scottish labourer with the presumed absence of ideas one would find in an ill-educated 'English clodhopper', and concludes, 'You see what John Knox and his schools have done' (Letters 1: 297).
- 45 Stevenson may imply that he anticipates a Scottish readership,





although one wonders how many readers, Scottish or not, would be as familiar with Donald Mackenzie Wallace's book *Russia* (1877) as he seems to expect.

46 Jolly, 'Travel Writing', p. 87.

47 Katz, 'Stevenson's *Silverado Squatters*', p. 327.

48 The public sometimes observed transformations long after the fact, however, since Stevenson's California writings were not issued in book form until at least a decade after their initial serialization in magazines; as a reviewer of the 1892 publication of *Across the Plains* observes, reading excerpts in a magazine is not the same experience as holding the complete bound volume in one's hands; 'Even Mr. Stevenson is read with a certain feeling of depression in the double columns of a bound magazine' – 'Mr Stevenson's *Across the Plains*', *The Spectator* (July 16, 1892), p. 99.

49 'Sylvanus Urban', 'Table Talk'. *Gentleman's Magazine* (Jan-June 1892), p. 638.

50 'Mr. Stevenson's "Across the Plains"', *The Spectator* (16 July 1892), p. 99.

51 Stevenson of course admired Walt Whitman greatly, as he discusses in his 1887 essay 'Books Which Have Influenced Me.'

52 Stevenson, 'The Foreigner at Home,' *Memories and Portraits* (New York: Scribner, 1904; 1st ed. 1887), pp. 7-8.

53 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 13.





Stevenson as sympathetic essayist

Andrew Robson

Robert Louis Stevenson was a traveller, and his essays offer not only a chronicle of his experiences abroad but also a world view marked by humanitarianism, sympathy, respect, and empathy. He also reveals a thoughtful, philosophical mind, able to see people and situation from multiple perspectives. In his writings from circa 1880, he observes people of many different backgrounds, and he is also aware of how others might see him. In the United States and in the Pacific, his sympathies sometimes appear to reverse those of his friend Henry James, who wrote, in a letter praising *The Beach of Falesà*, that 'Primitive man doesn't interest me, I confess, as much as civilised – and yet he *does* when you write about him'¹. Stevenson has an eye for the suffering and oppression experienced by indigenous and minority groups, and he sometimes imagines – and even adopts – the point-of-view of these individuals and groups as they look at him and people like him. These qualities were, however, not new; in earlier writings, Stevenson also reveals an acute sensitivity and understanding with regard to the lives of others in an unjust and sometimes uncaring world.

In 'Lay Morals', which he began in 1879, Stevenson observes the gulf between thought and speech, suggesting the imperfect nature of communication, self-knowledge, knowledge of others, knowledge of history, and more. The implications of this are humbling enough in any setting, but especially so in the context of interactions between people with very different cultural backgrounds and/or politico-economic situations. He writes:

No man was ever so poor that he could express all he has in him by words, looks, or actions; his true knowledge is eternally incommunicable, for it is a knowledge of him-





self; and his best wisdom comes to him by no process of the mind, but in a supreme self-dictation, which keeps varying from hour to hour in its dictates with the variation of events and circumstances.²

Stevenson sees the difficulty in understanding others, in articulating our own thoughts, and in leading a life based on religious or other principles. He is acutely aware of privilege: he discusses a friend at college who imagines changing places with a much-less-privileged fellow student:

There sat a youth beside him on the college benches, who had only one shirt to his back, and, at intervals sufficiently far apart, must stay at home to have it washed. It was my friend's principle to stay away as often as he dared; for I fear he was no friend to learning. But there was something that came home to him sharply, in this fellow who had to give over study till his shirt was washed, and the scores of others who had never an opportunity at all. *If one of these could take his place*, he thought; and the thought tore away a bandage from his eyes. He was eaten by the shame of his discoveries, and despised himself as an unworthy favourite and a creature of the back-stairs of Fortune. He could no longer see without confusion one of these brave young fellows battling up-hill against adversity. Had he not filched that fellow's birthright? At best was he not coldly profiting by the injustice of society, and greedily devouring stolen goods? The money, indeed, belonged to his father, who had worked, and thought, and given up his liberty to earn it; but by what justice could the money belong to my friend, who had, as yet, done nothing but help to squander it? [...] But looking to my own reason and the right of things, I can only avow that I am a thief myself, and that I passionately suspect my neighbours of





the same guilt. (pp. 543-44, 549.)

The idea that we must put ourselves into other people's shoes appears again when Stevenson notes that, 'to learn right from any teacher, we must first of all, like a historical artist, think ourselves into sympathy with his position and, and in the technical phrase, create his character' (p. 533).

In his essay 'The Morality of the Profession of Letters',³ Stevenson offers thoughts on the responsibility and challenge of being a writer, including an important humanitarian aspect. The writer is in a position, he notes, 'in some small measure to protect the oppressed and to defend the truth' (p. 74), and he contends that 'in the humblest sort of literary work, we have it in our power either to do great harm or great good' (p. 75). Again, however, he raises the issue of the elusiveness of truth, stating that 'a fact may be viewed on many sides; it may be chronicled with rage, tears, laughter, indifference, or admiration, and by each of these the story will be transformed to something else' (p. 79). Honesty is important, he writes, and omitting inconvenient truths is reprehensible, leading to a narrowness of vision, as can be seen in 'the smallness, the triteness, and the inhumanity in works of merely sectarian religion' (p. 80). 'So', he continues:

the first duty of any man who is to write is intellectual [...] Everything but prejudice should find a voice through him; he should see the good in all things; where he has even a fear that he does not wholly understand, there he should be wholly silent; and he should recognise from the first that he has only one tool in his workshop, and that tool is sympathy. (pp. 80-81)

Narrowness of mind is rejected; it is the open and curious mind that enables us to understand and even enjoy each other. Criticism and disparagement of things and people one does not





understand is, Stevenson implies, unworthy of the profession.



In the late 1860s-early 1870s, Stevenson reveals a striking sensitivity and empathy with regard to an underclass of people who serve – with little reward – those more privileged than themselves. In ‘Nurses’, he describes a lonely retired nurse who lives in poverty, with little or no contact with her former charges. As a child, Stevenson himself had had a close relationship with his nurse, Alison Cunningham (‘Cummy’), and this gives additional poignancy to the account, suggesting self-criticism and an ability to see through the eyes of others. He writes in very personal terms:

I knew one once, and the room where, lonely and old, she waited for death [...] I think I know a little of what that old woman felt; and I am as sure as if I had seen her, that she sat many an hour in silent tears, with the big Bible open before her clouded eyes. (p. 14)

He feels the poignancy of her growing separation from her charge, intimacy turning to distance as the child grows. He imagines that this woman came to live a life of ‘vain regret’, having sacrificed a love of her own, and the possibility of motherhood, for this work, in which those who once saw her as a mother see her now as a servant (p. 15). Stevenson imagines a kind of unrequited loyalty, and his empathy with these ‘quasi-mothers’ is profound:

It is for this that they have remained virtuous in youth, living the dull life of a household servant. It is for this they refused the old sweetheart, and have no fireside or offspring of their own’. (p. 16)

Stevenson wishes for a world without nurses and their like, by which he means a world marked by more tenderness.





This focus on individual lives and on common people – and the ability to observe and at the same time be observed – is characteristic of other works of Stevenson at this time. In 1871, in ‘An Old Scotch Gardener’, he depicts a working man, Robert Young. As elsewhere, he alludes with nostalgia to the Covenanters, recognising the passing of generations and the respect due to the lives of others. Of Robert, he writes:

He was a man whose very presence could impart a savour of quaint antiquity to the baldest and most modern flower-plots. There was a dignity about his tall stooping form, and an earnestness in his wrinkled face that recalled Don Quixote; but a Don Quixote who had come through the training of the Covenant, and been nourished in his youth on *Walker’s Lives* and *The Hind Let Loose*.⁴

Stevenson captures the dignity of this man:

As far as the Bible goes, he was deeply read. Like the old Covenanters, of whom he was the worthy representative, his mouth was full of sacred quotations; it was the book that he had studied most and thought upon most deeply. To many people in his station the Bible, and perhaps Burns, are the only books of any vital literary merit that they read [...] One thing was noticeable about Robert’s religion: it was neither dogmatic nor sectarian. He never expatiated (at least, in my hearing) on the doctrines of his creed, and he never condemned anybody else. (p. 85)

The account is affectionate and sympathetic. Stevenson appreciates Robert’s private life of faith, reading, and plants. He notes his tolerance of others, and he pays all due attention to the gardening skills of this old man, whose life was so familiar but also so different from Stevenson’s own.





This interest in the lives of others, and thoughts about how people can understand each other – or not – is apparent again in ‘The Foreigner at Home’, where Stevenson delves more overtly into cultural issues. Robert the gardener was a fellow Scot, and in ‘The Foreigner at Home’ Stevenson discusses the great diversity of the population in Britain. ‘[T]here are foreign parts of England’, he states –

and the race that has conquered so wide an empire has not yet managed to assimilate the islands whence she sprang. Ireland, Wales, and the Scottish mountains still cling, in part, to their old Gaelic speech. It was but the other day that English triumphed in Cornwall.⁵

Stevenson sees the English as uninterested in this diversity, comparing them unfavourably with some other colonial powers:

ignorance of his neighbours is the character of the typical John Bull. His is a domineering nature, steady in fight, imperious to command, but neither curious nor quick about the life of others. In French colonies, and still more in the Dutch, I have read that there is an immediate and lively contact between the dominant and the dominated race, that a certain sympathy is begotten, or at least a transfusion of prejudices, making life easier for both. But the Englishman sits apart, burning with pride and ignorance. (pp. 3-4)

In this rather sweeping assessment, we hear the voice of the colonised, a voice we hear again when Stevenson is in the American West and the Pacific Islands. We also hear Stevenson’s frustration – even anger – at the condescending arrogance of a fellow traveller, supposedly an educated man, in England, a man completely ignorant of the fact that Scotland has its own legal





system. When Stevenson pointed out that he was qualified in law and was 'a member of a Scottish legal body', 'he looked me for a moment full in the face and dropped the conversation. This is a monstrous instance, if you like, but it does not stand alone in the experience of Scots' (pp. 7-8).

Stevenson feels the resentment that arises not merely from English ignorance of the colonised but also from his total lack of curiosity or interest in the lives of others. Stevenson was to encounter many such instances in the last few years of his life, when he observed interactions (or the lack thereof) between migrants and American Indians, Mexicans, and others and between colonial officials and Pacific islanders. He demonstrates the need for curiosity and sympathetic understanding between people. Using one's own assumptions and prejudices as a yardstick will not produce understanding across cultural, linguistic, or socio-economic divides.

Stevenson went to the United States twice, observing the struggles and moods of fellow travellers and migrants and forming impressions of local residents through the windows and at stops. From the beginning, however, Stevenson clearly saw the migrant experience itself as worthy of close examination, and to this end he at first intended to travel as a steerage passenger, but was persuaded to opt for the second cabin, a choice that allowed him to share many of the travails of steerage while receiving some basic conveniences. There can be no doubt that this was Stephenson's most extended immersion into the lives of people who enjoyed few, if any, privileges. He shared the emigrant experience – he did not simply observe it – and it can be seen as a watershed, to be followed by the rich experiences, engagement, and observations of his time in American and the Pacific Islands. His writing from this period includes *The Amateur Emigrant* a section of which was also published separately as 'Across the Plains'. Travelling across the USA by rail, Stevenson observed that his fellow-travellers were –





somewhat sad, [...] with an extraordinary poor taste in humour, and little interest in their fellow-creatures beyond that of a cheap and merely external curiosity. If they heard a man's name and business, they seemed to think they had the heart of that mystery.⁶

Stevenson never lacked curiosity, and he was able to see himself as well as others in particular situations, frankly acknowledging his own assumptions and the trajectory of his immediate responses. In a railway waiting-room in Pittsburgh he encountered 'a coloured gentleman' for the first time:

He did me the honour to wait upon me after a fashion, while I was eating; and every word, look, and gesture marched me further into the country of surprise. He was indeed strikingly unlike the negroes of Mrs. Beecher Stowe, or the Christy Minstrels of my youth [...] I had come prepared to pity the poor negro, to put him at his ease, to prove in a thousand condescensions that I was no sharer in the prejudice of race; but I assure you I put my patronage away for another occasion, and had the grace to be pleased with that result. (pp. 21, 22)

On his way across the continent, heading for California, Stevenson occasionally caught sight of American Indians, and he was struck by the poignancy of what he saw. He acknowledges the ancestral claims of –

him over whose own hereditary continent we had been steaming all these days. I saw no wild or independent Indian: indeed, I hear that such avoid the neighbourhood of the train; but now and again [...] a husband and wife and a few children, disgracefully dressed out with the sweepings of civilisation, came forth and stared upon





the emigrants. The silent stoicism of their conduct, and the pathetic degradation of their appearance, would have touched any thinking creature, but my fellow-passengers danced and jested round them with truly Cockney baseness. I was ashamed for the thing we call civilisation. We should carry upon our conscience so much, at least, of our forefathers' misconduct as we continue to profit by ourselves. (p. 67)

Stevenson recognises his own place in the continuing saga of violence against the Indians, to whom he is – like his fellow-travellers – an interloper, a conqueror, a coloniser. It is an ironic and painful recognition, compounded by his sense of shame at the behaviour of his fellow passengers. The ragged Western clothes the American Indians wore imposed a further and particular humiliation, on top of the cataclysmic loss of lives and lands.

The loss of lands by indigenous peoples is deeply felt by Stevenson, who was steeped in stories of the Clearances in the Scottish Highlands, who observed the similar land issues in Hawaii, and who was later to warn Samoans of the urgent need to protect their land from colonial take-over. The depth of his feelings on these issues cannot be doubted, nor the international sweep of his concern:

[God] has given you [he told the Samoans] a rich soil, a splendid sun, copious rain; all is ready to your hand, half done. And I repeat to you that thing which is sure: if you do not occupy and use your country, others will. It will not continue to be yours or your children's, if you occupy it for nothing. You and your children will in that case be 'cast out into outer darkness where shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth'; I who speak have seen these things [...] I have seen them in Ireland, and I have seen them in the mountains of my own country – Scotland – and my heart





was sad. These were a fine people in the past – brave, gay, faithful, and very much like Samoans [...] And now you may go through great tracts of land and scarce meet a man or a smoking house, and see nothing but sheep feeding [...] To come nearer; [...] I have seen the judgment in Oahu also [...] The other people had come and used that country, and the Hawaiians who occupied it for nothing had been swept away.⁷

The journey across North America also brought Stevenson into contact with Mexicans – and another story of lands lost. In ‘The Old Pacific Capital’ he notes that the town of Monterey ‘was essentially and wholly Mexican; and yet almost all the land in the neighbourhood was held by Americans, and it was from the same class, numerically so small, that the principal officials were selected’.⁸ Catholic missionaries, Mexicans, Caucasian-Americans, Indians, and others played parts in this tug of war over land, and Stevenson has particular empathy for the Mexicans and the Indians:

Nothing is stranger in that strange State than the rapidity with which the soil has changed hands. The Mexicans, you may say, are all poor and landless, like their former capital; and yet both it and they hold themselves apart and preserve their ancient customs and something of their ancient air [...] [I]t was a matter of perpetual surprise to find, in that world of absolutely mannerless Americans, a people full of deportment, solemnly courteous, and doing all things with grace and decorum. (pp. 88, 90)

Similarly with the Indians of Carmel, where Stevenson found the ruins of an old mission atop a hill, from which vantage point

the eye embraces a great field of ocean, and the ear is





filled with a continuous sound of distant breakers on the shore. But the day of the Jesuit has gone by, the day of the Yankee has succeeded, and there is no one left to care for the converted savage. [...] There is no sign of American interference, save where a headboard has been torn from a grave to be a mark for a pistol bullet. So it is with the Indians for whom it was erected. Their lands, I was told, are being yearly encroached upon by the neighbouring American proprietors. (p. 99)

Here, Stevenson describes a day in the year when the Indian community celebrates and is celebrated. It is an acute, sensitive, and painful account, for it is clear that the Indian rituals are understood by holiday-maker onlookers only in terms of their relationship to English/European ceremonies and rituals. Even the date of the event is defined in English terms; it takes place each year on the day before Guy Fawkes. Stevenson observes the scene:

The padre drives over the hill from Monterey; the little sacristy, which is the only covered portion of the church, is filled with seats and decorated for the service; the Indians troop together, their bright dresses contrasting with their dark and melancholy faces; and there, among a crowd of somewhat unsympathetic holiday-makers, you may hear God served with perhaps more touching circumstances than in any other temple under heaven. An Indian, stone-blind and about eighty years of age, conducts the singing; other Indians compose the choir; yet they have the Gregorian music at their finger ends, and pronounce the Latin so correctly that I could follow the meaning as they sang. [...] I have never seen faces more vividly lit up with joy than the faces of these Indian singers. It was to them not only the worship of God, nor an act by which they





recalled and commemorated better days, but was besides an exercise of culture, where all they knew of art and letters was united and expressed. And it made a man's heart sorry for the good fathers of yore who had taught them to dig and to reap, to read and to sing, who had given them European mass-books which they still preserve and study in their cottages, and who had now passed away from all authority and influence in that land – to be succeeded by greedy land-thieves and sacrilegious pistol-shots. So ugly a thing may our Anglo-Saxon Protestantism appear beside the doings of the Society of Jesus. (pp. 99-101)

The poignancy of the contrast between the casual, unsympathetic, even mocking holiday-makers and the solemnity and beauty of the Indian believers and their festival shows once again Stevenson's profound sense, on the one hand, of human dignity and seriousness (here, as with the old Scotch gardener) and, on the other hand, human insensitivity.

One of the rail cars on Stevenson's train was set aside for Chinese. Again, Stevenson is appalled by the attitude and behaviour of his fellow passengers:

Of all stupid ill-feelings, the sentiment of my fellow-Caucasian towards our companions in the Chinese car was the most stupid and the worst. They seemed never to have looked at them, listened to them, or thought of them, but hated them *a priori*. The Mongols were their enemies in that cruel and treacherous battlefield of money. They could work better and cheaper in half a hundred industries, and hence there was no calumny too idle for the Caucasians to repeat, and even believe. ('Across the plains', p. 63)

Stevenson ridicules the bigots, and in a commentary still reso-





nant today, adds the following:

Awhile ago it was the Irish, now it is the Chinese that must go. Such is the cry. It seems, after all, that no country is bound to submit to immigration any more than to invasion; each is war to the knife, and resistance to either but legitimate defence. Yet we may regret the free traditions of the republic, which loved to depict herself with open arms, welcoming all unfortunates. And certainly, as a man who believes that he loves freedom, I may be excused some bitterness when I find her sacred name misused in that contention. [...] For my own part, I could not look but with wonder and respect on the Chinese. Their forefathers watched the stars before mine had begun to keep pigs. (pp. 65-66)

Stevenson reacted with moral outrage to news stories, even if his information was sometimes incomplete. In an unpublished piece on the Irish question entitled 'Confessions of a Unionist' he addressed his American readers, who were largely in favour of Home Rule, and explained why, even though he and others had long been in favour of home rule for Ireland, and even though they held no land or held other material interests there, they were nevertheless 'in the camp of Union'.

Stevenson's first 'confession' is as follows:

[T]he state of Ireland is a perpetual and crying blot upon the fame of England. England went there, as every nation in the world has gone where you now find it, because it consisted with her interest. She conquered it as the Normans had conquered herself not so long before; and she has ever since majestically proved her incapacity to rule it. It is not an easy country to rule; its ethical state much like that of the Scots Highlands before the pacification, its people still





much behind the age. But this backwardness is the fault of English indifference, English sentimentality, and the wavering of English party government.⁹

Stevenson was deeply offended by the oppressive tactics of the Fenians and other groups with their bombs and boycotts, and by the failure of the English to establish the rule of law in Ireland. 'We have suffered the law to tumble in the mud', he wrote. 'Violence surrounds us, the Jacobin is abroad. The Kingdom of the Bully is at hand'. These 'bullies' think only of themselves and their own self-interest; theirs is a narrow and ungenerous world view, rather like the English and the Yankees in 'A Foreigner at Home'. Here, as elsewhere, Stevenson sees the need for people who will rise above this level – people able to see situations from multiple points of view, who pay particular attention to the poor and the downtrodden, and who do not put their own short-term interests first. Stevenson would have called such people 'gentlemen' – those who put the interest of others ahead of their own.

Stevenson writes in defence of legislation:

directed simply against crime: the crime over which your [American] journals love to pass so lightly: unmanly murders, the harshest extreme of boycotting, and that applied to the poorest and most pitiable persons: murders like the Joyce murder or the Curtin murder; boycotting like that of the Curtin family; crimes which, if any government permit and do not sternly suppress it, has ceased to be a government at all. (Ibid.)

Stevenson goes on to suggest American hypocrisy in its criticism of English treatment of the Irish, given that the Irish were often victimised in America. Furthermore, he writes, 'If Ireland had been in the hands of the States, there would be none of this; not because the Irish would have been contented, but because you





would have put them down' (ibid.).

Perhaps because of such criticisms the American publisher of *Scribner's, Magazine*, Edward Burlingame, recommended withdrawing the 'Confessions', and Stevenson accepted this advice. This was not a new issue for Stevenson, who had, nineteen months earlier, considered making a personal intervention in Ireland, writing in a letter that he was 'not unknown in the States, from which the funds come that pay for these brutalities' (Letters 5: 390).

Stevenson felt an urge to be a public advocate on the side of people whom he saw at the time as the victims of personal or political injustice or incompetence. He hated those who used power and violence against the weaker, and he thought that his public messages or appearances might make a difference. He regretted not having taken a public stand on behalf of the eccentric General Gordon when he was besieged and then killed in Khartoum in 1885. Stevenson wrote that 'England stands before the world dripping with blood and daubed with dishonour' (Letters 5: 81).

As we have seen, his protest about the state of things in Ireland was not published, and an earlier piece, also unpublished in his lifetime, concerned the first Boer War (1880-1881), which Stevenson saw as another appalling blemish on English history. This was written in 1881, and Stevenson observes that he had once been a 'Jingo' but not any more:

I was not ashamed to be the countryman of Jingoese; but I am beginning to grow ashamed of being the kin of those who are now fighting – I should rather say, who are now sending brave men to fight – in this unmanly Transvaal war. [...] We are in the wrong, or all that we profess is false; blood has been shed, glory lost, and I fear honour also.¹⁰





It would, of course, have been more significant if Stevenson had written on behalf of Zulu independence; nevertheless, his thinking again reveals his sympathy with the perceived underdog in the European aspects of this war. His information was not always complete, but his views were humane and heartfelt.



Another famous cause was Stevenson's defence of Father Damien, long-resident at the leper colony on Molokai, Hawaii, who had died shortly before the author's visit there. This took the form of a privately printed letter. It was addressed as follows: 'Father Damien: An Open Letter to the Reverend Dr. Hyde of Honolulu'. Hyde had publically criticised Father Damien, and Stevenson feared a lawsuit because of the personal character of his rebuke, but it didn't materialise. Stevenson had visited the colony (seeing extreme underdogs) and he wrote to Sidney Colvin, 'I have seen sights that cannot be told, and heard stories that cannot be repeated: yet I have never admired my poor race so much, nor (strange as it may seem) loved life more than in the settlement' (Letters 6: 391).

Hyde had remarked that Damien 'was a coarse, dirty man, headstrong and bigoted', going on to assert that 'he was not a pure man in his relations with women, and the leprosy of which he died should be attributed to his vices and carelessness'.¹¹ An outraged Stevenson takes issue with each point, biting sarcasm:

Damien was *coarse*: It is very possible. You make us sorry for the lepers, who had only a coarse old peasant for their friend and father [...]

Damien was *dirty*: He was. Think of the poor lepers annoyed with this dirty comrade! [...]

Damien was *headstrong*: I believe you are right again; and I thank God for his strong head and heart.

Damien was *bigoted*: I am not fond of bigots myself,





because they are not fond of me.... [H]is bigotry, his intense and narrow faith, wrought potently for good, and strengthened him to be one of the world's heroes and exemplars [...]

Damien was *not a pure man in his relations with women*, etc.: How do you know that? Is this the nature of the conversation in [your] house on Beretania Street which the cabman envied driving past? (pp. 6, 7)

The indignation is real. Damien was dead, and couldn't defend himself; more importantly, Hyde could not see beyond the superficial. Damien was not someone from polite Honolulu society, and Hyde's letter suggested a strong sense of class and sectarian division; there is no empathy, no attempt to understand the man, no attempt to 'see the good in all things', as Stevenson had urged in *The Morality of the Profession of Letters*. For Stevenson, even if everything Hyde wrote were true, it would make no difference:

It was [Damien's] part, by one striking act of martyrdom, to direct all men's eyes on that distressful country. At a blow, and with the price of his life, he made the place illustrious and public. And that, if you will consider largely, was the one reform needful; pregnant of all that he should succeed. It brought money; it brought (best individual addition of them all) the sisters; it brought supervision [...] If ever any man brought reforms, and died to bring them, it was he. (pp. 33ff).

Towards the end of his life, Stevenson's public advocacy focused mainly on Samoa, where he lived, and we see the same power of observation and understanding, and the same human sympathy and empathy that is apparent in the essays discussed above. Of Apia, the main town in Samoa, he wrote that 'The handful of whites have everything; the natives walk in a foreign





town'.¹² 'The Germans', he wrote, had 'made a dreadful mess here in Samoa'. Among other things, Stevenson notes in a letter to the Scribner's editor, Edward Burlingame, that 'there are a lot of poor people who are brought here from distant islands to labour as slaves for the Germans' (Letters 7: 227). This so-called 'Black birding' was not invented by the Germans, and it was not technically slavery, but Stevenson apparently saw little reason to split hairs. He also describes Samoan unhappiness at their loss of land as much of it was converted into German plantations, leaving 'a desert of food'.¹³ In a revealing letter to Sidney Colvin, dated November 25th, 1891, Stevenson writes: 'But that is the worst thing in the South Seas; the moral tone of the whites is so low; the natives are the only gentle folk' (Letters 7: 199).

Interest, sympathy, and an open and generous mind led Stevenson to his understanding of lives lived in many different contexts. He saw many parallels between far-flung colonies and Scotland, and this connection helped him to feel what others felt when faced with oppression and exploitation. In a chapter of *In the South Seas* entitled 'Making Friends', Stevenson compares what he encounters in the Marquesas Islands with what happened in the Scottish Highlands:

It was perhaps yet more important that I had enjoyed in my youth some knowledge of our Scots folk of the Highlands and the Islands. Not much beyond a century has passed since these were in the same convulsive and transitory state as the Marquesans of to-day. In both cases an alien authority enforced. The clans disarmed, the chiefs deposed, new customs introduced, and chiefly that fashion of regarding money as the means and object of existence. The commercial age in each, succeeding at a bound to an age of war abroad and patriarchal communism at home. In one, the cherished practice of tattooing, in the other a cherished costume, proscribed.¹⁴





The criticism of the dominant interloper and sympathetic interest in the lives of the dispossessed is, as we have seen, a thread that connects many of Stevenson's North American and Pacific essays, but the same humane spirit is evident in pieces going back to his earlier writings. Stevenson was interested in people, and he tried to understand their lives from their point of view. He was an acute commentator and a sympathetic observer, able to see dominant and oppressive groups through the eyes of the subaltern, and to describe ordinary, individual lives, with their satisfactions and struggles, with profound sympathy and understanding.

NOTES

Quotations from *Stevenson's Letters*, ed. by Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Meheew (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), are cited in the text by 'Letters' followed by 'volume number: page number'.

- 1 Henry James to RLS, in *Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson: A Record of Friendship and Criticism*, ed. by Janet Adam Smith (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1948), p. 231.
- 2 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Lay Morals', in *Letters and Miscellanies* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911), pp. 531-532; henceforth cited in text.
- 3 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'The Morality of the Profession of Letters', in *Robert Louis Stevenson, Selected Essays*, ed. by George Scott-Moncrieff (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1959), henceforth cited in text.
- 4 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'An Old Scotch Gardener', in *Memories and Portraits* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900), pp. 77-78, henceforth cited in text.
- 5 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'A Foreigner at Home', in *Memories and Portraits*, p. 2, henceforth cited in text.
- 6 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Across the Plains', in *Across the Plains with other Memories and Essays* (London: Nelson, n.d.), pp. 57-58, henceforth cited in text.
- 7 Quoted in C. Brunsdon Fletcher, *Stevenson's Germany. The Case Against Germany in the Pacific* (New York: Arno Press and The New





- York Times, 1970), pp. 219-220.
- 8 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'The Old Pacific Capital', in *Across the Plains with other Memories and Essays*, p. 91, henceforth cited in text.
 - 9 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Confessions of a Unionist' (1887), uncorrected galley proofs, National Library of Scotland, MS 9891, f. 97.
 - 10 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Protest on Behalf of Boer Independence', in Tusitala Edition, vol 28, pp. 217-18.
 - 11 Robert Louis Stevenson, *Father Damien An Open Letter to the Reverend Dr. Hyde of Honolulu* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), pp. 6-7, henceforth cited in text.
 - 12 Robert Louis Stevenson, *A Footnote to History* (London: Cassell, (1892), p. 24, henceforth cited in text.
 - 13 *A Footnote*, p. 401.
 - 14 Robert Louis Stevenson, *In the South Seas*, in *Letters and Miscellanies*, pp. 11-12.





‘Not so childish as it seems’: Stevenson’s interrogation of childishness in the South Seas

Timothy S. Hayes

Our washing was conducted in a game of romps; and they fled and pursued, and splashed, and pelted, and rolled each other in the sand, and kept up a continuous noise of cries and laughter like holiday children.

In his appreciation of jams and pickles, in his delight in the reverberating mirrors of the dining cabin, and consequent endless repetition of Moipus and Mata-Galahis, he showed himself engagingly like a child. And yet I am not sure; and what seemed childishness may have been rather courtly art.

In the South Seas

Robert Louis Stevenson’s popular reputation was built largely on a series of novels and one poetry collection directly associated with childhood that he published during the mid-1880s. But a close examination of the many essays he wrote makes evident that the meaning of childhood, including ‘childish’ behaviour and beliefs in adults, was a subject that he explored on numerous occasions throughout his career, from ‘Notes on the Movements of Young Children’ (1874) to ‘Rosa Quo Locorum’ (1893), with ‘Child’s Play’ (1878) representing his most direct and sustained examination of childhood. What these essays reveal, as Julia Reid has recently argued, is Stevenson’s sustained and ‘self-conscious participation in the contemporary debate about the nature of childhood’.¹ Glenda Norquay has also demonstrated how Stevenson used other essays like ‘A Gossip on Romance’ (1882) and ‘The Lantern-Bearers’ (1888) to ‘explore the significance of





imagination' through 'the world of the child'.² And other scholars have also explored the meaning of childhood in Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses*.³ Yet critics have yet to investigate Stevenson's portrayal and analysis of childlike behaviour in some of his most intriguing and complex essays – those contained in the posthumously published work *In the South Seas* (1896). An essay collection that critics often view as a turning point in Stevenson's career, *In the South Seas* reveals the author's intense fascination with the people, the politics, and the cultures of the Pacific and his attempts to capture them in a compelling way for his readers. At the same time, Stevenson's ongoing interest in childhood gains new depth and complexity as he analyses potentially 'childish' behaviour in narrated encounters (as opposed to the largely hypothetical/theoretical musings of his other essays). Considering these essays in the context of Stevenson's enduring interest in and yet complicated feelings toward childhood, though, we can discover how *In the South Seas* ultimately fuses Stevenson's long-held ambivalence about childhood and his then-current ambivalence toward the islanders in unique ways. And, in doing so, it also reveals his uneven and yet fascinating attempts to analyse and explain the childish behaviour of the islanders – and may be a key to understanding Stevenson's frequent analysis of childhood in his other essays as well.

Initially conceived as 'letters' to be published in both the United States and Great Britain, the exact nature of the collected works that now make up *In the South Seas* was an ongoing point of contention and confusion for the better part of three years of Stevenson's life (1889-91) as well as the decades following his death. In agreeing to write about his travels in the Pacific, Stevenson undoubtedly sought to finance an intended cruise of seven months in the South Seas and to support his family. But his growing sense of the dense and complex problems at the heart of this region – the 'questions of race and civilisation at every step' that he described in an October 1888 letter (Letters 6: 213)





– left him unwilling to write the kind of light and inconsequential letters that his publishers probably expected. In addition, Stevenson's fascination with the South Seas led him to begin planning a separate work, what he enthusiastically referred to as his 'big book on the South Seas: *the big book on the South Seas* it ought to be, and shall' (Letters 6: 401). Imagining a grand project that would combine anthropology and storytelling but with an eye toward correcting what he saw as gross misconceptions about the people of the South Seas, Stevenson began transforming the material from journals he kept during his initial cruise into chapters in this 'big book'. However, the dual purposes he now envisioned for the material soon sparked disappointment in his intended publishers and confusion in his editors. On several occasions, Stevenson sent his 'letters' to S.S. McClure, his American publisher, along with insistent letters declaring that he was sending 'chapters' and not 'letters'; on 19 July 1890, for example, Stevenson wrote to McClure, 'what you are to receive is not so much a certain number of letters, as a certain number of chapters in my book. The two things are identical but not coterminous' (Letters 6: 394-95). The New York *Sun* initially refused to publish Stevenson's writings, pointedly explaining that 'the letters did not come as letters are supposed to come. They were not a correspondence from the South Seas' and 'in no way . . . fulfil[led] the definition of the word "letter."'⁴ Ultimately, some of Stevenson's 'letters' were published in both Great Britain and the U.S. for a reduced rate, but the author's inability to pull together his 'big book' again changed the status of his South Sea writings. In the spring of 1891, Stevenson shared his increasing frustration and his growing doubt about being able to live up to his ambitious goal, telling his friend Sidney Colvin in April, 'I never meant [the letters/chapters] to appear as a book', and in May, 'these letters were never meant, and are not now meant, to be other than a quarry of materials from which the book may be drawn'.⁵ Stevenson himself, then, remained unsure of what the 'letters'





would ultimately become. Finally, he settled down in the late summer of 1891 and finished the work that would be known as *The South Seas* for the remainder of his life. Following his death in 1894, Colvin began to gather as many related materials and plans as he could, and created the edition known as *In the South Seas* that appeared in 1896.⁶

Given the fraught history of their creation, to what extent can we consider the many ‘chapters’ of *In the South Seas* essays to be analysed alongside other, more traditionally formal essays that Stevenson wrote throughout his career?⁷ Certainly, many of the essays in *In the South Seas* are more interested in documenting conditions on specific islands, relating stories told by inhabitants of those islands, and explaining certain local traditions than in making a specific, sustained argument. And, in a career filled with unique works – Henry James once noted, ‘Each of his books is an independent effort – a window opened on a different view’⁸ – *In the South Seas* may have been his most unique. Blending history, ethnography, anthropology, and narrative (along with a wealth of keen analysis), Stevenson’s approach to presenting the South Seas to his readers, story by story and island by island, in many ways fits the simplest, most enduring definition of the ‘essay’ from the Oxford English Dictionary: ‘An attempt, endeavour; [...] A rough copy; a first draft’.⁹ Indeed, due to its complicated composition and publication history, *In the South Seas* stands as both Stevenson’s first and, in many ways, his final word about the South Seas. Not to mention that the widely variable form of the essay ultimately matches well with Stevenson’s overall approach to the region, one eloquently captured by Roslyn Jolly: ‘[Stevenson] regarded every new island as a new world. [...] Between ocean and shore, high and low islands, indigenous and European society, Stevenson encountered not one Pacific, but many’.¹⁰ Seeking a deeper understanding of the diversity of societies he encounters and the stories he hears, Stevenson’s essays help him steadily dig beneath the surface of the childish behav-





four he frequently observes in this new and intriguing region.

The meanings of childhood

At the heart of Stevenson's numerous essays exploring the relative importance and value of childhood lie two key concepts. The first, convincingly explained by Julia Reid in her recent contribution to *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson*, is Stevenson's cautious yet clear embrace of the evolutionist thought that dominated beliefs about childhood during the late Victorian era. Central to these early versions of childhood psychology was a belief in 'recapitulation', the idea that 'the individual repeated the development of the species' – including individual children whose growth into adulthood was imagined as just as evolutionary as the growth of a 'primitive' society into an advanced civilization.¹¹ Yet Stevenson also seemed wary of the idea of 'progress' that this suggested, an attitude evident in his essays about childhood as well as those about the people of the South Seas. As Reid asserts:

This evolutionist approach to the childhood imagination centrally informs Stevenson's essays and poetry [...] However, where most evolutionists adhered to a progressive narrative of gradual imaginative refinement, Stevenson celebrated the endurance of states of primitive consciousness, and even suggested that they might rejuvenate an overcivilised modern world. (p. 44)

In fact, this speaks to the key tension in Stevenson's childhood essays, as he frequently both indulges in nostalgia for the lost days of childhood and unrestrained imagination and play and rejects such nostalgia, extolling the deeper, more meaningful interactions and theories of the adult world. And, as I will explore in-depth later in this essay, a similarly conflicted approach marked his attempts to describe the South Seas islanders as well.





The second key concept revolves around two similar and yet remarkably distinct definitions of 'childish', both of which would have been current during the late Victorian era:

1. Of, belonging, or proper to a child or to childhood; childlike; infantile, juvenile.
2. Exhibiting unduly the characteristics of childhood; not befitting mature age; puerile, silly.¹²

While the distinction between what is properly childlike and thus charming and/or nostalgic and what is *improperly* childish and thus worthy of scorn plays less of a role in Stevenson's childhood essays than in his essays about the South Seas, we can see the development of this very clear dichotomy in his approach to childhood in three key essays during his career: 'Notes on the Movements of Young Children', 'Child's Play', and 'Rosa Quo Locorum'.

Though childhood became a key and frequently revisited subject in his essays, Stevenson's earliest essay on the subject, 'Notes on the Movements of Young Children' (1874), represents a brief and fairly limited meditation. Stevenson's main intention is to celebrate the beauty that we find in the awkwardness of children who attempt to dance (an awkwardness that he admits we would find merely 'unpleasant' in dancing adults).¹³ He focuses particularly on the gracefully awkward movements of a young girl, celebrating the intermediate stage she occupies between the fully awkward, even clumsy child she once was and the graceful, self-possessed young woman she might eventually become.¹⁴ In addition to this beauty, what seems most striking to Stevenson about this dancing girl is her purity of intent and devotion to the dance: 'the music said something to her, and her whole spirit was intent on what the music said; she must carry out its suggestions, she must do her best to translate its language' (p. 198). Still quite a young man himself, Stevenson seems to envy the





simple task and unqualified devotion to it that the child displays. But the author offers no deeper theory here about childhood or the complicated relationship between childhood nostalgia and adult responsibility, aside from one intriguing moment late in this brief essay. Summing up his impressions about the dancing children, Stevenson insists –

we cannot overcome our astonishment that they should be able to move at all, and are interested in their movements somewhat as we are interested in the movements of a puppet. [...] There is a sincerity, a directness, an impulsive truth, about their free gestures that shows throughout all imperfection, and it is to us as a reminiscence of primitive festivals and the Golden Age. Lastly, there is in the sentiment much of a simple human compassion for creatures more helpless than ourselves. (p. 200)

Even in this fairly simple early essay, Stevenson's mix of fondness for and critical detachment from childhood, as well as his sympathy with evolutionist thinking, are clearly on display. But I also include this quotation here because it offers an early example of how a description of a charming child in 1874 foreshadows similar passages describing the islanders of the South Seas, another group that will inspire fondness, protectiveness, and at times criticism in Stevenson fifteen years later.

While it was written only four years later, Stevenson's 1878 essay 'Child's Play' represents a much more in-depth and sustained comment on the storytelling and imaginative play at the heart of childhood. Stevenson leaves little doubt about his central argument with his opening words: 'The regret we have for our childhood is not wholly justifiable [...] for although we shake our heads over the change, we are not unconscious of the manifold advantages of our new state'.¹⁵ Much more directly than in 'Notes', Stevenson seeks to point out the obvious and undeni-





able advantages of being an adult, both in terms of daily life and explaining the world to ourselves: 'they [most adults] know more than when they were children, they understand better, their desires and sympathies answer more nimbly to the provocation of the senses, and their minds are brimming with interest as they go about the world'.¹⁶ At the same time, though, the very fact that Stevenson feels the need to make this case suggests that childhood still retains an almost mythical and yet arguably undeserved significance for many adults, including the author himself. Even more crucially, Stevenson explains that perhaps the most important difference between adults and children is that children remain unable to create their own stories, instead depending on the grown-ups in their lives to provide the basis for their play: 'It is the grown people who make the nursery stories; all the children do, is jealously to preserve the text'.¹⁷ Given the directness with which he illuminates the fundamental differences between adults' theories of life and children's simpler, imitative play, 'Child's Play' might seem to lack complexity. And yet, just as in a number of his other essays on fiction/stories/imagination, Stevenson also draws a direct parallel between children and adults, deliberately questioning just how much distance and difference ultimately separate them. For, beyond their unconvincing performance of acting like grown-ups, Stevenson affirms that 'children think very much the same thoughts and dream the same dreams as bearded men and marriageable women'.¹⁸ This connection anticipates his more famous formulations in 'A Gossip on Romance' (1882) that '[f]iction is to the grown man what play is to the child' and in 'A Chapter on Dreams' (1888) that 'we only guide ourselves, and only know ourselves, by these air-painted pictures of the past'.¹⁹ And this sneaking doubt about the ability to leave childhood behind – or even the necessity of doing so – takes centre stage in Stevenson's final essay on childhood, 'Rosa Quo Locorum'.

By 1893, fifteen years after the confident assertions at the





heart of 'Child's Play', an older and arguably wiser Stevenson approaches childhood nostalgia much more carefully and fondly. He begins with this essay's most famous and enduring statement, the prediction that, though only a 'matter of curiosity to-day, [the child's mind] will become the ground of science to-morrow'.²⁰ The reason behind such a prediction lies in the abiding power of Stevenson's recollections of the time both before and after he learned to read. Of that earlier time when he remained dependent on adults for his stories, he remembers, 'I listened for delightful plots that I might re-enact in play, and romantic scenes and circumstances that I might call up before me, with closed eyes, when I was tired of Scotland and home' (p. 4). In doing so, the author reminds us both of the power of stories to help us escape and of the less than ideal childhood that Stevenson endured and likely often wanted to escape. But he also celebrates the powerful and intimidating moment when he could choose his own stories:

To pass from hearing literature to reading it is to take a great and dangerous step. [...] it is even kind of a second weaning. In the past all was at the choice of others; they chose, they digested, they read aloud for us and sang to their own tune the books of childhood. In the future we are to approach the silent, inexpressive type alone, like pioneers; and the choice of what we are to read is in our hands thenceforward. (p. 5)

With pride and solemnity, Stevenson marks the first moment when the child begins to make his own decisions, to choose his own adventures, and to grow less dependent on the story giving adults of his world. But he also pointedly notes that those first choices that seemed to be his own were in fact usually extensions of his nurse Alison Cunningham's reading tastes. And this sneaking sense that childhood persists, especially the part when we can only receive and act out the stories that adults tell us, helps to





explain the intriguing question that Stevenson abruptly leaves his readers with at the end of the essay (which remained unfinished upon his death in December 1894).²¹ Noting somewhat sheepishly his enduring preference for scenes from his childhood readings, Stevenson suddenly asks, 'does that mean that I was right when I was a child; or does it mean that I have never grown since then, that the child is not the man's father, but the man?' (p. 8). In what would become his final word on the questions about childhood that stayed with him throughout his literary career, Stevenson poses the question that most clearly captures the essence of the issue – whether the child and the adult are really so separate after all. In this light, I now want to turn to a work that approaches childhood and childishness in a less direct but even more intriguing manner: glimpsing it through Stevenson's eyes in the behaviour of the adults of the South Seas.

'What seemed like childishness'

Given his persistent though largely theoretical interest in childhood and childish behaviour, it becomes clear in one of the earliest essays in *In the South Seas* why it becomes a major theme of his collection: the fact that childhood is valued more absolutely and childish behaviour displayed more regularly in the Pacific than any place he has ever seen before. '[N]o people in the world are so fond or so long-suffering with children', Stevenson explains, adding that the 'spoiling, and I may almost say the deification, of the child, is nowhere carried so far as in the eastern islands'.²² Relating how children are given great, sometimes astonishing power in the South Sea islands, even being allowed to discipline or injure their parents with impunity, Stevenson is clearly astounded – and fascinated as well. In addition, as he describes a wide variety of people that he meets, the author repeatedly notes the 'childish' behaviour (in both positive and negative senses of the word) of the islanders and ultimately offers his theory as to *why* they seem more likely to exhibit such behaviour. At the





same time, writing both within and against a long tradition of portraying Pacific societies as backward, 'savage', and generally more simple (even childlike), Stevenson shifts unevenly between his evolutionist assumptions and the more complex and respectful 'functional anthropology' that Roslyn Jolly credits him with developing during the course of writing *In the South Seas*.²³ This latter development grows more pronounced toward the end of the collection, as Stevenson thinks more deeply about the societal and cultural reasons for the behaviour that he so frequently witnesses.

As both Vanessa Smith and Jolly have noted, Stevenson often supplemented his observations of Pacific life by reading a number of authors who had preceded him there, most famously Herman Melville and American travel writer Charles Warren Stoddard.²⁴ And one trait that he (possibly unwittingly) carried into his own writing on the South Seas is what Jolly calls the 'Romantic primitivism' of those authors as well as Stevenson's own, unique version of this: the 'Highland comparison'.²⁵ The author introduces this method early in the collection and seems quite proud to do so, as he confirms its apparent success: 'When I desired any detail of savage custom, or of superstitious belief, I cast back in the story of my fathers, and fished for what I wanted with some trait of equal barbarism [....] The native was no longer ashamed, his sense of kinship grew warmer, and his lips were opened' (p. 13). This approach also fits into the evolutionist thinking that marks Stevenson's beliefs about childhood behaviour and may help to explain the author's frequent descriptions of the islanders' children – and of the islanders *as* children. Twice in the section entitled 'The Paumotus', Stevenson portrays separate island couples as children, noting the 'childish side of native character' that one displays while describing an elderly husband and wife as 'an old child' and 'like a child', respectively (pp. 166, 183). Beyond these relatively benign references, though, lies Stevenson's criticism of two sets of island women whom he sees as acting in inappropri-





ately childish ways. His strongest disapproval falls on a group of traders' wives in the Gilbert Islands, whose social climbing and flaunting of the local curfew clearly disgust him.

The position of a trader's wife in the Gilberts is, besides, unusually enviable. She shares the immunities of her husband. Curfew in Butaritari sounds for her in vain. Long after the bell is rung and the great island ladies are confined for the night to their own roof, this chartered libertine may scamper and giggle through the deserted streets or go down to bathe in the dark. [...] And she who was perhaps of no regard or station among natives sits with captains, and is entertained on board of schooners. [...] Four were skittish lasses, gamesome like children, and like children liable to fits of pouting. (p. 267)

Unlike the many moments when Stevenson writes of being charmed or even impressed by the people of the South Seas, here the author speaks critically of the silly and disrespectful 'wives' who take advantage of their privileged existence like children who never bothered to grow up. Indeed, this moment stands out for its very harshness – Stevenson rarely criticizes any native islanders in *In the South Seas* and even defends ostensibly childish behaviour in others. Part of his critical stance here may come from either adopting/embracing the envy that other locals likely would have felt toward these social climbing wives or at least sympathising with the noble 'underdogs' in this struggle. Class concerns also drive his description of another group of 'childish' women, these sent from the palace and 'of the lowest class [...] probably low-born, perhaps out-islanders [...] but jolly enough wenches in their way' (p. 303). As Stevenson and the other men attempt to wash themselves, the 'wenches' 'splashed, and pelted, and rolled each other in the sand, and kept up a continuous noise of cries and laughter like holiday children' (p. 304). More





annoyed than disturbed this time, Stevenson again associates inappropriately 'childish' behaviour with women and particularly women of a low social class.²⁶ At the same time, while these judgments are important to consider, they certainly represent the exception within Stevenson's collection, as he consistently presents the majority of the childish behaviour he glimpses in either a neutral or even a positive light.

In a separate category for Stevenson are traditionally 'childish' behaviours that he observes in the South Seas that he ultimately values and defends. One of these is the power of superstition among the Pacific islanders, a topic of keen interest to Stevenson. Describing a 'superstitious friend' of his, Stevenson explains, 'I am as pleased to hear as he to tell, as pleased with the story as he with the belief; and besides, it is entirely needful. For it is scarce possible to exaggerate the extent and empire of his superstitions; they mould his life, they colour his thinking' (p. 186). But, beyond his own personal fascination with it, Stevenson also deliberately places this superstition in a broader anthropological context, normalizing it by comparing it with two treasured western cultures:

Half blood and whole, pious and debauched, intelligent and dull, all men believe in ghosts, all men combine with their recent Christianity fear of and a lingering faith in the old island deities. So, in Europe, the gods of Olympus slowly dwindled into village bogies; so to-day, the theological Highlander sneaks from under the eye of the Free Church divine to lay an offering by a sacred well. (p. 189)

Instead of viewing Pacific culture as backward or less evolved based on its persistent devotion to superstition, Stevenson affirms that old religions and superstitions die hard if ever, even in his own country. And he further normalizes this superstition by relating a number of tales, most prominently in the chapter/





essay entitled 'Graveyard Stories', that depend heavily on superstition without any hint of irony or criticism.²⁷ Even more strikingly, Stevenson later relates how the locals become convinced of the truth of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, after seeing scenes from it depicted during a magic lantern show. But he swiftly anticipates and shuts down any judgment by readers about the credulousness of the islanders: 'The argument is not so childish as it seems; for I doubt if these islanders are acquainted with any other mode of representation but photography; so that the picture of an event [...] would appear strong proof of its occurrence' (p. 259). Focusing more on the anthropological ambitions of the project and thus largely ignoring his lingering evolutionist beliefs, Stevenson defends and contextualizes local customs that might be perceived as 'childish' as anything but.

Beyond this defence of broad social beliefs in the South Seas, Stevenson singles out two particularly intriguing men whose odd, even childish behaviour ultimately leads him to a recognition of the potential manipulation and even social creation of such 'childishness'. The first is a Marquesan named Moipu whom Stevenson initially 'detest[s]' (largely due to what he perceives as Moipu's unrepentant attitude about cannibalism). Yet, at the end of an uncomfortably racialised description of Moipu, Stevenson looks more deeply into his behaviour and offers this provocative possibility: 'he showed himself engagingly a child. And yet I am not sure; and what seemed childishness may have been rather courtly art' (p. 138). Ruminating on Moipu's behaviour, and its 'exaggerated emphasis, like some enormous over-mannered ape', Stevenson tries to see through his own ambivalence toward this man to the motives behind such behaviour, affirming how 'I feel the more sure that [his behaviour] must have been calculated' (p. 138). 'Performing' childishness as well as being 'well-mannered' and 'refined', Moipu seems to taunt and deliberately bewilder Stevenson. In response, Stevenson again brings his analytical and anthropological eye to the moment and offers an even





more striking possibility (though he never really follows up on this thought-provoking encounter). ‘And I sometimes wonder next, if Moipu were quite alone in this polite duplicity, and ask myself whether the *Casco* were quite so much admired in the Marquesas as our visitors desired us to suppose’ (p. 138-39). This is a relatively fleeting moment, yet it distinctly and powerfully shows Stevenson beginning to move past the surface of ‘childish’ actions to thinking more about their causes (and potential motives/motivations behind them, especially in the context of the South Seas). And this search for deeper, more complex explanations for childish behaviour also drives Stevenson’s appraisal of Tembinok’, the King of Apemama in the Gilberts, and his subjects.

Undeniably, Stevenson speaks more glowingly of Tembinok’ than any other individual that he describes within his South Seas essays. This is particularly evident as he explains Tembinok’s one moment of childish behaviour: Commenting on Tembinok’s abrupt departure from a meal with the Stevensons, he explains, ‘there was something childish and disconcerting in Tembinok’s abrupt “I want go home now,” accompanied by a kind of ducking rise, and followed by an unadorned retreat. It was the only blot upon his manners, which were otherwise plain, decent, sensible, and dignified’ (p. 309). Chalking it all up to the ‘Gilbertine etiquette [being] defective on the point of leave-taking’, Stevenson moves back to praising the king. But, near the very end of the chapter/essay, Stevenson briefly ponders the idleness that he constantly observes in Tembinok’s subjects, seeming to blame it largely on their culture and, by extension, their leader. ‘They bear every servile mark, – levity like a child’s, incurable idleness, incurious content. [...] I wrote of Parker that he behaved like a boy of ten: what was he else, being a slave of sixty? He had passed all his years in school, fed, clad, thought for, commanded; and had grown familiar and coquetted with the fear of punishment’ (p. 313). Though this is far from a damning statement against





Tembinok', it nevertheless speaks to Stevenson's increasing commitment to an anthropological and analytical approach to the childish behaviour that he observes, even in a leader he seems to genuinely respect. Indeed, Stevenson also shares a revealing conversation he has with another one of Tembinok's subjects, Te Kop. After noting Te Kop's capacity for 'childish pleasure' (p. 316), Stevenson explains his secretive and very grown-up discussion with the young man, one that reveals Tembinok's intimidating power and status as feared ruler: 'From the beginning he had made no secret of his terror of the king; would not sit down nor speak above a whisper till he had put the whole breadth of the isle between himself and the monarch, then harmlessly asleep' (p. 318). This conversation, which only occurs once Te Kop feels he is a safe distance from the king, is a singular event, as Te Kop deliberately avoids any further contact with Stevenson. From an outside perspective, this potentially chilling conversation would suggest that Tembinok' is more feared than respected, a stern and demanding 'parent' to his many 'children'. Yet it doesn't substantially alter Stevenson's high opinion of Tembinok'. Why? The answer, I think, lies in an earlier episode, one in which the King of Apemama conjures a village for the Stevensons seemingly from thin air and, in the process, leaves Stevenson awestruck like a child.

Arriving in the Gilbert Islands on the *Equator*, the Stevensons ask King Tembinok' to build a place for them to live (which Stevenson names 'Equator City'), and the king obliges his guests. In fact, he does so in remarkably swift fashion, motivating his workers with threatening gunshots to create a settlement in the space of only a few hours. Stevenson's descriptions make two things clear: (1) how impressed he is with the sturdiness of the village and its rapid construction and (2) how this act of hospitality occurs very much on the king's terms. Having valued the site where the settlement is constructed for its copious amounts of trees and other vegetation that masked it from the local village,





Stevenson watches Tembinok' swiftly remove all of those obstructions, reaffirming his control over the situation and making clear that Stevenson and his family will be ever under the watchful eye of the king. And Stevenson's description, filled with wonder and astonishment, further suggests an intriguing reversal in which the author mimics a child filled with awe over what his parent has created, seemingly through magic:

By dusk, when his majesty withdrew, the town was founded and complete, a new and ruder Amphion having called it from nothing with three cracks of a rifle. [...] We made our first meals that night in the improvised city [...] which – so soon as we had done with it – was to vanish in a day as it appeared, its elements returning whence they came, the tapu raised, the traffic on the path resumed, the sun and the moon peering in vain between the palm-trees for the bygone work, the wind blowing over an empty site. Yet the place, which is now only an episode in some memories, seemed to have been built, and to be destined to endure, for years. (pp. 291-92)

Within the context of *In the South Seas*, this reversal reminds us of the book's status as, in many ways, the author's 'first draft' of his study of this new region, a 'draft' marked by frequent shifts in mood and point of view: outsider and insider, critic and supporter, anthropologist and storyteller, grown-up and child.²⁸ And this is why I argue that it is worth viewing the entire book more as a collection of essays than as a fully coherent work of travel writing (though the two categories need not be mutually exclusive). Had Stevenson's life in the South Seas gone differently, and had his 'big book' come together, we may very well have seen one side of those contrasts emerge as more dominant. The models of Stevenson's 'big book' – the large survey studies of exotic regions available to him ca. 1890 – of necessity adopted a con-





trolled point-of-view and method of presentation. And it is easy to imagine that Stevenson's embrace of a more anthropological and analytical approach to the variety of related but distinct cultures that he encountered during his Pacific travels might have dominated in the end. And yet an essay like 'Rosa Quo Locorum', as well as Stevenson's uncritical admiration of Tembinok's creation of 'Equator City' above, both suggest that choosing just one side of any binary opposition might not have been so easy for an author who was so consistently interested in the multiplicity and constantly-shifting perspectives of individuals.

Ultimately, Stevenson's essays on childhood do have some affinities with his evaluation of childish behaviour within *In the South Seas* but often in surprising ways. There are certainly depictions of many adults in Pacific societies as acting like children. Stevenson doesn't consider these adults as being quite as helpless as the dancing girl of 'Notes on the Movements of Young Children', but he does seem to view the islanders' behaviour in a similar context – as something precious, rare, and destined to disappear far too soon, much like the unthinking and carefree grace of the dancing girl. The intriguing power dynamic between parent and child in 'Child's Play' (especially the way children depend on parents to provide the stories and props for their imaginative play) casts revealing light on Tembinok's control of his subjects and, rather surprisingly, his ability to impress and manipulate Stevenson himself. Indeed, while Stevenson presents himself to his readers more as an impressed and somewhat neutral observer than an awed child in relating this tale, the behaviour he describes paints a different picture, as he imaginatively and playfully elevates the gathering of hastily built houses provided by Tembinok into a 'city,' hinting at a surprisingly grand story for the fairly basic props that are given to him. At the same time, though, I think the most important connection between Stevenson's earlier essays on childhood and his work in *In the South Seas* is how they reveal the author's interest in exploring





how childhood and childish behaviour can be found in people of any race. And this trait would continue in his later works, especially his two South Seas novellas, *The Beach of Falesá* and *The Ebb-Tide*, which also offer a mixture of disturbingly simplistic portrayals of 'childish' natives and intriguingly subversive depictions of colonialists using 'childish' means to tyrannize both local populations and rival colonialists.²⁹ Striving to explain a new region and seemingly a new world to his readers, Stevenson came to realize that it wasn't all that new after all and provided fruitful terrain for further exploration of his previous thoughts on a central aspect of human existence, the inexplicable and yet inescapable power of childhood.

NOTES

Quotations from *Stevenson's Letters*, ed. by Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Meheew (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), are cited in the text by 'Letters' followed by 'volume number: page number'.

- 1 Penny Fielding, ed., *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 41.
- 2 Glenda Norquay, *R. L. Stevenson on Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 11.
- 3 See McCulloch, *The Fictional Role of Childhood in Victorian and Early Twentieth-Century Children's Literature* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004); Colley, "'Writing Towards Home': The Landscape of A Child's Garden of Verses", *Victorian Poetry*, 35 (3) (1997 Fall), pp. 203-23; and Julia Reid, 'Childhood and Psychology' in *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson*, pp. 41-52.
- 4 Roger Swearingen, *The Prose Writings of Robert Louis Stevenson: A Guide* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1980), p. 142.
- 5 Swearingen, p. 143. Oliver Buckton also notes how Stevenson ultimately used a number of scenes and ideas from *In the South Seas* as a 'quarry of materials' for his South Seas novellas, *The Beach of Falesá* and *The Ebb-Tide*. See Buckton, *Cruising with Robert Louis Stevenson* (Athens: Ohio UP, 2007), p. 157.
- 6 See Swearingen, p. 138. Though some uncertainty remains, Colvin





seems to have done the best he could to honour Stevenson by editing *In the South Seas* to represent the author's sometimes conflicting views of what the final text should look like.

- 7 A chapter of *In the South Seas* (I.IV 'Death') is included in a collection of Stevenson's essays translated into Spanish, *Memoria para el olvido: los ensayos de Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. by Alberto Manguel (Madrid: Simela, 2005).
- 8 Fielding, p. 5.
- 9 'essay, n.', in *Oxford English Dictionary Online* <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/64470?rskey=LJhXeZ&result=1>>. [27 September 2011]
- 10 Roslyn Jolly, 'Stevenson and the Pacific' in *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson*, pp. 125, 128.
- 11 Reid, p. 42.
- 12 'childish, adj.', in *OED* <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/31635?redirectedFrom=childish>>. [27 September 2011]
- 13 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Notes on the Movements of Young Children', in *Virginibus Puerisque & other Essays in Belles Lettres*, Tusitala Edition, vol 25 (London: William Heinemann, 1924), p. 196. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.
- 14 Stevenson's focus on what might be called 'primitive' movements in the young girl's dancing also echoes typical descriptions of 'primitive' cultures and rituals in Victorian discussions of evolution, further suggesting his sympathies with evolutionist thinking.
- 15 Norquay, p. 30.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 61, p. 129. Another essay entitled 'The Manse' (*Memories and Portraits*, 1887) portrays the deliberate effort required for adults to recall a specific moment from their childhoods in full detail.
- 20 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Rosa Quo Locorum', in *Further Memories*, Tusitala Edition, vol 30, p. 1. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text. As Reid notes in 'Childhood and Psychology', Stevenson's prediction soon came true: 'The burgeoning scientific interest in the child's nascent artistic appreciation which





- Stevenson predicted in 'Rosa' [...] was well under way by the turn of the century' (p. 43).
- 21 Swearingen, p. 189. Even more poignantly, Swearingen speculates that 'Rosa' may have served as inspiration or even source material for an essay focusing on 'reminiscences of childish days' that Stevenson agreed to write for *Scribner's Magazine* on 9 October 1894. This suggests even more strongly that Stevenson remained fascinated and somewhat perplexed about the relationship between childhood and adulthood even in his final days
- 22 Robert Louis Stevenson, *In the South Seas* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1971), p. 36. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.
- 23 Roslyn Jolly, 'Stevenson and the Pacific' in *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson*, p. 120.
- 24 See Chapter 3 of Vanessa Smith, *Literary Culture and the Pacific* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), and Jolly, 'Stevenson and the Pacific', p. 119.
- 25 Julia Reid compiles examples of critics' ambivalence toward this 'comparison' in her article 'Robert Louis Stevenson and the "Romance of Anthropology,"' *Journal of Victorian Culture* 10 (1) (2005 Spring): p. 46.
- 26 On the issue of Stevenson and class, see Bob Irvine, 'Romance and Social Class', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson*, pp. 27-40. Irvine chronicles previous commentary on class in *Treasure Island* and also adds his own ideas on class in *The Ebb-Tide*, among other Stevenson works. And yet I certainly believe that Stevenson's views on class merit further exploration.
- 27 This normalizing is hardly a rare occurrence within *In the South Seas*. Indeed, as Julia Reid argues, '*In the South Seas* unsettlingly contextualises cultural norms – perhaps most provocatively in discussing cannibalism (the practice that, for British readers, put Polynesian society beyond the pale)'. See Reid, 'Robert Louis Stevenson and the "Romance of Anthropology,"' p. 60.
- 28 For more about this issue, see Richard Dury's thorough exploration of Stevenson's essay style and its 'shifting viewpoints' elsewhere in this issue of the *Journal of Stevenson Studies*.
- 29 For more on this phenomenon, see Timothy S. Hayes, 'Colonialism in R. L. Stevenson's South Seas Fiction: "Child's Play" in the Pacific',





English Literature in Transition: 1880-1920 52.2 (2009 January):
pp. 160-81.





The reception of Stevenson's essays¹

Lesley Graham

Introduction

Stevenson's literary reputation has plummeted from dizzy heights to dark depths then risen again to respectable levels over the past 140 years – that is, since he published his first essay, 'An Old Scotch Gardener', in *Edinburgh University Magazine* in 1871. Over the same period, the reputation of the essay as a literary form has undergone a similar vertiginous fall from favour then timid reinstatement. This article examines the vicissitudes of those intersecting reputations; from the publication of the essays to their present-day status as reflected in fora as varied as academic publications, copybooks, compilations of quotations, and social networks.

Jeremy Treglown suggests that the amount of truth in Stevenson's essays can be calculated by 'the extent to which passages from them have entered the language'² and, among others, cites as examples: 'To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive' and 'Politics is perhaps the only profession for which no preparation is thought necessary'. The familiarity of these quotations illustrates not only the enduring relevance of Stevenson's essays but also their susceptibility to being cherry-picked for telling phrases, to being the object of micro-appreciation rather than considered as whole pieces, a trend that we shall also see applied to the ideas developed in the essays as well as to phrases.

General reputation

Stevenson's overall literary reputation and his reputation as an essay writer specifically are so closely entwined that distinguishing them is not straightforward. It is however necessary to trace the former separately in order to better understand the context against which the latter evolved.³





Stevenson was adulated both as a writer and as a man battling poor health during his lifetime. Late Victorian readers enthusiastically praised his works of imaginative romance, his exquisite style, as well as his personal qualities. He was perceived as being plucky, debonair and moralistic. This hyperbolic adulation continued virtually unabated and unchallenged for about twenty years after his death, only to be supplanted after the First World War by disdain and dismissal. Edwin Muir declared in 1931: 'Stevenson has simply fallen out of the procession. He is still read by the vulgar, but he has joined that band of writers on whom, by tacit consent, the serious critics have nothing to say.'⁴ The process of rejection accelerated after the 1914-18 War and the next twenty years saw a period of particularly harsh attacks notably from Swinnerton, but also Steuart, Benson, Hellman and Beer.⁵ Reading Stevenson came to be considered, in the words of J. C. Furnas, 'aesthetic slumming' (p. 386).

Several factors appear to have motivated Stevenson's critical fall from grace – first among these a reaction against the excessive cult of the RLS personality, secondly a reaction against the perceived hyperbole of past literary praise, and thirdly the advent of a new sort of literary criticism that mercilessly swept out the old. A generation of academic literary critics regarded Stevenson's writing as a prime example of the spirit of the Victorian period: passé and unworthy of inclusion in the canon. Robert Kiely, in a review of two Stevenson biographies, summarises Stevenson's dismissal thus:

Stevenson's ephemeral charm became in the eyes of most critics an unforgivable fault. For the first wave of Freudians, he was too reticent in his treatment of sexuality; for the social moralists, his preaching was a self-indulgent mingling of the bourgeois and the idiosyncratic; for the new critics – despite their devotion to his friend and admirer, Henry James – his prose was a gaudy mixture of





other writers' styles. What had once looked like versatility appeared to new generations as dilettantism. What had once seemed bold, experimental, and invigorating appeared stale and pretentious.⁶

The collapse in the standing of Stevenson's work is unusual in the suddenness and the polarity of its swing. This negative appraisal held sway for over fifty years.⁷

The late twentieth century saw a revival in interest in Stevenson's work – especially the fiction – and the birth of what we know (and celebrate in this journal) as Stevenson Studies. However, reinstatement was a gradual process. Maixner closed his introduction to the *Critical Heritage* in 1981 with the words: 'One hesitates to speak of a Stevenson revival, but one is entitled to say with confidence that the reaction against him dating from Swinnerton's study has finally run its course and that the man and the works can now be looked at afresh.'⁸

An acclaimed essayist

So much for the ups and downs of Stevenson's general literary reputation; the trajectory of his reception and standing as an essay-writer developed slightly differently if interdependently and is complicated by the very definite collapse of the critical interest in the genre itself. Stevenson's own appraisal of his standing as an essayist and of his readership's interest in the essays was perhaps a little disingenuous. In 1894, he wrote in the essay 'My First Book: *Treasure Island*':⁹ 'I am not a novelist alone. But I am well aware that my paymaster, the great public, regards what else I have written with indifference, if not aversion'. In reality, the essays garnered extremely high praise during the author's lifetime and for several decades after his death, a period during which he was regarded by some above all as a brilliant writer of essays. The essays were generally well received on publication both when they first appeared in periodicals and





when collected in the volumes *Virginibus Puerisque* (1881), *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* (1882), *Memories and Portraits* (1887), and *Across the Plains* (1892) and even more highly regarded as Stevenson's fame as a writer of fiction grew – a regard reflected in the fact that periodical editors were willing to pay very highly to attract his contributions.¹⁰

William James considered that 'The Lantern-Bearers' deserved 'to become immortal, both for the truth of its matter and the excellence of its form.'¹¹ Jack London in 1899 declared that Stevenson's essays might almost be said to have no equal.¹² The essays were admired primarily for Stevenson's highly personal style and in particular his careful choice of words, but the subject matter was also considered admirable. R. A. Scott-James in a review of the Pentland Edition in 1906 wrote: 'how many memorable phrases there are in these essays, how much just exploding of prejudices, recalling of simpler and elemental ideals, of probing down to important and fundamental truths'.¹³ A review of *Familiar Studies* in 1882 praised Stevenson's 'keenly individual views', and Barrett in 1900 was of the opinion that in 'Beggars', 'he touches the real depths of the question, and illumines the subject with many a brilliant flash of truth and insight'.¹⁴

Up until the First World War, Stevenson was regularly considered to be one of the best, if not the best essayist of his generation: his volumes of essays were never out of print during that period. Some perhaps even downplayed the fiction the better to praise the author of 'The Lantern-Bearers' and 'Pulvis et Umbra'. The essayist Richard Le Gallienne, for example, declared: 'Mr. Stevenson's final fame will be that of an essayist, nearest and dearest fame of the prose-writer.'¹⁵

Early biographers such as Baidon had only praise for the essays, lauding their unmistakable style, Stevenson's felicitous turn of phrase and most especially the sense of 'personal frankness and intimacy' that his writings evoked in the reader.¹⁶





This praise was echoed in the main entry for Stevenson in *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature* during this period, which described him as ‘the foremost essayist since Lamb’.¹⁷

A classroom model

The high regard in which Stevenson was held as a figure of moral inspiration is also reflected in the number of popular collections such as *The Wisdom of R. L. Stevenson* (1904), *The Pocket R.L.S.* (1906), *A Stevenson Calendar* (1909), and *Brave Words About Death* (1916), which anthologized excerpts from his work, especially his essays. Meanwhile, another genre embraced Stevenson’s essays with equal enthusiasm: American college textbooks. The history of the English essay in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is bound up with the association of literature and the teaching of writing in the USA. University teachers of English literature also taught writing and chose the essay as the model to be imitated by students as they learned to construct essays for their other classes. The association spread to high schools: in 1892 the National Education Association ‘formally recommended that literature and composition be unified in the high school course’.¹⁸

Virginibus Puerisque and *Memories and Portraits* rapidly gained the status of models and were adopted as classroom texts. The rationale for the study of essays in writing courses was – sometimes explicitly – based on an idea proposed by Stevenson himself: that of slavishly reproducing the style of authors one admires, in other words, of ‘playing the sedulous ape’. Frances Campbell Berkley’s *College Course in Writing from Models* (1910) is fairly typical in the way it expresses that rationale:

The present volume of prose selections urges, as its best excuse for being, the conviction of the editor that it is founded on a principle psychologically and pedagogi-





cally sound. Although this principle, in the abstract, has been recognized by teachers, and although it has been delightfully expounded and advocated by Robert Louis Stevenson, it has not, so far as I am aware, had a sufficiently wide nor definite application to the study of writing among undergraduates.¹⁹

Essays and excerpts from essays were used to illustrate the qualities instructors hoped to see emulated in the written productions of their students, qualities as diverse and ambitious as an 'unerring choice of delicate words',²⁰ alternative paragraph construction,²¹ a direct beginning with 'clear, short crisp sentences, a smooth, conversational style'²² as well as exposition that is 'logical in composition and literary in diction'.²³

William Lyon Phelps, who edited a selection of Stevenson's essays for 'school and college courses' in 1906, expressed the hope that his collection of 'masterpieces of style' would not be 'too much like a textbook to repel the average reader'.²⁴ He was, perhaps over-optimistic since this diet, over-rich in Stevenson's essays, brought about the inevitable reaction. Frank Aydelotte claimed that no author was so frequently quoted in the classroom and recounts that student resentment ran so high that he had 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'.²⁵

Rumbling disaffection

During the nineteen-twenties, a downward turn in Stevenson's reception as an essay-writer began to be expressed in slightly more subtle ways than by sophomoric stamping. Occasional and, as yet, fairly gentle criticism appeared from various quarters. In an introduction to popular literature written in 1923, George Hamlin Fitch, for example, tempered his praise declaring that although Stevenson was justly regarded as the greatest essayist





of the period, many of his essays seemed too stylish, as if revised with an eye on posterity.²⁶

If we track back a little to the end of the nineteenth century we can observe the onset of a move towards valuing Stevenson's fictional work more than his essays, in part due to the devaluation of the essay genre itself. In 1898, Stephen Gwynn wrote of Stevenson: 'That he was a great essayist no one is likely to deny [...] But what appears not less obvious is that creative work ranks higher in value than work that is not creative'.²⁷ Doubts had already been expressed by contemporary reviewers too, as to the robustness of his thinking and the value of his ideas: J. A. Symonds wondered privately how much 'solid mental stuff' he had, while Edmund Purcell had already, in the columns of *The Academy* in 1881, reached the conclusion that he was neither a philosopher nor a moralist.²⁸

The criticisms raised by these first hostile critics foreshadowed those that were to be fully deployed, repeated, amplified and supplemented in later years. Stevenson would continue for many years to be castigated for his precious style, for deficiencies in the moral code he appeared to set out as well as for a perceived lack of originality.

The simultaneous death of the essay

This disaffection was accompanied and strengthened by a similar downturn in the popularity of the essay as a literary genre. The essay, not only as popular reading matter for the general public but also as an object worthy of interest from literary critics, fell from favour and became exclusively the college professor's preferred exemplar of 'good writing'. This gradual loss of interest in the essay can be traced, from after the First World War until relatively recently, through the knell tolled by the titles of articles such as 'The Lost Art of the Essay', (1935), 'On Burying the Essay' (1948), and 'A Gentle Dirge for the Familiar Essay' (1955).²⁹

In the early 1950s, Furnas lamented the consequence of this





disaffection – the inability of most modern readers to appreciate the essay form in general, and concluded: ‘it is an unfortunate loss to the sum of culture when a narrowness of taste parochial to any given fashion blacks out excellent work in idioms grown unfashionable’ (p. 387). This demise reinforced Stevenson’s declining standing and the result was that Stevenson’s essays quite simply disappeared from the critical map. Readers no longer liked essays and they no longer read Stevenson, so they certainly didn’t appreciate Stevenson’s essays. The essay still suffers from a certain lack of prestige as is observed by Graham Good in *The Encyclopedia of the Essay*:

Essayists are commonly also poets, philosophers, theorists, and so on, though usually this statement is put the other way round: poets and the others are also essayists. This way of stating the matter reflects the ancillary or secondary status of the essay as the least prestigious of the literary forms.³⁰

The result is that Stevenson’s essays have had a secondary status in his *oeuvre* for the past hundred years.³¹

Reasons for the disenchantment cited by critics

Critics of Stevenson during the period of critical disfavour from 1890 to 1950 repeated a variety of received ideas concerning the style and content of the essays: ‘commonplace in thought and contrived in expression’;³² his writing and personality regarded as no more than a collection of poses; mere whimsy and sentimentality. His style was also widely characterised as mere imitation of earlier writers – an accusation almost always accompanied by that quotation from Stevenson’s ‘A College Magazine’ in which he described his literary apprenticeship imitating other writers, playing ‘the sedulous ape’.³³ It became a commonplace of Stevenson criticism that he merely imitated other writers, as we





see in John Jay Chapman 's 1898 description of Stevenson as 'the most extraordinary mimic that has ever appeared in literature'.³⁴

The question of style was the first area of criticism. In Stevenson's lifetime Andrew Lang was already suggesting that what attracts or repels readers to Stevenson is the presence of the artist's hand: 'All this work [the essays] undoubtedly smelt a trifle of the lamp, and was therefore dear to some and an offence to others'.³⁵ In 1897, Moore accused him of mere trickery: composing by a technique of substituting banal expressions with more striking replacements: 'literary marquetry'.³⁶ Benson, in 1925, accused him of unnatural stylism, and managed to tie this defect in with the writer's sartorial style. His forced style, Benson claimed, 'compelled him, as under the lash to sacrifice simplicity to the desire to be striking and sonorous, and to arrest attention to what is trivial by some unusual phrase, just as he called attention to himself by outlandish habiliments'.³⁷ Leonard Woolf in 1924 declared that 'a false style tells most fatally against a writer when, as with Stevenson, he has nothing original to say'.³⁸

Accompanying the rejection of his style was the dismissal of Stevenson's ideas.³⁹ His thought is 'merely ingenious' (1892), he has 'nothing original to say' (1924), 'his ideas, such as they were, were no more than moralisings' (1945). His style was a mechanical trick of 'substituting rare words and new turns of phrase for old and familiar epithets' (1897); 'tedious virtuosity, a pretence, a conscious toy' (1914), his essays are written in 'a false literary style' (1924), notable for 'affectations of diction' and stylistic 'tricks' (1947).⁴⁰ The negative reaction is probably due in part to Stevenson's own emphasis on mechanical training, on writing as a trade and style as something that could be acquired by practice: these views were in opposition to those who regarded style as subordinate to thought and the writer as an inspired thinker: 'The highest art is unconscious', says Rawlinson in 1923, while Stevenson is 'deliberately self-conscious' (p. xvii).

The critical reaction to Stevenson's essays found its first full





formulation in 1914 with Frank Swinnerton's *R. L. Stevenson: A Critical Study*. With respect to Stevenson's essays, Swinnerton was derisory and misogynous in his attack, claiming that although Stevenson had influenced nearly all the minor essayists since his death, most of those had been women.⁴¹ He objected to Stevenson's generalisations on childhood because they were too closely founded on Stevenson's own young days, that is those 'of a single abnormal model.' He took issue with Stevenson's 'rather unpleasant descriptions of adolescence' for the same reason – 'he never had the detachment to examine disinterestedly the qualities of any person but himself'. He dismissed Stevenson's morality as laid out in 'Lay Morals' because it was 'expressed with the wagged head of sententious dogma.' As for the essays on marriage, he disparaged their commonplace conclusions and dismissed any pleasure that the ordinary reader might draw from the essays. But above all, he seemed to dislike the essays for the praise of their epigrams and striking phrases:

I wonder what it is that makes such phrases (for they are no more than phrases, phrases which are not true to experience, and which therefore can have no value as propositions or as explanations) give so much pleasure to such a number of readers. How can we explain it, unless it be simply by the explanation that Stevenson has been idolised? This book, *Virginibus Puerisque*, has been a favourite for many years, sanguine, gentle, musical, in the deepest sense unoriginal. It is the most quoted; it is the one which most certainly may be regarded as the typical book of Stevenson's early period. Surely it is because a half-truth, a truth that may be gobbled up in a phrase and remembered only as a phrase, is easier to accept than a whole truth, upon which the reader must engage his attention? It must, I mean, be the trope that lures readers of *Virginibus Puerisque* into acceptance of thought so





threadbare and ill-nourished. Only its phrases remain for quotation, for use in calendars, common thoughts turned into remembrances and mottoes ready for the rubricator. (pp. 73-74)

Stevenson's aphorisms were stripped of context in books of extracts and popular quotations and this stripping seems to have provoked Swinnerton's waspish criticism. In addition, Stevenson's insistence on the importance of happiness, having good friends, and an optimistic disposition contributed both to the adoption of Stevenson as a consoling guide in life, and his subsequent rejection by others as a naive and shallow thinker. In 1902, Muirhead summed up his philosophy of life along the following lines: ordinary life has a balance of happiness, or at least pleasure; we should try to live 'strenuously and truly', inspired by 'an ideal of life behind and beyond [...] conscious impulses', struggling courageously for 'great and comprehensive purposes in which the body and soul may unite'; as a result of this rule, we should not act guided by the merely customary and conventional; we should act with honesty and kindness, aware of how our acts are involved in 'the policy of mankind'.⁴² Independently in 1901, John Franklin Genung made a similar summary of Stevenson's 'attitude to life': rejecting conventional thinking, we should focus on living and its pleasures, spreading happiness to others, while aware of duty and the need to struggle.⁴³ For Kelman (1903), 'The duty of joy, the ethical value of happiness, is *par excellence* the message of Robert Louis Stevenson'.⁴⁴ Rawlinson (1929) sees Stevenson's teaching as centred on 'courage, good humour, patience in the face of adversity', 'to be honest, to be kind' and to struggle even in the face of inevitable failure (pp. xix-xx).

Reappraisal

Stevenson's essays did have some sympathetic defenders especially at the beginning of his fall from grace. Richard Le Gallienne,





for example, reacted to the change of mood he sensed brewing in 1900 and was moved to entitle a chapter in a collection of prose fancies 'The Dethroning of Stevenson'.⁴⁵ This was a riposte notably to the attacks by George Moore and St Loe Strachey. Le Gallienne explicitly attributed Moore's hostility to over-exploitation of the name and the myth of Stevenson, but how could one blame him, Le Gallienne asked, when everyone was heartily sick of every new writer being hailed as the new Stevenson even when the newcomer's style was at a polar opposite? In order to protect and promote the essays he went as far as to downplay one area of Stevenson's production, concurring that he had been overrated as a novelist:

That Stevenson could tell certain stories and create certain characters is undeniable, but it is in his numerous other writings that his highest significance is to be found. And that significance is that of a poet using the medium of prose – a poet, and one of the most original philosophers of his time. (p. 159)

Another early supporter of the essays over the fiction was Janetta Newton-Robinson,⁴⁶ who claimed in 1893 that Stevenson's essays 'are the most fascinating that have appeared in England since the time of Lamb' and that it is 'as an essayist that his intimates know and love him' (p. 601).

A desire for reappraisal gradually made itself felt. G. K. Chesterton called for a reassessment that would distance itself from 'the Victorian whitewashers and the Post-Victorian mudslingers'. His own monograph *Robert Louis Stevenson* (1927)⁴⁷ answered Swinnerton and other critics, but was perceived as being an insufficient response by T. S. Eliot, who called for 'a critical essay showing that Stevenson is a writer of primary importance'.⁴⁸





The reinstatement movement began timidly with mixed praise in *Robert Louis Stevenson* by Stephen Gwynn (1939)⁴⁹ and in *Robert Louis Stevenson: A Revaluation* by David Daiches, published in 1947 – a work in which Daiches claims, somewhat surprisingly, that ‘it has long been the fashion to esteem him as an essayist and dismiss the novels’. In accordance with his appraisal of the state of reception, one of the declared aims of Daiches’s study was thus ‘to redirect attention to the novels as the most impressive expression of Stevenson’s genius’ (p. 148). In his desire to rehabilitate Stevenson’s fictional work Daiches correspondingly downplayed the merits of the essays, which he describes as ‘self-conscious’ and ‘affected’. He completely overlooked the essays on literary theory and dismissed his essayistic thought with the following comment on a quotation from ‘The Lantern-Bearers’ (the essay that William James said deserved to become immortal): ‘The modern reader looks askance at this pretentious and perhaps at the same time commonplace philosophising’.

Kurt Wittig in 1958 agreed about the pretentiousness of the essay prose: Stevenson was still the ‘sedulous ape’ of – in the words of Daiches again – ‘too many words and too few insights’, but he concluded that this preoccupation with form can be considered part of a Scottish tradition:

This was part of his European background. But the preoccupation with style as a fastidious taste – with intricate forms, echoes, and alliteration, with the dance of sounds and meanings, with word-painting, and with possibilities of variation and counterpoint – all this representing a mood frequent enough in older Scots poetry and is strongly reminiscent of the way in which Dunbar especially is apt





to subordinate thought to meter.⁵⁰

J. C. Furnas's *Voyage to Windward* (1951) was the first major sympathetic biography since Graham Balfour's *Life* in 1901 and devoted an unprecedented amount of space to the essays. Then in 1968, in *The Art of Victorian Prose*, Travis R. Merritt enthusiastically emphasized the 'amazing' nature of Stevenson's essay 'On Style in Literature':

For sheer concentration on verbal method, for a specific interest in the texture of language which seems oddly to anticipate some of the habits of the New Criticism, there is nothing like this piece in all Victorian criticism. In its way, it is the most extreme offering from any of the advocates of prose stylism.⁵¹

Such praise remained isolated, however, and most appraisal and overviews of the essays tended at best to be mealy-mouthed. Irving Saposnik's appraisal of Stevenson in the Twain Authors series (1974) asserted that 'There is much in the essays – an elaborate and overly self-conscious style, a homiletic directness and a posturing meant to resemble wisdom – which explains their current disfavor but which also provides their rhetorical strength and their Stevensonian identity'.⁵² He also noted that most readers either ignored the essays entirely or treated them 'as Stevensonian samplers from which to cull appropriate reflections about life and literature' (p. 21). This is still true today, the essays most often being plundered as repositories of explicit reflection used to decode the art and moral stance implicit in the fiction.

Saposnik was particularly critical of some pieces that he puzzlingly classified under the heading 'reminiscent essays', which included 'Virginibus Puerisque':





The reminiscent essay may be distinguished from the others by a content which is overtly didactic and by a structure which emphasizes Stevenson's homiletic intentions. Perhaps no other essays were so widely read during his lifetime, and surely few others have since been so widely disregarded. Often annoyingly self-centered, they present ethical imperatives in a wisdom-literature in which theme and structure emphasize the rhetorical manipulations so characteristic of the Stevenson essays. [...] Concerned with childhood, love, marriage, age, youth and the general minutiae of daily conduct, they extend the aphoristic tendencies of the other essays and codify the Stevenson moral. (p. 30)

Ultimately, Saposnik was unconvinced by the essays and summed up their overall achievement, somewhat parsimoniously, in the following terms, adopting a common approach of seeing them as preparations for his narratives:

Thematically and structurally, they contain ideas that he was to extend in his fiction: man as pilgrim on a journey to an illusive salvation; the blessings of non-achievement and the paradoxical necessity of action; the consequences of the clash between civilization and its barbaric sediment. The result in both forms is an attitude which is best described as a shrug-of-the-shoulders fatalism and an ability which is immediately compelling but ultimately disappointing. (p. 24)

Given the harshness of this sort of criticism it is hardly surprising that, as Robert Kiely suggests in 1964, critics with low expectations were surprised by what they found in Stevenson: 'Within the past ten to fifteen years critics and biographers have begun to look again at Stevenson and, perhaps prepared by their





predecessors not to expect too much, have been surprised by the richness, variety, and maturity of what they have found.⁵³ Indeed, much of the isolated approval that Stevenson's essays were to garner during this period of reappraisal was inevitably a reaction based on and built around past criticism and this was a limiting framework that prevented critics from producing fresh and original observations.

This mild renewal of interest in the essays continued into the 1980s. Meanwhile, however, Stevenson's essays were becoming better known and appreciated outside the English-speaking world. In 1987, Guido Almansi claimed that Stevenson was better appreciated in Italy than in Britain and America where nobody bothered themselves any more with 'poor Stevenson'.⁵⁴ There was an increase during the nineteen-eighties and nineties in the number of translations of the essays, especially the essays on the art of literature, appearing in languages such as French, Italian, German and Russian. The year 1988, for example, saw the publication of three essay anthologies: *Essais sur l'Art de la Fiction*⁵⁵, edited by Michel Le Bris; *Robert Louis Stevenson. L'isola del romanzo* edited by Guido Almansi⁵⁶; and *The Lantern-Bearers and Other Essays*, edited by Jeremy Treglown, all three with interesting and perceptive introductions. A decade or so later, Glenda Norquay brought together all of Stevenson's essays that 'explore fiction-making' in the very useful volume *R. L. Stevenson on Fiction: an Anthology of Literary and Critical Essays*.⁵⁷ As part of their Great Ideas series Penguin reprinted eight of Stevenson's essays under the title *An Apology for Idlers* (2009).⁵⁸

Renewed interest in the essay in general was also reflected in the publication of *The Encyclopedia of the Essay* in 1997, although the entry for Stevenson was not entirely positive. The contributor, Peter Hinchcliffe, accuses Stevenson the essayist of purveying 'solemn nonsense about marriage and old age' in the collection *Virginibus Puerisque*, though he is much more sym-





pathetic to the subject matter of 'Æs Triplex' in which, mixing life and works together, he judges Stevenson to be 'both graceful and convincing on the need to face life with courage. His own ill health, which had already brought him to the brink of death several times, enabled him to write with real power on a subject that could easily become trite and sentimental' (p. 1727). Hinchcliffe's assessment of Stevenson's style is similarly ambivalent. His essay prose is judged, as it had been so often in the past, to be 'highly wrought' and 'marked by a precise, even precious vocabulary and carefully controlled cadences' (p. 1727). He explains this propensity for 'flamboyant' style with an original take on Stevenson's belief in style as a moral quality:

Partly this is a matter of financial probity, insuring that the author gives honest value for money received. But there is also in his writing a firm belief that grand, heroic gestures can be performed in words as well as in deeds. (pp. 1727-8)

Hinchcliffe concludes with his own magnanimous gesture: 'At their best, the essays manifest the twin virtues of beautiful prose and a generous heart' (p. 1728). In 2006, Alan Sandison was still lamenting the lack of any proper attention being given to Stevenson's essays: 'One of the obstacles that has, for most of the twentieth century, impeded the proper evaluation of Stevenson's work, is that his essays have tended to be both separated from, and overshadowed by, his fiction.'⁵⁹

As we have already noted, reception, both positive and negative, of Stevenson's essays in the first half of the twentieth century was influenced by the publication of extracts from them in anthologies, gift-books and pocket-book collections of Stevenson's 'wisdom'.⁶⁰ These works extracted elegant, comforting, or thought-provoking epigrams and paradoxes that gained the status of well-known quotations. They did not in any way





represent the whole essay, which as a genre does not aim to arrive at a final solution in moral or epigram but to think through a problem, to 'assay' various approaches, experience different points of view: a performance for the writer, an event for the reader. In Stevenson's work in particular, this accompanied by linguistic deception and sleight-of-hand – establishing a playful relationship with the reader.

Recent years have seen greater appreciation of the playfulness in Stevenson's approach to his art so that, now, rather than condemning his 'apparent refusal to take his art seriously',⁶¹ critics have embraced the game. At the same time, Stevenson's critical essays have acquired new credibility, his ideas being compared to the approach of twentieth-century critics such as Barthes and Bachelard. For Italo Calvino 'Stevenson's lucid and concrete understanding of literary techniques and their effect on the reader are extraordinarily modern and precise', and his observations in 'Technical Elements of Style' 'anticipate the phonetic and phonological analyses of Roman Jakobson'.⁶² For Glenda Norquay, he 'developed a phenomenological analysis of reading that appeared ahead of its time'.⁶³ Recent interest in Stevenson's scientific and anthropological preoccupations, notably by Julia Reid, has sparked interest in these themes, too, as they are explored in the essays. Reid deploys the essays as manifestations of Stevenson's engagement with and participation in the scientific debates of his time and discusses their resonance with his fiction.⁶⁴

Admiration from other writers

It is notable that the most prominent admirers of Stevenson's essays have not come from academe but have generally been other writers. Authors, and especially foreign authors, have in general tended to be more appreciative than critics and academics. Walter Benjamin praised 'A Plea for Gas Lamps' in a letter to Theodor and Greta Adorno in 1938, comparing it to Poe's 'The





Man in the Crowd'.⁶⁵ Indeed Matthew Wickman sees Benjamin's *Passagenwerk* (the Arcades Project written between 1927 and 1940) as similar to Stevenson's essays but on a larger scale.⁶⁶ In 'Borges y yo' (1960), Jorge Luis Borges listed the things that the real Borges liked: '*Me gustan los relojes de arena, los mapas, la tipografía del siglo XVIII, las etimologías, el sabor del café y la prosa de Stevenson*'⁶⁷. Indeed, in *El precursor velado: R. L. Stevenson en la obra de Borges*, Daniel Balderston⁶⁸ demonstrates that Borges's early literary theories, as expressed in essays he published early in his career, closely parallel concepts formulated by Stevenson. Elsewhere Balderston reveals that Borges and Bioy planned to publish an anthology (*suma*) of writing by Stevenson, to be divided almost equally into essays and fiction. Their plan included the following essays: 'Lay Morals', 'On Morality', 'The Ethics of Crime', 'On the Choice of a Profession', 'Gentlemen', 'Some Gentlemen in Fiction', 'On the Morality of the Profession of Letters', 'A Note on Realism', 'A Gossip on Romance', 'A Humble Remonstrance', and 'A Chapter on Dreams'. Balderston concludes that the *Suma de R. L. Stevenson*, though never published, is coherent evidence of Borges and Bioy's prolonged engagement with, and deep respect for, the works of Robert Louis Stevenson⁶⁹ and notes that almost all of the titles listed in the projected anthology are essays that Borges referred to at least once in his own writing (p. 180).⁷⁰ He also claims convincingly that rereading Stevenson's essays and fiction was crucial to the formation of Borges's ideas on narrative as set out in a series of essays in the 1930s (p. 175). He frequently referred to 'Lay Morals' and the other essays on ethics, being particularly taken with a notion of an ethics that was not religiously based (p. 176). Two relatively little-known essays, 'Gentlemen' and 'Some Gentlemen in Fiction' are mentioned a number of times (particularly the latter) in discussions of fictional character, Borges frequently commenting on Stevenson's assertion in the latter essay that characters are 'only strings of





words and parts of books' (p. 177). Sometimes the references are oblique – 'References to "A Gossip on Romance" are found in several places in Borges's works, most notably in the preface to Bioy's novel of 1940, a text which has the character of a literary manifesto' (p. 179).

The French writer and essayist Michel Le Bris has perhaps been the most energetic recent defender of Stevenson's essays. He begins this preface to *Essais sur l'Art de la Fiction*⁷¹ by citing the numerous writers who have admired these essays on the art of writing, adding the following names to those already cited: Nabokov⁷², William James⁷³, Julio Cortazar, Octavio Paz, Alejo Carpentier, Marcel Schwob, G. Manley Hopkins, W. B. Yeats, Hermann Hesse, Pierre MacOrlan, John Steinbeck, Graham Greene, Paul Thérout, Colin Thubron, Jonathan Raban, Richard Holmes, Angela Carter. For Le Bris, the essays he presents in French translation constitute the only real body of theoretical writing devoted to the literature of adventure. Why then, he wonders, is Stevenson ignored as a theoretician of literature? These essays on the art of fiction were influential enough to cross continents and cultures; admired as late as the 1940s, they were brandished like a flag by a generation of writers unimpressed by the alternatives.⁷⁴ Le Bris puts the neglect down to ignorance and arrogance – the refusal to believe that there was anything to learn from a writer taken for a simple 'amuser'. The contrast between the obvious historical importance of Stevenson's essays, taken up by the fervour of so many contemporary writers and the silence of critics is, in his opinion, nothing short of scandalous.

With the enthusiasm of an excitable puppy, Stevenson drew his subject matter from the lives of his parents, history, his reading and Edinburgh street scenes, flitting easily from literary criticism (he was one of the first to write about Japanese literature and Walt Whitman) to the familiar record, from philosophical speculation in





the style of Francis Bacon to reflective autobiography à la Montaigne. Despite his youth he was never ridiculous, and this was thanks to his fundamental honesty and unfailing humour. [...] He avoided the haughty rigour of Carlyle and Macaulay and the brilliant but vain fantasy of Wilde. He developed a tone that was unique: both moral and irreverent, egotistical yet open to the world and to others, skilled in drawing seductive conclusions from a series of paradoxes but never forgetting that any point of view is necessarily relative. Above all, he developed an accurate eye; a sense of image that enabled him to put together, in the same sentence, extreme abstraction and the most prosaic observation and to suggest an infinite number of hidden worlds behind what appear to be the most ordinary things. All of this gives the reader that real feeling of jubilation, a feeling of both freedom and discipline when on having experienced the heady lightness of what one imagines an impromptu fantasy one realizes in the very last line that it has all along been a perfectly mastered and perfectly *finished* piece. (pp. 15-16)⁷⁵

There is a definite sense of recognition in the appraisals of fellow writers. Stevenson famously declared in the dedication to *Travels with a Donkey* that 'Every book is in an intimate sense, a circular letter to the friends of him who writes it.' Francis Hart⁷⁶ notes that many read Stevenson's essays as letters to themselves. The essays spoke to them in some private way, just as Montaigne's essays did and continue to do. It is indeed a style and a life that still seem to invite projection on the part of some twentieth- and twenty-first century authors, perhaps more especially Scottish authors. Thus Kenneth White might almost be describing his own endeavours as he describes Stevenson's striving to attain a familiar style like that of Hazlitt: 'what Hazlitt advocated in writing was a familiar style – that is one that was





neither sophisticated nor vulgar: the most difficult style of all.⁷⁷ Another present-day Scottish writer who feels the same communication with Stevenson's essays is Andrew O'Hagan whose own essay-writing style has been compared to that of Stevenson. At a recent conference on the literary essay, he chose to speak on the subject of Stevenson's essays saying that in them we see literature at play, not just in the meaning of the words 'but beyond and beneath them'. Scott Hames argues that O'Hagan's 'cadence of easeful observation' plays a similar role to 'Stevenson's charm [...] in making the discursive good to taste.'⁷⁸

Conclusion

Despite a renaissance of interest in Stevenson's fictional output and travel writing, especially since the turn of the century, there continues to be a lack of academic interest in Stevenson's essays. This is partly due to the ambiguous and uncertain place of the essay in the literary system and to the decline of the essay as a popular literary genre, but also to the persistence of commonplaces about Stevenson's essay-writing style and world view. The essays have consequently tended to be instrumentalised; treated as apprentice pieces and dismantled for the micro-appreciation of isolated opinions or carefully selected passages, but very rarely studied as whole carefully crafted pieces of text. In fact, the essays seem to be studied in academe primarily for clues to ways of decoding the fiction or to bolster theories about Stevenson's opinions. Occasionally they are combed for contradictions between the opinions expressed in them and those deployed in the fiction, or mined as some sort of sandbox in which Stevenson played around with ideas before developing them in his fiction; or plundered as a subconscious backchannel indicative of his true feeling on given subjects.

The aphorisms that once filled the pages of books of uplifting thoughts are now tweeted and retweeted many hundreds of times a day in several languages by individuals who have,





for the most part, probably never heard of Stevenson's essays, and by automatic bots that are never likely to. The general non-reader, then, continues to appreciate and propagate gobbets of truth preserved in the essays reducing them to oft-repeated, oft-retweeted, oft-misquoted aphorisms gleaned from online repositories of quotes, which in turn were gleaned from books of quotes and aphorisms, such as those mentioned earlier, in a continuous, self-perpetuating motion. The current favourites, echoing Treglown's observation (quoted earlier) in the days just before Internet dissemination, appear to be: 'To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive,' and 'Politics is perhaps the only profession for which no preparation is thought necessary'. The source is rarely provided and many are spurious, or mangled in the retweeting process. The bulk of the essays themselves lie little-read, and too long under-examined for their own intrinsic merits.

NOTES

- 1 I would like to thank Robert-Louis Abrahamson and Richard Dury for sharing their knowledge and making invaluable suggestions as this article took shape.
- 2 Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Lantern-Bearers and Other Essays*, ed. by Jeremy Treglown (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1999), p. xv.
- 3 For a comprehensive overview and discussion of Stevenson's general literary reputation see the web page curated by Richard Dury, 'Robert Louis Stevenson's Critical Reception', <http://www.robert-louis-stevenson.org/richard-dury-archive/critrec.htm> and Alex Thomson, 'Stevenson's Afterlives' in *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. by Penny Fielding (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 147-159.
- 4 Edwin Muir, 'Robert Louis Stevenson', *The Bookman*, September 1931, p. 55. Quoted in J. C. Furnas, *Voyage to Windward: the Life of Robert Louis Stevenson* (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), p. 377.
- 5 Frank Swinnerton, *R. L. Stevenson: a Critical Study* (London: Martin Secker, 1914); John A. Steuart, *Robert Louis Stevenson:*





- Man and Writer. A Critical Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co, 1924); E. F. Benson, 'The Myth of Robert Louis Stevenson', *The London Mercury* 12 (1925); George S. Hellman, *The True Stevenson: A Study in Clarification* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co, 1925); Thomas Beer, *The Mauve Decade: American Life at the End of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1926).
- 6 Robert Kiely, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol 31, no. 4 (March, 1977), p. 461.
 - 7 So that in 1947 David Daiches could open his book on the Scottish author with the words: 'The works of Robert Louis Stevenson are not widely read today' – David Daiches, *Robert Louis Stevenson, A Revaluation* (Norfolk, Conn: New Directions Books, 1947). Indeed, as late as 1982 Jenni Calder could declare just as baldly that 'No-one would now claim that Stevenson is a great writer' (*Modern Language Review* 77.1, p. 398).
 - 8 Paul Maixner (ed.), *Robert Louis Stevenson: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 44. Oliver Buckton, for his part, identifies 1994, the centenary of Stevenson's death as a major turning point – 'Reanimating Stevenson's Corpus', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 55, no. 1 (June, 2000), p. 22.
 - 9 'My First Book: *Treasure Island*', *McClure's Magazine* 3 (September 1894) p. 283.
 - 10 See Robert-Louis Abrahamson's article in this publication.
 - 11 William James, *On Some of Life's Ideals: On a certain blindness in human beings: What makes a life significant* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1900). p. 10.
 - 12 Letter to Cloudesley Johns, 7 March 1899 (*The Letters of Jack London, vol. 1. 1896 - 1905* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1988).
 - 13 In *The Daily News*, Oct. 26, 1906.
 - 14 Jas. Barrett, 'The Essays of Robert Louis Stevenson', *New Century Review* 7 (1900), 47-58, p. 55.
 - 15 'Across the Plains', *The Academy*, 41, 1045 (May 14, 1892), p. 462. Elsewhere Le Gallienne described Stevenson as 'one of the most original philosophers of his time' – *Sleeping Beauty and Other Prose Fancies*, (London/New York: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1900), p. 159. Another (anonymous) reviewer of *Across the Plains* concurred in the columns of *The Scottish Leader* in 1892, wondering





- if it is not in the essay that Stevenson's true strength and vocation would be found – quoted by Alan Sandison, 'Masters of the Hovering Life: Robert Musil and R. L. Stevenson' in *Robert Louis Stevenson: Writer of Boundaries*, ed. by Richard Ambrosini and Richard Dury (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006) p. 316.
- 16 H. Bellyse Baildon, *Robert Louis Stevenson. A Life Study in Criticism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1901) p. 41.
- 17 *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature in 18 Volumes: Volume XIV. The Victorian Age, Part Two (1907–21)*.
- 18 William R. Parker, 'Where Do College English Departments Come From?', *College English* 28 (1966–67), pp. 339–351.
- 19 Cited by John C. Brereton, *The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College, 1875–1925: A Documentary History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), p. 383. Many years later, Robert Frost declared: 'I was the enemy of that theory, that idea of Stevenson's that you should play the sedulous ape to anybody. That did more harm to American education than anything ever got out.' – *The Paris Review*, Summer-Fall 1960, no. 24. <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4678/the-art-of-poetry-no-2-robert-frost>
- 20 W. F. Webster, *English: Composition and Literature* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co, 1900) p. viii.
- 21 William Strunk, *Elements of Style* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Priv. Print., 1918), p. 18.
- 22 William Maddux Tanner, *Essays and essay-writing based on Atlantic Monthly models* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Co., 1918), p. xxiii.
- 23 Maurice G. Fulton, *Expository writing; materials for a college course in exposition by analysis and imitation, comp. and ed., with questions and exercises* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1912), p. 123.
- 24 William Lyon Phelps (ed.), *Essays of Robert Louis Stevenson*, (New York: Scribner's, 1906), p. v.
- 25 Frank Aydelotte, 'Robert Louis Stevenson Darkening Counsel', *English Journal*. 1, no. 6: 340–350. (1912.)
- 26 George Hamlin Fitch, *Modern English Books of Power* (San Francisco: Paul Elder and Company, 1912.) p. 40.





- 27 'The posthumous works of Robert Louis Stevenson', *Fortnightly Review* no. 63, 1898, 569. Quoted by Roslyn Jolly, *Robert Louis Stevenson in the Pacific: Travel, Empire, and the Author's Profession* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2009) p. 174.
- 28 Both cited by Treglown, pp. xi-xii.
- 29 Elizabeth Drew, 'The Lost Art of the Essay', *Saturday Review of Literature*, 16 February 1935. W. P. Eaton, 'On Burying the Essay', *Virginia Quarterly Review* 24, 1948. Clifton Fadiman, 'A Gentle Dirge for the Familiar Essay', in his *Party of One* (Cleveland: World, 1955).
- 30 Tracy Chevalier (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Essay* (London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997), p. 33.
- 31 Although *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010) does not devote a chapter to Stevenson's essays, the editor Penny Fielding's introduction ably explores the place of the essays in Stevenson's oeuvre as well as their reception, notably concluding that despite what might be considered a cool contemporary reception, towards the end of his life people began to feel that it was by his essays that Stevenson would be remembered. Fielding suggests that this tension is present in the essays themselves: 'On the one hand they are "familiar", sociable essays written on accessible topics and addressing themselves to the reader in an affable (and to the modern ear sometimes affected) tone. [...] Yet the essays are also deeply serious' (p.4).
- 32 Maixner, pp. 1-2.
- 33 The practice of citing Stevenson's confession to an apprenticeship of slavish imitation was already so common in the early years of the twentieth century that Max Beerbohm in 'Note', *A Christmas Garland* (London: Heinemann, 1912) claimed that 'the compositors of all our high-toned newspapers keep it [this phrase of Stevenson's] set up in type always, so constantly does it come tripping off the pens of all high-toned reviewers'. Daiches quotes the passage in full in 1947 (p. 157) and regards Stevenson's earlier essays as 'primarily exercises in literary craftsmanship'.
- 34 John Jay Chapman, *Emerson and Other Essays* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898), p. 221.
- 35 Andrew Lang, *Essays in Little* (London: Henry and Co. 1891), p. 27.





- 36 Quoted by Furnas, p. 380.
- 37 Quoted by Furnas, p. 381.
- 38 Leonard Woolf, 'The Fall of Stevenson', *Nation and Athenaeum* 34 (5 January, 1924), p. 517, reprinted in *Essays on Literature, History, Politics, Etc.* (London: Hogarth Press, 1927), pp. 33-43.
- 39 This association was observed by H. G. Rawlinson in 1929: 'a new generation has arisen [...] to whom his morality seems a little commonplace, his epigrams a trifle obvious, his style slightly mannered and artificial', *Selected Essays of Robert Louis Stevenson* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), p. xvii.
- 40 (i) Anon., review of *Across the Plains*, *Scottish Leader* 14 April 1892, repr. in Maixner pp. 379-83, Maixner p. 382; (ii) Leonard Woolf, repr. in Maixner p. 517; (iii) V. S. Pritchett, 'Introduction', *Robert Louis Stevenson, Novels and Stories* (London: Pilot Press, 1945), p. vii. (iv) George Moore, review of Yeats' *The Secret Rose*, *Daily Chronicle*, 14 April, 1897, repr. Maixner pp. 475-77, p. 476; (v) Frank Swinnerton, *R. L. Stevenson: A Critical Study* (London: Secker, 1914), p. 208; (vi) Leonard Woolf, repr. Maixner p. 517; (vii) David Daiches, *Robert Louis Stevenson* (Glasgow: McLellan and Norwalk CT, New Directions, 1947), pp. 151, 154.
- 41 In a review in the *American Mercury*, 3 (2) (Nov. 1924). pp. 378-80, Mencken also condemns Stevenson by identifying his enthusiasts as women.
- 42 J. H. Muirhead, 'Robert Louis Stevenson's Philosophy of Life', in *Philosophy of Life and Other Essays* (London: Sonnenschein, 1902), pp. 40-50; pp. 56-57.
- 43 John Franklin Genung, *Stevenson's Attitude to Life* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1901). Genung argues that Stevenson freed his generation from the burden of Victorian introspection, and that his style reinforced this light moral touch working through story and 'the non-didactic form of conversational playful essay' (p. 41).
- 44 John Kelman, *The Faith of Robert Louis Stevenson* (Edinburgh and London: Oliphant Anderson and Ferrier, 1903), p. 240.
- 45 Richard Le Gallienne, *Sleeping Beauty and Other Prose Fancies*, (London/New York: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1900).
- 46 Janetta Newton-Robinson, 'Some Aspects of the Work of Robert Louis Stevenson', *Westminster Review* 139.1 (Jan 1893), 601-09.
- 47 G. K. Chesterton, *Robert Louis Stevenson* (New York: Dodd, Mead &





- Company, 1928).
- 48 See Thomson, p. 151. Maixner claimed that the same request might still be made in the nineteen-seventies.
- 49 Stephen Lucius Gwynn, *Robert Louis Stevenson* (London: Macmillan, 1939).
- 50 Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1958), pp. 257-258.
- 51 George Lewis Levine and William A. Madden (eds), *The Art of Victorian Prose* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 28.
- 52 Irving S. Saposnik, *Robert Louis Stevenson* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974), p. 21.
- 53 Kiely in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, p. 461.
- 54 Guido Almansi, 'Prefazione', in Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson, *Amici Rivali: Lettere 1884-1894*, ed. by Guido Almansi (Milano: Rossellina Archinto, 1987), p. 10.
- 55 Michel Le Bris (ed.) Marie Watkins (transl.), *Essais sur l'art de la fiction* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1988).
- 56 Robert L. Stevenson, *L'isola del romanzo. A cura di Guido Almansi* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1987).
- 57 Glenda Norquay (ed.), *R. L. Stevenson on fiction: an anthology of literary and critical essays* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).
- 58 Robert Louis Stevenson, *An Apology for Idlers* (London: Penguin, 2009).
- 59 Alan Sandison, 'Masters of the Hovering Life' in *Writer of Boundaries*, p. 315.
- 60 Lloyd Osbourne (ed.), *The Stevenson Reader. Selected Passages from the Works of Robert Louis Stevenson* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1898); school reader of longer passages from all Stevenson's works, including essays); *The Pocket R.L.S.: Being Favourite Passages from the Works of Stevenson* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1902; New York: Scribner's, 1905); T.S. (ed.), *The Wisdom of Robert Louis Stevenson, Collected and Arranged from his Writings* (New York: Scott-Thaw, 1904); Florence L. Tucker (ed.), *Stevenson Day by Day* (New York: Thomas D. Crowell, 1909; also a version with interleaved blank pages for recording birthdays called *The Stevenson Birthday Book* published in the same year;





- The Meaning of Friendship* (Chicago: The Canterbury Co., 1909); Wallace and Frances Rice (eds), *From Day to Day with Stevenson* (New York: Barse and Hopkins, 1910); *A Golden Month with Robert Louis Stevenson* (Buffalo: Hayes Lithograph Co., 1911); *Brave Words About Death. Selected from the Writings of Stevenson* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1916); *A Book of Selections from the Writings of R. L. Stevenson*, ed. by S. G. Dunn (London: Longmans, 1918).
- 61 Margaret Drabble, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). The reference here is to the phrase, 'Fiction is to grown men what play is to the child'.
- 62 Italo Calvino (a cura di Mario Barenghi) *Saggi: 1945-1985*. (Milano: Mondadori I meridian, 1995), p. 980.
- 63 Glenda Norquay, *Robert Louis Stevenson and Theories of Reading* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 144-46, 196.
- 64 Julia Reid, *Robert Louis Stevenson, Science, and the Fin de Siècle* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). Reid concludes that whereas the essays are overwhelmingly and uncomplicatedly affirmative in their exploration of, for example, evolutionary psychology, Stevenson's fiction is more complicated (p. 38, p. 53).
- 65 In Walter Benjamin, (1938), *Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1971).
- 66 Matthew Wickman, 'Stevenson, Benjamin, and the Decay of Experience' in *international journal of scottish literature*, Issue Two, Spring / Summer 2007, at <http://www.ijsl.stir.ac.uk/issue2/wickman.htm>
- 67 'I like hourglasses, maps, 18th-century typography, etymologies, the flavour of coffee and the prose of Stevenson.'
- 68 Daniel Balderston and Eduardo Paz Leston, *El precursor velado: R. L. Stevenson en la obra de Borges* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1985).
- 69 Daniel Balderston, 'A Projected Stevenson Anthology (Buenos Aires, 1968-70)' in *Variaciones Borges* 23, pp. 173-182, (2007), p. 181.
- 70 'The total number of references to Stevenson in Borges's published works number at least a hundred, with many being reflections on quotations from Stevenson, often from the literary essays.' (p. 176).
- 71 Michel Le Bris (ed.), 1998, *Essais Sur l'Art de la Fiction* (Paris: Payot, 2007).





- 72 In his lecture series at Cornell published in *Lectures on Literature*, Nabokov recruited the essays 'On Some Technical Elements of Style' and 'A Gossip on Romance' for his investigation of *Jekyll and Hyde*.
- 73 Cf. 'On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings' about 'The Lantern Bearers' and 'What Makes a Life Significant' about 'Pulvis et Umbra', both republished in *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1983).
- 74 In a longish account of the debate that lead to emergence of Latin American fiction, and Borges' influential preface to *L'Invention de Morel* by Adolfo Bioy Casares, Le Bris notes that commentators have insisted on locating his inspiration in André Breton's *Premier manifeste du surréalisme*, while Borges actually makes explicit references to 'A Humble Remonstrance' from the first sentence onwards and picks up the main arguments of the essay one by one and in order.
- 75 My translation.
- 76 'Robert Louis Stevenson in Prose', *The History of Scottish Literature. Vol.3, Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Cairns Craig and Douglas Gifford (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988), 291-308.
- 77 Kenneth White, *The Wanderer and His Charts: Exploring the Fields of Vagrant Thought and Vagabond Beauty* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2004), p. 78. White also underlines Stevenson's lack of 'interest in the literature that was practiced around him: that "sea of banalities" as he called it in a letter.' White also approves of Stevenson's preference for the literary climate in France: 'at least in France, he considered, you could ask questions about style, form and composition, level of logic and intellectual conception. To do so in the Anglo-British context, where, as he said, literature is produced like plum-pudding, is to be an outcast from society' (p. 77).
- 78 Scott Hames, 'A Box of Toys: Robert Louis Stevenson and Andrew O'Hagan' in *Edinburgh Review* 130 (Autumn 2010), p. 134.





Uncollected Stevenson (3)

This occasional section of the Journal will feature previously uncollected notes, articles and fragments from Stevenson's output, some of which will be taken on board the New Edinburgh Edition of his work. Each piece will be put into context by its contributor, as below, and Stevenson students, scholars and researchers everywhere are encouraged to submit similar material that they may have come across during their researches.

Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Books and Reading. No 2. How books have to be written'

In our first paper we said that books are read for the pleasure of getting out of ourselves and our surroundings; and that by reading, we learned about the world, and foreign lands, and ancient history, and the different sorts of lives that people lead. Now we shall come to the question of how books are written and the sense in which they are generally false. It may seem very easy to write the truth. The famous schoolboy, who wrote home to his friends: 'I want a cake and a cricket bat and five shillings', was probably pretty exact in the statement of his wishes. But whenever people try for something longer and larger, and either more amusing or more instructive, whether it is a storybook or a history of England or a book of travels in a foreign country or the life of a great man, they begin to find it exceedingly difficult to tell the truth.

Suppose you were to be asked to write a complete account of a day at school. You would probably begin by saying you rose at a certain hour, dressed and came down to morning school. You would not think of telling how many buttons you had to fasten, nor how long you took to make a parting, nor how many steps you descended. The youngest boy would have too much of what we call 'literary tact' to do that. Such a quantity of twaddling detail would simply bore the readers head off. But you see this is already not a complete account. Nobody could be got to write, and still less anybody to read, a really complete account of anything. The whole





art of a writer is to leave things out. And it is by what he leaves out, much rather than by what he puts in, that he manages to tell so many lies or, if you think that too strong, to produce so very false an impression.

This is the reason why the lives we read about seem so much more exciting than the lives we lead. The writer has left all the dulness out. He has skipped the days when his hero was merely attending to his business, and jumped from one adventure clean over to the next. If a history of your last half were to be written on the same principles, leaving out everything but a few of the best matches and one or two splendid larks, you would think there had never been anything like it in the Christmas holidays. If you could lead, instead of reading about, two or three days of the life of a great traveller or a great soldier, you would open your eyes to see how dull and irksome and annoying they would be. But the writer has left all that out, because, poor gentleman, nobody would have read his book if he had put it in.

Now, let us take another class of books that boys liked very much in my time, and used to read a great deal in secret; I mean books about highwaymen. I begin by admitting what you did not expect perhaps: that they are amusing to read. Nothing is more delightful than to be on horseback, on the long white roads, down the winding lane or on the open heath; to be out all night long, to fear no man, to see the dawn coming, to be chased and always escape and to be a most chivalrous person all the while – it is beyond question good fun to read and fancy yourself leading such a life. There is only one objection; it is not the life of a highwayman. If you could see the highwayman, as he generally was, dirty, cowardly, cruel, muzzy with brandy, beating poor old labourers to screw three halfpence out of them, you would understand what a very great deal the writer was obliged to leave out in order that you should care to read about his heroes. And in the same way the famous buccaneers – hardly a man among them was able even to navigate his ship! They were not sailors, even; they were lubbers and swabs, and downright dunces. If you read a true account of these rogues you would be thunderstruck. Again and again they try to cross the Atlantic – what hundreds of decent, respectable merchant skip-pers do successfully every month – and again and again they lose their





way cannot find the trade-winds, and, from sheer block-headedness, suffer the last extremities of thirst and hunger. All this sort of matter, the pirate story people quietly leave out; because you they know very well, it would not go down with the reader. Nobody wants to read about men who could not do their own business. And since I am here on the subject of the pirates, I may add, that very few of them were brave. Howel Davies was a treacherous fellow, but he had courage; Blackbeard I imagine, was a brave enough sort of wild beast; but the great bulk of them were as bad at fighting as at sailing their ships, and were only good at two things – drinking and bullying. In fact, you can see just the sort of character in any school: if there is a boy who is very greedy, overeats himself at the pastrycooks, steals when he can find a chance, bullies a little boy when he gets him alone in a corner, gives up at once to a big boy, and can't play cricket – that is the boy who would have been a buccaneer.

There is a second difficulty that writers feel; not only have they to leave a great deal out, but the things they leave in are never strong enough. A visit to the dentists in real life is not a thing to be forgotten. But you read about a man having his leg shot off, and it seems a trifle. To get the reader to realise how anything happened, how a battle was gained, or how the seaman felt when he was left on the desert island, the writer is kept hard at work. He tries to call up the scene before his fancy, and he chooses out the two or three things that will go best together, and then for these two or three he tries to find the most exact and expressive words. Again, it is a trick of his trade – and quite a right one – to stick in a little bit of contrast, as salt is put in puddings, just to help the flavour. And yet when he has done, his description looks pretty pale; and a young gentleman will read about the massacre of the innocents or the Black Hole of Calcutta, without interrupting his tea. If the young gentleman were to bite his tongue, he would take it very differently!

Now, as the first objective of books, is to afford us a pleasant change, it is just as well that we can read so unconcernedly about tragic and revolting subjects. But, in view of the second, which is to learn something about the world before we go out into it, it is as good to bear the fact steadily in mind; and above all to read some of the books of the great writers. A weak





book is misleading; but a strong book will correct the error. In the trash that I have no doubt you generally read, a vast number of people will probably get shot and stabbed and drowned; and you have only a very slight excitement for your money. But if you want to know what a murder really is – to have a murder brought right home to you – you must read of one in the writings of a great writer. Read *Macbeth*, for example, or still better, get someone to read it aloud to you; and I think I can promise you what people call a sensation. You may have thought, when you were reading the cheap books, that it would be rather fun to kill people; but nobody ever thought it would be fun to be *Macbeth*. And the reason of this difference is in the talent of the writers. The bad writer couldn't tell a murder; but Shakespeare could, and it makes your scalp turn cold. Shakespeare's murder is true.

Yet Shakespeare's murder is purely imaginary; all his people talk in blank verse, which nobody ever did; and they use language so fine that Shakespeare himself could not have used it on the spur of the moment, let alone an ancient Pictish Mormaer, like the real *Macbeth*. And perhaps the murder in the cheap book was far more natural, happening in everyday circumstances, and with the characters talking prose as real people do. Yet Shakespeare's is the one that is true to the spirit. He has left out the right things (which is the first business of the author); he has kept in the right things (which is the second); and by a singular kind of ingenuity, which we call literary genius, he has told those things in words that bring them right home to you – which is the third and last. The other, the bad author, has only made a sham. And when once you clearly understand that difference you are in a fair way to be an excellent critic.

Richard Dury, Notes on Stevenson's 'Books and Reading. No 2. How books have to be written'¹

'Books and reading. No. 2. How books have to be written' is clearly a sequel to the untraced 'On the value of books and reading'





listed by Swearingen (Swearingen, *Prose Works*, pp. 195-6). The present essay refers back to this earlier one ('In our first paper we said that books are read for the pleasure of getting out of ourselves and our surroundings'). The references to boys' experiences and the clear didactic style indicate a non-adult audience – the two essays were clearly intended for a juvenile magazine. Publication has not been traced, even though the present MSS looks like a fair copy prepared for the printer.

The MS is held in Syracuse University Library, Special Collections, where provenance is recorded as Albert B. Ashforth, Jr. (former owner) and Sol Feinstone (donor). Written on five leaves of 24-line notebook paper measuring 218 x 170 mm, numbered top centre [1]-5, with catchwords at the bottom, it is a fair copy in ink, with few cancellations and insertions, signed at the end 'Robert Louis Stevenson'.

On the recto of f. 1 is a scrap of melodramatic declaration written in pencil, which might help in dating:

if he would but bend [?] his finger, I would have you
standing If he would love me, I would follow him [unclear
word] I died he says and gloomy [?] in his notice There
is not life enough in your whole heart to understand that
love
It is I keep him treasured in my heart; I cannot sleep
for the dear

The only other 24-line notebook paper that has so far been logged in the Edition's 'Prose Works Database' is the Haverford College Geometry notebook used 1868-70 but that seems too early: so readers are asked to keep their eyes open in any library visits for paper of the same description, especially if the MS is datable.



**'Books and Reading. No. 1'.**

This MS has not resurfaced since the 1914 auction (Anderson II, p. 351), so any information on its whereabouts from readers will be appreciated. To be more accurate, the auctioned MS was only one page: 'Portion of an essay in the handwriting of R. L. Stevenson. 1. p. 4to.' We can get an idea of its contents from references in the present essay and the quotation included in the auction catalogue:

In our first paper we said that books are read for the pleasure of getting out of ourselves and our surroundings; and that by reading, we learned about the world, and foreign lands, and ancient history, and the different sorts of lives that people lead. ('Books and Reading. No. 2', para 1).

[T]he first objective of books, is to afford us a pleasant change [...] the second [...] is to learn something about the world before we go out into it. ('Books and Reading. No. 2', para 7)

So in reading books, a strong boy can learn something of what it is to be a weak boy, and a boy of what it is to be a girl, and a son of what it is to be a father or a mother, and the young of what it is to be old. Only a little, the more is the pity; but it is just by means of that little that we can be kind and good. Of these two things, the information and the moral that can be got out of books, the second is far the more important. Information is easily forgotten [...] But the moral is of use all through. (1914 Anderson catalogue qu. Swearingen, *Prose Works*, pp. 195-96).

Here there are three interesting points: (i) reading allows us to learn about 'the world, and foreign lands etc.', 'something about the world'; (ii) reading gives us the pleasure of 'getting out of ourselves', gives us 'a pleasant change'; and (iii) it allows us to learn what it is like to be someone else. The first is 'the information [...]





that can be got out of books', the second the pleasure that can be gained, and the third is 'the moral that can be got out of books'. Or perhaps the third aspect of the reading experience ('a strong boy can learn something of what it is to be a weak boy' etc.) is the 'means' by which we arrive at the moral lesson ('it is just by means of that little that we can be kind and good'). The moral benefit comes from picking up the 'spirit' of others, which then helps us understand how we are to act in our own life.

The reading pleasure of 'getting out of ourselves' and the therapeutic value of reading are referred to on several occasions by RLS. For example, in a letter of 1886 (Letters 5: 220-21) he notes 'a certain impotence in many minds of today, which prevents them from living in a book or a character, and keeps them standing afar off, spectators of a puppet show. To such I suppose the book may seem empty in the centre; to the others it is a room, a house of life, into which they themselves enter, and are tortured and purified'.

Swearingen, who only had the benefit of the auction catalogue quotation, says the first essay is possibly related to 'The Morality of the Profession of Letters' (henceforth MPL, 1881), especially the middle part. Here, he must be referring to –

There are two duties incumbent upon any man who enters on the business of writing: truth to the fact and a good spirit in the treatment [paragraph 4] [...] The second duty, far harder to define, is moral [para 6].

Although there is some confusion about the second duty, there is the same distinction between information and moral teaching. And the moral teaching in 'Books and Reading. No. 1' is being 'kind and good', and 'kind' is a key term in paragraph 4 of MPL:

Each man should learn [...] what is without him, that he may be kind to others [...] He should tell of the kind and





wholesome and beautiful elements of our life [...] the body of contemporary literature [...] touches in the minds of men the springs of thought and kindness

In addition, 'a strong boy [learning] something of what it is to be a weak boy' etc. can be seen as exercises in 'sympathy', which is another key term in MPL: it is used only once, but it is prominently placed at the end of paragraph 5: 'he has only one tool in his workshop, and that tool is sympathy'.

We can also see affinities with other writings written in the same early 1880s period, especially the Preface to *Familiar Studies* and, 'Lay Morals' which both contain discussion of the partial vision we have of the world and therefore the need to accept that all verbal description is incomplete and therefore a 'lie'.

Dating.

MPL was written in Davos, January-March 1881, yet the two 'Books and Reading' papers were probably written after RLS had come into contact with *Young Folks* (i.e. after later summer 1881 in Braemar, when he started *Treasure Island*). It is possible that the two articles were prepared with *Young Folks* in mind, as this was the only juvenile publication he had a lasting relationship with, it must anyway be the most likely candidate. Another possibility is given in a letter from the travel- and horticultural-writer Rose G. Kingsley who also wrote for children. The letter, dated 17 November 1885, is in the Beinecke Library and the McKay catalogue gives the following description 'Miss Kinsley asks Stevenson to contribute an article to 'a new first class magazine for boys and girls' of which she is to be one of the editors' (B 5017; Gen Mss 664, box 18 folder 401c).

The reference to buccaneers, Howel Davies and Blackbeard, suggests a post-Treasure Island dating. Also the obviously felt evocation of highwayman stories chimes with the plan for the





highwayman story 'Jerry Abershore' in September 1881 (Letters 3: 228-29). RLS's enthusiasm for highwayman stories is also confessed in 'A Gossip on Romance', written February 1882: 'Give me a highwayman and I was full to the brim; a Jacobite would do, but the highwayman was my favourite dish'.

A visit to the dentists 'not a thing to be forgotten' probably dates the essay to after the extraction of his teeth in East Oakland in 1880.

The two essays on 'books and reading' may have had a more specific audience in RLS's stepson, Sam Osbourne. In April he turned thirteen and later in the year he was sent to a tutor in Malton, near York, then he was at a small private school in Bournemouth from November 1882 (Letters 4: 26, 41n). Schooldays for 'Sam', in the sense of secondary boarding school, covered the period 1882-84. Possibly it was from him that RLS picked up the schoolboy slang: 'twaddling', 'half' (= half-year or term), 'splendid larks' (first OED citation for 'larks' in the sense of 'fun', 1811).

It could date from any time in the period 1881-87, more probably towards the beginning than the end of the period. A 'good fit' date that covers a number of the above clues, as well as others in the commentary below, would be 1882.

Explanatory notes and commentary.

Paragraph 1

books ... are ... generally false: The 1881 essay MPL puts great emphasis on truth, though this is more truth to the writer's own perceptions, thoughts and feelings. Later in the essay, at the end of para 6, the emphatic underlined last word is 'true': 'Shakespeare's murder is true', in the sense of 'true to the spirit' (para 7). Here we are more into the argument of the impossibility of representing life in words, which had first appeared in any length in 'The Truth of Intercourse' (1879) and is examined again in the unpublished Lay Morals (1879, revised 1883) and 'A





Humble Remonstrance' (1884).

Paragraph 2

dressed and came down to morning school: It must have been a cultural convention of the time to assume that the reader of a boys' magazine was at an English boarding school. Strange that RLS should assume this too.

The whole art of the writer is to leave things out: This immediately reminds us of the injunction in RLS's letter to Bob (September 1883): '[T]here is but one art: to omit!'. (Letters 4:169)

Paragraph 3

the lives we read about seem so much more exciting than the lives we lead: RLS's discussion here about real life being dull, irksome, annoying, and (in para 4) about 'heroes' (like highwaymen and pirates) being cowardly and cruel, drunken and bullying, links up with his doubts about the romance code of boys' fiction in *The Black Arrow* (1883), where the tale's hero is gradually released from adventure's spell, and comes to recognise the destructive nature of its primitive forces. Describing how Dick eventually realises the tragic consequences of his desire for glory--'for the first time [he] began to understand the desperate game that we play in life'--the narrator revalues the idea of 'game' or play at the heart of the romance code.²

Paragraph 5

how the seaman felt when he was left on the desert island: This reminds us of Benn Gunn and the way he dreams of toasted cheese.

stick in a little bit of contrast, as salt is put in puddings, just to help the flavour: We can see this all the time in RLS's works (we need only start with the attractive sides to Long John Silver).

in words that bring them right home to you: This reminds us





of the essay 'Walt Whitman': 'To show beauty in common things is the work of the rarest tact. It is not to be done by the wishing. It is easy to posit as a theory, but to bring it home to men's minds is the problem of literature, and is only accomplished by rare talent, and in comparatively rare instances.' Here we have 'tact', 'the problem of literature' and 'bring it home', which all ring a bell with this essay. This essay was written and published in 1878, but RLS was reading proofs of this and other essays collected in *Familiar Studies* in late 1881 and early 1882.

the things they [writers] leave in are never strong enough: the same point is made in 'A Humble Remonstrance' (1884): 'these phantom reproductions of experience, even at their most acute, convey decided pleasure; while experience itself, in the cockpit of life, can torture and slay'.

Paragraph 7

Mormaer: 'a high steward of one of the ancient Celtic provinces of Scotland' (*Concise Scots Dictionary*), 'although not always in practice, a Mormaer was second only to the King of Scots' (Wikipedia). RLS would doubtless have come across the term in his research for the study of 'The Transformation of the Highlands' in 1880-81 (Swearingen, *Prose Works*, pp. 55-56).

NOTES

- 1 These notes make use of the contributions by the other members of the essays discussion group (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ReadingRLS/>), especially Robert-Louis Abrahamson and Neil Macara Brown. Many thanks to Robert-Louis Abrahamson for reading and correcting the draft version of this contribution.
- 2 Julia Reid, 'Childhood and Psychology', in Penny Fielding (ed). *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 41-52; p. 52.







Contributors

Robert-Louis Abrahamson is Collegiate Professor of English at the University of Maryland University College's European Division. He has written about Stevenson's essays and fables, and gives public talks on Stevenson, recently on the voyage of the *Casco*, to a National Trust audience, and, at Amherst College, a talk on St Gaudens' medallion of Stevenson. He is a co-editor of the Essays volumes in the New Edinburgh Edition of Stevenson. He is a founder of the listserv Reading RLS, and appeared in the short film on Stevenson's fables, *Ai Minimi Drammi*.

Neil Macara Brown is a former community worker, native to Edinburgh; he also contributed the series on the city in *Collins Encyclopaedia of Scotland*. His lifelong interest in RLS was furthered during the 1980s while engaged in environmental projects at Cramond and on the Water of Leith. Ownership of some books from Vailima left by his aunt embarked him on a study of RLS's library, later compiled with Richard Dury and Roger Swearingen as an online database to assist the New Edinburgh Edition. Living round the corner from where RLS holidayed in Peebles, he has a special interest in his time spent there, especially the effects upon his works.

Richard Dury taught for many years at Bergamo University where he taught history of the English language. He has been closely involved in the biennial series of Stevenson Conferences since 2002, and founded the original RLS website in 1996 at Bergamo University which subsequently migrated to Napier University in Edinburgh, where he maintains an editorial and consultant role. Now retired, he is able to devote himself to the New Edinburgh Edition of Stevenson, for which he is editing a volume of uncollected essays and also, with Robert-Louis Abrahamson, *Familiar Studies of Men and Books*.

Dewi Evans read English Literature at Brasenose College, Oxford, before undertaking postgraduate studies at Cardiff





University. His recently submitted doctoral thesis is entitled 'The Idea of the Book in Late-Victorian Fiction' and focuses on the role of books in the writings of Oscar Wilde, Robert Louis Stevenson, M. R. James and E. M. Forster. Current research interests include the history of the book, literary representations of the male body and intersections between literature and archaeology at the turn of the twentieth century.

Lesley Graham is *maître de conférences* at the Université Bordeaux Segalen in France. Her research interests focus on the accounts of Scottish travellers in Europe in the nineteenth century. Her recent publications include several articles related to Stevenson, his family and the followers in his footsteps. She is currently editing a volume of essays for the forthcoming New Edinburgh Edition of Stevenson's works.

Timothy S. Hayes is an Instructor of English at Auburn University in Auburn, Alabama. His current research uses literature written for and about children to offer new perspectives on adult fiction, especially adventure fiction by Stevenson and Conrad. He has previously published on Stevenson in *English Literature in Transition: 1880-1920* and also served as Features Editor of an eBook of *Heart of Darkness* for Penguin Classics.

Jennifer Hayward, professor of English at The College of Wooster, received her PhD in English Literature from Princeton University. She has published essays on nineteenth century British travellers in Latin America as well as *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soaps* (1997) and scholarly editions of Maria Graham's 1824 *Journal of a Residence in Chile* (2003) and *Journal of a Voyage to Brazil* (2011; co-editor Soledad Caballero). Hayward's current project focuses on questions of national identity in the writings of nineteenth century Scottish travellers in the Americas.

Richard Hill is a lecturer in English literature at Chaminade University of Honolulu, Hawaii. Hill's research into literary illustration is cross disciplinary with the history of art and the history





of the book. He has published articles and lectured on Scott and James Hogg, and is the author of *Picturing Scotland through the Waverley novels: Sir Walter Scott and the Origins of the Victorian Illustrated Novel* (Ashgate, 2010). He is now examining the lifetime illustrations of Robert Louis Stevenson.

Marie Léger-St-Jean is a doctoral candidate at the University of Cambridge. Her dissertation regards mid-nineteenth-century popular literature as the beginnings of a global transmedia mass culture. She created *Price One Penny: A Database of Cheap Literature, 1837-1860*, a peer-reviewed resource that catalogues early Victorian penny fiction to enable easy access to surviving copies and accurate bibliographic information. She has also edited *The Mysteries of the Inquisition*, a penny translation of a French novel. Her Masters' thesis analysed notably the criminological implications of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

Andrew Robson was born in England and now lives in the USA. He has worked in universities and schools in several countries, beginning with British government contracts in Samoa, Fiji, and the Solomon Islands. His PhD, from the Australian National University, was based on research in the Samoas and Kiribati. His research continues to focus on literary and historical themes, with a particular focus on the Pacific. His publications include a textbook, *Thinking Globally*, and *Prelude to Empire*, a biography of William Pritchard, the first resident British consul in Fiji. His current work is on Robert Louis Stevenson.

Alex Thomson is Senior Lecturer in Scottish Literature at the University of Edinburgh. He is currently editing *Memories and Portraits* for the *New Edinburgh Edition of the Collected Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*. He has published two recent essays on Stevenson: "Dooty is Dooty": Pirates and Sea-Lawyers in *Treasure Island* in *Pirates and Mutineers of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Grace Moore; and 'Stevenson's Afterlives' in *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. by Penny Fielding.





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The New Edinburgh Edition of the Collected Works of Robert Louis Stevenson

General Editors: Stephen Arata, Richard Dury, Penny Fielding
and Anthony Mandal

THE NEW EDINBURGH EDITION OF THE COLLECTED WORKS OF ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON (EdRLS for short) continues to progress. The first volume to be published will be *Prince Otto*, edited by Robert Irvine of the University of Edinburgh: he is at present completing the introduction while the main text is set. One or two volumes of the essays should follow soon after: the main text for *Virginibus Puerisque* is at present being proofed and work has started also on volume 4 (Uncollected Essays to 1881). (Five volumes of essays are planned, co-ordinated by Richard Dury).

Julia Reid has been working on the *Amateur Emigrant* MS at Yale; Glenda Norquay has also visited the USA, working on *St. Ives*, looking at MSS, letters etc. in the Beinecke Library, Princeton and the Huntington Library in Los Angeles while the MS is transcribed at Edinburgh; Gillian Hughes is working on the tricky question of the right copy text for *Weir of Hermiston* and reviewing the various witnesses, and Caroline McCracken-Flesher is working away at *Kidnapped*. One of our short story volumes is now underway under the editorship of Bill Gray. Our decision to include 'The Bottle Imp' with the Fables, rather than in a South Seas volume, made it to the Arts pages of *The Observer*!

The work of text-conversion from pdfs of the witness texts is being undertaken at the at the University of Edinburgh (coordinated by Penny Fielding) and at the University of Virginia (coordinated by Steve Arata).





More on progress can be found in the EdRLS blog at <http://edrls.wordpress.com/>.

There is still a great deal of work to be done after the main text is settled as, for example, its collation with other authorial lifetime editions, and the front and back matter, which is where some of the most interesting material will be for many readers. However, the main text is to be prepared first, to be set in camera-ready copy (this will be co-ordinated by Anthony Mandal of Cardiff University) with page numbers that can be used to refer to passages from the volume Introduction and the Explanatory Notes and other back matter.

The Edition office has been set up in Edinburgh and equipped. A major grant from the Royal Society of Edinburgh awarded in March 2011 has allowed us to appoint Lena Wänggren as postdoctoral research fellow. Lena will oversee the production of digital texts and assist in the research for individual volumes. The Edition also hosts 6-monthly internships for students from the University of Mainz. The interns receive training and act as Research Assistants to scan volumes, store and back up all the text and image files that we acquire, order scans and images from libraries etc. A generous donation from the RLS Club of Edinburgh has supported the acquisition of materials from the Beinecke library and we are exploring further ways of collaborating.

The Edition is in the process of negotiating a formal partnership with the National Library of Scotland: the proposal is that the NLS would scan a certain number of volumes in their collection and EdRLS would deposit files with them at the end of the project, to make a Robert Louis Stevenson digital archive.

If any reader of the *JSS* would like to collaborate in the work of MS transcription and proofing, please get in touch with Richard Dury (richard.dury@t-r.it).

Richard Dury, Penny Fielding





Stevenson: Notes and Queries

The *New Edinburgh Edition of the Collected Works of Robert Louis Stevenson* and the *Journal of Stevenson Studies* invite brief essays, bibliographical information, and/or Notes and Queries, relating to any of the following:

- The whereabouts of uncatalogued material
- Unpublished biographical information
- Supplementary material and emendations to Swearingen's *The Prose Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*
- Information on Stevenson's collaborations
- Details of Stevenson's relations with publishers, both financial and personal
- Distribution and sale of Stevenson's work in Britain and the USA
- Archive collections and printed guides relating to the magazines in which Stevenson published
- Information and opinions on different editions published during Stevenson's lifetime
- The production of illustrations
- Early reception of individual works (reviews not collected in Maixner's *Critical Heritage*)
- Mentions of Stevenson's works in letters or diaries of contemporaries, etc.

Alternatively, information not intended for publication may be sent directly to any of the General Editors, who would be grateful for any such material:

Stephen Arata: sda2e@cms.mail.virginia.edu

Richard Dury: richard.dury@t-r.it

Penny Fielding: penny.fielding@ed.ac.uk





RLS

WEBSITE

www.robert-louis-stevenson.org

Funded by a grant from the Carnegie Trust.

Dedicated to the life and works of Robert Louis Stevenson, making texts and information about his life and works freely available worldwide, www.robert-louis-stevenson.org is a primary online resource for students, scholars and enthusiasts alike. Galleries of images of places and people associated with Stevenson, and of RLS, himself are a particular feature of the website. It situates Stevenson firmly in Edinburgh, focusing on the city's, and on Scotland's influence on his writing, while also recognising the international dimension to his work and readership.

Listing past and current scholarly work on RLS, as well as the full texts and a significant proportion of all the available photographs and images, this site reaches a world-wide audience, many of whom cannot travel to the places where such items are located. Back numbers of the *Journal of Stevenson Studies* are also posted on this site in full-text format.

The site is established at the Centre for Literature and Writing (CLAW) at Edinburgh Napier University with support from Edinburgh and Stirling Universities, literary trusts like the Edinburgh UNESCO City of Literature, the Writers' Museum of Edinburgh, and Stevenson enthusiasts, museum curators and academics around the globe. It offers a significant contribution to the growing reputation of RLS as an important literary figure and personality of the late nineteenth century



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Volume 1 in 2004, contained essays by Richard Ambrosini, Steven Arata, Oliver S. Buckton, Liam Connell, Richard Dury, Vincent Giroud, Douglas S. Mack, Sudesh Mishra, Glenda Norquay, Olena M. Turnbull, Richard J. Walker, Roderick Watson.

Volume 2 in 2005, with essays by Hilary J. Beattie, Sara Clayson, Richard Dury, Liz Farr, William Gray, Gordon Hirsch, Jürgen Kramer.

Volume 3 in 2006 with a poem by Jim C. Wilson and essays by Giuseppe Albano, Katherine Linehan, Wendy Katz, Katherine Linehan, Laanvanyan Ratnapalan, Roger G. Swearingen, Saverio Tomaiuolo.

Volume 4 in 2007 contained essays from the Saranac conference by R. L. Abrahamson, Richard Ambrosini, Hilary J. Beattie, Jenni Calder, Dennis Denisoff, Cinzia Giglioni, Gordon Hirsch, Mary B. Hotaling, William B. Jones Jr, Wendy R. Katz, Jürgen Kramer, Ilaria B. Sborgi, Marilyn Simon, Robert Benjamin Stevenson III, Roderick Watson.

Volume 5 in 2008 was the special 'Stevenson and the Writers' edition with reflections, memoirs and creative contributions from Ron Butlin, Alan Grant, Diana Hendry, David Kinloch, Patrick McGrath, Donal McLaughlin, Barry Menikoff, Cees Nooteboom, James Robertson, Suhayl Saadi, Louise Welsh, Hamish Whyte.

Volume 6 in 2009 contained essays from the Bergamo conference by Hilary Beattie, Nicoletta Brazzelli, Nancy Bunge, Gordon Hirsch, Nathalie Jaëck, Matthew Kaiser, Sylvie Largeaud-Ortega, Rosella Mallardi, Burkhard Niederhoff, Laavanyan Ratnapalan, Sara Rizzo, Andrew De Young, Tania Zulli.





Volume 7 in 2010 contained three poems on Stevenson by Jean Taylor and essays by David Annwn, Dana Fore, Jeremy Lim, Glenda Norquay and Sara Wasson, with 'Uncollected Stevenson' introduced by Caroline A. Howitt and Roger G. Swearingen.

Volume 8 in 2011 contained essays from the Stirling conference by R. L. Abrahamson, Sarah Ames, Hilary J. Beattie, Jenni Calder, Ann C. Colley, Lesley Graham, Richard J. Hill, Gordon Hirsch, Nathalie Jaëck, Stuart Kelly, Donald Mackenzie, David Miller, James Robertson, Sara Stevenson, Saverio Tomaiuolo, Roderick Watson





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