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'inside my house of words': The Poetry of Anne Stevenson

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‘inside my house of words’: The Poetry of Anne Stevenson

This thesis examines the relationship between autobiography and art in Anne Stevenson’s work by exploring her poetic negotiation of her own presence within her poems, or ‘house of words’.

A brief contextual preface assesses Stevenson’s importance as a poet and explains the rationale for this study.

Chapter One relates the history of Stevenson’s work in the context of her life. It also explores her own critical writing, and considers critics’ views of her work.

Chapter Two explores Stevenson’s position in her poems which speak of the domestic house. Consistently wary of the confessional label, she erects the house of poetry as a house of words within the literal house, so that these poems become a dialogue between the personal and poetic ‘I’.

Chapter Three looks at her poems of place. Stevenson has lived in a number of towns and cities, and many feature in her poetry. However, in these poems she emerges as a shadowy presence that is both present and absent, so that biographical associations are both challenged and endorsed.

Chapter Four explores her poems of the natural world. These poems reveal a keen observation of the world she sees. However, she is a self-confessed Darwinian, so these poems become a lively negotiation between Stevenson the evolutionist and Stevenson the poet.

Chapter Five turns to her elegies for poets. The poems speak of her personal experiences of loss, but while hers is a cohesive voice, her relationship with the dead becomes less and less certain within this particular house of words.

I conclude that her poems are founded on autobiography, but it is the negotiations of her own presence that give them their inbuilt strength.

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Abbreviations

- LA*.....*Living in America*, by Anne Stevenson.
- R*..... *Reversals*, by Anne Stevenson.
- TBG*..... *Travelling Behind Glass*, by Anne Stevenson.
- C*.....*Correspondences*, by Anne Stevenson.
- EG*.....*Enough of Green*, by Anne Stevenson.
- MGM*.....*Minute by Glass Minute*, by Anne Stevenson.,
- FM*.....*The Fiction-Makers*, by Anne Stevenson.
- TOH*.....*The Other House*, by Anne Stevenson.
- 4DM*.....*Four and a Half Dancing Men*, by Anne Stevenson.
- CP* *The Collected Poems 1955-1995*, by Anne Stevenson.
- GS*.....*Granny Scarecrow*, by Anne Stevenson.
- ARB*.....*A Report From The Border*, by Anne Stevenson.
- Poems*..... *Poems 1955-2005*, by Anne Stevenson.
- CUL MS Add. 9451...The Anne Stevenson Archive, Cambridge University.

Preface.

Anne Stevenson's writing career spans more than fifty years and her poetry frequently receives high praise. Jay Parini admires her 'verbal chastity' and 'fierce intellectual precision' (Parini 1978:2), while Helen Dunmore believes her to be a 'magnificent poet of landscape' who is 'technically strong' (Dunmore 1996/7: 58). Gerard Woodward, reviewing Stevenson's collection *Granny Scarecrow* (2000), concludes that she has 'matured into one of the most intelligent, assured, vivid and skilful poets writing today' (Woodward 2000:26), and in 2003, the year of her seventieth birthday, John Lucas reiterates 'how outstandingly good a poet Stevenson is' (Lucas 2003: 90). After the publication of her most comprehensive collection *Poems, 1955-2005* (2005), Roger Caldwell stated unequivocally that it was now time for her to be recognised as 'one of the finest poets writing in English today' (Caldwell 2006: 25).

However, despite this resounding endorsement, not all critics are persuaded by the quality of her poetry. Reviewing her early work, Lachlan Mackinnon believed that 'Short lines tempt her into hermetic vacuity' (Mackinnon 1987: 767), and in 1990, Clair Wills condemned *The Other House*, published a year after Stevenson's controversial biography of Sylvia Plath, as an 'uncomfortable mixture of everyday pleasantries and envious bitterness' (Wills 1990: 1184), a criticism I explore later in this study. In 1994, Neil Powell suggests that Stevenson's 'control isn't infallible' (Powell 1994: 22), and three years later, Conor O'Callaghan, reviewing her *Collected Poems*, offered the somewhat mixed summary that Stevenson's voice is 'elegiac, fussy, affectionate, adjectival, polite, wry and bitter' (O'Callaghan 1997:25). In 2002, Jeremy Noel-Tod acknowledged Stevenson's 'venerable reputation' before observing that '*Hearing With My Fingers*, from its title onwards, contains more bad writing than good' (Noel-Tod 2002/3: 113). This is particularly interesting because these poems later reappear as part of *A Report from the Border*, a collection which

led Carol Rumens to conclude that Stevenson is ‘wise without portentousness, her technique faultless and her imagination fiery, political and fresh’ (Rumens 2003:1), a conclusion supported by Ruth Padel who believes that ‘Her clear, cadenced poems have subtle, unshowy grace and radiate a sense of being on the edge’ (Padel 2007: 97).

Criticism of Stevenson’s work, therefore, is mixed, but even Noel-Tod’s censure is qualified by his appreciation of her position as a much respected poet. However, while she is often admired by her contemporaries, Stevenson is not very well known outside poetic circles, unlike Carol Rumens and Fleur Adcock, two poets with whom she is often linked, although recent awards have drawn her more into the public eye. There have been times when she has been better known, particularly after the publication of *Correspondences* and *Bitter Fame*, her biography of Sylvia Plath, but interest in her work has tended to wax and wane. In his review, Caldwell notes her marginality when he states that ‘Given the richness and variety of her work, and how many of the poems cry out to be anthologized, it is remarkable how little celebrated, and how rarely anthologised, Stevenson remains’ (Caldwell 2006: 25). He then muses whether ‘she is too American for British audiences, [and] too British for American ones’ (Caldwell 2006:25), a question supported by Alfred Hickling who suggests that ‘Neither wholly British, nor completely American, Stevenson’s oeuvre might be better known if it were easier to place’ (Hickling 2004:22). Stevenson is indeed difficult to place both personally and professionally. In an interview in 2006, Mark Thwaite asked if she saw her work ‘as Andrew Motion does, as placed within a lineage of puritan women poets from Emily Dickinson to Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath?’ (Thwaite 2006:2). Stevenson’s reply is particularly telling:

How can I comment? *Correspondences* is certainly a poem about American puritans and how that deep New England strain comes through to the present. But I have lived in England for over 40 years now, and most of my recent poems are set in Britain— in Wales, the

industrial north-east, even Scotland.

(‘Anne Stevenson’ 2006:2)

Stevenson replies, somewhat evasively, to a question about a transatlantic poetic tradition with a reply about geography which makes it difficult to separate the two aspects of her life and work. Place, it seems, is important in her poetry and her creative process, while definitions based on national affiliations and traditions are not. Born in England to American parents, raised in the United States, yet resident, for most of her adult life, in the British Isles, Stevenson has often commented on this aspect of her life. While she once believed that ‘in so far as I feel any country to be ‘home’ it’s America’ (*Between the Iceberg* 1998:178), she has subsequently admitted that she feels ‘more British’ (Interview 2006). Her degree of ambivalence is perhaps explained by what follows: ‘On the whole I tend to think of people as ‘real’, while nations are historical creations’ (*Between the Iceberg* 1998:178). She has also admitted, in an interview for *Other Poetry*: ‘I have a vast sense of un-rootedness. I’ve never lived anywhere I felt I really belonged to— perhaps to the past, though I’m not nostalgic’ (‘Personal Artefact, Public Language’ 2000:55).

Her sense of personal ‘un-rootedness’ is reflected professionally in the variety of anthologies on both sides of the Atlantic in which her work has appeared. In 1975, four poems, ‘Aberdeen’, ‘Dundee: Night Wind’, ‘Oxford by the Boat House’ and ‘Mallaig in Spring Sunlight’ were included in *New Poetry 1*, an anthology edited by Peter Porter and Charles Osborne. In their introduction, the editors explain that, regarding inclusion, ‘the only stipulations were that no poem should have been published in book form at the time of submission, and that the poet should be a British subject, though not necessarily resident in the United Kingdom’ (Porter and Osborne 1975:15). In 1982, Stevenson was included in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, yet, in 1993, two poems, ‘The Suburb’ (1964) and ‘Poem to my Daughter’ (1982), were published in *No More Masks! An Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Women Poets*, edited by Florence Howe. In 1995, Parini

included her in *The Columbia Anthology of American Poetry*. Thus any notions of Stevenson's personal and poetic national identity or tradition are utterly confounded.

This poetic nomadism is further underpinned by the wide variety of writers she cites as being important to her own development. In an interview with Michael O'Siadhail for *Poetry Ireland Review*, Stevenson explains that 'Poetry was something that came with my childhood. Inhabiting poetry came in the sense that I learned poetry by heart and knew a great deal of it before I was ten. I grew up in the house of poetry' ('An Interview with Anne Stevenson' 1989:6). This is not any house, but 'the house', with its suggestions of literary lineage and history. She suggests that 'Influences are various. But after loving the Romantics as a child — Scott and the Border ballads, Byron, Keats ... I think Yeats was important to me, then Frost' (Email to Sara Johnson 2002). She has also revealed that 'I have always felt Jane Austen to be my refuge in times of stress. I read her in my teens. I also read the Brontes' ('An Interview with Anne Stevenson', 1989:8). In addition she declares an:

enormous respect for Emily Dickinson, especially for her concision. I can learn a great deal there and also from Elizabeth Bishop who has balance and, at her best, objectivity which I so value. I don't think it particularly matters whether these writers were novelists or poets; it is a kind of condition of mind that you are looking for, upon which you stand like a floor you trust.

('An Interview with Anne Stevenson' 1989:9).

Her engagement with such a mixture of traditions places Stevenson as a hybrid, drawing on the strengths of individual poets she admires on both sides of the Atlantic rather than on any one national tradition.

However, in this thesis I do not continue to explore wider notions of Stevenson's poetic nationality because I believe that her poems reveal a more pressing internal tension that invites further study. Nevertheless, it was a particular episode in American literary history that gave rise to this personal and poetic unease. Both Dunmore and O'Callaghan introduce their reviews with an overview of the time Stevenson began writing. Dunmore sets the scene and notes that:

A young American woman, born in Grantchester, Cambridge, is writing poems. Another young American woman, born in New England, is about to cross the Atlantic and go to Cambridge on a Fulbright scholarship. She, too, is writing poems.

(Dunmore 1996/7: 58)

Dunmore then moves on, but O'Callaghan makes a more revealing comment on the Plath/Stevenson relationship. He notes that in the same year (1965) that Stevenson's first collection *Living in America* was published 'Sylvia Plath's posthumous collections, *Ariel*, exploded into the light of day' (O'Callaghan 1997:25). He also observes that 'One year later, another compatriot, Adrienne Rich, shattered her own hitherto prissy aesthetic with the publication of *Necessities of Life*' (O'Callaghan 1997:25). This leads him to make the following conclusion:

At this distance, it is difficult to imagine that Stevenson, however acclaimed, was anything other than profoundly out of place in the activist fervour of that decade. This is as much a criticism of her luck as it is of her work.

(O'Callaghan 1997:25)

Stevenson herself though was profoundly wary of the sensational and confessional nature of the poetry this 'artistic fervour' was producing, and was psychologically averse to the public baring of her own soul. While O'Callaghan seems to suggest that this rendered her poetry less exciting, Parini admires her 'self-restraint' (Parini 1978:2), and later comments on her 'quietly detached irony and verbal restraint— a manner rarely found in contemporary American poetry' (Parini 2001:745). John Taylor also observes the 'ironic distance she maintains with respect to herself, even in intimate poems' (Taylor 2003: 583). Whether criticised or praised, her work is being considered in relation to the era in which Stevenson began her career as a poet and to the poets of this time.

In 1979 Stevenson published an essay, 'The Recognition of the Savage God: Poetry in Britain Today' in which she engages with Al Alvarez's earlier *The Savage God*, and evaluates the current work of some of her contemporaries. She makes the

following conclusion:

What, among others, Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes, Geoffrey Hill, Penelope Shuttle, Peter Redgrove have discovered since the era of suicides (most of these poets have lived through this area and learned from it) is that the poet ... is not called upon to sacrifice himself in the services of creation. He is not, to put it bluntly, that important. What he (or she) has to express, though it has everything to do with experience, has little to do with autobiography.

(‘The Recognition of the Savage God’ 1979:319-320).

In her praise of these particular poets, I believe that Stevenson actually offers a mini-manifesto of her own understanding of what constitutes good poetry. However, experience and autobiography are impossible to separate. Autobiography is an account of one’s life, experiences are a part of that life. Furthermore, her avowed belief that poetry must be more about experience and less about autobiography is made more complicated and more challenging by her understanding that:

human experience is like this. Take the surrealistic effect you get when looking through a window at night. You can see through the glass to the trees or buildings outside; at the same time you also see your face, or really through your face. This ‘surrealism of everyday life’ as Elizabeth Bishop called it, is obsessive with me. I can’t escape the fact that my first English collection was called *Travelling Behind Glass*

(‘An Interview with Anne Stevenson’ 1985: 212)

Even as she looks out, she nevertheless looks ‘through’ herself. She is in her own view even if she is a transparent presence. Furthermore, she is a poet for whom, as O’Brien notes ‘poetry is inseparable from life’ (O’Brien 2003:45). Many of her poems speak of her family and of the places where she has lived, autobiographical associations that are often highlighted by a poem’s title, subtitle or by references in the text. However, this presence she speaks of does not obliterate the view beyond herself. It therefore has the power to both endorse and disrupt the autobiographical nature of her work. Caldwell refers to her as ‘an incidentally autobiographical poet’ (Caldwell 2006:25), suggesting that her life story prompts, but does not hijack her poems. I argue that it is Stevenson’s exploration of the relationship of autobiography

to poetry in her negotiation of her own presence within her poems or ‘house of words’ (*Poems*: 167), that lies at the heart of both the strength and weakness of her work and therefore demands scholarly attention.

In his review of her *Collected Poems*, O’Callaghan proposes that ‘Few of her early and middle poems seem necessary’ because they do not ‘transcend’ their somewhat banal origins (O’Callaghan 1997: 25). He mentions ‘Giving Rabbit to my Cat, Bonnie’ as an example, but others might include ‘Clydie is Dead!’ (2000) and ‘Spring Song’(1985). The poem ‘A Prayer to Live with Real People’ (1984) never becomes more than a social commentary on her neighbours in Langley Park before concluding, in a final ingenuous exhortation, that she be saved from ‘too damn much literary ambition’ (*Poems*: 84-85). However, in her best poems her negotiation of the precarious relationship between experience and autobiography creates a subtle but insistent tension which gives them the edginess Padel speaks of.

There has not been wide academic coverage of this aspect of her work, but it has featured in a growing body of criticism. Jan Montefiore, discussing Stevenson’s dislike of the term ‘woman poet’, suggests that she associates ‘too narrowly’ a ‘female culture ... with domesticity’ (Montefiore 1987: 37-38). The position of the poet housewife and mother is a profound source of anxiety for Stevenson and is discussed further in this thesis. However, while Montefiore’s study of *Correspondences* and the poem ‘Black Mountain, Green Mountain’ engages with these anxieties, there is no room for a wider consideration of their implications in Stevenson’s poetry. In 1993, Neil Corcoran included her in his study *English Poetry since 1940*. He too took issue with Stevenson’s arguments on the nature of female writing in the light of her ‘self-representation’ (Corcoran 1993: 225) in *Correspondences*. However, he does comment on the ‘generality of her poems— even those which quite specifically deal with what we might think the feminist themes of marriage, maternity and the resented or disabling confinement in a domestic space’

(Corcoran 1993: 225). While they are less insistent as potentially feminist texts, I believe that Corcoran's comment on their 'generality' fails to appreciate the poetic tensions within these poems. Claire Buck, in her discussion 'Poetry and the Women's Movement on Postwar Britain' (1996) notes that Stevenson's 'mobilization of an ideal of good poetry and the structuring value of art in opposition to unmediated experience' failed to 'recognize the call to reformulate and reposition personal experience, which is central to consciousness-raising' (Buck 1996: 92-93). However, she does not explore Stevenson's negotiation of this ideal nor her poetic negotiation of her own position. Alan Robinson discusses *Correspondences* and Stevenson's attempt to 'reconcile' the 'apparently incompatible roles' of the woman writer (Robinson 1988:166) but he also takes a wider look at her work and includes a discussion of her landscape poem 'Sierra Nevada'. Here he notes the 'perceptual interchange' in her work in which 'imagination confers meaning on the world' while nature, in turn, confronts us with 'our individual significance' (Robinson 1988: 185). He does not mention Stevenson's personal engagement with Darwinism which I believe prompts this 'interchange' and creates a dialogue between poet and scientist which is as lively as her poetic exploration of herself in her domestic poems.

My thesis will build on, and develop, these studies which support my belief that these aspects of Stevenson's work warrant further analysis. Therefore, in order to explore her negotiation of her own position within her poems, the first chapter of this thesis charts the production of her work in relation to the circumstances of her life. This will prepare the groundwork for an analysis of how Stevenson uses, and challenges, autobiographical details. It includes further critical opinion of her work, and an overview of her own thoughts and beliefs on the process of writing poetry. My second chapter engages with her poems about the house and home in relation to her often heated, and haughty, argument with the confessional school of poetry and its close relationship between the lyrical and the personal 'I'. The third chapter

moves beyond the home to discuss how she negotiates her own experience of the many places in which she has lived, particularly in poems which highlight their place of origin. The fourth and fifth chapters of this study embrace a wider consideration of the autobiographical aspects of her work. Chapter Four turns to her understanding of, and engagement with, Darwin and his work. Here the evolutionary disciple and artist clash head on as she attempts to reconcile science and art. The final chapter examines her elegiac 'house of words', particularly those poems written in memory of other poets. Here I explore Stevenson's negotiation of her personal and poetic relationship with the dead in relation to elegy as a genre, and consider the contradictions this creates.

In this study, I explore both Stevenson's poetry and critical writings. The majority of poems are quoted from her most comprehensive collection to date, *Poems 1955-2005*. Published by Bloodaxe, the publication date on the frontispiece is 2005. In the publishing details it says the book was first published in 2004. I use the 2005 date after advice from the publisher. There are occasions when I refer to her earlier collections, and any references to her *Collected Poems 1955-1995* are from the Bloodaxe Books publication of 2000 rather than the earlier Oxford University Press version (1996) because the Bloodaxe edition was more widely available to purchase at the time of the conception of this study. I include unpublished material from the Stevenson archive which is held at Cambridge University Library. This archive was established in 1997, and is kept as Additional MS 9451 in the Library's Department of Manuscripts and University Archives. Stevenson's archive is still a work in process so I have referenced each quotation as accurately as possible. This thesis is also enriched by information given to me by Stevenson herself both personally and by e-mail. Stevenson's second study of Elizabeth Bishop, first published in 1998 by Bellew was republished in 2006 by Bloodaxe Books. All references here are to the Bloodaxe edition. Finally, Stevenson published two collections, *A Lament for The*

Makers (2006) and *Stone Milk* (2007), just as this thesis was drawing to a close. I have therefore decided not to include them.

Chapter One.

'An Irregular Trajectory': Biographical and Literary Introduction.

Anne Stevenson was born in Cambridge on 3 January, 1933. Her American parents, Louise Destler and Charles Leslie Stevenson, were high school sweethearts. After graduating in 1930, Charles from Harvard and Louise from Wooster College, Ohio, the young couple moved to England where Charles studied philosophy under the tutelage of Wittgenstein and G.E. Moore at Cambridge University. Six months after the birth of their baby daughter, the family returned to America, first to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and then, six years later, to New Haven, Connecticut where Charles held posts at Harvard and Yale Universities respectively (Lucas 2003:1).

In 1982, Stevenson published an autobiographical essay, entitled 'The Music of the House', which was published in *Poetry Review*. The family home was full of music and she recalls how 'Every evening after supper people arrive to play two-pianos, or bring violins and cellos for chamber music. Does this begin in the yellow frame house with the rickety porch in Cambridge? Or have you moved to the yellow-and-blue house with the rickety porch in New Haven?' ('The Music of the House' 1982:7). Hers was a privileged childhood, an understanding the young poet voices when she realises that 'an invisible moat of music separates you from your friends whose fathers, amazingly, do not play the piano' ('The Music of the House' 1982:5). Her father was also a 'superb reader', and Peter Lucas believes that from him 'came the music of poetry' (Lucas 2003:2), Stevenson herself recalls:

Like many poets, I began to write verse when I was introduced to Shakespeare and the English Romantics as a child. I have no doubt that it was rhythm, the stressed, unstressed undulations of the iambic line, that first bewitched me.

(*Between the Iceberg* 1998:121).

Captivated by the poetry and music that were an integral part of the young Anne's childhood, sound and rhythm were to be important to her poetry throughout her life. She is, however, all too aware that this childhood was charmed in every way. Not

only was her father a gifted poetry reader, who encouraged his daughters to recite poetry aloud, he was also a philosopher who encouraged them to think and challenge received opinion. Stevenson herself believes that ‘the questioning, self-questioning ways of my poems owe a lot to him’ (E-mail to Sara Johnson, 2002).

The war in Europe barely touched the tenor of her young life, although in her autobiographical essay she remembers that ‘There is a war in Europe so you have two pianos but no living-room carpet’ (‘The Music of the House’ 1982:7). There is a moment of terror, however, as the young Stevenson remembers being frightened by 4th of July fireworks:

You are the single scared scrap of silence alive in this forest of noise. Evil and giant, the tall boys are Nazis, torturers of mothers and children. They take aim through a haar of creamy sulphur and blank smoke. Bang ... The attack is incessant and deadly.
(‘The Music of the House’ 1982: 5)

A harmless celebration has brought alive her fears about a conflict raging far away. However, the adult poet admits ‘I have written almost nothing about the armed wars –political and social– that destroyed the lives of millions in the 20th century’ (E-mail to Professor Leighton, 2002). Nevertheless, the war was to have an indirect effect on the Stevenson family. In 1944, Charles Stevenson published his book *Ethics and Language* which led to his dismissal from Yale. Hickling, in his profile of Stevenson in the *Guardian Review*, notes both the circumstances of this dismissal, and the influence the book was to have on his daughter’s explorations of language:

In 1944, her father published *Ethics and Language*, whose principle argument– that everything we believe is conditioned by language– was not lost on the future poet. Though now acknowledged as a landmark, the book prompted his dismissal from the philosophy faculty at Yale. “He refused to acknowledge the existence of absolute evil”, explains Stevenson. “It was not a popular position during the war with Hitler.”
(Hickling 2004:22)

The family then spent the summer of 1945 in Berkeley, California, moving from there to Chicago before settling in Ann Arbor in 1946. There Charles accepted the

Still standing where I'd seen it— standing still,
Until I saw the day begin to fade
And mist among the rushes of the marsh,
And went away.
(CUL MS Add. 9451)

Stevenson, aged fifteen or sixteen when she wrote this, believes that it was perhaps her first real poem. She discusses it in a radio programme:

Poetry is sign and sound, words on the page and sound in the ear; with me sound usually comes first. I remember the first time I realized I'd written a poem. I was sitting in a row-boat on a lake in Michigan in 1947 or 8. As a red-winged blackbird started up from the rushes, a line started up in my head, 'the mist among the rushes of the marsh' — all those 'm's' and 'ushes', like a delicious taste. It's still the taste of word-sounds and the cadences they enact that signal 'poem' to me.

(CUL MS Add. 9451. Draft for 'The Living Poet'
Programme number BDB476R262N, Tape no. TMR46/476 R262)
Radio 3)

Stevenson's understanding of the importance of the sound of poetry was taking shape at a very early age. Later on, as a mature poet, she sees this as the bedrock of her writing process and states:

For me, in any case, the musical component controls the pace, pitch, tone, even the meaning of a poem, and I often work months or years to get the noises right. My purpose is usually to convey a multi-sided emotion or idea through the interplay of syllables and cadences that suggest more than words do in everyday speech.

('Purifying the Cistern' 2000: 35).

There are also other early poems, written when she was aged sixteen to seventeen, that display some of the features that were to become an integral part of her mature poetry.

Sonnet - written in 1949-1950

I walked in April orchards recently
And under decorated branches passed,
As through some oriental tapestry
Woven by an empress. "At last",
I said, "I walk in paradise, for this must be
That earthly paradise, that Eden, dreamed,
that was the garden of eternity."

And delicate [sic], the trees immortal seemed.
But now November with her windy hands
Has stolen all the jewels. I am not sad,
Though now the orchard in gray, mourning, stands;
For I can love these trees all winterclad,
And know the joy of winter barrenness,
And paradise is only perfectness.

(CUL MS Add. 9451 Early poems)

From the Staten Island Ferry- written 1950.

Now as we lean against the railing can
You for a moment watch this city seen
From waters as a city set between
Those four fantastic walls said circling heaven?
Are there so many yesterdays, old man,
That this to you is like a magazine
Much read? Is all so sealed in slow routine
That you will not know ecstasy again?

No wonder then that you and I and all
Created One who can with confidence
Distinguish what is Paradise and tell
Each how to build Him separate monuments.
He separates these monuments from Hell
But here we cannot know the difference.

(CUL MS Add. 9451 Early poems.)

These poems show varying degrees of maturity, but they are both pointers towards Stevenson's adult work. They look at the world around her, revealing a keen power of observation coupled with a sensitive reflection on more than the merely visible. Many of Stevenson's poems begin as seemingly simple observations, and gradually develop into more abstract considerations, a transition that is always deftly and quietly achieved. The second poem also shows Stevenson's manipulation of pronouns. In this instance it is not too complex, but as her poetry matures, she frequently switches pronouns in order to create both a distance and a closeness between the poet, the poem and the reader. In addition, her perspective on the scene moves and shifts. The strange juxtaposition of Paradise and hell in 'From the Staten Island Ferry' suggests that the young poet is attempting to reconcile different

representations of what is before her, and foreshadows the more subtle challenging of perspective that appears in her later work.

During her school years Stevenson remembers that she ‘was in love with acting, acted in Shakespeare and in Edna St. Vincent Millay’s plays’ (E-mail to Sara Johnson, 2002). In May 1950, her last year in high school, she also wrote and produced a play *Tempus Immutabile*. Performed by the high school dramatic society, the play was described in the programme as ‘A tragical-comical-historical-pastoral poem unlimited’ and was set in the past ‘as conceived by the present’ (CUL MS Add. 9451 *Tempus Immutabile*). In the play, historical characters from different periods are brought together as a way of representing history. Helen of Troy exclaims to King Alfred:

They think because we’re in the past that we have nothing to say about what happens to us. I don’t see why the past can’t change as much as the present or the future. I don’t mean the boring history, because that happened a long time ago, and no-one cares now. But why must they always think of us doing one thing? Why must you always be burning cakes and I always making love to that same stupid Paris? I did other things, I had other lovers. And you, you didn’t only burn cakes. You must have fought in battles, given banquets, killed people, and all sorts of things.

(CUL MS Add. 9451 *Tempus Immutabile*)

Another historical figure in the script suggests that ‘under the domination of the present, we have been subjected to unbearable and undemocratic tyranny’ (CUL MS Add. 9451 *Tempus Immutabile*), as the people of the past try to break free of the moments in the past that continue to define them in the present. Just as her early poems reveal some of the characteristics of her adult work, this play, although naive, does herald the beginnings of her exploration of the myth-making process she was to develop in *The Fiction Makers*.

In September, 1950, Anne began her studies at the University of Michigan, and her years there are amusingly described in her article for the *Michigan Quarterly Review* entitled ‘When The Kissing Had To Stop’. Enrolling first as a music student,

majoring in the cello, she transferred, in 1952, to the College of Literature, Science and the Arts, having discovered that ‘I could put into poetry the music that I was failing to find completely satisfying as a cello major’ (‘When The Kissing Had To Stop’ 2003:355). This move was prompted, in part, by the University Inter-Arts Union’s production of *The Silver Heron*, a long ‘lyrical poem for dancing’ (‘When The Kissing Had To Stop’ 2003: 355), which Anne had written with Jamie Ross. Karl Magnuson wrote the music, and the poem/dance was performed in January 1952. The poem is based on the story of Dick Whittington but, Anne explains:

it owed its originality to a symbolist philosophy Jamie and I had worked out in the course of endless discussions. Art’s role, according to our Yeatsian brand of modernism, was to purify and preserve as myths or artefacts beautiful versions of natural or historical events. However squalid or mean Dick Whittington’s life had really been, once it had become a song, a dance, or a legend ... it would forever exist in the eternal present, full of symbolic significance but purged of suffering.

Yeats was not only behind the idea of *The Silver Heron*; his notion that poetry could and should be danced to like music struck me then as sublime— as it still does.

(‘When The Kissing Had To Stop’ 2003: 355)

The play begins with Dick Whittington’s cat who announces:

Come, come, let’s cast the world again!
Oh give me shining stuff, and silver mold it
Something like a globe, but small and square,
Something like an earth, but made of air;
And here’s a paradox I won’t explain
Because I’m of the sun and sea and rain,
And can’t tell birds from elements, or things
And dreams, or tears from ornaments of kings.

(CUL MS Add. 9451 *The Silver Heron*.)

Art, in the form of the pageant that is to follow, recasts the world. In the case of poetry, the world is reduced to the ‘small and square’ page of paper. Later, Whittington, watching a musical tableau of his early life, gives a voice to art’s ability to write over, and transform the past when he exclaims that:

Remarkable that such a sordid time

Can be transformed and made a pageantry.
(CUL MS Add. 9451 *The Silver Heron*)

This reveals Stevenson's early, and ongoing, negotiations with the role of art, and its capacity to disguise or even hijack, a poem's subject or location. The poem, she believes, is then freed from its origins and stands alone as a work of art. This early work also shows evidence of Stevenson's continuing, and developing, engagement with the musicality of language. In the 'Dance of the Seasons' the chorus sing:

Winds, impassioned with desiring, blow,
Careless, fearless.
Great whirled whips bend all the thin trees low,
Barren, cheerless.
Last life powers of the earth are weary,
Last late flowers in the gardens, dreary.
Up, sun, down sun,
Days come, tides run,
Wildly with a white moon.
(CUL MS Add. 9451 *The Silver Heron*)

The choppiness of the wind is reflected in the sound of the words even if they are a little over blown.

Stevenson's growing engagement with the musicality of poetry eventually prompted the young undergraduate to move from the music of the instrument to the music of the poem, a move that was to shape the future of her adult life. Another early exploration of the relationship between music and poetry took shape when she wrote the libretto for Karl Magnuson's one-act opera, *Adam and Eve and the Devil*. Performed just before her graduation in 1954, the story was set during the Second World War, and positioned the Devil and Adam as both evil, having overthrown God and fallen in love with Eve. The devil offers spiritual temptations, while Adam's persuasions are more carnal. Despite the Devil's subsequent transformation to a purer God-like figure, Eve chooses Adam, persuaded more by his sexual charms than the devil's spiritual encouragements. Stevenson, in her Michigan memoirs, remembers that 'my poetry, with its Elizabethan-cum-Yeatsian overtones, was so grotesquely

out of fashion that no student poet at Michigan took it seriously ... no-one knew where to begin attacking it' ('When The Kissing Had To Stop' 2003: 360). While the musical influences on her poetry were being developed and refined, other areas, perhaps, had yet to mature.

Nevertheless, in June 1954, Stevenson graduated, as well as being the recipient of the Hopwood award for poetry in 1951, 1952 and 1954. An undated newspaper clipping in the Stevenson archive reads: 'Anne K. Stevenson, a senior, of 904 Olivia Ave., daughter of Prof. Charles Stevenson of the U-M philosophy department, \$600 in major poetry for 'Aspects of Season' (CUL MS Add. 9451, cuttings from college years). Despite her later misgivings about the quality and nature of her early poetry, Anne's choice to develop her writing, instead of her musical studies, was proving to be the right one.

The next major step in her life was marriage to Robin Hitchcock. Robin, an English war evacuee, had stayed with the Stevensons when they lived at New Haven. In 1951, Charles Stevenson had bought an old farmhouse in southern Vermont, the 'clapboard-white' farm of 'A Summer Place' (*Poems*:38-39), and it was while on holiday there, in 1953, that Robin and Anne met again. After a summer romance, the couple became engaged, and following her graduation, Anne returned to England to marry Robin in July, 1955. Stevenson later reflects on this time of her life:

When I left Michigan I was intoxicated with the idea of becoming an artist. At the same time I thirsted for "real life", and assumed that any story I lived could be incorporated into the fiction I intended to make of myself. I came to England to marry a childhood playmate who had been seconded to New Haven during the war. When we met as adults, he seemed glamorous, a conflation of Rupert Brooke and Robin Hood. Marriage, I thought, would be the culmination of my American success story. I was secretly relieved not to have to think of a career in writing or teaching.

(*'Anne Stevenson writes'* 1985: 186).

Nevertheless, she did want to continue writing, but despite her undoubted success as a writer during her university years, she found that marriage and a career were not

easy to reconcile, a situation that was ultimately to cause her great personal pain and professional anxiety. However, she persevered, and after attempting to write a novel, she soon decided that poetry was her calling, even though she was met with rejection by the English journals. This was a severe setback, and compounded her feelings of frustration and isolation. In 1957, her daughter, Caroline, was born and the situation, in her own words, 'got not better but worse' ('Writing as a Woman' 1979:165).

In addition to living in what she later termed 'an alien role' ('Writing as a Woman' 1979: 166), she was also attempting to come to terms with England, for although born here, she did not feel she belonged. She felt not only confused and frustrated, but alienated and rootless. Gradually her relationship with Robin began to break down. 'We were both self-centred and ambitious' writes Stevenson ('Anne Stevenson writes' 1985:186), and after a succession of moves, Norwich, Grimsby, Belfast, New York and Corinth (Mississippi), the marriage finally ended. Anne, taking Caroline with her, took up a teaching post at the Westminster School, Atlanta, Georgia. At this point, she decided to return to her own studies and, in 1961, she enrolled once again at the University of Michigan, this time to read for a Master of Arts degree in English Literature. Here she met Donald Hall and, with his encouragement, began to write poetry again, some of which would become her first collection *Living in America*. Stevenson remembers that these were 'sad, sometimes cynical poems in the shadow of Robert Frost, Richard Wilbur and, when I discovered her, Elizabeth Bishop' ('Anne Stevenson writes' 1985: 186). This cannot have been an easy time, for she was still only twenty-eight years old, with a young daughter whom she describes as 'a source of love and agony and guilt' ('Anne Stevenson writes' 1985: 186). Furthermore, it was at this time that her mother's cancer was diagnosed. Nevertheless, the poems were written and, with Hall's help and encouragement, she embarked on a study of Elizabeth Bishop for Twayne's United States Authors Series which was based largely on the correspondence between the

two poets, and was to be published in 1966. Studies of Elizabeth Bishop have since become increasingly common, but Stevenson's early contribution to these studies was a brave and unfashionable move.

Following her year of postgraduate study, Anne chose not to embark on doctoral research and, instead, moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to teach at The Cambridge School of Weston. In October, 1962, she met Mark Elvin, an English sinologist from Cambridge, England, who was doing research at Harvard on a Fulbright scholarship. They were married three months later after a whirlwind romance. Then, in January 1963, her mother died. Two poems in her collection *Living in America*, which was to be published in 1965, appear to speak of her loss.

Apology

Mother, I have taken your boots,
your good black gloves, your coat
from the closet in the hall, your prettiest things.
But the way you disposed of your life gives me leave,
the way you gave it away.
Even as I pillage your bedroom,
make off with your expensive, wonderful books,
your voice streams after me, level with sensible urgency.
And near to the margin of your tears as I used to be,
I do what you say.

(*Poems*:172).

The second poem is entitled 'After her Death':

In the unbelievable days
when death was coming and going
in his only city,
his mind lived apart in the country
where chairs and dishes were asleep
in familiar positions,
where geometric faces in the wallpaper
waited without change of expression,
where the book he had meant to come back to
lay open on a bedside table,
oblivious to the deepening snow,
absorbed in its one story.

(*Poems*: 172)

The first poem speaks of raiding the life of a loved one, while both poems hint at the on-goingness of writing and the printed word. Both of these concepts will become a particular feature of Stevenson's later elegies, particularly the poems that speak of the death of poets. In a lecture given at the University of Hull in April, 2002, Stevenson describes her poem, 'When the camel is dust it goes through the needle's eye', as a 'love-elegy to my mother written long after she died' ('Elegies and Love Poems' 2002), and it gently charts her mother's increasing fragility:

This hot summer wind
is tiring my mother.
It tires her to watch it
buffeting the poppies.
Down they bow
in their fluttering kimonos,
a suppressed populace,
an unpredictable dictator.

(*Poems*:179)

It is worth noting that this poem was published in *Four and a Half Dancing Men* in 1993, almost thirty years after her mother died. An even later poem, 'A Marriage', was published in *A Report From The Border* in 2003, and Stevenson chose to read this poem at the University of Hull in February 2006. She noted then that it was written a long time after her mother's death, which leads to a questioning of the nature, and purpose, of elegy. Furthermore, the survival of the elegist becomes accentuated by the ever lengthening span of time between the loss and the writing of the poem. The focus of the elegy begins to turn towards the elegist rather than the elegised, a turning that emerges as a particular contradiction in her elegies for poets.

It was the natural world that was to provide a refuge for the young poet the summer following her mother's death. She and Mark embarked on a tour of America and walked in the Sierra Nevada, the mountains that feature in the poem that bears their name. Following this tour, Anne, deciding not to return to teaching, began to work in earnest on her writing in order to continue compiling *Living in America* and her Elizabeth Bishop book.

In 1964, Anne, Mark and Caroline, now old enough to attend primary school, moved back to Cambridge, England in order for Mark to return to the University. Already Anne had travelled, and lived, in many different locations so it is not surprising that place, and her relationship to place, is such a feature of her poetry. Still only thirty two, she had settled on both sides of the Atlantic more than once which, coupled with the fact that she was born in England but raised in America, must have seriously challenged her sense of home and belonging. Nevertheless, in 1965, *Living in America* was published by the University of Michigan's Generation Press. Stevenson claims that this collection 'owes a great deal to discoveries I made about diction, tone, pitch and content in poetry in the course of studying first Hall and then Bishop' (*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 123). Stevenson frequently cites Bishop as a source of inspiration, and many of her poems, especially 'The Mudtower', carry echoes of Bishop's work. In 1966, the Twayne biography was published in America, which, with her own collection of poems, established her as a poet and critic in the United States.

The year 1966 also saw the birth of Anne and Mark's son, John, and in 1967, after a move to Glasgow, their second son, Charles, was born. Despite a very busy home life, she continued to write, and *Reversals* was published by The Wesleyan University Press in America in 1969. Stevenson believes that this was her 'first 'real' book of poems' but admits that it 'fell all but dead' (*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 124). However, she did not lose heart, but appreciated that the experience had set for herself 'a certain standard of economy and craft' that was to stand her in good stead for the future (*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 124). This belief is reflected in a review of the book by Ralph J. Mills in the Chicago based journal, *Poetry*. Mills writes:

Anne Stevenson's new collection should secure a place for her as one of the most promising young women poets. Her main themes, as announced in a prefatory poem, are childbirth and death, but they extend to love, landscapes, and some subtle but haunting forays into the interior life. Ideally, she seeks to come upon the poem that lies in

wait amidst the “dissolving chromatics/ of the commonplace / absorbed by the listening eye” which so often go unseen and hence unrealized. ... The poems of place display a personal responsiveness to the features of a particular location that never let subjectivity overbalance them, so the resulting detail is always fresh, discriminating, and independent. In pieces treating love, childbirth and death, however, intimacy and inwardness assume greater control.

(Mills, R Jr. 1971:334)

This is a glowing review and supports my belief that this volume contains some of the best poems of her early work, in particular ‘In the House’ and ‘Sierra Nevada’. It also contains her arguably most anthologised poem ‘The Spirit is too Blunt an Instrument’. While highlighting Stevenson’s preoccupation with motherhood, this review pertinently, and even prophetically, takes note of her poems of landscape. Writing as a woman is an area that Stevenson is to explore further in the next few years, but there is also, in *Reversals*, a hint of the poetry that is to come.

Six years after settling in the United Kingdom, the family returned to the United States. In 1970, both Anne and Mark were awarded American scholarships and they returned to Cambridge (Massachusetts). For six months Anne studied at the Radcliffe Institute for Independent Women where she found herself surrounded by ‘discontented contemporaries’ (‘Writing as a Woman’ 1979:168). At this time she was writing *Correspondences*, and was very aware that she was living through difficult, and changing times in America. She remembers that ‘excitement, despair, challenge, unhappiness and anger infected the New England air’, and she ‘began to understand why Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton had gone mad’ (‘Writing as a Woman’ 1979: 168). However, Anne was determined that she would not follow in their wake. She remembers:

It would have been too easy. All around me the world seemed mad. Lowell and Plath had set a fashion, and for a poet, madness (with blame on society and capitalist materialism) was all but obligatory. Two things saved me. In the first place, I had found an archive of letters from well-known American families in the Schlesinger Library, and reading them, I decided I could use them in a poem. The only way to fight the madness of the present was to gain some

understanding of the past. I discovered a trunk of family letters in my sister's basement in New York, and these, too, profoundly moved me. In the second place, we had a weekly escape route from Harvard to Vermont. We drove up to my family's house in Wilmington nearly every weekend, and it was there I decided to set my poem in a mythical Clearfield, and make Vermont and the peace it stood for a symbol of the more solid America that had disappeared from the demented cities.

(‘Writing as a Woman’ 1979: 168-169).

The result was *Correspondences*, a volume that was very much the product of, and a reaction to, a particular time in America's history. Fortunate in being able to escape from the pressures of daily life, Anne was able to offer multiple perspectives on the society she was observing, and to document it more objectively.

Less objectively, this book was also a product of Stevenson's own experience for, as she admits: ‘It was a book I couldn't avoid’ (‘Writing as a Woman’ 1979: 167). While in Glasgow, she had written a poem, later to appear in *Travelling Behind Glass*, which she believes was ‘the seed from which *Correspondences* grew’ (‘Writing as a Woman’ 1979: 168). The published version of ‘Generations’ consists of three stanzas:

Generations

Know this mother by her three smiles:
A grey one drawn over her mouth by frail hooks,
A hurt smile under each eye.

Know this mother by the frames she makes.
By the silence in which she suffers each child
To scratch out the aquatints in her mind.

Know this mother by the way she says
‘Darling’ with her clenched teeth,
By the fabulous lies she cooks.

(*Poems*:150)

Stevenson notes that ‘The women in each stanza represent my grandmother, my mother and myself in that order... three degrees of self-sacrifice’ (‘Writing as a Woman’ 1979:168). It is, by her own confession, a ‘bitter poem’ (‘Writing as a

Woman' 1979:168), but the original, unedited version was much more vitriolic:

Christ's Presbyterian blood for her was grapevine
She would have choked on 'liquor'
even from God's redeeming thimbles.

It was her daughter said
"Good wine for good company"

I drink by myself

It is not when she moves through sleep
that I'm haunted most.
I am where she was
And my own ghost.

(CUL MS Add. 9451, Poems)

The language is of intense sacrifice and haunted resistance, while the religious references alert us to powerful oppositions of right and wrong.

In the light of this poem, it is credible to assume that *Correspondences* appears to be a book that not only expresses her own observations on a changing America, but also explores her own emotions and inner turmoils caused not only by the conflicting demands of marriage, career and motherhood but also the need to resist the sacrificial example set by her own mother. Stevenson writes:

After my mother's death from cancer in the early 1960s (when I married again) I was still unable to rid myself of her image— her ghost. Yet I was inexpressibly upset by her death. I felt I had to tell her something, that she had cheated herself and me by dying just as I was about to speak. It was this urgency to resurrect her and at the same time to kill her spirit (remember Virginia Woolf's struggles with *The Angel in the House*) that made it impossible for me not to write *Correspondences*.

(*'Writing as a Woman'* 1979:167)

By her own admission, *Correspondences* is rooted in her own experience, but she suggests that 'Without resorting to confessional poetry, I managed to exorcise some of the guilt I felt with regard to my mother, my children, the nineteenth-century puritanical morality in which I'd grown up— and indeed, with regard to my confused, poisoned feelings about America itself' (*'Anne Stevenson writes'* 1985: 187). It is

interesting to note that the final stanza of the unpublished version of 'Generations' was actually published in *Minute by Glass Minute* (1982) under the title 'Haunted'. This volume also contains the poem 'Green Mountain, Black Mountain' which is an elegy for her American parents, so that 'Haunted', by association, appears less resentful and more elegiac in tone. Neither of these poems were included in *The Collected Poems* but both return in her latest volume *Poems 1955-2005*. This book is arranged thematically rather than chronologically, and here 'Haunted', 'Green Mountain' and *Correspondences* appear in the same section, as if she is still aware of all the issues she grappled with in her earlier years even though they now seem to stand as monuments to time past rather than an outpouring of struggle and guilt.

Stevenson was very keen to avoid the confessional label. In 1975, she wrote an article for *The New Review* entitled 'Is the Emperor of Ice Cream Wearing Clothes?' which was virtually a manifesto of her growing concerns about the state of poetry. In this essay, she writes 'Was it Sylvia Plath who made necessary a poetry of guilt, despair and breakdown, or would such poetry have appeared anyway?' ('Is the Emperor' 1975: 44). She does not endorse the position of the poet as hero-victim and later states:

Alvarez wrote of the artist as an isolated spirit in a murderous age who was victim of emotional disturbances beyond his or her control. Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, Alvarez himself can be regarded as artists who offered their lives to the god of their subconscious turbulence. It was not so much that Alvarez was wrong about the savage nature of his god; he was only mistaken, I think, in supposing that the artist must offer his own life as a sacrifice.

(*'The Recognition of the Savage God'* 1979: 319).

Furthermore, the poetry of writers like Berryman, Sexton and Plath had fostered a growing understanding that great poetry was somehow inextricably linked to mental turmoil and distress. She believes that not only must artists not offer their life for their art, but also that the undisciplined outpourings of a troubled soul do not necessarily produce well crafted poems. For very gifted writers, they may well do

so, but she believes that they set a trend for the less gifted to follow. She concludes that poetry:

can be therapy, just as painting can. But there's a world of difference between a person who, to be happy, needs to learn to express himself (psychotherapy) and an artist who, equally needing to express himself, still knows that self-expression can only be part of the truth.
(*'Is the Emperor'* 1975: 45)

This facet of her argument with confessional poetry, therefore, is based on her concerns about the quality of that poetry, concerns that she maintains to the present day.

This perhaps explains her desire to argue that *Correspondences* was not a form of confession, even though she felt compelled to write in order to absolve herself of the guilts and frustrations that had so troubled her. However, had this been Stevenson's final book, I believe that her work might have been categorised as confessional, particularly had she been driven to take her own life. When she writes that she had 'learned how to put experience into poetry without "confessing" it', she explains that 'the facts pertaining to the Chandler family in my poem differ from those pertaining to my own family in history. The nearer I came to my time and to people I knew, the more imperative it seemed to me to get feelings right but to invent 'facts' (*'Writing as a Woman'* 1979: 173). This is possibly naive, especially when she admits that 'all the anger, the confusion, the misery and doubt I experienced during the fifties and sixties went into it' (*'Writing as a Woman'* 1979: 175). Neil Roberts believes that *Correspondences* is an 'anticonfessionalist project that implicitly addresses Plath's life and work' and that 'it is the multiple perspective and historical reach of the text which supply the alternative, or challenge, to confessionalism' (Roberts 1999: 61 and 63). I do not agree with his suggestion that it only addresses Plath and her work, although Stevenson's later biography of Plath raises all these questions. In *Correspondences* I think it becomes clear that Stevenson faced many of the same struggles as Plath, the difference being that Plath

was suicidal while Stevenson, however depressed, did not succumb to taking her own life. Roberts's second point is more helpful as it supports Stevenson's own belief that, in writing of her own difficulties, she is expressing the turmoils of a generation of women:

Thousands of educated women with small babies who have followed in the wake of an enterprising husband have undergone the same depressions, the same sense of failure, the same collapse into breakdown, if not divorce.

(‘Writing as a Woman’ 1979:166)

In writing on behalf of others, as well as herself, she clearly believes she is not ‘confessing’ on a personal level, a belief that remains open to question. Diane Wood Middlebrook’s suggestion that ‘The confessional poetry of Plath and Sexton opened the way for the woman-centred poetry of the 1970’s’ (Middlebrook 1993: 646), coupled with Stevenson’s admission that ‘Naturally, when I was writing that poem I realised that Kay was a version of myself’, reopens the confessional debate about this particular volume. *Correspondences*, therefore, remains difficult to assess as a confessional project. Nevertheless, Stevenson’s admission that some of her early poems, and in particular those that relate to the house, reflect a more personal relationship between poem and poet suggests a continuing anxiety over the location and identity of the poetic ‘I’. In a more recent interview, she positions poetry as a house of words with the result that the literal and the poetic house become held in a delicate tension, a tension that she continues to negotiate in her later work.

Stevenson is well known for her desire not to be labelled a ‘woman’ writer, but *Correspondences* also raises another issue, for in expressing the anger and frustrations she had experienced, she does admit ‘they were a woman’s angers and miseries’ (‘Writing as a Woman’ 1974: 175). Although she states ‘I have never considered myself to be a specifically feminist poet’ (‘Writing as a Woman’ 1979: 164), her own admission that this volume grew from a particular female experience raises questions about her relationship with feminism. Stevenson’s own plea: ‘is it

possible for a woman to be an adult, married, sexual person and a poet as well' ('Writing as a Woman' 1979:173) highlights the conflicting demands of home and career that so racked the young, female writer/poet. It is just such ideological constraints that feminism questions and challenges. This makes it stranger that Stevenson should question her own role as a feminist writer. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was published in London in 1971, highlighting the plight of the woman in the home who felt guilty for not being fulfilled as a wife and mother. This guilt finds a voice in *Correspondences*. Maura coherently encapsulates the position of women in the nineteenth century:

Perhaps it was never meant
that I work as I intended.
Perhaps it was never meant
that I write, learn, elevate
myself as I intended.
My vocation. My mission.
What does Nature
ask of Woman
Give to him that needeth.
Employ the hour that passeth.
Be resolute in submission.
Love thy husband.
Bear children.

(*Poems*: 224)

Her role is clear, indeed it is more than a role, it is a mission, with all the religious ideologies such a word implies. Ruth Boyd, Maura's daughter, appears to internalise these values too, and embraces her role as wife and mother by extending that role into political and social welfare. Nevertheless, she recognises the demands and sacrifices this puts upon her:

And what are these terrible things
they are taking for granted? Air and grass,
houses and beds, laundry and things to eat—
so little clarity, so little space between them;
a crowd of distractions to be
bought and done and arranged for,
drugs for the surely incurable pain of

living misunderstood among many who love you.

(Poems: 237)

The mundane jobs of domesticity cover a hidden longing for another life, while the self-knowledge that recognises that longing brings the 'incurable pain' of knowing that the identity she presents to the world actually belies that which is fundamental to her. Ruth manages to control the bitterness created by the demands of domesticity, but her daughter Kay cannot maintain such a calm exterior, and cannot remain bound by the ideological demands of motherhood. Stevenson herself states that ' Sylvia Plath was a spokeswoman for a whole generation of Kays' ('Writing as a Woman' 1979: 172), a surprising assertion that highlights Stevenson's contradictory relationship with Plath and the confessional school. Plath's poetry is all too resonant in Kay's outpouring of grief and bewilderment in her letter from The Good Samaritan Hospital in New York:

Come when you can, or when
the white coats let you.
But they may not let you, of course.
They think you're to blame.
Good God, mother, I'm not insane!
How can I get out of here?
Can't you get me out of here?

I'll try, I'll try, really,
I'll try again. The marriage.
The baby. The house. The whole damn bore!

Because for me, what the hell else is there?
Mother, what more? What more?

(Poems: 243)

Kay fails to discipline herself into the role of wife in the way that her mother and grandmother had done before her, and angrily voices her rejection of their internalised ideologies:

God knows I have fought you long enough...
soft puppet on the knuckles of your conscience, or
dangling puritanical doll made of duty and habit

and terror and self-revulsion.

(*Poems*: 239)

She vows that she will not be driven by the same ideologies, like a 'soft puppet', yet repeats her will to try again to cope with domesticity and appeals to her mother for help, realising ultimately that her mother too has had to face this dilemma. Kay's rejection of her husband and child is diagnosed as madness, yet she herself vows 'Good God, mother, I'm not insane!' (*Poems*: 243). Maura's desires to study and to write are branded as unfeminine, an ideology that reaches its apogee in Kay's denial of maternal interest being branded as outright lunacy.

Jan Montefiore describes *Correspondences* as the 'most feminist' (Montefiore 1987:34) of Stevenson's poetry. Yet Stevenson repeatedly denies any ideological impetus in her writing. In an interview with Helena Nelson she states: 'I want to write good poetry but I don't care to belong to a stable' ('Anne Stevenson in Conversation' 2000:55). In *The Cortland Review* she affirms Elizabeth Bishop's view 'that if you don't stay well away from the gray world of ideology and theory, you will never become a poet' ('Interview with Anne Stevenson' 2000: 15). *Correspondences* appears to have been the product of a certain time in Stevenson's life. She had small children, she had a busy, academic husband, and she was attempting to forge her own career, while at the same time racked with doubt and guilt. While, therefore, Stevenson might reject the feminist label, *Correspondences* appears to be negotiating the position of the woman writer, and exploring the possibilities and impossibilities she faces. Stevenson writes 'one way out of the dilemma of the woman/writer is to write poems about the dilemma itself' ('Writing as a Woman' 1979: 164). Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly true that *Correspondences* asks to be read as a feminist text.

While Stevenson's attitude to the writing of the female experience is, at times, ambiguous, even contradictory, she vigourously refutes the need for any form of gendered language. She takes issue with Adrienne Rich, stating: 'I am not

convinced that women need a specifically female language to describe female experience ... A good writer's imagination should be bisexual or transsexual' ('Writing as a Woman' 1979: 174). Furthermore, she suggests that:

For better or worse, women and men writers in the West, in the later twentieth century, share a common consciousness. Their language is a reflection, or even a definition, of that consciousness. If anything we want *more* communication, *more* understanding between the sexes. We are beginning to see that though our physical functions differ (necessarily) our psychic needs are alike. If there is to be a new creative consciousness— one that is not based on phallic values of conquest, power, ambition, greed, murder and so forth— then this consciousness must have room for both male and female; a consciousness the greatest literature has, in fact been defining for a long time.

(‘Writing as a Woman’ 1979:174-175)

Stevenson refutes the need, or indeed the viability and credibility, of an exclusively female language ('Writing as a Woman' 1979:174). She later claims that she 'dislikes isms' and 'political correctness' and that 'If women and men can't share "traits of mind" as well as jobs and role definitions, I don't want anything to do with feminism' ('*Between the Iceberg*' 1998: 182). Montefiore replies to Stevenson's argument suggesting that,

the intellectual strength of her [Stevenson's] insistence that the tradition she belongs to transcends gender, lies in her refusal to be, as she sees it, ghettoized. Her weakness— as with most proponents of this argument— is that she idealizes the tradition which she endorses, failing to take account of the exclusions and injustices which help to constitute it, especially the marginalization of women's poetry Women do *not* normally get included either in the canon of important literature or in reconstructions of that complex of feeling, myth and experience which makes up ideological traditions of the kind that Anne Stevenson's own poems explore. Her argument for the transcending of gender takes too little account of reality...

(Montefiore 1987: 38)

Montefiore is right to take Stevenson to task on her rather naive understanding of the history of women and literature. However, she is responding, to *Correspondences* and the 'Writing as a Woman' essay which were products of a particular time in

Stevenson's life. She is wrong to use this, and Stevenson's poem 'Green Mountain, Black Mountain', as the sole works on which to engage with the poet. A wider critique of her work would have given her argument a sounder grounding.

Stevenson's argument with feminism is one aspect of her understanding of the relationship between politics and poetry. Stevenson believes that poetry should not be 'written by a political party' ('A Few Words for the New Century' 2000: 183), suggesting instead that poetry remains 'expressive' not 'partisan' ('A Few Words for the New Century' 2000: 183). In an interview on the state of American poetry she claims that 'Poetry has become little more than a self-gratifying academic or ethnic/gender-centred option. Not poetry, in other words, but virtual poetry' ('What is American...' 2002:1-2). Real poetry should not follow political ideology or fashion. Stevenson also believes that 'once any sort of machine, any kind of impersonal ideology takes over the artist's mind he or she is finished' ('Interview with Anne Stevenson' 1998:3). This is rather dogmatic, and appears to suggest that if a poem's content speaks of ideology it cancels out any possibility of such a poem being supported by its own artistic form. This may happen, but it is far from inevitable. Stevenson's resistance to ideologically driven poetry, and her own refusal to be slotted into any gendered category, permeates both her critical opinion and her view of her own work rendering her, at times, rather haughty and even arrogant. In her essay 'The Recognition of the Savage God: Poetry in Britain Today' she argues that:

There is no doubt that violent disagreement about the purposes of poetry, its execution, its audience, its relevance to private and public life, has increased the popularity and seriousness of poetry all over Britain in the span of a decade. Wars in Vietnam and Northern Ireland have spurred poets out of aesthetic ruts and brought about, in Northern Ireland at least, what amounts to original and powerful poetry of concern. Few writers in Belfast or Dublin— or London for that matter— would agree these days with Auden's "poetry makes nothing happen". It has made *itself* happen'.

('The Recognition of the Savage God' 1979:317).

Poetry, she believes, must be active and responsive but remain autonomous. She rejects all form of ‘dogma, banner-waving, self-righteousness and confessional self-pity’ (‘The Recognition of the Savage God’ 1979:317).

This rejection also lies at the heart of her argument with what she terms confidential poetry. In her essay ‘Tony Curtis, Seamus Heaney and Confidential Poetry’, published in 2002, she suggests that ‘If “confessional” poetry was a mid-century innovation of discontented Americans, “confidential” poetry has come to be the principal mode of expression for a great many politically sensitive , ambitious yet reader-friendly poets— of both sexes— in the United Kingdom today’ (‘Tony Curtis, Seamus Heaney and Confidential Poetry’ 2002:22). She offers a scathing indictment of the growth of this form of writing:

Arts Council schemes, marketing strategies, lucrative poetry competitions and, above all, the widespread availability of creative writing courses, have provided poetry with a new purpose. The aim of these new ‘initiatives’ has been partly to broaden the concept of poetry and thus remove from it the stigma of control by an intellectual elite; and partly to connect people as individuals, to get people talking about themselves, sympathising with each other, whose lives might otherwise be laid waste by the meaningless pursuit of material advancement or the soulless acquisition of consumer goods. ...

And of course, what we call Post-Modernism has not been able to humanise contemporary life, either, although it looks to be trying hard. In reality, it has split poetry pretty much in two. The older universities, uncertain of their democratic credentials and vulnerable to accusations of social inequality, have practically succeeded in turning poetry into a theoretical branch of the social services. Meanwhile, ordinary people who seek education wherever it is offered— at the Arvon centres or in sixth- form colleges or via the internet and television— have taken up their pens and computers, deciding that poetry is not so much an art they want to inherit and revere as a line of immediate communication, a skill to be learned and passed on to others, something like journalism. And this partly explains why what I have called “confidential” poetry has become so ubiquitous— or perhaps the more appropriate word would be contagious.

(‘Tony Curtis, Seamus Heaney and Confidential Poetry’
2002:22-23).

This is a stinging attack, not only on certain forms of poetry but also on the, albeit

anonymous, people she dismisses by her self-important and contemptuous tone, and it is possible that it is this attitude that has sometimes left her on the margins of the contemporary poetry scene. However, her dislike of confidential poetry is twofold and genuinely relates to the poetry itself. Firstly Stevenson believes that it is written ‘in comfort, on the warm side of the window’ (‘Tony Curtis, Seamus Heaney and Confidential Poetry’ 2002:26). It assumes shared ideologies with its readers and therefore demands little from them. Secondly, in an echo of her views on confessional poetry, it does not always create good poetry. Attacking Tony Curtis she states:

We live now, unfortunately, in an age that values instant information (journalism) and entertainment (pop culture) far more than it values art— for all our art councils and creative initiatives and high-paying prizes. Tony Curtis is by no means the only good contemporary poet to discover that by writing what is essentially prose, tightening it up, dividing it into sharp lines and filling it with lively images, personal and cultural, he can appeal to a readership without upsetting it too much.

(‘Tony Curtis, Seamus Heaney and Confidential Poetry’
2002:25)

For Stevenson, poetry is not only an art with its own rules and demands, it is also an art that must be inherited, learned and developed. However, the tone of this essay, reveals a satisfied confidence in her own aesthetic which refuses to consider new possibilities.

Ultimately, as if in conclusion , she states in her essay ‘A Few Words for the New Century’ :

In my book, the ideal poem of the next century will not be a game of hunt the references. It will not be a furious tirade, or in-depth self interview, or a river of tears that floods its banks with self-pity. It will not mistake novelty for originality. It will not be afraid of learning from the poetry of the past, but it will not be imitative either. For a while it may not win poetry prizes, for it won’t be written with “promotion” in mind. Nor will it be written by a culture, a gender, a race, a nation, a political party or a creative writing group. Although many such influences may flow into the writing of it, in the end it will be written by a very rare person— a poet who is in thrall to nothing but poetry’s weird tyranny and ungovernable need to exist’

(‘A Few Words for the New Century’ 2000:183).

Written for the new millennium, these words serve as a form of poetic manifesto. Although rather pompous and lacking in a degree of self-awareness, her earlier work, written while a young mother, does sometimes take the form of an 'in- depth self interview', even if it is an 'interview' which she recognises and attempts to negotiate, this manifesto is nevertheless challenging and thought provoking. For Stevenson, the poem must stand alone. Poetry exerts its own authority and pressure on the poet rather than being the mouthpiece for the poet. He or she must not approach poetry with a fixed agenda but must, instead respond to its needs and waywardness.

Stevenson's essay, 'Is the Emperor of Ice Cream Wearing Clothes?' (1975), also raises another issue which is a constant feature of her writings: 'If poetry is the art in which language comes closest to expressing emotional experience, then that language should have the range of experience. Unfortunately for poets, it is not in the nature of language to have this range. Reality cannot be snared in a net of sentences' ('Is the Emperor' 1975:44). Influenced by the work of her father, Stevenson is acutely aware of the slipperiness and limitations of language, an awareness that is evident in her early High School sonnet, 'We watched the colors on a changing sky'.

Sonnet- written 1949- 1950

We watched the colors on a changing sky
While talking. Someone spoke of poetry
And envied pleasure's worded ecstasy
And sorrow's spoken tears. Reflecting, I
Too wished that I could recognise
My language in the sun-made colors there,
And write a worded glory to compare
With that a scarlet sun can improvise.

Later, when alone, I thought of you,
Recalling how you watched quite silently,
Not needing tongue or words to crystalize
Emotion. Thinking of your quietness, I knew
That greatest poets write no poetry
But speak some silent language with the skies.

(CUL MS Add. 9451. Early poems)

Language is the poet's only tool but, at times, it is inadequate. In an interview with Richard Poole for *Poetry Wales*, she makes a delightful analogy:

Robert Graves's poem "The Cool Web" claims that language "winds us in" to protect us from the horrors of speechless nature. There's some truth in that—*some* truth—though there's lots of speechless nature in Cwm Nantcol, and I, for one, find it a relief! My image of language is rather more domestic. Think of any language as a single sheet you are trying to fit on a big double bed. You no sooner cover one corner than the one opposite is laid bare. You manage to tuck it in at the top, but the bottom remains exposed. There is no way the language-sheet is going to cover the *whole* bed! So we have a choice. We can petulantly throw away the sheet and give up trying to express reality altogether. Or we can make do with a bed only half made-up. I myself would choose the latter.

(*Between the Iceberg*, 1998: 178).

Language, therefore, cannot be stretched neatly to fit the poet's demands. However, for Stevenson, it is this that gives language its strength. The poet must allow words to 'have their heads in a play of meaning' (*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 131). Words can, and should, escape even the poet's control.

Nevertheless, Stevenson also believes that 'Intelligent control of language is essential to poetry' ('The Recognition of the Savage God' 1979: 316). The control she speaks of however, is less to do with interfering with language's innate slipperiness, and more to do with resisting both the unabashed presence of the confessional 'I', and the ideology and comfort behind the confidential 'I'. In her essay on the nature of confidential poetry she suggests that Tony Curtis needs to learn from Heaney, and to 'tune into his mentor's profound and wonderful-sounding word hoard' ('Tony Curtis, Seamus Heaney and Confidential Poetry' 2002:25). She writes of Heaney:

What was so new and wonderful about Heaney? Well, the frankness and warmth of his personality, for one thing. Here was "confessional poetry" if you like, but instead of the Freudian angst and ego-centred violence we had come to expect from the Americans—Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath—here was a collection of affectionate, tenderly explorative memories of a rural childhood, written by a poet whose credentials were all home made. What a relief, what a pleasure

these poems were to hear! And Heaney's placing was for him as fortunate as his timing. A far-sighted Catholic from war-torn Northern Ireland, dedicated to his vocation and with a true poet's ear-- at the time nothing more rooted and nourishing could have happened to poetry in the English language.

(‘Tony Curtis, Seamus Heaney and Confidential Poetry’
2002:21).

Stevenson suggests that while the poet might draw on his own experience, this must be mediated through a control of language that is driven by the ear.

In an interview with Cynthia Haven she offers this summary of the role of the poet:

You need to be sensitive to all the sounds, rhythms, echoes, et cetera, that constitute a poem to know what's going on in it. If nothing is going on except the promulgation of some one-dimensional idea or personal experience, if the so-called poem is nothing but a cut-up piece of not-very-interesting prose, then it isn't poetry at all.

(‘Interview with Anne Stevenson’ 2000)

Stevenson believes that music and rhythm are ‘the elements common to the best poetry’ (‘A Few Words for the New Century’ 2000:183), but she has also said:

I rarely think in terms like alliteration, internal rhyme, et cetera. Either a poem sings or it doesn't. I am conscious of the line endings, yes, but I never analyze what is happening when I write. That comes later. ... My model is, anyway, music: that is, poems come to me in musical phrases or cadences. Some of my poems are probably just musical toys.

(‘Interview with Anne Stevenson’ 2000: 4)

An inbred musicality appears to lie at the heart of her aesthetic, and she has said that while metre is ‘to do with prosodic forms, rhythm is ‘a physical cum musical concept’ and ‘poetry has to either sing or talk-- almost naturally. Otherwise it gets boring’ (‘Interview with Anne Stevenson’ 2000: 3). In her essay ‘The Trouble with a Word like *Formalism*’, Stevenson offers her response to the New Formalism movement in America which some of her contemporaries, such as Dana Gioia, were advocating. This group were calling for a return from free verse to more traditional forms of poetry with its more rigid rules of versification. In this essay, she argues

that the ‘Trouble with a word like *formalism* is that it seems to impose restrictions on the making of poetry without taking into consideration the conditions a poem sets for itself’ (*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 107). Later in the essay, she writes:

More importantly, many well-meaning contemporaries use the term formalism as if it meant merely writing in rhyme and meter— merely learning to scan, or count syllables and stresses so as to qualify as a producer of sonnets, couplets, narrative epics and so on. Alas most beginners who try out “form” in poetry achieve only exercises in verse— probably not very good verse at that. They would almost certainly write better poetry if they followed their instincts in free verse, if free verse is what they were brought up hearing. It’s not so much that poetic technique or craft cannot be taught (it can and should be) as that the process of absorbing and assimilating the feel of poetry is so psychologically complex. It takes a long time— half a lifetime maybe— to *overhear* those hardly definable facets of a language that give it a distinctive music. Writing poetry is inseparable from a poet’s unconscious at homeness with the sounds, inflections, pitches, and textures of a language. The pulse of its rhythms, the different weights and lengths of its vowels— these have to accumulate in a poet’s consciousness without his knowing how.

(*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 108-109)

This again suggests that Stevenson’s aesthetic is ultimately instinctive, a conclusion supported by her admission that poems ‘come from I don’t know where’(Interview with Mark Lawson 2007). She has also claimed that:

The appeal [of poetry] is altogether to our musical instincts, to the rhythms culturally bound within our bones or bred in our muscles and ears. Any theory of prosody that pits itself against rhythms we feel or want to sing is bound to come a cropper.

(CUL MS Add. 9451 ‘The Music of the Muses’ unpublished paper, 2000:3)

This presents some difficulties in the light of Stevenson’s own cultural hybridity and the multi-cultural diversity of her British and American audiences. Furthermore, this adherence to acknowledged patterns of sound has the potential to prevent innovation. She argues that:

In a good poem, as everybody knows, form is inseparable from sense and tone. No poem worthy of the name can be formless, whether it is written according to metrical rules or in free verse. The sounds, rhythms, pitch and intensity of the lines ARE the poem. Every poem

IS its form. A bad or failed poem is one whose form has either been too much imposed upon it, or neglected through ignorance and lack of an ear.

(Between the Iceberg 1998: 107)

This too is problematic for, by her own admission, her understanding of what constitutes good verse is what ‘everybody knows’, while ‘ignorance’ and ‘lack of an ear’ are highly subjective. Together they suggest a possible unwillingness to embrace an aesthetic that challenges existing possibilities. Nevertheless, her commitment to the musical quality of her work invites frequent praise. Rumens describes her poem ‘Green Mountain, Black Mountain’ as ‘strikingly musical’ (Rumens 1983: 469), Woodward believes her work to be ‘musically assured’ (Woodward 2000:26), Caldwell comments on the ‘musicality’ of her work (Caldwell 2006: 25), and Padel notes her ongoing ‘experiments with form and music’ (Padel 2007:98). Despite the possible limitations Stevenson’s aesthetic might impose, it is an aesthetic that is consistently and widely recognised.

Returning to 1970, during which time she was still writing *Correspondences*, and struggling with her own position within that text, Stevenson became tutor of extra-mural studies at the University of Glasgow. She was also a counsellor for the Open University, Paisley, Renfrew from 1972-1973. This was a turbulent time for her. She felt that she wanted ‘to be free’ (Interview with Sara Johnson 2006) and, finding the world of academia ‘unbearable’, the more bohemian life of the poet appeared particularly ‘alluring’ (Interview 2006). Mark, now teaching Chinese history at St. Anthony’s college, returned to Oxford with the two boys. Caroline was, by this time, at boarding school. Stevenson now describes this time as being very difficult for women in general, and although she says she was ‘never a feminist’, she does believe that she was ‘supremely selfish’ (Interview, 2006). She says that she felt like a Henry James heroine, and ‘thought I understood English society’. However, she found that, while she imagined she would ‘fit in well’, she did not, and

it was then that she began to understand some of the dilemmas faced by Sylvia Plath (Interview, 2006). The opportunity to work in Scotland offered her the escape she needed. During this time she enjoyed the company of many poets, Norman MacCaig, Edwin Morgan, Alasdair Maclean to name but three, but it was with Philip Hobsbaum that she became particularly close, and he gave her the encouragement she needed to finish *Correspondences*.

In 1973, Stevenson was awarded a Scottish Arts Council Bursary and from 1973-1975 she remained in Scotland, but moved north to take up a position as Writing Fellow at the University of Dundee. Here she also enjoyed the fellowship of many poets including Jay Parini, Alistair Reid and Bill Tate. She describes this as a 'very creative' environment (Interview 2006) and it was during this time that *Correspondences* was published by Oxford University Press. So was *Travelling Behind Glass*, which included new poems as well as the many she had published in her two American collections. *Correspondences* was later adapted as a radio play and broadcast by the BBC, with Stevenson reading the role of Maura Chandler. It was also produced as a play at the University of Hull. In 1996, two poems from *Correspondences* were set to music by Rhian Samuel as 'Daughters' Letters'. This was first performed by Sinfonia 21, conducted by Martyn Brabbins, in London in 1997. As recently as February 2003, this work was performed in a series of concerts in Scotland. Fiona Leith, writing in *Scotland on Sunday* asks:

What do you get when you cross a soprano from Bombay, a Michigan-born poet, a Welsh composer and a Scottish Orchestra? If this was a comedy it would be a hilarious punchline, but this week, all the above are involved in bringing to life something far more sombre and stirring – a production inspired by Anne Stevenson's text, *Daughters' Letters*.

Stevenson, poet, critic and biographer, has carved a niche for herself with a writing style which flits between poetry and prose, gaining her an appreciative audience since her first book, *Reversals*, was published in 1969. Her work mostly focuses on the histories of relationships through correspondence, and it is this insight which appealed to Welsh composer Rhian Samuel, who has set Stevenson's

fictional letters to music for this series. Samuel is best known for her large-scale orchestral works.

(Leith 2003)

Although riddled with inaccuracies, this review nevertheless highlights the role *Correspondences* has played in Stevenson's critical reception. Samuel and Stevenson enjoy a close professional relationship, and Samuel wrote a piano solo entitled *A Garland for Anne* for Stevenson's seventieth birthday in January 2003. It has five parts: 'The Therapy of Moonlight', 'Vertigo', 'On Going Deaf', 'Morning' and 'Four and a Half Dancing Men' and was first performed, as a complete work, by Cheyin Li, on 14 April, 2005 at City University in London. Stevenson also wrote the text for 'Nantcol Songs', a composition in two parts for a soprano and harp ensemble. The two songs, 'The Sun, the Wind and the Moon' and 'A Perfect View', were first performed together on November 27, 2003, in the Duke's Hall of the Royal Academy of Music, London, conducted by Gareth Wood. Stevenson has also written *The Snow Queen: Twelve Fragments from a Story without an End*, a story adapted from the longer one by Hans Christian Andersen, which was set to music by John Woolrich. This work was commissioned for performance by the directors of The Helmsley Festival in Ampleforth, North Yorkshire, and was first performed with the Helmsley Festival Orchestra, with Mary Wiegold as soprano, on July 27th, 1985. Stevenson's love of music, and the musicality of her poetry, join together in these works, and recall her early days of student operas.

Returning to the publication of her two volumes, *Correspondences* and *Travelling behind Glass*, *The Times Literary Supplement* praised both books, finding them 'remarkable for a fresh, authentic brand of realist observation and an impressive capacity to reflect intelligently on what it sees' (Unattributed Review 1974:762). The article suggests that there are, however, moments in *Travelling Behind Glass* where 'that reflectiveness declines into flat discursive generality' although this, the unnamed reviewer believes, is redeemed in *Correspondences* (Unattributed Review

1974:762). This review is particularly telling in that it reinforces ‘O’Callaghan’s view that some of her early poems do not move beyond their autobiographical roots and become more descriptive than explorative. However, this collection includes ‘Coming Back to Cambridge’ and ‘On the Edge of the Island’, two poems that I believe are particularly interesting. Tony Curtis reviewed both *Travelling Behind Glass* and *Correspondences* in a later edition of the journal *Outposts* and wrote ‘I find it surprising that we’ve not heard more of Anne Stevenson before this. Her poems reveal the state of Woman with as convincing a voice as most, and with considerably more polish than many’ (Curtis 1975:28). He then compares Stevenson’s poem ‘England’ with Philip Larkin’s ‘The Whitsun Weddings’, suggesting that she, like him, is a ‘traveller behind glass’ (Curtis 1975: 28). This is a particularly pertinent, even prophetic observation, for although Curtis initially praises the ‘woman’ poems, he quickly moves on to consider her a poet of place, and in particular, a poet that has travelled from place to place. He writes: ‘Poems such as “Living in America” and “The Dear Ladies of Cincinnati” make incisive comments on aspects of life in the States, whilst “England” distances her homeland and enables her to be at once detached and committed’ (Curtis 1975: 28). Curtis believes that the quality of the poetry in *Correspondences* ‘is variable’, but he suggests there is evidence of ‘fine writing’, and finally proposes that ‘*Correspondences* may quickly come to be seen as a work of influence, and Anne Stevenson as a poet of significance’ (Curtis 1975: 29).

During her time as writer in residence at Dundee University, Stevenson lived across the Tay in Tayport, the town that is described in ‘The Mudtower’. With *Correspondences* behind her, it was here that Stevenson believes that she ‘began to see my way through irrational miseries I could neither explain nor confront’ (‘Anne Stevenson writes’ 1985:187). In the same essay she writes:

In Dundee I made many friends. I liked and still like the Scots. Theirs is a poetry of steely, philosophical romanticism, a good antidote to

the soft-centred confessional stuff I'd been drawn into in America. In Dundee we laughed and drank and behaved in a generally anarchic (Celtic) manner, but we never felt pity for ourselves.

(‘Anne Stevenson writes’ 1985:187)

Anxious that she had allowed too much of the personal to enter her poetry, Stevenson clearly remembers this as a time of readjustment and redirection. In her poem, ‘A Legacy’, written for her fiftieth birthday, she writes:

By Tentsmuir’s Tayport, where the Tay
Spills out in salty, spatulate
Redundancies of tidal clay,
I buried all that out-of-date
Hysteria of want and hate.
In Fife I count among my friends
The spumey bay, the slanted light—
Ablutions for us puritans.

(*FM*: 57)

This poem was not included in *The Collected Poems* or the more recent *Poems 1955-2005*, perhaps because of its rather whimsical style and autobiographical nature even though it seems to encapsulate Stevenson’s drive to look outwards, rather than inwards. Indeed, there is almost a religious fervour in her determination to allow herself to be washed clean of the taint of hysterical confession in order to fully appreciate the world around her.

In 1975, Stevenson left Dundee to take up a fellowship at Lady Margaret Hall in Oxford. The family, separated while she lived in Scotland, were now reunited, but her marriage to Mark was becoming more and more uneasy. Stevenson remembers:

I was now in a safe position, I thought, to write an authoritative book on American puritanism and be the faithful mother I thought I should be. As it turned out, I did neither of these things. The marriage seemed to belong to somebody else; and the academic book never materialised; I had written enough about puritans in *Correspondences*.

(‘Anne Stevenson writes’ 1985: 187)

The poet still appears to be troubled by the conflicting demands of home and work, family and poetry. Nevertheless, she continued to write, and was very active in the

setting up of the poetry workshop in the Old Fire Station Arts centre which was run by Diane Montgomerie.

In 1977, *Enough of Green* was published by Oxford University Press and included some of the poems she had written while in Scotland. This collection is an interesting mix of Scotland and Oxford, and features some of her best poems about landscape, as well as a continuing preoccupation with place and belonging. Parini describes the book as a 'collection of tense, ironic lyrics of surpassing skill' (Parini 1978: 1), while Andrew Motion, who suggested the book's title, concludes his review of the collection with the following observations:

Her ... determination to include alternative responses to any given situation, and her ability to write with a detachment which is both objective and engaging prove her a poet of exceptional distinction— on the terms she sets out in her own preface, or any other.

(Motion 1977:1381)

Motion notes Stevenson's ongoing negotiation of the paradoxical nature of her 'detachment'. However, his reference to the volume's preface is particularly pertinent. Entitled 'To Be a Poet' in *Enough of Green*, it is reproduced in *Poems 1955-2005* as 'To Write It' with no alterations or amendments. This poem lays out the need for the poet to 'Shift for yourself' before accepting that:

As furniture heaves off your life
you'll love your deliverance.

(*Poems*:287)

The playful use of 'shift' and 'heave' suggests the force required to set aside the daily grind in order to write. The short and long sounds of the two verbs echo the variable tenor of every day life, while the noun 'furniture' suggests both the heaviness and the solidity of the comforts of domesticity. The second stanza of this poem becomes rather pragmatic as Stevenson mentions the 'drunk twins' of 'Memory and Remorse' (*Poems*:287) which rather complicates her understanding of memory in her creative process, but the third stanza is much more exciting:

Refuse them. Stay faithful to Silence, just

Silence, sliding between that breath
and now this breath, severing the tick
from the tock on the alarm clock,
measuring the absence of else.
And the presence, the privilege.
(*Poems:287*).

The sudden short exhortation to 'Refuse' these' twins' emphasises their wasteful potential in its relationship with the noun 'refuse'. Memory here then becomes the painful memories Stevenson has spoken about regarding family and motherhood. Then the tone of the poem changes. The internally rhyming 's' sounds emphasise the 'Silence'. It is as if the poem is whispering, and the interrupted lines focus on the gaps the stanza speaks of. Ultimately, the paradoxical impression of 'absence' and 'presence' create a hiatus which allows the poem to be created. Motion says of this preface:

These are grave words, but any such didacticism—whether it refers to poetic technique or, as in this case, to a preferred *modus vivendi* [sic]—is bound to raise problems. It implies an unhealthy degree of selfconsciousness and advertises intentions by which succeeding poems are likely to be too exclusively judged. Fortunately Anne Stevenson only courts these dangers to dismiss them.
(Motion 1977:1381)

The didactic tone Motion refers to weakens the poem and suggests a lack of self awareness. Many of the poems in *Enough of Green* turn to the landscape and avoid the pitfalls this poem/preface engages with. However, there are others which I think do reveal a considerable degree of selfconsciousness. 'The Price' is a particular example, with its exploration of the relation between domesticity and family and writing. Although the angry tone of some of her earlier work on this subject has gone, there is still a tension expressed between her role as wife and mother and poet. In her essay, 'Writing as a Woman', Stevenson concludes that:

choosing what often feels like a selfish independence means that one pays a price— a high price— in human terms. I don't think you can write truthfully and be entirely comfortable. Tension is a mainspring of the imagination. And something has to be sacrificed—the satisfaction

of a role, the satisfaction of a cause, the satisfaction, even, of a sense of guilt.... a price is asked for every engagement with the truth— but it need not be a price that destroys affection. It is also the price of affection.

(‘Writing as a Woman’ 1979: 175)

This is dramatic writing and it is interesting that she talks in terms of sacrifice rather than compromise. Nevertheless, in the poems in *Enough of Green*, there is more exploration than anger as living and writing become more of a negotiation and less of a conflict.

From 1977-1978 Stevenson was writer in residence at Bulmershe College, Reading. In 1978 she received a Southern Arts Bursary, and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. She also co-founded, that year, *Other Poetry* with E.Paterson and G.S. Fraser. In March 1979, Stevenson’s father died suddenly and, her marriage to Mark now over, she moved to Hay-on-Wye. Once again her personal life was in turmoil. ‘Feeling old’ and in need of ‘adventure’ (Interview 2006), and armed with a legacy from her father and a grant from the arts council, she and Michael Farley, to whom she was briefly married, established the Poetry Bookshop in Hay-on-Wye. They were helped by Robin Waterfield, founder of the antiquarian bookshop in Oxford, and established themselves first in the laundry of the old town workhouse, before moving the bookshop to their home on Broad Street. Also involved were Alan Halsey and Glyn Stauhaugh, through whom links were forged with the Five Seasons Press. Stevenson admits that she was no good at selling books but enjoyed the poetry readings (Interview 2006) and has written that it was a ‘precarious venture’ which was ‘too frailly financed to produce any profit’ (‘Anne Stevenson writes’ 1985:187).

In 1981, while still writing *Minute by Glass Minute*, Michael and Anne moved to the north-east of England. Anne had been appointed as Northern Arts Literary Fellow for Durham and Newcastle, and Michael was asked to edit books for the Ceolfrith Press before establishing the Taxvs Press. The couple lived first in

Sunderland and then Langley Park, a small mining village situated just west of Durham. Also in 1981, Anne was awarded a Welsh Arts Council bursary, and in the following year, *Minute by Glass Minute* was published. This collection includes the poem 'Swifts' which, as Emily Grosholz suggests 'was written at a time of intense transformation in Stevenson's own life, for she had just left a marriage of long standing to go off with another poet, the one who shouts "The swifts are back!" The poem is suffused with a sense of freedom, of breaking free, but also with a deep anxiety about the rigors of being unfettered' (Grosholz 2001: 732). This creates an ironic contrast to the earlier poems which explored the limitations imposed on her by domesticity and family life. There is also a somewhat mournful tone to this volume, for it includes *Sonnets for Five Seasons*, the sequence of poems written in memory of her father, as well as the long poem, *Green Mountain, Black Mountain*, which Stevenson dedicated to the memory of her parents. In a personal e-mail, she adds that the poem is 'based on the border between the past and present, new and old worlds, my life as a child in the US and my life in Britain as an adult' (E-mail 2003.). In 1983, Rumens' review of *Minute by Glass Minute* included the observation that despite certain 'lapses towards bathos' in some of the poems in this collection 'The subject of loss is approached with a more assured and controlled intensity in the fine central sequence "Green Mountain, Black Mountain" ' (Rumens 1983: 469). This poem turns to the landscapes of Vermont and Wales to explore loss, and Rumens notes the particular relationship between poetry and geography in this collection when she writes:

Like its predecessor, *Enough of Green*, *Minute by Glass Minute* draws a fair amount of its inspiration from geographical location. The new volume in fact marks a return to green, for the landscape is no longer primarily coastal but dominated by the mountains and pastures of South Wales.

(Rumens 1983: 469).

Landscape continues to be a feature of Stevenson's poetry, and her published

volumes reflect the progress of her nomadic lifestyle. In this review, Rumens also returns to the subject of the woman poet, and suggests that:

Today it is virtually impossible for a writer of female sex and Western culture to be unconscious of her gender — a situation more oppressive than liberating. Stevenson’s vision seems to be aligned with the less doctrinaire aspects of “raised consciousness”, as in “At Kilpeck Church” and “Poem for my Daughter”, the latter moving from irony to a rather mournful celebration of biological destiny: “When we belong to the world we become what we are”. In a poet of this stature, however, the particular perceptions according to gender are constantly being transcended by the essentially androgynous power of the imagination. As the poem “The Figure in the Carpet” puts it: “Usually/ I am man or woman./ I do not ask./ I feel happiest / when I melt into the plan/ without description.”

(Rumens ‘Rub of the Green 1983: 469).

Although still being assessed in the light of her gender, Stevenson must have been delighted to read this echo of her own assertion that ‘A good writer’s imagination should be bisexual or transsexual’ (‘Writing as a Woman’ 1979:174).

The year 1982 also saw the publication of *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, edited by Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion. The editors’ preface states: ‘This anthology is intended to be didactic as well as representative. It illustrates what we believe to be the most important achievements and developments in British poetry during recent years’ (Morrison and Motion, 1982: preface). Five poems by Stevenson, as well as two extracts from *Correspondences*, are included in this anthology which is particularly noteworthy in light of the editors’ introduction about the changing direction of poetry. The volume is published ‘in the belief that this shift is genuine and important, and needs to be brought to the attention of a wider public’ (Morrison and Motion, 1982: ‘Introduction’). This ‘shift’ is seen, in part, as being ‘antipathetic to the production of a candidly personal poetry’ and ‘most of the devices developed by young poets are designed to emphasize the gap between themselves and their subjects’ (Morrison and Motion, 1982: ‘Introduction’). Furthermore, Morrison and Motion conclude

their introduction to their anthology by stating: 'while all the poets have distinct and distinguished individual talents, what we are struck by powerfully is the sense of common purpose: to extend the imaginative franchise' (Morrison and Motion 1982: 'Introduction'). Stevenson must have been pleased to see her own criticisms, and fears, of confessional poetry vindicated, and her concept of what poetry should be not only supported but recognised. In the following year she became a member of the Arts Council's Literature Panel, a position she held until 1985 and, in 1984-1985, she was reappointed to the post that had first brought her to Durham.

In 1983, *A Legacy* was published by Tavus Press, and this was followed, in 1985 by *The Fiction Makers*, published by Oxford University Press. This included the *The Black Grate Poems*, which were also published, with illustrations, by Annie Newnham, in a limited special edition by The Inky Parrot Press, Oxford, in January 1985. *The Fiction Makers* is dedicated to the poet Frances Horovitz, and includes what is arguably Stevenson's most famous elegy, 'Willow Song', which was broadcast on the BBC in 1984. Stevenson describes Horovitz as a 'good friend' whose 'death was a great loss to me' (E-mail to Sara Johnson 2002). When Stevenson and Farley first moved to Sunderland they lived in the basement of Horovitz's house, a house she was sharing with Roger Garfitt. Stevenson describes Horovitz as a 'pure person' and a 'beautiful person'; and believes her to be a 'better poet' than her husband Michael Horovitz even though he is perhaps the better known writer (Interview, 2006). In an interview for *Oxford Poetry*, she says how much she admired Frances who could 'do anything with a free form and still sound authentically pure' ('An Interview with Anne Stevenson' 1983:49). 'Willow Song' is one of the many elegies written by Stevenson for fellow poets and this collection includes poems for Elizabeth Bishop and Harry Fainlight, which introduce differing perspectives on the mourning process and the nature of elegy. Peter Hainsworth, in his review of *The Fiction Makers*, comments:

Much of *The Fiction Makers* is concerned with pain and loss, though it is neither a gloomy book nor a self-indulgent one. She has said recently that she follows David Jones in believing in a “work-aesthetic in which an artist commits himself (herself) to craft almost at the expense of self.” In her poems this commitment means writing clearly, even coolly, in a purification of contemporary dialect and in structures which put the harmony of parts before self-expression.

(Hainsworth 1986:34)

Once again, Stevenson must have been pleased to be praised for her lack of self-indulgence and her priority of ‘harmony’ over ‘self-expression’, although Hainsworth fails to address here the contradictory nature of the elegies in this collection which speak of personal loss and, therefore, are inevitably a form of self-expression.

In *The Fiction Makers*, she also develops her ideas on the degree of invention, or myth-making, that occurs when the past is recovered through memory and history, an interest she had expressed in her high school years. The collection begins with ‘From an Unfinished Poem’ which sets out this process. In an article entitled ‘Imagination and Reality’, Stevenson discusses the ideas that fed these poems. In response to the question ‘What do you mean by ‘fictions?’’, she gives the answer:

The stories we tell in language. . Not only ‘made-up’ stories, but history, biography, abstract ideas of events that occur in time. It’s the nature of humankind to live through imagination, isn’t it? The only way we have of believing in the past is through memory— visual and verbal. All writers are chroniclers, keepers of the past. But they are also inventors, people who deal in fantasies and expectations and fears and joys in imagination.

(‘Imagination and Reality’ 1985:5)

There is evidently, for Stevenson, a tension between the past and present as the imagination inevitably intervenes in the process of remembering, a tension that is crucial, she believes, in her creative process. Hainsworth notes, however, that in this collection:

as in a good many of these later poems, facts seem to have the edge over fiction, pragmatism over imaginative power. But discontinuity and unevenness are perhaps unavoidable. Anne Stevenson’s writing does not aim at unity in anything but the individual artefact. One of her strengths is her refusal of specious systems. To a poet, that means

recognising the force of other things apart from making fictions, and facing the difficult incoherence that must result.

(Hainsworth 1986:34).

Hainsworth's noting of the unevenness in Stevenson's work in the poems that fail to transcend autobiographical details further supports O'Callaghan's criticism of her work. This collection contains 'A Prayer to Live with Real people', 'Spring Song' and 'Epitaph for a Good Mouser'; entertaining pieces which, however, I suggest lack imaginative verve in that they are more readily defined by content rather than form. Nevertheless, the elegies in *The Fiction Makers* deserve further study in their exploration of personal loss.

The Fiction Makers also reveals a lesser discussed element in Stevenson's work. In answer to the questions: 'Do you believe in God? Is God the laws of physics and mathematics? I notice there are references to crosses throughout *The Fiction Makers*. Are you some sort of mathematical Christian?', Stevenson replies:

I believe that contradiction and inconsistency are the conditions of human life, not rationality (which, *unlike* the laws of physics, is another fiction we live by). The cross is a universal symbol of human self-contradiction and the contradiction of man in nature. Christianity, to me, is the way of living through otherwise unbearable conflicts.

('Imagination and Reality' 1985:5)

Her reply is somewhat equivocal and rather surprising. In a later essay she confesses that 'I sometimes suspect that I am drawn to poetry because it nurtures contradiction. Unlike the arguments from conviction that characterise the language of politics and philosophy, poetic language is essentially oxymoronic, a coinage stamped on two sides with logically irreconcilable messages' ('Defending the Freedom' 2000:1). This contradiction finds itself echoed in her use of the symbol of the cross. Helena Nelson, interviewing Stevenson, questions her about her use of this symbol. Stevenson replies:

In the early nineteen-eighties I went through a period of being intensely interested in religion and began to attend Anglican services somewhat in the spirit of Emily Dickinson's 'Better an ignis fatuus

than no illumine at all'. Later I found myself writing a long poem, almost a novel, about betrayal and disappointed expectations. The only section I didn't throw away was that fragment (From an Unfinished Poem') about the idea of an event being horizontal and the personality vertical

(‘Anne Stevenson in Conversation’ 2000:59)

Nelson continues her interview by asking ‘So the symbol of the cross isn't always a Christian symbol for you?’ (Nelson 2000:60). Stevenson answers ‘By no means’ (‘Anne Stevenson in Conversation’ 2000:60). Stevenson now rejects any form of religious belief, although there are traces of residual Christian imagery in the language of her poetry.

In 1986, *Winter Time* was published by the Mid- Northumberland Arts Group. This slim volume continues in the same vein as *The Black Grate* poems, but looks out on the North-East as a whole, rather than on one village. Stevenson offered the poem, ‘Jarrow’, as a contribution to an anthology published by Verse-Aid to raise money for the African famine fund for Ethiopia. In the following year, Oxford University Press published Stevenson's *Selected Poems 1956- 1986*. Mackinnon, reviewing the book in the *Times Literary Supplement*, is critical of her choice of poems:

A Selected Poems ought to convey the full range and flavour of a writer's work, but although the recent *The Fiction Makers ...* is well represented, the richer *Minute by Glass Minute...* is not. The most astonishing omission of all is the sequence “Green Mountain, Black Mountain” ... If selection means this kind of misrepresentation, it seems hardly worth doing.

(Mackinnon 1987: 767)

It is a pertinent comment, and Stevenson does actually reintroduce a revised ‘Green Mountain, Black Mountain’ in her later volume *A Report from the Border* even though it was not even included in the later book *The Collected Poems* (1996 and 2000). In a personal e-mail she discusses her feelings about this poem:

When I first lived in Wales in the early 1980s, I was much taken by its legends and Mabigonian tales. I wrote ‘Green Mountain, Black Mountain’ to explore the difference between the New World, in which

I had grown up, and the Old World of Wales and its myths that still overhang its history. I took against the poem when I was putting my *Collected Poems* together in 1995. However, both Peter and particularly the Welsh poet, Dewi Stephen Jones, pleaded with me to include in in *RFTB*. I looked at the poem again and decided that, with some cutting and language revision towards the end, it would do
(E-mail 2003).

The revisions are minimal, but one particular change personalises an unnamed farmer in Wales. This slightly alters the poem's perspective, for the poet appears more involved with, rather than a spectator of, the Welsh countryside she describes. It is perhaps for this reason that the poem, after its rather chequered start, is in the 2005 volume of her work.

The Peter that figures in this e-mail is Peter Lucas whom Stevenson married in 1987 after the failure of her marriage to Michael Farley. She had met him as early as 1965 when he was a solicitor, but it was not until 1986 that they became very close. She dedicated her *Selected Poems* to Peter, and he continues to take a keen interest in her writing. Although it was Elizabeth Bishop that first led Stevenson to read *The Voyage of the Beagle*, Peter's work as a Darwin specialist is a continuing influence on her work. Together they have lived in London, Cambridge, (Peter's father was a Cambridge don), County Durham and Edinburgh, where from 1987-1989, she was writer- in- residence. After living in so many different places, the couple settled in Durham in 1998, although they frequently visit their cottage in Pwllymarch in Cwm Nantcol, Wales.

Early in 1986, Stevenson accepted a contract to write a biography of Sylvia Plath and, in 1989, *Bitter Fame* was published. For many, Stevenson is still best known for this controversial work, in spite of its largely critical reception. However, there were some favourable reviews. Diane Middlebrook suggests that Stevenson's own voice is heard, amongst the many contributors to the biography, as 'singularly and valuably as a little sister in poetry', (Middlebrook 1989: 1179), and praises her understanding of Plath's verse. Indeed, Middlebrook concludes her review with the

words: 'Stevenson builds into the story a vision of Plath's development as an artist, which no-one can explain but which Stevenson comprehends', a comprehension born of a 'piercing intelligence' (Middlebrook 1989: 1179). Dana Gioia believes that the biography was the 'first (and in some ways remains the only) study that gave a credible and cogent explanation for the poet's brilliant but self-destructive career. Stevenson took St. Sylvia the Martyr and turned her into a recognizable if still unique human being' (Gioia 2003:35).

However, Jacqueline Rose dismisses *Bitter Fame* as a form of 'psychotic criticism', and ultimately positions the book as 'abusive' (Rose 1991: 93). Rose also berates the 'self-complacent, and terrifying, normality from which Stevenson claims to speak (and write)' (Rose 1991: 98), and describes her response to Plath's poetry as being flawed with a 'dull predictability' (Rose 1991:121). Rose's criticisms are extreme and, in response, Stevenson says in a letter to Janet Malcolm, dated 5/9/91: 'In her unkind, unjust remarks about BITTER FAME [sic], Rose accuses me, at one point, of not believing in the psyche. What she means, I think, is that I don't believe in her neo-Freudian feminist version of the psyche' (CUL MS Add. 9451, letter). However, Rose believes that, while *Bitter Fame* professes to 'correct a specific image of Plath' the result is a 'counter-image' that becomes merely a 'systematic assault on Plath' (Rose 1991: 93). This is perhaps harsh, but there are moments when Stevenson is not afraid to pass judgement on Plath's sexual 'mores' (*Bitter Fame*: 62), and her 'irrational and uncontrollable rage' (*Bitter Fame*: 206). In addition to this, Stevenson does offer her own particularly uncompromising observations on Plath's dexterity as a poet. She suggests that the young Plath possessed an ability for 'rewriting life to suit the audience' (*Bitter Fame*: 46), but later concludes that much of Plath's poetry still revolves around the circumstances of her own life:

Her problem, as always, was to escape from herself. For all her will power, immense vitality, intelligence, and passion to give order to life through art, she was helplessly tied to events that pressed themselves on her limited experience. She could exaggerate, distort, caricature,

remodel, and interpret, but she could not easily invent.
(*Bitter Fame*:103)

Later in the biography, Stevenson compares the work of Plath and Hughes, and suggests that:

Throughout their writing partnership, husband and wife explored a common theme in their poetry: both were interested in anthropology, primitive myth and religion. But Ted Hughes's work turned outward to the natural world beyond the self as Sylvia Plath's never could.
(*Bitter Fame*:238)

Stevenson herself tends to rely heavily on the details of Plath's life in the poems she discusses in *Bitter Fame*, and she has said that 'Unless a reader knows something of this poet's biography many of her references will be lost' ('Sylvia Plath's Word Games' 1996/7: 28).

There is the danger, therefore, that this aspect of Plath's poetry becomes caught in a vicious cycle, even though Stevenson also concentrates on the form and language of the poems. She describes 'Fever 103', 'Purdah' and 'Lady Lazarus' as 'merciless self-projections of Sylvia, the central figure of her mythic world' although recognising that they also show 'consummate poetic skill' (*Bitter Fame*: 269).

Discussing the poem/ drama, *Three Women*, she suggests that: 'All Sylvia's experience of pregnancy, fear of pregnancy ... and miscarriage is contained within it, and each voice is recognizably hers' (*Bitter Fame*: 232-233). However, Stevenson also proposes that this drama 'makes an advance on earlier mysteries in Sylvia's work, rising above private iconography to become universal. It is probably the first great poem of childbirth in the language' (*Bitter Fame*: 234). She recognises Plath's negotiation of the confessional 'I', and as early as 1983 Stevenson acknowledges that 'Unless you are a skilled craftsman like Sylvia Plath-- straight confession is doomed to failure' ('An Interview with Anne Stevenson' 1983:45). In a later essay, written after the publication of *Bitter Fame*, Stevenson suggests that labelling Plath a 'confessional' poet is somewhat 'simplistic', but she nevertheless continues to

believe that Plath wrote 'at least on one level, straight out of experience' (*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 39).

However, in this essay, she notes that she had been 'alerted to the amount of T.S.Eliot that Plath incorporated into her writing' (*Between the Iceberg* 1998:41), and she uses the rest of the essay to develop this idea before concluding that: 'I would like to suggest that closely studying Plath's language, vocabulary, and literary borrowings ... is a rewarding and enriching approach to her work' (*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 50-51). Stevenson quotes Plath's own words from a recorded interview at Yale in April, 1958, in which she talks about the process of writing poetry:

Technically I like to be extremely musical and lyrical, with a singing sound. I don't like poetry that just throws itself away in prose. ... I like just good mouthfuls of sound which have meaning...

(Plath quoted in *Between the Iceberg* 1998 : 51).

This emphasis on the musicality of poetry echoes Stevenson's own views on poetry, which suggests that the two seemingly disparate women were more closely allied than then seemed possible. In a note dated the sixteenth of November, 1989, the year of *Bitter Fame's* publication, Stevenson writes that she took it on in order to subsidise her own writing (CUL MS Add. 9451) but, more pertinently, she also reveals that :

In taking on Plath I realized I was taking on, too, a version of myself. A destructive, egotistical interior self, very female, very American.

(CUL MS Add. 9451, notes on Sylvia Plath and *Bitter Fame*).

In a recent interview she reinforces this understanding, suggesting that writing the book made her 'see herself' (Interview, 2006). This is a startling confession, and carries echoes of all the doubts and anxieties Stevenson had expressed earlier in her career, particularly in her essay 'Writing as a Woman'. Perhaps, ultimately, the author of *Bitter Fame* was too close to its subject. Stevenson's concerns about writing about her own experiences in her early work, particularly *Correspondences*,

are well documented, but she lived on, and through, these experiences, and her own poetry moves on accordingly. Plath's suicide froze her poetry to a certain time in her life, and Stevenson acknowledges this when she asks: 'What would we think of her today had she lived into her sixties, the famous author, doubtless, of eight or ten volumes of verse and a shelf of fiction?' (*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 39). Stevenson has admitted that: 'I suppose over the years I've learned to take myself less seriously. Surely, part of the skill of survival is to laugh at yourself, to realize you've made mistakes, that everybody makes mistakes ('Interview with Anne Stevenson' 2000:12). Ultimately, Stevenson concludes that Plath's poetry was 'not confessional' (Interview 2006), which suggests that Stevenson has finally resolved her own contradictory battles with both Plath and her work.

In her interview with Helena Nelson, Stevenson says that she is not sorry to have written *Bitter Fame*, which she describes as a 'fair biography' ('Anne Stevenson in Conversation' 2000:54), although she earlier admits that she 'probably shouldn't have taken it on, but Plath was a challenge' (*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 182). In an essay, 'The Biographer as Fiction Maker: Writing on Sylvia Plath', Stevenson looks back on the writing of *Bitter Fame* and there seems to be an element of regret in her reflections:

As for me, I believed then that any worthwhile biography of Plath must focus on her poetry. I had drafted my Penguin guide on the basis of her writings. The poems, the letters, and the journals provided evidence enough of the contradictory dreams and imaginings that created Plath, the poet. Anything that outside witnesses could add to the poet's self-portrait would be fascinating but essentially extraneous. If I had persisted with my original book I would have produced a careful reading of the poems set within a rough sketch of the life. The book would have stirred up no controversy whatsoever.
(*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 31)

She ruefully admits to realising that it is 'all but impossible to tell the "truth" about any human relationship', and that it is even more difficult to 'recall exact words, moods, and feelings lost in the past' before ultimately concluding that 'fiction making

is implicit in biography making' (*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 35-37). This does not sound like an apology, but instead suggests a degree of resignation to the past, and in an interview for *The Cortland Review*, she admitted to Cynthia Haven that she would 'never write another biography about a living person' ('Interview with Anne Stevenson' 2000: 12). Furthermore, this experience has made her very wary of any possible biographies of her own life.

While writing *Bitter Fame*, Stevenson was also writing poetry, and, in 1990, *The Other House* was published. This collection contains three poems dedicated to Plath which, together, create a memorial to a poet who had consumed three years of Stevenson's life. In 'Letter to Sylvia Plath', the eighth stanza begins 'Because you were selfish and sad and died' (*Poems*: 385). Wills, reviewing *The Other House*, believes that this is 'bad poetry' (Wills 1990: 1184). However, in the light of Stevenson's own comments, particularly in the note written soon after the publication of *Bitter Fame*, I believe that Stevenson is also addressing herself in this verse. The version of herself that she took on in tackling Plath, her own 'destructive, egotistical interior self' (CUL MS Add. 9451 notes on Sylvia Plath and *Bitter Fame*), has been laid to rest too, so that she can now grow up 'on the other side' (*Poems*: 385) of both herself and Plath. In September, 1990, Kay Parris wrote an article on Stevenson for *Writers' Monthly*. Here Stevenson states:

Many of the poems in *The Other House* are spin offs from this curious sense of suddenly realising that you were in the older third of the living generations. You were no longer a young, vulnerable and perhaps unformed person. Whatever you now were, you had to be. In the title poem, *The Other House* [sic] refers to the house of everything but oneself.

(Stevenson in Parris 1990:5).

This suggests that she is now more relaxed about the relationship between herself and the 'I' of her poems, but does not appear to recognise the possibility that she does not always exclude herself altogether. Chris McCully, reviewing her work in 1993, suggests that in the later collections there is poetry which is now as 'Stevenson has

wished it to be: it is poetry which ‘has made its peace with language, [that] finally turns away from the mirrors of self-interest and begins to look out of the window’ (McCully 1993: 33). McCully’s comment fails to consider that there are some later poems which continue to explore her relationship with the lyrical ‘I’, for example ‘Black Hole’ in *Four and a Half Dancing Men*, and that any act of looking out of a window still has the potential to be shaped by the poet’s own perspective.

Despite her criticisms, Wills’s review of *The Other House* does admit that, in general, these poems are ‘above all well-finished’, but she then suggests that ‘one looks in vain for anything much beyond inoffensive descriptions of daily life, babies and nature. Some poems for her grandson are nauseating in their evocations of his “sweetness” (Wills 1990:1184). Rumens took exception to this comment, and replied in Stevenson’s defence. Referring to the poem, ‘In the Nursery’, Rumens wrote:

The lines have an aura of tenderness, certainly. Where is the disgrace in that? I agree with Wills that poetry must be open to the dark and difficult emotions (an openness that Stevenson, it seems to me, was trying to achieve in the “Letter to Sylvia Plath”) but that is not to say that the generous emotions are redundant. Plath herself, as we so easily forget, wrote many poems expressing maternal tenderness.

(Rumens 1990: 1265).

This prompted an extraordinary reply from Michael Horovitz:

Most of Sylvia Plath’s “poems expressing her maternal tenderness” mentioned by Rumens are demonstrably more exact, humorous, original, tough and inspired than ‘In the Nursery’— not that there’s “any disgrace in that”: in so far as comparison is possible, very few poems on any subject would shine after a reading of Plath’s at their best. The disgrace is that Anne Stevenson’s writing continues to trade on her corny, tendentious, moralizing reactions to what she makes of Plath’s life and work, with such a glaring absence of what Rumens calls “generous emotions”. Perhaps Stevenson’s line in “Letter to Sylvia Plath”, “My shoulder doesn’t like your claw”, acknowledges the sort of poetic justice she might reasonably expect in a letter *from* Plath’s shade. When she recants as fully regarding Plath as Eliot did about Milton, praise will be in order.

(Horovitz 1990: 1349)

In a letter dated 17 October, 1994, Horovitz wrote to Stevenson saying 'I'm sorry there's been such a distance between us since 'Bitter Fame' [sic] — v. difficult for both of us (CUL MS Add. 9451), but the vitriolic nature of this review encapsulates the degree of criticism Stevenson faced over her engagement with Plath's work, a criticism that I believe sometimes failed to consider the wider implications of Stevenson's argument with both Plath and herself.

The early 1990s saw another pitched battle, this time waged across the pages of *PN Review*. Stevenson questioned Eaven Boland's claim to have been restricted as a writer by her gender and nationality, a restriction imposed by the number of male, Irish poets who have, Boland suggested, 'feminized the national and nationalized the feminine' to the extent that 'the true voice and vision of women are routinely excluded' (Boland 1990:26). Stevenson rejected this by offering examples of Irish women poets, and suggested that Boland's concept of the 'virulence and necessity of the idea of nation' was no longer applicable to a 'republic secure in the Economic community, whose changing mood is now reflected in the election of a woman president' (*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 74). Nuala Ni Dhomnaill leaped to Boland's defence, accusing Stevenson of a 'subtle sneering tone' (Dhomnaill 1993:39), and drawing attention to a glaring error in Stevenson's argument, namely that one of the Irish poets quoted as a literary foremother was actually male. Acknowledging her mistake, Stevenson, in an article entitled 'Outside Histrionics', nevertheless firmly defended herself by reiterating that her quarrel was not with Boland's poetry, which she claimed to admire, but with Boland's association of poetry and 'nationalism and sexism', and concluded that: 'The only way I know to insure poetry against the misconceptions and stereotypes of our time is to distrust all cultural generalizers and, as a woman or a man, allow oneself to make poetry out of the particular. That will be the poetry that lasts and that eventually will represent the imagination and culture (whatever its faults) of our period.' (*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 89). While

this argument supports her consistent opinion that poetry must be free of ideological and gender considerations, its lofty tone again suggests the personal complacency that is evident in some of her critical writing.

In 1993, *Four and a Half Dancing Men* was published by the Oxford University Press. Reviewed by Neil Powell, he believes that this collection 'contains some of the most carefully judged and finely textured poems she has written so far' (Powell 1994:22). He draws particular attention to 'Negatives' and 'Binoculars in Ardudwy' to which list I would add 'Black Hole'. In 1996, *The Collected Poems, 1955-1995* was published by the Oxford University Press, and, after the closure of their poetry list, subsequently republished by Bloodaxe Books in 2000. Dunmore reviewed this collection in *Poetry Review* and wrote:

Her scrutiny of the world in which she finds herself is witty, honest, precise and deeply humane. ... Her responsiveness to changing times, to changing faces, to the unreeling of her own life, has an impressive clarity and lack of self-pity. And beyond all this there is an elusive quality of wildness, untamed but never chaotic, which makes her such a fine observer of the wildness in the world around ... Her feeling for the topography of the landscapes she inhabits is acute. These are maps made by feet testing the contours and hands touching them. They explore America, England, Scotland, Wales.

(Dunmore, 'Bare and Frondish' 1996/7: 58-59)

This is high praise indeed and draws attention to the breadth of Stevenson's work while, at the same time, admiring her negotiation of the associations between her poetry and her life. Stevenson states, in the preface to this volume, that it: 'follows an irregular trajectory' as it moves around Britain and America, and even suggests that 'It may be possible to descry in these peregrinations stages in 'the growth of the poet's mind' (*CP* : 'preface'). In addition to her observations of the world around her, she is also interested in the relationship between humans and the natural world, particularly in the light of the work of Charles Darwin. Writing about her collection *Four and a Half Dancing Men* in the *PBS Bulletin*, she says:

I shall be disappointed if readers miss the unifying perspective expressed in the epigraph from one of Stephen Jay Gould's many

essays on evolution and the history of science: 'Nature is not intrinsically anything that can offer comfort and solace in human terms-- if only because our species is such an insignificant latecomer in a world not constructed for us.' A quotation from Darwin's notebooks might have done as well: 'Man in his arrogance thinks himself a great work, worthy the interposition of a deity, more humble and I believe truer to consider himself created from animals.' It is the animal who 'in his arrogance' behaves like a god that the title poem refers, although its immediate inspiration was an incident in the life of my small grandson. For most of the time I was writing- or not writing- *Four and a Half Dancing Men*, I was thinking about history and the natural sciences.

(*Four and a Half Dancing Men*— Anne Stevenson writes'
1993:13)

Her interest in Darwin's work is given a voice in several of her poems, although this often creates a less than unifying dilemma for her when she attempts to reconcile the tenets of evolutionary theory with the demands of poetry and language's innately human bias.

In 1998, Stevenson's second book on Elizabeth Bishop was published. John Mole, writing for the *Times Literary Supplement*, suggests that *Five Looks at Elizabeth Bishop* is the 'the best available introduction to that marvellous poet' (Mole 1999:25). In the book's preface, Stevenson makes a startling admission:

My reason for heaping yet another book about Bishop on the pile rests on a twofold indebtedness. More than any other contemporary, Elizabeth Bishop opened my eyes to possibilities and directions for poetry I might never have explored without her example. I have long wanted to thank her. More heavily on my conscience weighs the burden of having written, over thirty years ago, an introduction to her work that she liked at the time but later could not approve. In 1962 ... so little material relating to her life and work was available that I was reduced to writing to Miss Bishop herself for guidance. At the time she was living in Brazil, and the letters she wrote back to me, warmly and exhaustively answering my questions, were so exciting and yet far beyond anything I was in those days capable of assimilating, that I am today embarrassed by the sketch I offered to Twayne in 1965.

(*Five Looks at Elizabeth Bishop* 1998:11-12)

This is a generous response to Bishop's own comment in a letter to Dr. Anny Baumann , dated December 5, 1975. In this letter, Bishop writes:

I haven't had time to read Mrs. [Candace] Macmahon's bibliography carefully yet, just glance at it. It represents a great deal of work, I know (the kind of work I've never been able to do in my life!) I'll send it back to you in a few days— on Monday or Tuesday. She sent a copy of two chapters of a Twayne book by Anne Stevenson (you certainly don't have to read *that*). It is so badly written, out-of-date, and full of mistakes— although I sent her lots of information and even visited her in England in 1964— that for Mrs. MacMahon's benefit, I'm going to correct *some* of it for her. It would be impossible to correct it all.

(Bishop in Giroux 1994:601)

This is rather strange, in view of Brett Millier's claim that Bishop 'had the opportunity to approve the manuscript before it was published', and 'kept it for months before giving her approval' (Millier 1993:342).

However, Stevenson's own recollections of her meetings with Bishop do suggest a rather uneasy tension between the two women:

I didn't meet Elizabeth until she came to England in 1964 ... We were both nervous, meeting after all those letters; for me Elizabeth was a sort of God. The drink relaxed me, but she remained tense. Later she came to see us in Cambridge, and Mark and I put her straight into a punt. She absolutely loved that. Punting broke the ice.

(Stevenson in Fountain and Brazeau 1994:188)

Unfortunately this happy day was followed by a miserable night, for the wallpaper in Stevenson's guest bedroom had rekindled childhood memories for Bishop. She had suffered nightmares and an attack of asthma. A later meeting seems, at first, to have been less fraught:

Elizabeth Bishop and I met for lunch a couple of times when I was at the Bunting Institute (must have been 1970) and she was living in Kirkland House. We were better friends this time. In 1964 I had been a worshipper. In 1970 I was older and we talked a lot about bringing up children and teaching.

(Stevenson in Fountain and Brazeau 1994:273-274)

However, on one occasion, while discussing her appointment as poetry reviewer for *The New Yorker*, Bishop had broken down in a state of nervous anxiety. Stevenson remembers that on returning to Bishop's apartment, after using the laundry in the basement, Bishop had locked the door. Stevenson's recollections continue:

I was hurt, but I think, really, she was overcome with her embarrassment at her show of emotion— to me, of all people, who envied her, and had said so, for being perfectly in control. After that, although I phoned her and we talked (not mentioning the incident), I never saw her again.

(Stevenson in Fountain and Brazeau 1994:274-275).

The relationship between Bishop and Stevenson appears to have been, at best, somewhat troubled, but it does not really account for Bishop's criticism of a book of which she had previously approved.

In 1998, Sandra Barry interviewed Stevenson at the Blomidon Inn, Wolville, Nova Scotia where she had been the keynote speaker at a conference on 'Divisions of the Heart: Elizabeth Bishop's Art of Place and Memory' at Acadia University.

When asked about Bishop's criticisms, Stevenson replied:

Well, Elizabeth never told me she didn't like it. Perhaps someone at Harvard was jealous and told her I was on the wrong track. We kept up our correspondence well into the seventies, but we never got on personally as we had as pen-pals.

('Interview with Anne Stevenson' 1998:4-5).

This is merely conjecture, but Stevenson's acknowledgement of Bishop's influence on her own writing in the preface to *Five Looks at Elizabeth Bishop*, becomes all the more significant when viewed in the light of the difficulties in the relationship between the two poets. Stevenson admired Bishop's ability to look out beyond herself in her poetry:

If anyone had a right to a psychodrama, she did, and yet, instead, she focussed simply on the way things looked. ... Elizabeth saved herself by keeping her eyes on grains of quartz and amethyst while the world pounded around her. She preferred the iceberg to the ship every time. No wonder we didn't talk about personal matters ... not that they weren't there, for they were, all too much. They gave depth to a poetry that never mentioned them because Elizabeth's eyes were fixed, always, on the beautiful shell (the physical world) she perceived to exist independently of herself. Art, for her, was crystalline, a possibility for purity. That's why she didn't sully it with excretions from her own life.

(Stevenson, in Fountain and Brazeau 1994:189).

Stevenson's own dislike for any confessional 'psychodrama' in poetry was very much influenced and supported by Bishop's own approach to poetry. In 1977, Andrew Motion, reviewing *Enough of Green*, notes Bishop's early influence when he suggests that:

Ellipsis and imperatives have replaced epistolary frankness, and the result is a marvellously tense diction which relishes physical detail and also admits abstract considerations. It is a style owing something to Elizabeth Bishop...

(Motion 1977: 1381)

Much later, Chris McCully notes 'Stevenson's deep and abiding understanding of Bishop whom she has referred to as 'a model of Shakespearian workmanship' (McCully 1993:33). Bishop's influence continues to shape Stevenson's work and her views on the process of writing and the nature of art.

In 1998, Stevenson's collection of essays, *Between the Iceberg and the Ship*, was published, the title itself taken from Bishop's poem, 'The Imaginary Iceberg', which, as McCully summarises 'embodies the endless quarrel over the meaning of art' (McCully 1999:60). John Mole notes Bishop's influence in his review of *Between the Iceberg and the Ship* when he suggests that 'For Anne Stevenson, though, the exemplary poet remains Elizabeth Bishop' (Mole 1999: 25). In the same review, Mole also states that: 'Anne Stevenson enjoys the rhetorical flourish, but the real value of her writing about poetry resides in her insider dealing. She is excellent, detailed and eloquent on the process of creation' (Mole 1999: 25). Mole's understanding of 'the rhetorical flourish' might, by others, be read as didactic arrogance. While these essays on the process of writing poetry, as well her other critical commentaries and interviews on this subject, reveal a consistency of approach that spans the decades of her work, they can, however, also suggest a self-satisfied reluctance to challenge the borders of her own work.

The year 2000 saw the publication of *Granny Scarecrow* (Bloodaxe Books), which Gerard Woodward describes as a 'collection whose tone is always affirmative,

generous and non-conformist' (Woodward 2000:26). Two years later, the pamphlet *Hearing with my Fingers* was published by the Thumbscrew Press. The title is a reflection on the progressive hearing loss Stevenson has suffered over the last decade, a loss that culminated in a cochlear implant operation. For a musician this has been a profound loss, but the music she plays in her poetry is still very evident. Fifteen poems in *Hearing with my Fingers* were later incorporated into *A Report from the Border*, published in 2003. Peter Robinson, in his review of this collection concludes that 'Imagination, philosophy and common sense: it's not a bad description of Anne Stevenson's poems, which are frequently both down to earth and unobtrusively profound' (Robinson 2003: 28), a good description of her ability to begin a poem in the everyday and the ordinary before allowing it to break free of any such tethers.

Anne Stevenson was awarded an Honorary D.Litt. by Loughborough University in 1997, and, in 2002, she was awarded the first Northern Rock Foundation Award for writers in the North-East. In 2003 she reached her seventieth birthday, and *The Way You Say the World* was published to celebrate her achievements and her life.

This celebration, published by the Shoestring Press, features tributes and poems written for her by many fellow poets. Her husband provides the opening biography, and John Wells, archivist at Cambridge University Library, gives a detailed account of the contents of the papers held there and in other archives, notably, The University of Michigan, The Neilson Library at Smith College, Massachusetts, The British Library, Leeds University and the Brynmor Jones Library of Hull University. Among other essays, McCully discusses the musicality of Stevenson's verse, while Helena Nelson looks at Stevenson as a writer of prose. She concludes:

Perhaps it is her acute sensitivity to the music of language which makes her use of words so very satisfying. In prose, as in verse, each phrase she unfolds stands upright, an honest image of her life's

thought. Then, with visible warmth, she invites her reader in.
(Nelson 2003:147).

There is an appreciation here of Stevenson's critical integrity, but a celebratory book of this nature is unlikely to question the haughty tone of some of her prose writing. The book also contains photographs of a younger Anne, as well as Ernestine Rubens's photograph of her taken in Central Park, New York, in 2001. There is also a picture of her cottage in Wales, so altogether the book offers a very personal tribute to a career that has already spanned over fifty years.

In 2005, Durham University awarded Stevenson an Honorary Doctorate of Letters in recognition of her work and her links with the North-East. In the summer of the same year (2005) Stevenson published her collected volume entitled *Poems 1955-2005*. In this collection the poems are not published chronologically, but are, instead, listed under themed subtitles. Stevenson says that she felt like a 'Curator in a gallery' as she set them out in a different format, a process she says 'renewed my interest in my own poems' (Reading and Talk 2006). Kate Clanchy suggests that this reworking of her poems is:

an intricate, essentially musical arrangement: the recasting by this classically trained pianist of her life's work as a single symphony. It also seems certain to drive future scholars bananas as they flip through the index, trying to discover where the poems belong in real rather than musical time.

(Clanchy 2005:1)

While this new arrangement might at first appear to be chronologically disruptive, Stevenson paradoxically rehouses her poems under a collection of subtitles that, in the case of *Seven Ages* for example, reassert the personal nature of these poems. The offering of such subtitles has the potential to be somewhat reductive too, for example the section called *The Art of Making*. We are told what to expect so that the poems are given less of a chance to speak for themselves.

The University of Hull awarded Stevenson an honorary doctorate in June 2006, a fitting reward for a poet who has visited, and supported, the Department of

English on a number of occasions. The line 'The sea is as near as we come to another world' from 'North Sea off Carnoustie' (*Poems* : 22-23) is displayed at the beginning of the journey into The Deep, a thriving marine tourist attraction in the city, which ensures her a continued presence in Hull itself.

In 2003, in a letter to Geoffrey Dutton, Stevenson wrote:

The part of me that writes poetry is exactly what it was when I was ten. I know a little more now, but not much. And the same ideas, sights, feelings trigger the poems ... Over the years, of course, we learn how better to write the poems we've been writing all our lives, but what MAKES for poem-writing does not change.
(CUL MS Add. 9451)

I believe that this modest appraisal of her art is particularly telling. Although the quality of her work is not always even, each collection contains work that I maintain invites, and warrants, further attention and study. In 2007 she was awarded the Aiken Taylor Award in Modern American Poetry which is the most important prize administered by the *Sewanee Review*. In the same year she was also honoured with the Lannan Lifetime Achievement Award in celebration of her contribution to literature in the English language and, ironically, the Neglected Masters Award, a prize bestowed annually by the Poetry Foundation of America upon an under-recognized, significant poet. Meanwhile, Stevenson continues to write, and has recently published *A Lament for the Makers* (2006) and *Stone Milk* (2007).

Chapter Two.

'You have to inhabit poetry': Inhabiting a House of Words.

While Stevenson's assertion that she 'grew up in the house of poetry' ('An Interview with Anne Stevenson' 1989:6) suggests a literary house with its own traditions and history, she also positions poetry as a house which she 'inhabits'. In her interview with O'Siadhail she says that 'As a writer one lives in words and words are a medium of creation' ('An Interview with Anne Stevenson' 1989:11). Poetry is troped as a house built of words. Past writers lay the foundations of the house she lives in, but she builds the walls, doors and windows. The metaphorical house of poetry is a creative place, a place where the poet is in the habit of not just living, but working and constructing. However, in this particular interview she also refers to her childhood, so Stevenson's account of becoming a poet is as much about the literal as the poetic house. Her childhood home was filled with the arts, and she was encouraged in her artistic pursuits by both of her parents. However, the house was to become a more difficult place when she became a wife and mother. The relationship between the house of biography and the house of poetry then appears to become tense and anxious, especially when Stevenson attempts to inhabit them both simultaneously.

Life and art, this suggests, are not always harmonious occupants of these two houses, and the conflict this creates finds its way into some of her poems which speak about the house and family and reveal the tensions created by the conflicting demands of writing, marriage, motherhood and domesticity. Although Stevenson maintains that in *Correspondences* she was not 'confessing' on a personal level, she has said that the 'feelings' of the central character Kay 'have been mine. They can be found in other poems ... in one called 'In the House', for instance ('Writing as a Woman' 1979: 172). This suggests that she was uncomfortably aware of the confessional nature of some of her early poems. M.L. Rosenthal first used the term

confessional in relation to Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, a collection about which he states:

In most of *Life Studies* there is one protagonist only— Robert Lowell. Through what he has to say about himself we discover the real, essential bearing of most of the earlier work. As a result, it is hard not to think of *Life Studies* as a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal.

(Rosenthal 1965: 231).

In confessional poetry, the poetic 'I', he suggests, is recognisably the poet. In a letter to Seamus Heaney dated 28.1.81, Stevenson wrote: 'In Lowell, ... the accent is always on what language can do to make his, Lowell's, experience significant. The language ceases to be a window and becomes a mirror' (CUL Add.MS 9451 Letters). Poetic language must allow the reader to look out through, and beyond, the poet. Nevertheless, in an interview four years later she explains that 'the "I" I write *as* is not really the 'I' I know, or other people know. It's not exactly a *persona*, this 'I' in the poems. It's more a reflection in a mirror' ('An Interview with Anne Stevenson' 1983:49). This is no longer a transparent presence but a refracted image which becomes more complex when it is positioned within a poem that speaks of inhabiting a literal or metaphorical, house. Instead of the poem looking outwards, the poem is looking inwards, or even inside, a very personal space so her negotiation of this reflected 'I' becomes much more fraught.

Confessional poetry is also marked by the sensational nature of its content. M.H. Abrams suggests that confessional poetry differs from the self-revelations of the Romantic poets 'in the candor and sometimes shocking detail with which the poet reveals private or clinical matters about himself or herself, including sexual experiences, mental anguish and illness, experiments with drugs, and suicidal impulses' (Abrams 1999:45). Stevenson's poetry of the house looks inside the private space of the home but avoids such radical exposures. However, Middlebrook's suggestion that the confessional poetry of Lowell, Sexton and Plath

‘investigates the pressures on the family as an institution regulating middle-class private life, primarily through the agency of the mother’ (Middlebrook 1993: 636) creates a new dilemma. Stevenson admits that her relationships with both her mother and her children were fraught with unreal expectations and guilt:

I began to think with troubled resentment of my mother. All through my childhood I’d seen her sacrifice herself and her interests for the sake of my father, myself, and my sisters. She wanted to be a novelist, and we all encouraged her. But, as in my own case, encouragement only made her feel guilty when she was not doing her “duty” toward us. And when she did her “duty”— and sighed afterward— then we felt guilty for taking so much of her time. The process of “wifeing” and “mothering” was steeped in guilt. By modeling myself on my mother, I had plunged unwittingly into the same guilt;

(Between the Iceberg 1998:12)

In the light of Middlebrook’s understanding of confessional poetry, the moments in Stevenson’s poems that speak of the tensions of family life could arguably be described as confessional. Furthermore, Philip Hobsbaum modifies Abrams’ description of the outrightly shocking nature of confessional poetry, and suggests instead that it is ‘verse in which the author describes parts of his life which would not ordinarily be in the public domain’ (Hobsbaum 1994:97). The inside of the house is usually private, but in her poems of the house this private space is exposed to the public. The inside is then exposed for scrutiny. James Booth suggests that in Philip Larkin’s poetry ‘The earliest rooms ... are highly abstract symbols of the tension between public and private, life and art’ (Booth 2005: 153). I suggest that this is relevant to those of Stevenson’s poems which engage with rooms, houses and domesticity. The house becomes a symbol of both female domesticity and the process of writing poetry. The house as both a literal and a metaphorical structure is a space in which life and art meet. In her earlier poems, these meetings tend to be more aggressive than in her later work, especially when the poems speak of children and marriage. In the light of her own distrust of confessional poetry, with its erasing of the gap between the autobiographical ‘I’ and the poetic ‘I’, her negotiation of this

relationship in her poems of the house is particularly pertinent.

In her poem 'Making Poetry' (1985), Stevenson voices her anxieties about the nature and position of poets in relation to their poetry. Originally published in *The Fiction Makers*, the poem is placed at the beginning of her latest volume *Poems 1955-2005* as if to emphasise its importance both to, and in, her work. It is called 'Poetry Lesson' in an early draft, and, during a reading at Hull University (Reading and Talk 2006), Stevenson explained that it was written in response to some poems she did not think were actually poems. 'Making Poetry' stands, therefore, as a poetic creed. In order to write good poetry, the poem asserts, it is important to 'evade the ego-hill, the misery-well' (*Poems*:17). A poem is not the place for the poet to explore the poet. Nevertheless, she insists that poems must be 'inhabited' by their creator:

'You have to inhabit poetry
if you want to make it.'

And what's to 'inhabit'?

To be in the habit of, to wear
words, sitting in the plainest light,
in the silk of morning, in the shoe of night;
a feeling bare and frondish in surprising air;
familiar ... rare.

(*Poems*:17)

This creates an interesting dialectic. The poet, it seems, must be both in and out of the poetry. Although her use of the pronoun 'you' might stand as an exhortation to the reader, it also suggests that she is in a form of dialogue with herself, while simultaneously distancing herself from the poem. However, the poem moves on to draw on the trope of the poem as a house of words. The poet inhabits this house by being in the habit of using language, a relationship that is stressed by the repetition of the word 'inhabit' and its emphatic position in a single line. The poet not only builds, but adorns this house with words that can be both 'familiar ... or rare', 'bare' or 'frondish'. The clothing metaphor suggests layers of meaning, layers that can be added to or stripped away, a metaphor echoed in the simple sound of 'bare' and the

lush, full-mouthed sound and image of 'frondish'. In addition, the rhyming 'bare' and 'rare' suggests that it is sometimes the exposed layers of meaning that offer the most unusual and uncommon significance. Stevenson once suggested that meaning can be 'flipped from one side to another in the ongoing wordgame' ('Defending the Freedom' 2000:1), and in the gap between 'familiar' and 'rare' it is almost as if she is attempting to demonstrate that moment where meaning suddenly turns itself over.

The 'ego-hill' emphasises the poet's presence as the poem pragmatically turns to consider the reputation of poets and their poetry, and the material aspects of their occupation:

And what's 'to make'?

To be and to become words' passing
weather; to serve a girl on terrible
terms, embark on voyages over voices,
evade the ego-hill, the misery-well,
the siren hiss of *publish, success, publish,*
success, success, success.

(*Poems* :17).

The use of the verb 'to be' and 'to become' suggests a constant moving forward, but the harshly alliterative 'terrible terms', separated by a line break, suggest the personal cost poetry inflicts, a cost Stevenson questions. An investment in poetry does not always pay well financially either, as the poem plays not only with the creative act of writing poetry but also the drive to achieve material advancement. All of this comes at a price, as the poet falls prey to the alluring call of success. The weather metaphor not only paints a backdrop of stormy times and quiet doldrums, fair days and foul days, creative days and uncreative days, but also the passing of trends, of highs and lows in fashionable appeal. Drawing on the episode of the Sirens in Homer's *Odyssey*, the metaphorical and alliterative 'voyages over voices' suggests that the poet must steer her own steady course, and not be waylaid by the dictates of voices other than her own. Stevenson resists trends and fads in the creation of poetry, and believes that 'The poems will take you in their own direction if you trust

them, but if you keep looking in the mirror of society, the fictions of establishments or literary circles, you get nowhere' ('An Interview with Anne Stevenson' 1998: 9-10). The poems, she suggests, must navigate their own course, driven by their own impetus. The internally rhyming 'voyages' and 'voices', and the repetition of 'm' in 'terms' and 'embark' turn the mythology into poetry, while the repeated double 's' sound in the last two lines echoes the double 's' in 'passing', and adds a viciousness that the softer 'sh' sound in 'publish' does not diminish. In turn, 'passing' changes its meaning when linked to 'embark' and 'voyages' as the poem turns into a journey itself.

The final stanza of this poem draws several threads together:

And why inhabit, make, inherit poetry?

Oh, it's the shared comedy of the worst
blessed; the sound leading the hand;
a wordlife running from mind to mind
through the washed rooms of the simple senses;
one of those haunted, undefendable, unpoetic
crosses we have to find.

(Poems:17).

Here inhabiting and making are again united, and the 'washed rooms' lead us back into the metaphorical house of poetry. Words then become the building bricks of the poem. Although dressed up they nevertheless constitute the barest fundamentals of the poet's trade. However, while they are at the poet's disposal, they also have a life of their own. 'Wordlife' plays with the word wildlife; words are both controlled yet run out of control. Poet and language are engaged in a lively negotiation over meaning, a negotiation that is nourished by the sounds words generate. The line 'the sound leading the hand' emphasises Stevenson's musical aesthetic, with the result that she is not merely in the habit of wearing words, she must also tunefully arrange them. The 'n' sound itself runs through these lines, and the half rhyme of 'hand' and 'mind' emphasises the connection between consciousness and creativity, and highlights the need for these separate concepts to come together if the poem is to function.

The repeated 's' sound in 'simple senses' echoes the sounds of the previous stanza but here it is a sound tempered by the more gentle consonants 'm' and 'n' so that they stand in stark contrast to the earlier, harsher sounds.

Suddenly, however, the poem mentions the 'unpoetic', the life outside poetry, yet it is still bound to the poem, as the 'un' prefix attempts, yet fails, to cancel out the 'n' sound that is maintained throughout the stanza as if to reinforce the impossibility of divorcing the life and the art. Stevenson has said that the crosses in this poem refer to the 'crossroads in life' and that they are situated where 'language and life' meet (Reading and Talk 2006). Discussing her use of the word 'crosses' she states:

Think of the many ways in which we use the word 'cross, or 'crux' or 'crucial' in ordinary conversation. Quite outside the Christian context, we talk about being crossed in love; or we cross the street or cross a river (or cross the Rubicon when we make an irrevocable decision). Gibbets and markets have traditionally been set up at crossroads; Oedipus killed his father at a crossroads. When we're discontent or fed up we're 'cross'. I think I ended 'Making Poetry' with the lines 'One of those haunted undefendable, unpoetic/crosses we have to find' not only because it suggests bearing one's cross, or bearing one's fate patiently, but because if one's life isn't 'crossed' at some point, that is, if nothing ever happens to challenge you-- if you never undergo some psychological or physical ordeal that tests you to the utmost, then you're likely to become unsympathetic to the failings of others. An uncrossed person is a shallow person, a figure without a shadow. I can't think of a single crossless poet, for example.

('Anne Stevenson in Conversation' 2000: 60)

These crosses are 'haunted', they creep silently into her work so that the 'simple senses' appear to become vulnerable rather than gentle. Visible yet transparent, like the reflection of Stevenson's face in the glass at night, they are the threads of her own life that weave their way into the poems. Although wraithlike, they are, nevertheless, 'undefendable' (*Poems*; 17). They cannot be fought, or written, off but they can be written in, as emphasised again by the continuing 'n' sound in 'undefendable'.

Language and life are, therefore, destined to meet in poetry and can do so. However, once the cross between language and life refers to personal psychological tests

within the private domestic sphere, anxieties once again emerge over the confessional element in her poems.

Autobiography and art meet head on in her early poem 'The Women' (1965). There is no 'I' in the poem, but Stevenson alerts us to its origins when she writes about the poem in her essay 'Writing as a Woman'. She explains that while her husband was in the Territorial Army they would spend weekends away at the home of a colonel and his wife:

During the day the men went out on maneuvers; if it was a weekend, they went shooting on the moors. The women stayed at home by the fire, surrounded by vases gorged with dahlias, gossiping, sighing, waiting for the men to come back so we could all broach the drinks cupboard. I spent the greater part of the mornings roaming the blustery streets of Halifax in the hopes of bumping into the public library, but after lunch I was condemned to interminable cups of tea. One such afternoon I withdrew to my bedroom and wrote this poem.
(*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 9)

The women are consigned to the house, and this sense of confinement appears to be one of the 'undefendable' crosses mentioned in 'Making Poetry' (*Poems*: 17), and the poem soon assumes a more sinister tone. The room that contains the women is no longer a living room, but a waiting room with its associations of both travel and medicine.

Women, waiting for their husbands,
Sit among dahlias all the afternoons,
While quiet processional seasons
drift and subside at their doors like dunes,
And echoes of ocean curl from the flowered wall.
(*Poems*: 46)

The women are stationary, while the door of the house acts as a barrier to the movement of the natural world outside. This is a waiting room that does not lead to onward travel; it is instead a place of suspended animation. It is situated between arrival and departure, but there is to be no departure and therefore no progress. In the rhyming long sounds of 'afternoons' and 'dunes', time and place join in a seemingly inseparable infinity. The waiting room analogy also suggests sickness and, possibly,

even death for the 'quiet processional seasons' pass by outside like a funeral cortege. 'Women', 'waiting' and 'While' are united by the same initial consonant in an endless stagnation. They are simultaneously dead and alive as suggested by the stanza break separation of the rhyming 'death' and 'breath' (*Poems: 46*). When the fire 'dies', the embers are heard 'thundering when they fall' (*Poems: 46*), a vigorous word that starkly contrasts with the quietly 'murmuring shell of nothing at all' (*Poems: 46*) and further emphasises the lifelessness of the women. They are even outfaced by the dahlias, both literally and poetically, by Stevenson's choice of the startling word 'phosphorescence'. The dahlias are radiant with an inbuilt light that does not merely efface the women but actually dominates them as the women can only 'wait', emphasising the earlier 'waiting':

Flung phosphorescence of dahlias tells
The women time. They wait to be,
Prepared for the moment of inevitable
Good evening when back from the deep, from the mystery,
The tritons return and the women whirl in their sea.
(*Poems: 46*)

The tricks of the light, on and from, the dahlias tell the women the time. But it is interesting that there is no definite article before the word 'time', nor is there a possessional apostrophe. Women's time might suggest a female interpretation of time, giving it a circular rather than a linear perspective. However, the word 'time' is also being used in the sense of 'time up'. 'Time' here then becomes both finite and infinite. The end of the women's day of death is about to be brought to a close as 'they wait to be' and can return to life. These dahlias no longer merely represent vitality, but also sexuality. Their richly coloured heads 'whirling' in the evening signify the response of the women who 'whirl' to the demands and expectations of their husbands. The women are awakened then and come to life as they respond sexually to the men, and symbolically 'Spin on their stems until the shallows sing' (*Poems:46*) in an alliterative frenzy. Briefly they are alive, awake, but this

waiting room is also a place of moral judgement for it is only the 'faithful' who 'waken bathed in slumber' (*Poems*: 46). These women are physically, sexually and morally restrained and controlled within the literal house.

Despite the gendered tensions within this room, there is nevertheless some beautiful imagery of the sea. Alan Robinson suggests that 'In the gender stereotypes of Stevenson's early poem 'The Women' ... the sea is the domain on which phallic tritons imprint their mastery, while their passive womenfolk flounder in their wake, seemingly out of their depth' (Robinson 1988: 180). This is a sound observation but the poet is not out of her depth. She is very much in charge of her poem and the language that shapes it. The 'echoes of oceans' sounds like the gentle rolling of waves, a sound picked up by the use of 'o' in 'from' and 'flowered', while the 'The loud tide breaks' (*Poems*:46) fractures this languid scene with its play on the word 'breaks'. The 'inevitable/ Good evening' is positioned as being less than assured by its line break separation while the alliterative 'women whirl' in the poem's final line strangely returns us to the equally alliterative 'Women, waiting'. Poetic creativity is not stifled by the confines of the room. Instead the room becomes a shell, it is a part of this poetic marine landscape. Gaston Bachelard, in his evocative study *The Poetics of Space*, notes that 'Everything about a creature that comes out of a shell is dialectical. And since it does not come out entirely, the part that comes out contradicts the part that remains inside. The creature's rear parts remain imprisoned in the solid geometrical forms' (Bachelard 1994:108). While the women might be restrained by the room, the poet is not, for creatively she can move out and from the walls that apparently imprison her. The waiting room becomes the standing room, or the stanza, of the poem. It is a place of poetic creativity even while it is a place of restriction. Bachelard proposes that a 'creature that comes out of its shell suggests daydreams of a mixed creature that is not only "half fish, half flesh", but also half dead, half alive' (Bachelard 1994: 109). The poet is simultaneously dead and alive.

Crushed by the house she nevertheless escapes into a sea of creativity. Triton, the huge merman sea god, is usually represented as blowing on a shell. The men are also returning to the shell, the room. The use of the third person pronoun in the line 'the women whirl in their sea' (*Poems*: 46) is ambiguous. Grammatically it must refer to the women, but pragmatically it might also refer to the tritons. The men and the women become blurred in the sea of creativity that washes through the poem. While the women of the poem are confined to waiting in the house, the poet is not. Language allows her to move in and out. She can cross the seemingly 'undefendable' boundary of the walls of the literal house. This transgression moves the poem beyond its autobiographical limits, and even allows the poet to have some fun. The showy dahlias are so flamboyant that they draw attention to themselves as artistic creations. They are performing a role in the picture of the poem and, in doing so, absorb any personal emotion that Stevenson might have expressed. However, the absence of an 'I' where we might expect it, in the light of Stevenson's own discussion of the poem and its very particular subtitle, leave us with the uncanny feeling that she must be there somewhere. However, it is impossible to find her in this particular poem. Instead the beautiful imagery and strikingly vivid dahlias bump any trace of the 'I' right out of the picture.

The 'I' however is evident in the poem 'In the House' (1970), one of the poem that Stevenson mentions in her essay 'Writing as a Woman'. It was first published in Stevenson's early collection *Reversals*, a volume which Peter Lucas explains was written 'against the odds' (Lucas 2003:3). These odds included a new husband, a transatlantic move and the birth of her two sons. 'In the House' tells of a biographical house which is full of children, but begins with an unidentified structure that challenges any notions of stability, enclosure or privacy:

Among others it is the same. It is repeated.
A box not solid but with apertures
showing it to be, to the eye, hollow,
a container for light and noise,

not necessarily in three dimensions.

(Poems 146)

The poem's title suggests that 'it' is a house, but the nature of this house is very confusing. The poem's syntax is tentative and qualifying, and introduces the possibility of an extra dimension which is not specified but offers the reader a space for his or her imagination to roam. This is a box that is 'not solid' yet is paradoxically a 'container'. Gradually, this container becomes even more uncertain until it begins to dissolve into a mirage of possibilities in the second stanza:

It might be the third in a series of mirrors.

It might be the real thing.

(Poems 146)

Within these two lines, with their echoing repetitions which remind us of the poem's first line, this structure begins to emerge as a textual rather than a literal house so that 'It' appears to refer to the poem itself. The poem completes itself as it defines itself while it moves through its allotted time and space. It is the extra dimension.

'Repeated' suggests something verbal or textual, and in drawing attention to the repetitions and reflections that run through the poem, the word appears to emphasise the poem's own construction. The textuality of this 'box' is further reinforced by the poetically organised line 'A box not solid'. The repetition of the letter 'o', a letter picked up in the 'hollow' of the next line, stresses not only emptiness and lack of solidness, but also meaninglessness and lack of significance even while, paradoxically, it is a very solid phrase. This box appears to be useless in terms of practicality and purposefulness, yet it is still a container even if, like the poem, it only appears to contain itself.

In the first stanza there is an 'eye', an eye that sees. The container is looked at, observed, but does not seem to be inhabited. In the third stanza this changes because the 'it' becomes more personal in the next verse:

Whatever it is, it has claims on me.

Its surface establishes itself

outside and around me,
drawing me through or into
what I take to be my proper dominion.
(*Poems*: 146)

As it wraps itself round the poet, she becomes positioned within this structure. The last two words of this stanza suggest both domain and domination, territory and authority. This reminds us of Stevenson's claim that the poet 'is in thrall to nothing but poetry's weird tyranny' ('A Few Words For The New Century' 2000: 183). The poetry both exerts and possesses its own 'dominion', and it is this that the poet believes to be her rightful place of habitation. It is her property that she must maintain. Not only that, the word 'proper' refers to suitability and aptness. Derived from the Latin *proprius*, meaning special, it carries overtones of a personal attribute or quality. There is an affinity between the poet and the poem, and it is the poet who holds the keys of the typewriter which are the door to the printed poem. However, the poem itself immediately challenges such a simplistic reading. While the line 'The interior is entirely familiar' might apply to the inside of the poem because it is a textual shelter that surrounds the poet, the word 'familiar' also introduces the concept of the family and all that means in terms of shared intimacies, experiences and even ghostly echoes from the past.

This playfulness with the word 'familiar' also turns the typewriter keys into the keys of the literal house with the result that the poem's tone begins to change as it turns to speak of the domestic home. Then the concept of her 'proper dominion' takes on a more sinister significance:

It waits in the silence of concealed energy.
It grins with the jaws of a piano.

Again, these interminable stairs bristling with children.
'Mother, mother,' they wail. They bleat with desire.
They quarrel and hold up their wounds to be kissed.
And yet when I bend to them
I'm kissing a photograph. I taste chemicals.

My lips meet unexpectedly a flatness.
(*Poems*: 146)

Here the 'It' of stanza one is again repeated, but it is not a cosy scene. Even the piano becomes a frightening predator. The sense of frustration and alienation in these lines stands in stark contrast to the paradoxically enfolding freedoms of the earlier stanzas. Stevenson explains that for her 'A poem arrives when words somehow flock to an experienced occasion' (*Between the Iceberg* 1998:180). However, once words start to flock to the experiences of domestic anxieties and tensions, the poem is in danger of becoming confessional when measured against Middlebrook's definition of the genre. Stevenson's admission that 'In the House' speaks of her mixed feelings about motherhood and the confines of domesticity (*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 18) suggests that the 'I' in this stanza is her. Even though the photograph's 'flatness' erases the family, or familiar, picture from the scene, it also nevertheless highlights the poet's own anxieties about her relationships with both her children and her mother. This stanza breaks with the form of the rest of the poem. The other stanzas bar this one, are five lines long and interspersed with two line verses. This stanza is six lines long and there is not a two- line verse before the next five line stanza. The poem's form is disrupted by the 'bristling' children who divert the poet who then can only kiss a 'photograph'. However, this returns us to the apertures of stanza one, for, by association, they they have now become the spaces through which light passes in a camera. Reality and impression now become muddled and uncertain, as the poem states. It 'might be the real thing' but it might not. Fact and fiction, experience and impression become reflected images in a 'series of mirrors' until the poem becomes a snapshot, or textual reproduction, of one moment in time. Once on the page it becomes divorced from the moment of its inception to become a piece of art, which, like the photograph, stands by itself.

However, the poet, either as the observer, the taker of the photograph or the subject of the picture, cannot absent herself altogether. She must be somewhere. The

poem continues with further repeated 'reflections':

And here are vases and reflections of vases
on the tables; gardens, and reflections
in the windows of the gardens.
Delphiniums and poppies, veins and arteries,
they compose an expensive anatomy.

The sunlight is apparently generated indoors.
The season is synthetic but permanent.

(Poems: 146)

The repetition of 'reflections' recalls the earlier possibilities created by the interplay between the real and the imagined, although the resumption of the poem's five plus two stanza form suggests that it is now speaking about itself. Eventually the sun is on the inside and the naturally re-occurring seasons have become 'synthetic' and 'permanent'. Everything is turned inside out and anything becomes possible.

Although the literal house might not be a place of domestic peace and fulfilment, it nevertheless acts as a stimulus to writing poetry. The house of poetry is being built out of, and in, the house of biography. The two houses are standing at the crossroads of art and life, with the result that the poem can look both within, and without. The 'I' has faded in these lines, but there are, however, 'reflections' in the windows. Once again the image of the poet looking through herself emerges as 'Delphiniums and poppies' are compared to 'veins and arteries'. The blue and red flowers are humanised, which suggests that there is an 'I' somewhere in this stanza, but it is refracted through the window. It might be the real thing' but it might also be the 'third in a series of mirrors' (*Poems: 146*). Together they 'compose an expensive anatomy' which stresses the careful orchestration of the poem. At the same time, however, the mention of 'anatomy' echoes the 'veins and arteries' of the previous line. The poet's own presence, and own experience, is hinted at again and this creates a powerful paradox. The 'I' of the biographical house faces the 'interminable stairs bristling with children', but the 'I' of the house of poetry is 'free to go anywhere'. However, the irony is that 'There is nowhere to go' (*Poems: 146-147*). These are the

'contradictory perspectives' of the two houses. The 'I' is free in poetry but confined in the home. The poem concludes:

Nothing has happened. Nothing will happen.
There is neither an exit nor a reason for getting out.
(*Poems* : 147)

As Stevenson plays with Auden's line "poetry makes nothing happen" (*Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957*:142) the poem appears to be speaking about poetry and not domesticity. 'Nothing' not only recalls the meaninglessness of the 'hollow' container but also cancels out the 'real thing' of stanza two. Reality is displaced by the poem. Angela Leighton suggests that while 'Form is the poem's body ... [it] is also a design, an outline, a habitable room, an empty shelter, which lets meaning in and out. It is something and nothing, and both of those matter' (Leighton 2007:261). What ultimately matters is itself and the line 'incandescent, metallic, immaculate, sweetened' with its cacophony of vowels seems to stress the poem's textual prowess. Leighton also suggests that Stevenson 'sees form, not just as a matter of technique or pattern, though that is part of it, but also as a matter of resistance. It is the thing that cuts the poem off, from meaningful duties, civic or ethical, in order to be a thing in itself' (Leighton 2007:257). The poem needs only to exist in itself and for itself.

Life and art also come together in the poem 'The Takeover' (1970), a poem ostensibly about housework. Published in the same volume as 'In The House', this poem opens with two short questions:

What am I to do? Where am I to go?
The house has been entirely taken over by women.
To every corner they have brought their respectable destruction.
Listen and you can hear them bustling in my lost rooms,
sorting the dust into piles, embracing the furniture,
polishing, pummelling, scurrying, complaining;
pulling up the papers like weeds.
(*Poems*: 149).

The 'I' is displaced, and both unsettled and unsettling. Its identity is unclear. It does

not want to be a part of the domestic women that are monopolising this house. The list of verbs in the second half of the stanza emphasises the level of activity that is taking place, but the oxymoronic ‘respectable destruction’ tells us that all is not well. Stevenson writes on the plight of the poet housewife:

As I look back over my own experience, I see, however, that I have only *just* managed to survive. Writing poetry is not like most jobs; it can't be rushed or done well between household chores— at least not by me. The mood of efficiency, of checking things off the list as you tear through a day's shopping, washing, cleaning, mending, and so forth is totally destructive of the slightly bored melancholy that nurtures imagination. ... It is possible that marriage, children, social obligations have always been ways for me of avoiding the hard work of making poems. But even if this were so, I can't now reverse my decision to have a family. I have to be a writer with a handicap.

(Between the Iceberg 1998: 8)

This rather plaintive recollection appears to suggest that the ‘I’ in ‘The Takeover’ is Stevenson herself. The poem, therefore, is in grave danger of falling into the confessional trap. However, while the inside of the house appears to be positioned as a female domain, the ‘I’ believes it can escape. Furthermore, there is also more than one ‘I’ in stanza three:

Their little red pulses beat I,I,I,
under the most delicate skin.

(Poems : 149)

These ‘I’s belong to the unnamed others in the poem, but they are underneath, buried literally within the words ‘delicate’ and ‘skin’. The text can manipulate the ‘I’ so that the poem emerges as a poetic house, not just a literal one. These multiple pronouns suggest that multiple presences are engaging and negotiating with each other. The poet seems to be in the poem because it is set in a house and engages with some of the personal issues she has written about, but the poem’s shifting engagement with the pronoun ‘I’ resists any certainties.

This resistance becomes more evident in the second stanza. The house is being transformed by dint of vigorous housework, despite the paradoxical

'respectable destruction'. Bachelard asks the question 'how can housework be made into a creative activity?' and offers this reply:

The minute we apply a glimmer of consciousness to a mechanical gesture, or practice phenomenology while polishing a piece of old furniture, we sense new impressions come into being beneath this familiar domestic duty. ... And so, when a poet rubs a piece of furniture -- even vicariously-- when he puts a little fragrant wax on his table with the woollen cloth that lends warmth to everything it touches, he creates a new object
(Bachelard 1994:67).

There is, therefore, a work of creativity taking place in this house. The familiar tasks take on a new hue. The poem is engaging with a chore usually associated with the house and turns it into a textual activity. The poem asks:

I am useful as a conductor of superfluous energies.
But how through their wire-like waists and wrists
do their quick lusts slip unresisted into my lap?
Why do I allow them to litter my mind?
(*Poems*: 149)

The noun 'conductor' picks up the suggestion that 'Every woman is an orchestra' (*Poems*: 149) earlier in the stanza.. However 'conduct' also indicates the capacity to transmit or carry through. The 'I' that stands apart from the other presences in the poem does allow the work of the house to affect her, but, as it does so, it is transformed into a textual work as illustrated by the careful alliteration, range of vowel sounds and the internal rhymes in these lines from the second stanza. While the poem speaks of one type of work, it is turning into another until it becomes an allegory for the process of writing poetry. All the moving and polishing tidies the home, the correcting and reshaping perfects the poem. The poet can not only inhabit the literal and the poetic house simultaneously, but she can turn her experience of one into the experience of the other. The poem returns to the dialectic between freedom and restraint:

Not one of them forgets for a moment
I am able to escape. They make it my fault

they have locked themselves up in my house.

(Poems :149)

‘My house’, whether literal or poetic, continues to be a space riddled with ‘contradictory perspectives’ (*Poems* : 147) as art and life jostle for position. However, the title ‘The Takeover’ suggests that, despite the boundaries imposed by the literal house, the imagination can take the experiences these boundaries generate and write through and ‘over’ them. The house of poetry might exist within the literal house but it is not confined or defined by it. The final stanza of this poem asks if it would make any difference if the poet was male. We are not given an answer. Instead we are left with a gentle wondering.

While the actual houses in ‘In the House’ and ‘The Takeover’ are not specifically identified, the later poem, ‘A Summer Place’ (1977), refers to a particular house, even though the title uses the indefinite rather than the definite article. Situated in Vermont, it was bought by Stevenson’s father, and provided her with a bolt hole during her six month stay in Cambridge, Massachusetts, when she was studying at The Radcliffe Institute for Independent Women. The poem opens with an address to the reader:

You know that house she called home,
so sleek, so clapboard-white,
that used to be some country jobber’s blight
or scab on our hill’s arm.
You can see the two cellars of the barn—
stones still squatting where the fellow stacked them.

(Poems: 38)

The use of the second person pronoun assumes a shared knowledge of this house, which invites the reader into the autobiographical picture the poem is painting. ‘The fellow’, mentioned later in the stanza, is given the definite article, rather than the indefinite, which suggests that we already know him. By the end of the first stanza the reader is firmly established as part of the scene, and is fully prepared for the conversational tone of the second verse. This is the first time the exterior of the

house is actually described in any material detail. It is also the first time the house is referred to as a 'home', which suggests Stevenson's personal association with it. It is particularly relevant that it is 'she' rather than 'they' or 'we' that is attached to this house. It is definitely a female domain, and appears to be comfortable and welcoming. However, a sense of unease creeps in to this picture of happy domesticity.

'Clapboard-white' rhymes with 'blight' which suggests that its position as a place of pure unsullied detachment is less than certain. There is still evidence of the time it was built as a farm, and the final line of this stanza is echoed in the 'stones for soil' (*Poems:38*) in the second verse which stresses the hard manual labour the house had previously witnessed.

However, by the third stanza the literal house is becoming more associated with art than farming. The poem asks:

Why else hang Haystack mountain and its view
from northwest windows?
It was the view she bought it for. He'd gone.
The house sagged on its frame. The barns were down.
(*Poems: 38*)

The surrounding countryside is presented as a picture, and the mention of the house's 'frame' puts it in the picture too. It is beginning to be less real and more an artistic representation. The line 'Partly she hoped he'd been a poet, too' (*Poems:38*) suggests that existing presence of a poet so that this 'picture' becomes a textual picture, a suggestion reinforced by the mention of 'books from bushes' in the next stanza. The literal house is becoming the house of poetry:

The use she saw for it was not to be
of use. A summer place. A lovely
setting where fine minds could graze
at leisure on long summer days
and gather books from bushes, phrase by phrase.
Work would be thought. A tractor bought for play
would scare unnecessary ugly scrub away.

A white gem set on a green silk glove
she bought and owned there.

And summers wore it, just as she would wear
each summer like a dress of sacred air,
until the house was half compounded of
foundations, beam and paint— half of her love.

(Poems: 39)

The poet now wears the poetry as she inhabits its house. The clothing metaphors recall the wearing of words in 'Making Poetry'. The poet drapes herself in words as she inhabits her art, which then itself emerges as merely ornamental, like the ring on a finger. This imagery is carefully introduced when it is described as 'A lovely/ setting' as the line break intimates that this refers to more than just its geographical position and emphasises the ring metaphor. Like jewellery, poetry is not written to be useful but to be beautiful. Stevenson explains that 'poetry ... never changes the outside world', and believes that it should not try to do so (An Interview with Anne Stevenson' 1985:215). Nevertheless, writing poetry is a form of 'work'. The witty juxtaposition of the tractor that was 'bought for play' challenges the nature of the poet's work. It is not hard labour but nevertheless requires ruthless application in order to avoid the 'ugly scrub' that might creep into the work. At this point, a sense of uneasiness re-emerges at the mention of something ugly invading this ornamental scene. Suddenly the house that was not to be of use takes on a different hue. Instead of a 'white gem', it is itself beginning to take the form of the 'ugly scrub' which recalls the 'scab' of the first stanza. Now the house is once again a literal house, and, in a subtle play on the word 'use' here, the poems seems to suggest that the literal house is not to be used in poetry.

The fifth stanza introduces a further dimension to this argument. The references to 'each confessional songbird' and 'bee balm' seem to point to Plath. Gradually something is destroying the house. 'Fear' and 'doubt' replace the earlier serenity. Ultimately though, the house still stands as 'pretty as new':

But you see the place still stands there, pretty as new.
Whatever she thought the mountain and trees would do,

they did, and took her with them, and withdrew.

(*Poems*: 39)

In this poem Stevenson seems to be negotiating her own feelings about confessional poetry. Despite the changing perspective of the pronouns in the first stanza, the house in the poem is Stevenson's house. An earlier draft of the poem calls it the 'scab on the hill's arm' (CUL MS Add. 9451 Poems), so the change to the published 'our hill's arm', along with its autobiographical associations, serves to gently stress that this place is a part of Stevenson's life. The poem, therefore, fuses the literal and the poetic house, and seems to suggest that the former is not the right place for the latter. However, despite the poem's imagery and use of literary devices and techniques, this poem nevertheless remains grounded in its origins. Even as it attempts to evade biographical details it re-embeds itself in the poet in its ideological argument with Plath.

The collection that followed *Enough of Green, Minute by Glass Minute* (1982), includes a poem called 'A Dream of Guilt'. Dedicated to her mother, this poem is not included in either *The Collected Poems* or her most recent volume *Poems 1955-2005*. However, this poem resonates with images from 'A Summer Place'.

'A Dream of Guilt'

When in that dream you censure me,
I wander in a house of guilt.
It has a door- apology.
And windows, scars. Myself have built
this huge, half-loved neglected place
out of the lintels of your face.

And still I hurt you. Still I- we-
occupy obscure regret.
Your white estate like secret money
weighs on me. I can't forget. I can't forget.
Long corridors of mothers lace
this house too fragile to efface.

(*MGM*: 49).

The 'white estate' must refer to the house in Vermont. The words 'half-loved neglected place' recall the lines in 'A Summer Place' that describe the house as 'half compounded of/ foundations, beams and paint— half of her love' (*Poems*: 39). This house becomes a symbol of her mother, and stands as a source of regret and guilt, an association enforced by the rhyming 'built' and 'guilt', 'place' and 'face'. The 'I' in the second line appears to be Stevenson herself, and as she tells of her own emotions about her relationship with her mother, the poem begins to sound distinctly confessional. The 'house of guilt' is the very house that 'A Summer Place' appears to position beyond the boundaries of poetry. However, 'A Dream of Guilt' introduces 'myself' in the fourth line of the first stanza. There is more than one 'I', a concept reinforced in the second stanza. It is almost as if the poet and the person are two people. The poetic 'I' and the personal 'I' are trying to negotiate their positions within the literal and the poetic house in order to maintain a 'pocket of objectivity' ('Interview with Anne Stevenson' 2000:14).

The final lines of the poem, however, suggest that the experiences and memories that live in the literal house cannot be erased. The poet is caught in a double bind. The 'secret money' recalls the 'expensive anatomy' of 'In the House'. There are costs involved both personally and poetically if the private and the public 'I' are not reconciled. However, the poem's penultimate line challenges its personal tone. There is more than one mother threading her way through the literal house which suddenly becomes the poetic house. Mothers become both literal and poetic, and they cannot be written out of the poetry altogether. They are inter linked in the poem as 'face', 'lace' and 'efface' emphasise both presence and non-presence both in the house and in the 'place' of the poem. Whereas 'A Summer Place' seems to suggest that there must always be an element of objectivity in a poem, 'A Dream of Guilt' seems to accept that this is not always possible as emphasised by the repeated 'I can't forget' which echoes the 'regret' in the second line of stanza two.

Perhaps the compromise rests on the word 'fragile'. The relationship between the house of biography and the house of poetry remains complex, but as long as the influence of the former on, and in, the latter is 'fragile', it is both delicate and easily fragmented. Together, these poems appear to stand as a dialogue between the poet and the person, the artist and the individual. The identity of the poetic 'I' becomes divided and unsure, which renders it delicate and fragile too. While Stevenson's poems of the house engage with subject matter that comes very close to that of confessional poetry, her poetic 'I' is distanced from her personal 'I' by its questioning uncertainty although this paradoxically also draws attention back to herself. The word lace is ultimately derived from the Latin word *laqueus* meaning 'noose' (*Oxford Concise English Dictionary*) which adds a sinister touch to the delicate imagery of this poem with its connotations of fatal ensnarement and entrapment. Suddenly the poem becomes more shocking and more related to its confessional cousins

Enough of Green also contains the poem 'The Price' (1977), which touches again on both the personal cost involved in poetry in relation to the ties of family and home. The poem speaks of the 'ropes that bind us' but here they are less sinister because they 'are safe to hold' (*Poems:288*). The poem begins by exploring a paradox:

The fear of loneliness, the wish
to be alone;
love grown rank as seeding grass
in every room,
and anger at it raging at it,
storming down.

Also that four-walled chrysalis
and impediment, home;
that lamp and hearth, that easy fit
of bed to bone;
those children, too, sharp witnesses
of all I've done.

(*Poems:287*)

The repetition of sound in 'loneliness', 'alone' and 'grown' is rather mournful and is in stark contrast to the anger and rage expressed later in the stanza. The sharp and repeated 'at it' provides a barbed sound that is picked up by the word 'sharp' later on and carries echoes of the 'bristling' children in 'In the House' (*Poems*: 146).

The second stanza also produces a paradox in its description of home. It is simultaneously an 'impediment' and a 'chrysalis'. It holds back but it also holds in before transforming its occupant into a delicate thing of beauty. The poem too can emerge from the home, despite the set backs, and it stresses its textual nature in its emphasis on the easy lexical slide from 'bed' to 'bone'. 'Home' and 'done' create a slightly off key rhyme as if to stress the hiatus between the work of domesticity and the work of poetry. The final stanza changes in tone however as the 'walls that crush us/ keep us from the cold' (*Poems*:288). The poem becomes more pragmatic so that the 'I' becomes more obviously Stevenson as she says 'I pay it, 'I pay it' (*Poems*: 288) in answer to the poem's title. The final two lines of the poem discuss the price exacted:

Words, their furtive kiss,
illicit gold.
(*Poems*:288)

The short lines sound alluring and mysterious. While 'illicit' suggests both forbidden and unlawful, its position after 'furtive kiss' also intimates seduction and enticement. The 'gold' recalls the earlier 'cold', it is outside the warmth the walls provide and outside the marriage, for the 'gold' becomes a symbol of marriage and returns the poem to the first stanza where 'love' has 'grown rank'. This poem becomes close to a confession in its intimate tone, yet the house itself remains a place of possibility while it remains a chrysalis. A thing of beauty will emerge but in the process it will destroy the hard case that produced it. 'The Price' is a difficult poem that seems to suggest that writing poetry inevitably demands a degree of personal sacrifice.

The nature and position of the poetic and personal 'I' is further explored in the poem 'The Mudtower'(1977). Published in the same collection as 'A Summer Place', it was written while Stevenson was living in Scotland. The family were, at this time, still living in Oxford, so she was free of domestic and family responsibilities. The mudtower replaces the domestic, literal house and speaks of a different structure, although this too becomes a trope for poetry. Stevenson explains that 'the mudtower was, I believe, a tower (chimney) for smoking fish situated on a small island in the shallow bay just off Tayport. It was disused when I lived there and has since been demolished. I used to wade out to it at low tide' (E-mail 2003). There is, therefore, in this poem a personal engagement with a physical structure, but it is also an engagement with the canonical house of poetry:

And again, without snow, a new year.
As for fifty years, thousand of years, the air
returns the child-blue rage of the river.
Six swans rise aloud from the estuary,
ferrying tremendous souls to the pond by the playground.
They're coming for me! No. I'm part of the scenery.
They fly low, taking no interest in migratory ladies.
(*Poems*: 110)

As Leighton has pointed out (personal communication), Stevenson here is 'calling in to play' (Ricks, 2002:1) Yeats's poem 'The Wild Swans at Coole', in order to 'place' her own poem and draw our attention to its position as a piece of art. She is deliberately using, echoing and then deflating Yeats's poem to place her own poem as ordinary, suburban. There is no mystery, no beauty, and the aristocratic grandeur of Coole Park is reduced to a common playground. The 'ferrying' of the 'tremendous souls' plays with Yeats' use of the word and hints at the journey of the dead across Hades. However, this passing allusion is soon ruptured by the other meaning of 'tremendous souls'. They are, euphemistically, the 'good old chaps', the salt of the earth, the regular, the good, decent folk found in every town. The language plays with Yeats' mythical vision and then subverts it. Similarly, the 'migratory ladies' are the

ordinary women, given the title 'lady' in the absence of the real thing. There is no Lady Gregory here by this muddy estuary, but simply the average everyday lady passing through an ordinary life. One of these ladies is the poet herself. However, this is not a confessional 'I' standing at the heart of the poem, but a distanced, ordinary 'I' who very subtly becomes one of many in the next line. As the single 'I' quietly becomes 'they', the poet disappears from centre stage. The poet is migrating through her poem: she is flitting in and out. She is not stopping. This positioning of the poem among real people in an ordinary environment suggests that Stevenson is not only releasing the self from her poetry, but is also attempting to place 'The Mudtower' within a contemporary middle class tradition by pointedly distancing her poem from the aristocratic milieu of Yeats' Coole Park. The second stanza emphasises this ordinariness with its description of the scene. However, the poem nevertheless imprints its own textual mark on the view with its interesting sounds and echoes. The combination of vowels in 'The stone town stumbles downhill' emphasises the unwieldy nature of its buildings as we lurch with them, while the 's's in the next line reinforce the 'shivering' of, and in, the 'high square houses' (*Poems*: 110).

Then the 'mudtower' of the title is introduced. While the first stanza carries echoes of Yeats, this strange feature seems to have much more in common with the strange structure in Elizabeth Bishop's poem 'The Monument'. Stevenson's espousal of Darwinian theory is echoed in the rising of the living, breathing mudtower from the estuary's slime, but there is a strain in this analogy. The survival of the fittest does not allow the useless to flourish. In the case of the mudtower 'its uses-- if it ever had uses-- have been abandoned' (*Poems*: 110). This reflects the question raised in Bishop's poem 'The Monument' :

'Why did you bring me here to see it?
A temple of crates in cramped and crated scenery,
what can it prove?

(Bishop *The Complete Poems*: 27)

Jonathan Ellis suggests that this voice wants ‘instant explanation, responding to the absence of clear meaning with several petulant outbursts’ (Ellis 2006: 67). The answer is surely that it cannot ‘prove’ anything, it is not for ‘use’ as such, for the monument is ‘an artefact’ (Bishop *The Complete Poems*: 28), a work of art; and so, allegorically, is the mudtower. Yet the mudtower is different from Bishop’s creation, for it is a natural feature. It is alive, it is ‘breathing in its skin or shrine’ (*Poems*: 110). The lighthouses, in contrast, ‘hold their messages aloft’ and ‘hate the mudtower’. They are useful, even moralistic, for they are ‘like saints bearing scriptures’ in their cautions to the careless. These lighthouses are transparent in their meaning: they save people, a direct contrast to the murky, seemingly useless mudtower. If, therefore, the mudtower is a metaphor for poetry, Stevenson appears to be suggesting that poetry should not be full of bright, self-important messages like the lighthouses. Its purpose is not to moralise or save, but simply to exist in its own skin, to live and breath its own life. The final stanza continues the poem’s engagement with Stevenson’s understanding of her art. The ‘struggle and panic’ become the process of writing and rewriting while the ‘inland hills’ (*Poems*:111) become a trope for the imagination itself. The presence of sandpipers in this last stanza recalls Bishop’s own poem ‘Sandpiper’. Stevenson, in her critical study *Five Looks at Elizabeth Bishop*, proposes that :

‘Sandpiper’ was doubtless begun after Bishop had observed an actual sandpiper running in and out of the surf on a North Atlantic beach. Already in the first stanza, however, the sandpiper is established as a ‘he’, the personal pronoun Elizabeth Bishop usually chose when writing obliquely of herself. ... References to the south and to Blake point the poem very plainly in a personal direction Everything the sandpiper sees or does reminds us of the poet...

(*Five Looks at Elizabeth Bishop* 2006:92-93)

By echoing Bishop’s poem, Stevenson is using the sandpiper as a metaphor for her own role as a poet. She must continue ‘looking for something, something, something’ (Bishop *The Complete Poems* :153) in a world outside herself.

In 'The Mudtower', the house of autobiography and the house of poetry meet again, but the relationship between them is less fraught because the subject of the poem is no longer the private anxieties and tensions of the literal house. Although, therefore, not confessional, the poem's subtitle, 'Tayport, Fife, 1 January 1975', is very specific, and reads like a diary entry. Because of this specificity, the poetic 'I' inevitably becomes Stevenson herself but she is only passing through. In this poem, the poetic swans, like words, come towards her but then leave her. They are deflected away from her and, instead, draw attention to the poem itself. The final stanza presents a beautifully observed, and aurally reproduced, scene as the wings that are 'made of sunlight' are seen, and brightly heard, to 'flicker as snow flickers, blown from those inland hills' (*Poems*: 111). The onomatopoeic 'scuttlings' allow us to hear the redshanks' busy activities, while the heavy sounding 'Mud's rituals resume' (*Poems*: 111) enmeshes us in the tidal ooziings of the estuary. The poem's language frees it from the personal moment of its conception so that the poem becomes our experience, even if Stevenson is there for a moment or two.

The relationship between the poet and language, the building material of her house of words, is further explored in the poem 'Meniscus' (1979), which was published in the same collection as 'The Mudtower' (1979). It is a short poem that playfully looks at language's own 'wordlife' by exploring the word meniscus:

The moon at its two extremes,
promise and reminiscence,
future and past succeeding each other,
the rim of a continuous event.

These eyes which contain the moon
in the suspect lens of an existence,
guiding it from crescent to crescent
as from mirror to distorting mirror.

The good bones sheathed in my skin,
the remarkable knees and elbows
working without audible complaint
in the salty caves of their fitting.

My cup overflowed at the brim
and beyond the belief of the brim,
absolved by the power of the lip
from the necessity of falling.

(*Poems*: 267)

Grosholz suggests that this is 'a finely honed poem that lays out four incompatible definitions of the word meniscus and then hovers above them, unwilling to spill over into decision or to gather together the dispersed semantic field' (Grosholz 2001:734). This is a sound description, but it does not fully explore the poem's wit. There are moments when the 'dispersed semantic field' is pulled together. The 'rim' in stanza one is echoed in the repeated 'brim' of the final verse, while 'reminiscence' and 'existence' are emphasised by the word 'crescent'. However, the poem's strength lies in its understanding that the poet is not always in a position to 'spill over into decision'. Once a word is offered, as in a poem, it is freed of any one meaning, regardless of the poet's willingness or unwillingness. Language is full of ambiguity and multiple meanings, and these are released the moment the word is on the page. The 'suspect lens' suggests that we must be careful how we look at what is before us, and 'fitting' and 'falling', in their end stage rhyme, alerts us to the possibility that a word's fitness or suitability might not always be secure. 'Meniscus' also makes a playful joke at the poet's expense. The final stanza recalls the old maxim 'there is many a slip twixt cup and lip', which suggests that whatever the poet may have meant to say, the slipperiness of language allows it sometimes to evade his or her grip. Meaning can fall out of the poet's control. The meniscus on top of the water might prevent the fluid from spilling over, but the word itself is not similarly contained. The poet can benefit from language's ambiguities, but at the same time, meaning can actually slither away 'from mirror to distorting mirror' (*Poems* : 267), reflecting and shifting meaning as it travels.

The nature of language, and its function in the house of words, features in the later poem 'Ah Babel' (1982) from her collection *Minute by Glass Minute*. Once

again the house of poetry is a tower, but here it is a mythical rather than a geographical feature. However, like the mudtower, it is personified with a 'high forehead unfinished'. It is alive:

your tower allures me--,
its lettered battlements,
sounds, words,
but the high forehead unfinished.

I would desert my eyes
for the windows that are you.
(*Poems*: 289)

The tower's relationship with poetry is emphasised by the significantly single line 'sounds, words', but in this tower, words do not just play with, but appear to fight for meaning. In an earlier draft 'words' was written as 'wounds' (CUL MS Add. 9451 *Poems*), which underpins the war imagery of the first two lines. The second stanza, however, introduces another battle ground. Once again the war between the homonymic 'I' and 'eye' erupts. If the observer and the observed become too close, the poem will begin to turn back on the poet herself. The poet must allow the language of her poem to look out through the window to a sky 'clean as meaning' (*Poems*: 289). It is not a sky that makes meaning clear, but a 'clean' sky that allows words endless possibilities of meaning as the rhyming echo in the two words stress their relationship with each other. The house of biography is not evident in this poem, but the presence of the poet in her house of poetry continues to be questioned. An earlier draft of this poem reads very differently: 'Tall ego, your multiple stones' is followed by:

Your landscape's baked sand
and black scars speak
in a sky sealed with hard meaning'
(CUL MS Add. 9451 *Poems*)

This appears to support the need for the 'eye' to win over the 'I'. If the words that build the tower of poetry reflect only a 'tall ego', meaning becomes 'sealed'; 'hard

meaning' does not have the same audible possibilities of 'clean meaning'. The 'I' locks the poem in one place and to one person.

However, the poem then becomes yet more complex::

Nameless
in mist and silence,
grey against grey,
I exist in your promise.
(*Poems*: 289)

The 'I' remains anonymous but nevertheless inhabits this tower and its possibilities. The 'I' is there, but whether it is a personal or poetic 'I', it is not the subject or the source of the poem. Instead it is the multiple possibilities of language which allow the poem to come into existence, and to continue to exist, as it offers a kaleidoscope of colour and meaning. Although the words of a poem are arranged in 'lettered battlements' so that they both look and sound as though they are at war, the windows in language offer a multitude of perspectives. The 'I' is given permission to 'exist' in the poem because it is language that releases poetic meaning. In a talk at the University of Hull, Stevenson explains that the word 'present' in the final stanza bears the two meanings of time and gift. The gift is language which, she says, 'changes as time changes' ('Reading and Talk' 2006). The poet therefore, inhabits a house, but it is a house built of bricks that constantly shift in meaning. It is not a permanent home.

The concept of the transitory nature of the literary home features in the poem 'From the Men of Letters'(1982). This poem abandons the 'I' in favour of 'we', which refers to the anonymous collective that is named in the title. The men of letters are writers, and users, of language and the poem makes no attempt to disguise their presence. Language itself is described as a hotel, and the men of letters have their own room within this hotel. The users of language that visit the hotel of this poem, therefore, are positioned as being constantly *en-route* because of language's innate instability.

The poem then begins to use some disturbing imagery:

Naturally
the unknown want to be us, but
they are crippled.

All of us are crippled, but
they are most crippled whose
disasters encourage our art.

They live
swarming and unnamed
in the rubble of a moment.

(Poems: 289- 290)

The poem suggests that the sorrows of others inspire the work of the poet, a shocking revelation emphasised by the solitary position of 'Naturally'. Leighton suggests that the room of this poem is 'a source of guilt' (Leighton 2003:272) although it makes no attempt to reconcile the divisions between them and us.

The poem also suggests that the house of poetry falls to rubble when it is inhabited by those not able to write. The men of letters not only use the disasters of others to fuel their art, they also dictate the terms of their art. However, the poem goes on to suggest, even the fame that poetry offers is elusive and transitory. Eventually, 'We' are no longer in a hotel but instead:

We live
decently rehoused
in the storeys of a time.

(Poems:290)

Despite the apparent permanence of this relocation, it is only for the duration of 'a time'. There is a limit to their stay which is emphasised by the stanza's short first line, and echoes the short line and momentary fame of the people referred to in the previous stanza. Fame and popularity are transient. Furthermore, these are tall houses, for they consist of many 'storeys' which wittily looks forward to the 'tall books' or account books of the final stanza. There is a punning here, too, on the concept of the 'tall story' with its suggestion of fictions and myths. Stevenson

explains this idea in an interview:

The establishment doesn't exist except in the minds of people who either think they run it or by people who feel themselves to be oppressed by it. It is an egotistical fiction. ... I thought fiction-making was my own idea. I see now that Jeremy Bentham and other people anticipated it. I came very much to the conclusion that much of social behaviour is fiction-making. Human beings cannot live without fictions or myths of their importance. It was a work of exorcism in which I tried to exorcise my ambition as a writer. Every writer is jealous, every writer feels they deserve more attention than they are getting, especially if they are misunderstood. This is universal. It matters not at all; the only important thing is to sit down and write the poem.

(‘An Interview with Anne Stevenson’ 1989:10)

Stevenson is engaging with the literary establishment and wryly accepts that the lure of ‘*Success, publish, success*’ (‘Making Poetry’, *Poems*: 17) is a very powerful one. However, for Stevenson, writing the poem remains the ‘important thing’. ‘From the Men of Letters’ voices some of the problems associated with her art. The literal house, and its relationship with poetry, might impose its own difficulties, but the institutional house of poetry is also a source of anxiety.

Even though Stevenson’s role in the literal house changes as her domestic responsibilities become less demanding, she nevertheless continues to engage with her position within her own work. The poem ‘A Dream of Guilt’ first hints at her desire to retain some elements of autobiography within her poetry, because they are too difficult, and too precious, to ‘erase’, a sentiment that is now explored in ‘The Three’. The title refers to The Fates, the three goddesses who hold the birth, life and death of humans in their hands. In this poem, the mythical figures in their paintings become an allegory for the poet and her poems:

In this picture I preside. I usher in
River and bathers, the green garden.
This tall white birch is my lively cocoon.
Out of it I spin chervils— marriages, babies.
All my blown hair is seed, is a tide in bloom,
Furious as history, indifferent as it is.

(*Poems*: 264)

Into this textual picture, the words are gathered to produce poetry. Their various sounds echo and resonate. The 'River' and its 'bathers' are united in rhyme, the alliterative 'green garden' sounds cultivated and organised, and heralds the horticultural imagery that follows. The productively sounding 'cocoon' and 'bloom' sound full of promise until the stanza's final line takes us by surprise and leaves us questioningly shocked.

The second stanza maintains the horticultural trope:

In this picture I persuade. I lead men in,
Conduct them through the garden.
Composed, smooth-headed in my spidery greys,
I drop their lines precisely, deploy them
Precisely. These are the criers out in my displays.
Their outrage burns in rage as I destroy them.

(Poems: 264)

The 'I' still appears to be in control. Time is taken to 'drop their lines precisely' and to 'deploy' them with great care. 'Deploy' suggests a military operation and recalls the battle imagery of 'Ah Babel'. The Latin and French roots of the word 'deploy' mean to 'explain', as the poet plays with words and meanings as she marshals and arranges them in careful rows. 'Composed' and 'smooth' complement each other and emphasise order and calm, an order reinforced by the repetition of 'precisely'. 'Composed' and 'Conduct' suggest the delivery of a musical script so that the words become 'criers out in my displays'.

The last lines of each stanza, however, create a mystery around this poem. It is not clear why there is such 'fury' and 'outrage'. Nor is it clear why the 'I' should want to destroy them. The 'I' is in charge in stanza one, but by stanza two the poet can only 'persuade' by her choice of word and sound. The final line of the poem is very violent, as the poet appears to be destroying the freedom of language:

In this last picture I work alone.
I kill roots to plant stone.
I bring to hard soil no fruit, no hurt.
No cry issues from my burnt hillside.

Green burden and echo wait under my foot
For the igneous reaches, the granite tide.
(*Poems: 264*)

Here there is a strange juxtaposition of harsh solidity and fluid creativity. Killing and planting work side by side and while there is evidence of growth in the 'green burden', this stands in stark contrast to the productive 'green garden' of stanza one. Altogether this is a very mysterious poem which suggests that while the artist can 'usher in' and even 'persuade', there is an element of struggle in using words creatively. This struggle is perhaps related to the authority of the 'I' that creates the poem. In the first stanza the birth of the poem grows out of the life. The 'lively cocoon' (*Poems: 264*) is the literal house. 'Marriages, babies' (*Poems: 264*) provide the seeds from which poems germinate and are transformed into beautiful artefacts that fly off from their origins. The second stanza looks at the life of the poem as opposed to its beginnings. The poem is written. It is carefully organised on the page. Now, though, the words are beginning to cry out in resistance. They want to be free of the poem's biographical origins. The weight of the confessional 'I' is beginning to destroy them but the final stanza changes this. Atropos, the third of the Fates, decides the life span allotted to each individual on earth by severing the thread that binds humans to life. In the final stanza of 'The Three' the poet now turns to look at the poem in which she has carefully destroyed all the threads of her life that went into the creation of the poem. Instead of the expected creativity there is barrenness. The poem says 'I kill roots to plant stone' (*Poems: 264*). Creativity is stifled 'under my foot' (*Poems: 264*). There is 'no fruit, no hurt' in the barren 'hard soil' of this poem. The line 'no cry issues from my burnt hillside' plays with the two concepts of productivity and offspring. Atropos means inflexible, and the poem seems to be suggesting that an inflexible 'I' that severs all biographical ties actually is an unproductive 'I'. There is room in the house of poetry for this 'I' to exist, but it must remain flexible. The poem can still possess its own 'wordlife', but without the

element of the personal 'I' the poem can turn to 'stone'. It runs the risk of becoming so divorced from the poet that it loses any trace of human strength or frailty, joy or sorrow. The 'I' is now allowed to be a personal 'I', for the words of the poem will still be 'criers out'. They will push the poem beyond the poet's grasp both during, and after, her lifetime. The poet can afford to relax and let the personal 'I' be given a voice.

This negotiation of the nature of the 'I' continues in the later poem 'Black Hole' (1993). Here poetry is firmly established as a 'house of words', but its inhabitant is not happy:

I have grown small
inside my house of words,
empty and hard,
pebble rattling in a shell.
(*Poems* : 167).

The stoniness of this 'I' is illustrated by the harsh consonants in the second two lines. This poem underwent a great deal of rewriting, and previous drafts included a line in stanza one; 'opaque not porous' (CUL MS Add. 9451 Poems), which adds to the general sense of the 'I's inflexibility and resistance, while a further draft states 'I have grown hard' (CUL MS Add. 9451 Poems) in stanza one. If the 'I' has 'grown small' in stanza one, by stanza three it is collapsing altogether:

I can't help being the hole
I've fallen into.
Wish I could tell you
how I feel.

Heavy as mud, bowels
sucking at my head
I'm being digested.
Remember those moles,

lawn full of them in April,
piles of earth they threw
out of their tunnels. Me, too.
Me, too. That's how I'll

be remembered. Piles
of words, sure, to show
where I was. But nothing true
about me left, child.

(*Poems*: 167)

Throughout this poem, the first and final line of each stanza engage in off-key half rhymes that appear to stress the gap between the fact that the poem speaks of a cloying stagnation even as it unfolds as a piece of artistic creation. This is made possible by the digestion of the stony 'I' which is then expelled. Words then are released into the poem even though 'nothing true/ about me' is 'left' (*Poems*:167). The inflexible 'I' of personal confession has gone so that the poem's words belong to the poem, they do not speak directly about the poet. The people in stanza two are 'cloudy, not ... not real' (*Poems*: 167). The hesitant and repeated negatives and the three dots emphasise the gap between reality and the imagination. 'Piles/ of words' plays on the term 'pile' for a large house. The house of poetry has become a mansion of poetry that has stood the test of time like a stately home. The stony, inflexible 'I' of stanza one has gone, but the final stanza states that the poem, the house of words, can still 'show/ where I was'. Poetry can speak about the autobiographical 'I', but the line break reminds us that the poem itself writes over the autobiographical experience that set it going.

The 'I' now offers poetic possibilities. Life and art can live together. The event, the experience and the imagination are creatively united. This reconciliation with the 'I' finds a voice in the poem 'In Passing'(2003) from the collection *A Report From The Border*. Here we do not know the identity of the 'I', but whether it is Stevenson or not, it no longer matters, and in her *Poems 1955-2005*, this poem is placed in the section 'The Art of Making' as if to stress its poetic significance:

Suppose I had paused a few seconds
clattering down those public stairs,
and you (by chance?) had met me.
Would a look or a brush of hands have swept away
or thickened the cloud between us?

Say I had found you on the phone
and not clicked off so quickly.
Would you have heard the heartdrum
beating, beating where my tongue should be?
Nothing's happened; nothing's to confess.
(*Poems*: 288)

The 'public stairs' (*Poems* :288) situate poetry in a tall structure of some kind, perhaps another tower or perhaps just a house. Either way, these stairs offer a way in to the poem which speaks of the missed opportunities between two potential lovers. The poem's line break reinforces the brief pause expressed in the first line while the brief, vulnerable moment of the 'brush of hands' is emphasised by the verb 'swept away', an action reinforced by the line's length as it too is carried away by the broom. 'Clicked off' in the second stanza recalls the 'clattering down' of the first verse, while the 'public' nature of the stairs paradoxically emphasises the privacy of the moment. The 'heartdrum' is a witty play on the verb 'beating', and reminds us of the inbred musical rhythms of which Stevenson often speaks. While they are 'beating where my tongue should be' the poem creates a sound of its own.

The second half of the poem turns to explore itself:

You asked how experience becomes a poem
in the weightless hour that makes poetry.
Look, it's happening now in a country,
not home, not foreign,
in language that puts its clothes on carefully

after unpaid, love-making labour in that
dark, erotic mill, the imagination.
Imagine believing that a cloud can be
talked into becoming a mountain long after
it has lost itself in common day.
(*Poems*: 288)

Here again is the cross between experience and imagination, life and art. In this poem the interaction happens in a placeless, weightless zone that sounds like outer space. It is a place that defies definition and location. Stevenson's analogy that 'When I begin to write a poem I have a vague idea of something I want to say; it hovers in

front of me like a mirage' ('Anne Stevenson in Conversation' 2000: 53) supports the imagery of the 'weightless hour', as the poem hangs somewhere between the external stimulus and the response of the imagination. Stevenson has said that ideas are experiences in themselves (*Between the Iceberg*: 180), and 'In Passing' looks at the transformation of an event, whether real or imagined, into a poem. In this case it is a chance meeting to which she responds erotically, aroused by the possibilities of a love affair. Stevenson's 'love-making labour' ultimately delivers the poem which has been conceived by her poetic coupling of creativity and experience.

The house of words that Stevenson inhabits is a complex, multifaceted and challenging structure. It is a house in which experience and art, life and language meet. It is also a place where the nature and position of the 'I' is explored and negotiated. In the poems that speak of the literal house, these negotiations become more complicated. In her early poems of the house, written when she was battling with the demands of her family, the experiences of the literal house appear to be at odds with the creation of poetry. Nevertheless, the poems are written. The poet can inhabit the literal and the metaphorical house simultaneously. Nevertheless, the position of the 'I' within these houses is a source of tension as she struggles with the ghosts of confessional poetry. However, 'A Dream of Guilt' suggests that it is not always possible, or desirable, to write out all evidence of the personal 'I'. Gradually the position of the 'I' becomes more flexible as Stevenson's personal position becomes less fraught. The spectre of confessional poetry recedes and she appears to relax about her own position within her poetry. This flexibility is further developed in her poem 'Black Hole' which offers an understanding of the poetic 'I' that is now at peace with itself. The 'I' that inhabits the house of poetry is often Stevenson but it is an 'I' that carefully, and discreetly, arranges its own position. Furthermore, it is allowed to take part in the transformation of her experience into art. The house of poetry, therefore, emerges as a structure inhabited by an 'I' that wanders creatively

between itself and the house of autobiography.

Chapter Three.

'It knows where you are' : Poems of Place.

In the preface to her *Collected Poems*, Stevenson states:

Geographically, the book follows an irregular trajectory, moving from London ... back to my home in Michigan, to England again and on to Scotland, across the Atlantic several times to Harvard and Vermont, back to Cambridge, Oxford, the Welsh borders, the coal fields of Durham, London, Scotland, Cambridge again and North Wales.
(*CP*: preface).

It is unsurprising, therefore, that place should be a prominent theme in her poetry. Indeed, several of her poems make a clear reference, either within the text or in the subtitle, to some of the places that have figured largely in her life. However, this dizzying catalogue of cities, countries and locations cannot begin to express the complexity of the poet's relationship, and the relationship of the self in general, to place; a concept which itself becomes less and less anchored than at first appears. In her most recent volume of poems, *Poems 1955-2005*, this trajectory is disturbed by her repositioning of the poems so that they no longer follow a chronological trail. This appears to endorse the shifting relationship with place expressed in the poems. Instead of giving us a series of destinations, of arrivals and departures, we are faced with a random record of passing-throughs. Like the poet, we do not stay long in any one place, so there is little sense of any permanency. The poet's presence becomes undefined and uncertain, an uncertainty made more complicated by a web of changing pronouns which challenge both our perspectives and our understanding. An early, unpublished poem reveals her developing negotiation with the position of the poetic 'I':

To My Ego

You live in sin with I and I
And Me and Mine and My.
Open the door,
Old lecher, or

We'll breed and multiply.
(CUL MS Add. 9451 Poems)

While this might be nothing more than a piece of Freudian playfulness, it is rather prophetic. The 'I' appears to be in dialogue with itself, so the use of 'You' in the first line becomes a device that deflects attention from the 'I' it replaces. Stevenson frequently uses the pronoun 'you' in her poems of place, which not only creates a distance between herself and the poem, but also '*introduces* the reader into the poem' (O'Brien 1998: 164). It then no longer remains a place solely occupied by the poet, but takes on a new shared position that belies its autobiographical origins.

Furthermore, while the recognisable place names in some of the poems appear to offer a sense of groundedness and reality, there are hints of unnamed eerie presences that seem to thread their way through the places and the people in these poems. These ghostly spirits take different forms as they quietly haunt her poetry of place, whether that place be a geographical location, or a more personal and private place or space. Julian Wolfreys suggests that 'haunting disrupts origin and eschatology' (Wolfreys 2002:2). Indeed, the ghosts that glide through Stevenson's poetry confound any notions of beginning and ending, starting and finishing, for each place appears to be merely a place on the way, or even, in the way. Wolfreys further proposes that: 'It is the case that haunting remains in place as a powerful force of displacement, as that disfiguring of the present, as the trace of non-identity within identity, and through signs of alterity, otherness, abjection or revenance' (Wolfreys 2002:1). Stevenson appears to echo the paradoxical concept of 'non-identity within identity' in the relationship of the individual both to, and with, place. Furthermore, her own identity in these poems is both present and non-present, as she writes of the places that have been an integral part of her own life. Lynne Pearce, in her essay 'Driving North/Driving South: Reflections upon the Spatial/Temporal Co-ordinates of "Home"', suggests that home is where her 'own ghost ... flits around the place in a state of intermittent erasure' (Pearce 2000:162). In Stevenson's poetry of the

places she herself has made home, however impermanently, she both endorses and erases her own presence. However, places are not merely haunted. They also haunt. They possess their own ghosts which exert their influence in the complex dialectic that takes place between place and person, poem and poet.

However, while these ghosts introduce a sense of displacement, Stevenson, recognises the strength of her emotional response to place. She admits that ‘I feel about places as I feel about people, the same kind of love, awe, or repulsion’ (‘An Interview with Anne Stevenson’ 1985: 212). This positions place as a key element in the process she calls the ‘creative exchange’. In a lecture called ‘Poetry and Place’, Stevenson introduces this process, which, she explains, is ‘A two-way circuit, as in the creation of electricity, [which] comes into being as soon as the poet acknowledges that he or she and the world are simultaneously inventing each other’ (*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 115). The negative pole of this exchange she describes as:

a poet’s capacity to receive, a willingness continually to be impressed, or “invented”. To be open to impressions, as every poet of real sensibility knows, protects the explorative mind from stagnation, from choking itself on obsessive interior concerns. As one who bears witness, the poet must, as Keats knew, keep alive the child within the adult—keep some impressionable core green and curious.
(*Between the Iceberg* 1998:115).

This negative pole, therefore, cannot be considered a purely passive process. While the ability to be ‘impressed’ by the world out there ‘protects’ the poet’s mind from decay and deterioration, Stevenson suggests that the poet must take responsibility for clearing that mind of too great a degree of inward reflection and absorption. She continues to explain that:

Poets radically differ, of course, as to which conditions best set off the necessary, irresistible two-way exchange of energy. Negative input need not arrive via the phenomena of worldly appearances. A philosophy, a religion, a mystical revelation, a personal story, an obsession with the past or with human behaviour— any stimulating factor passionately absorbed will activate the circuit.
(*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 117)

For the negative pole of this circuit to be functioning, the poet must remain actively engaged with that which prompts a response. Although the relationship between place and the individual is, at times, ambivalent, by her own admission it is a relationship that inspires the deepest of emotions, and so acts as a catalyst within the 'creative exchange' circuit. The positive element of the creative exchange is, as she explains; 'nothing less than what we call creative imagination or creative energy'. As a result of this positive element, 'The world, as it were, is never let off the hook. The poet is continually putting it on the spot, challenging its terms, reinventing, magnifying, even distorting it' (*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 116). The imagination is, Stevenson states 'informed or reformed memory' so that in the poem place is transformed into art.

'Forgotten of the Foot' is an early poem written when Stevenson lived in Langley Park, near Durham, and is an example of how she turns her experience of place into poetry. Once a pit village, it was then dominated by an abandoned coke works which stood as a memorial of the work, and life, that it once symbolised. This poem was first published in the *Black Grate Poems* which were incorporated in Stevenson's volume *The Fiction Makers*. She did not include it in *The Collected Poems* but reintroduced it, with some revisions, in her *Poems 1955-2005*. A copy of the early version of this poem is included in the appendix of this thesis. This reintroduction suggests that the poem is an important feature of her work, and its position in her new collection is within a group of poems all set in the north east of England. The poem explores both the village's mining past and the history of the coal that fed its existence. The *terza rima* presentation of the village's past and present also brings to the poem, and the village, a literary history that significantly precedes the advent of the mining industry. The poem therefore highlights its own position as a work of art as it negotiates its relationship with Dante's earlier work. Furthermore, as soon as the *terza rima* begins to unfold, we as readers, become prepared for a

journey into hell. The poem is leading the way so that it becomes a literal and a textual engagement with the past and present of a particular place.

Old and new, classical and contemporary appear side by side in the first line of the poem.

Equisetum, horsetail, railway weed
Laid down in the unconscious of the hills;
Three hundred million years still buried

In this hair-soft surviving growth that kills
Everything in the glorious garden except itself,
That thrives on starvation, and distils

Black diamonds, the carboniferous shelf--
That was life before our animals,
With trilobite and coelacanth,

A stratum of compressed time that tells
Truth without language and is the body store
Of fire, heat, night without intervals--

That becomes people's living only when the strange air
Fills out the folded lungs, the inert corpuscles.
Into the mute dark, light crawls once more.

(Poems: 86)

'Equisetum' and horsetail' are words for the same type of plant, so the scene is set for the impending juxtaposition of past and present, classic and contemporary, as the poem speaks now of a past encapsulated in the presence of the disused mine. The hills are given an 'unconscious' which personifies them while simultaneously rendering them as passive containers of the coal-forming cycle. The earlier version's third line reads 'Three hundred million years' dream still buried' (*FM*: 44, Appendix p.231), but the final version omits the word 'dream'. This sharpens the rhythm of the third line into tetrameter, and, removing any element of unreality, encourages a more scientific tone, a tone supported by the lack of adjectives. The rhyme scheme is disturbing, however, for 'weed' and 'buried' only fully rhyme if 'buried' is manipulated. This half-rhyme disturbs the poem's form and highlights the break

between the past and the present, while stanza two picks up the expected rhyming scheme as it concentrates on the past and the nature of the 'glorious garden' with its overtones of the garden of Eden and the beginnings of time and creation. This finds an echo in the 'slum of Eden' later in the poem, which ultimately shatters any of the beauty of the prehistoric landscape of this stanza. The whispering repetition of 's' in the second stanza reinforces the dreamlike process that the early version of stanza one describes. It also suggests the hissing presence of the serpent in the garden. The absence of the word 'dream' in the later version changes this sibilant sound into something more sinister than soporific and prepares us for the poem's final stanzas. Meanwhile 'distils' echoes the 'still' in 'still buried' and reinforces the nature of the refining process that ultimately produces energy from decayed vegetation.

Stanza two's enjambement into stanza three supports the ongoing development of the coal and the relentless passage of time. As the coal is formed, 'Black diamonds' refer not only to one of the stages of the process but also introduces an element of financial value to the developing fuel. The early version refers to 'life before the animals' while the later poem reads 'life before our animals' which changes the time span with its suggestion that 'our animals' refers to those creatures we know about. There may yet be, this revision suggests, more animals that we, mere humans, are still not aware of. The introduction of 'our' also positions us as evolutionary newcomers, which stresses the agedness of the coal in comparison to other life forms. The final line of this stanza is dramatically revised. Referring to this time span, the earlier version says 'Before trilobites and shellfish' (*FM*: 44, Appendix p.231), while the later poem reads 'With trilobites and coelacanth'. 'Shellfish' almost maintains the *terza rima* but coelacanth fractures it totally. The past is set apart, distanced. The onward narrative of the *terza rima* is halted, but at the same time, 'coelacanth' paradoxically cancels this breakage. The use of two technical terms in this stanza supports its scientific exploration of coal, but a

coelacanth is a creature once believed to survive only in fossil form. However, a living version of a coelacanth has been discovered so that Stevenson's use of this particular fish draws together the coal's property as a fossil fuel. It is both dead yet alive. It is prehistoric yet exists in the present. The shock of the rhyme break ultimately serves to stress the poem's understanding of coal and introduces the next two stanzas which begin to explore the nature of coal once ignited and brought to life again.

The 'carboniferous shelf' tells 'Truth without language' once ignited. This shelf then becomes a book shelf that holds the silent story of the coal. However, once ignited the it bursts into life, and the alternating vowel sounds of 'fire, heat, night' represent the crackling of a burning fire. 'Intervals' only half rhymes with 'tells' so the poem endorses the aporia between the sounds of the fire and the sounds of language and another enjambement leads into the fifth stanza where 'strange air' is made even stranger by its manipulation of the *terza rima*. The coal is personified as possessing lungs, and while 'corpuscles' can refer to a minute particles of matter, they also call to mind the blood of humans. It is as if this coal is living, even while formed out of death, and this plays on the concept of 'people's living'. Their livelihood is based on the mining of coal but it is a livelihood that has been lost. Furthermore, it was a livelihood that was dangerous and costly. To mine coal underground, the poem suggests, is a form of hell, a suggestion supported by Stevenson's choice of Dante's *terza rima*. Life and death are held in a precarious balance throughout this section of the poem.

A chorus interrupts the narrative at this point in the earlier version of the poem (Appendix p.231). Its rhyme and rhythm make it sound like a playground chant, and the use of local words such as 'proggie mat' (a home weaved hearth rug) locate the poem firmly in the north east. It is an amusing quartet which contrasts with the more serious stanzas that precede it. Furthermore, the less formal register the chorus uses returns the poem to the people. The poet is sidelined and the

challenge it poses to Dante's influence suggests that Stevenson is relocating this poem from one poetic house to another. It is as if she wants to offer the poem back to the people mentioned in stanza five. The voice of the living is given a space yet in the more recent version this chorus is omitted. This omission makes the poem's descent into a form of hell in the following stanzas more immediate but loses the imperative of the contemporary voice. The poem then stands as a monument shaped by Dante in which the voice of the poet is not challenged by the voice of the people, and in its new form is in danger of becoming a rather middle class overview of a life the poet has not experienced. This journey into the hell of the mines is a poetic journey in which the 'unconscious of the hills' refers as much to the imagination of the poet as it does to the geological formation of coal.

In the following stanza the *terza rima* become strained as if to suggest that life and art cannot be reconciled, and the alliterative 'buried black seams' remind us that even while the coal is being 'uncovered' it is being rebedded into a textual seam or sentence. Nevertheless the poetic journey is still based in reality. 'Pillaged' and 'hacked' suggest a frenzy of rapacious greed 'Urgent as money' plays on the word 'argent', meaning silver, so that not only does this stress the economic value of the coal but silver money reminds us of the talents of silver paid to Judas to betray Christ. The coal provides wealth, but not for the people who mine it. They are betrayed, a betrayal that pre-emptes the 'washed up innocents' that are spoken of in the final stanzas. The living hell of the mines is not populated by the evil doers of Dante's Florence as Stevenson emphasises their undeserved plight by repopulating the house of poetry she is subverting. The repeated 's' sounds of 'stunted houses', 'smoke', 'Sootblack houses' and 'pressed' recall the ominous sybillants of stanza two. Now they illustrate the 'cobra hood of smouldering coke' as the serpent in the garden becomes yet more predatory, particularly as it comes from a 'nest of ovens' which suggests both a source of evil, a metaphorical viper's nest, while at the same

time suggests that this snake has just robbed the earth and its people of their birthright. The north-eastern phraseology of 'pressed back hard against pit' reminds us that this is not a classical allegory but a regional reality. However, at the same time, this and the following stanza reassert the *terza rima* so that the poem's echoes of Dante re-emerge. It is as if we must be reminded of the poem's textuality despite its association with a particular time and place.

The rhyme scheme remains established throughout the remainder of this section of the poem although 'opposite' and 'it' is rather weak. The sound of the line 'Growing up, breathing it, becoming it' intimates a relentless inevitability, the repeated 'b' sound reminds us of being. However the suggestion that the families become the smoke is perhaps a sentiment stretched to accommodate the rhyme. Nevertheless, this suggestion endorses the poisonous influence of the mines and the evil they perpetrate. In the English language, *terza rima* imposes demands that can hinder the poet, making the poem more of a textual challenge which serves to emphasise its position as a work of art.

The poem then turns to the miners and their daily routine. The poem becomes more descriptive, and the alliterative 'Clatter of boots on tarmac' mimics the noise of the men's boots. The 'thick frost simple as gold/On the sulphurous roofs' creates an arresting image as nature's innocence is turned to wealth by the coking process. The earlier version reads 'First shift out and thick frost' while the later version becomes 'First shift out in thick frost'. This change positions the miners as walking into this gold trap so that 'simple' also suggests their innocence and their impending exploitation. The second chorus consists of four short lines which plays on the paradoxical position of the miners (Appendix p. 232). Day and night become juxtaposed until all is blackness.

The poem's third section returns to life above ground. 'A Nan or Nora' reminds us that we are far removed from the Italian notaries of Dante's poem even as

Stevenson continues to use this particular form. Everyday domesticity and the realities of the harshness of life in a pit village become the subject of poetry and although the poem attempts to hold on to its *terza rima*, the forced rhymes, such as 'forgets' and 'kids', suggest that this difficult existence is escaping the artistic confines of the poem. The rather prosaic narrative continues to chart the week until the last three stanzas of this section. Here there is a change in tone and it is here that the more recent poem is most changed from its earlier version. The earlier version speaks of 'A made way of being. A working place. Living a living.' (*FM:45*, Appendix p. 232). This is followed by the chorus, a plaintive chant about the sacrifices of the miners' wives. The next section in *The Fiction Makers* begins with the verse:

Prim Esh looks down on the red-tiled brick town's soul
Streaming from its roofs in the smoke of a lost century--
A veil of breath in which to survive the cold.
(*FM: 46*, Appendix p 232).

In the later version, the chorus is removed and the third section of the poem now reads:

A once way of being. A dead place. Hard livings

That won't return, grim tales forgot as soon as told,
Streaming from the roofs in smoke from a lost century --
A veil of breath in which to survive the cold.
(*Poems: 87*)

The place the poem speaks of is now dead. Only the poem survives into a new century. Even the stories that were told are no longer alive, and the prophecy of the next stanza, that 'Habits and voices' which maintain links with this past have themselves passed, has been realised. Yet there is an irony here for the poem now tells the story. The 'glorious garden' of the first section is now a wasteland. All that ostensibly remains are the miners' tools. The poem hopes that these men may 'wake in the living seams of Heaven' but they have been buried too within the seams of the

poem. The inscription on the Miners' memorial writes over their lives, just as this poem does. It becomes a memorial, a structure, a house that is built on top of the place it speaks of.

Stevenson's claim that 'Using poetry is like using language the way a miner uses a beam of light and a pickaxe to seek out the true seams of experience and find exact patterns of words to reveal them' (CUL MS Add. 9451, draft of essay 'What is Poetry') supports my suggestion that 'Forgotten of the Foot' is as much to do with writing poetry as it is about the life associated with the disused mine at Langley Park. The poem is like coal. It transforms one thing into another and produces something of value, although the analogy becomes strained at this point because coal is useful and poetry is useless. In the process though, the poem writes over the village of Langley Park, and the poem's revisions add textual layers to the seams that bury the miners. The village and its people are effectively replaced by the poem.

Stevenson's poetry of place, therefore, is released from its literal origins, as the imagination, the positive element of the creative exchange, creates a new place, the place in, and of, the poem. However, this poetic autonomy is apparently confounded by the specificity of the title or subtitles Stevenson attaches to some of her poems. These appear to tether them to a certain time and place in her life. One such poem is 'Coming Back to Cambridge' (1971). However, almost immediately the poem begins to confound any biographical associations by replacing an expected 'I' with the second person pronoun 'you'. It begins:

Casual, almost unnoticeable,
it happens every time you return.
(*Poems*: 59)

The reader expects an 'I' since the poem's title, 'Coming Back', and the dated subtitle, all suggest a poem rooted in personal history. The use of the second person pronoun is quite arresting. It not only challenges our expectations, but includes us in what might have been a private experience. We the reader become intimately involved

in a place and experience that were not originally our own, but become so as we read. The pronouns in this poem are also confounded in the single line 'It knows where you are' (*Poems* :59). Instead of an expected 'I know where I am', there is a strange awareness that Stevenson is hiding herself deliberately behind these pronouns which leaves us with the uncanny sensation that, in relation to this place, she is simultaneously present and absent. We expect to find her in 'Coming Back to Cambridge' because of its associations with her own life.

In his essay on the subject of 'The Uncanny', Freud begins with an exploration of the various meanings of the word *heimlich* and concludes:

What interests us most in this long extract is to find that among its different shades of meaning the word *heimlich* exhibits one which is identical with its opposite *unheimlich* ... In general we are reminded that the word '*heimlich*' is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory are yet very different: on the one hand it means what is familiar and congenial, and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight. The word *Umheimlich* is only used customarily, we are told, as the contrary of the first signification, and not of the second.

(Freud 1919:375)

There is in some of Stevenson's verse the uncanny sensation that she is both at home yet, equally, not at home. Kristeva, drawing on Freud's theory, concludes that the *Unheimlich* is 'a crumbling of conscious defences, resulting from the conflicts the self experiences with an other— "the strange"— with whom it maintains a conflictual bond' (Kristeva 1991:188). In the light of this understanding, the use of the second person pronoun becomes much more complicated. While 'we' can suggest an intimate plurality, it can also suggest a multifaceted 'I'. 'We', therefore, represents either a collection of visitors to the poems, that includes the poet and her readers, or a divided 'I', an 'I' that is both familiar and unfamiliar, an 'I' that does not always recognise itself. Kristeva voices this paradox in her work *Strangers to Ourselves*:

Strangely, the foreigner lives within us. He is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognizing him within

ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself. A symptom that precisely turns 'we' into a problem, perhaps makes it impossible. The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities.

(Kristeva 1991:1)

As visitors, 'we' become foreigners in the land of the poem, a land that resists boundaries of any sorts. The poet too, having removed herself from where we would expect to find her, is also a foreigner, and this understanding removes any differences between poet and reader. The collective 'we', in this respect, is fairly simple. The poem, driven by its own needs and demands, coupled with language's instabilities and playfulness, stands as a new territory ripe for exploration. It is free of its creator and the place of its creation. But, as Kristeva suggests, 'we' can become a problem, for within that pronoun there lurks an 'I'. 'I' am necessarily a part of 'we' so the reader begins to experience an uncanny awareness that the poet is both there and not there. Even though the poet looks through herself, she is nevertheless in the picture. She is apparently effaced but is not altogether absent.

This uncanny duality is given a voice in the poem 'Going Back', where the subtitle, *Ann Arbor, October 1993* apparently 'fixes' the place of the poem, a certainty that is immediately confounded in the first stanza:

It hazes over,
blurred by forty years,
a nerveless place,
like the idea of pain,
like love affairs
that at the time *were* time.

An intimate alias,
half mine,
floats on these streets,
identifies each elm
that isn't there,
breathes in these
shapeless, lax,
companionable homes,
hand-built midwest America

that clones itself
in leafy, bypassed towns
steeped, asleep on
ochre-coloured lawns,
named for the dead that still
fadingly mark a street, a school,
its sledding hill and park.

(*Poems*: 33-34).

The 'intimate alias' is the shadowy other, the other half of 'we'. In an early draft of this poem, Stevenson describes this alias as 'incredible' (CUL MS Add. 9451 *Poems*), which suggests an element of doubt, even disbelief that such an alias should exist. The later change to 'intimate' renders it infinitely more personal, even private. The combined sensation of unbelieving rejection and close concealment is summed up by Kristeva who writes:

Confronting the foreigner whom I reject and with whom at the same time I identify, I lose my boundaries, I no longer have a container, the memory of my experiences when I had been abandoned overwhelm me, I lose my composure. I feel 'lost', indistinct', hazy'. The uncanny strangeness allows for many variations: they all repeat the difficulties I have in situating myself with respect to the other and keep going over the course of identification-projection that lies at the foundation of my reaching autonomy.

(Kristeva 1991:187).

Kristeva's language finds an echo in the language of the first stanza of 'Going Back' with its impressions of haziness, blurredness and strange fusion of past and present in the line 'that at the time *were* time' (*Poems*: 33). The repeated 'v' sound in this stanza adds to its sense of vagueness while the adjective 'nerveless' suggests diffuseness and inertness. There is no sense of definition or focus. The abandoned 'I' is the mysterious alias that is, and is not, Stevenson, as it is only 'half mine' (*Poems*: 33). The precise naming of past residents of Ann Arbor in the poem serve to emphasise the namelessness of the 'I' and the 'intimate alias', highlighting their position as the stranger, the visitor, the interloper. They resist being firmly located, even the alias that remains in the city 'floats' on the city's streets. Ultimately, its

uncanny recognition of what is not there reinforces its own alienation even though it does not eradicate itself altogether. There is no definition, but there still lurks a something or a somebody.

Ann Arbor was Stevenson's home for many years, yet this uncanny sense of alienation helps to resist any biographical certainty. Although we, the reader, might know that Stevenson spent much of her young adult life in Ann Arbor, the fracturing of the 'I' in the poem into a hazy, indistinct creature quickly challenges the speaker's relationship with the place named in the subtitle. In the third stanza, the 'I' s question, 'when I next come', suggests that for a time both elements of the 'we' have been united. However, the poem's position becomes less and less certain:

And next? When I next come?
More will be gone.
The underwater palimpsest
may be all but illegible,
may even release me
from haunted erasures,
more haunting survivals—
Mrs. Winter's
witch's den of cures
now flaunts a showy extension
with red doors.

(Poems: 34).

At first the references to the Mrs. Winter's home improvements offer a mere commentary on the changes to familiar places that tend to occur over the years. However, the concept of the 'underwater palimpsest' deconstructs the very poem itself. 'Underwater' picks up on the earlier verb 'floats', while 'palimpsest' suggests a writing over, an effacement of the original. It is as if it is not enough merely to blot out what has gone before because, despite her 'erasures', there is always a trace left behind of what has been before. Instead there must be a rewriting, a writing over so that the point of origin, the poet, is never revealed. The poem, the poet, and the place it describes, are established as text, a mass of writing and over-writing, meaning and over-meaning, where certainties are resisted and challenged, indeed even denied. The

Ann Arbor of the subtitle is no longer a geographical place or a topographical feature. It is utterly effaced by the poem.

The relationship between poet and place gradually begins to move beyond the mere uncanniness of the alias, or the double. Instead a ghostly tone enters the poem because the 'erasures' are 'haunted'. They are not just traces of what has been, but remain to shape the present. The 'survivals', the living memories themselves, haunt the poet, creating a spooky negotiation of both what is, and is not, written, as well as suggesting that the 'alias', in identifying that which is not there, carries with it that which has gone. It is the past in the present, so it becomes a form of ghost. In an earlier draft the poem's final stanza mentions the word 'ghosts':

Perhaps when we say 'ghosts',
We mean nothing
but our own cast leaves
(CUL MS Add. 9451 Poems)

The leaves that fall decay, yet sometimes a filamental trace of what they once were remains. They leave a written record of themselves as if to ensure the rewriting of more leaves in the following Spring. Stevenson's early draft suggests that the 'alias' that exists in both Ann Arbor and the poem is a ghostly trace from her past. It is her own history that returns to 'mark' the poem just like the 'dead that still / fadingly mark a street, a school' (*Poems*: 34). Here 'mark' works on several layers. It might mean writing, but it might also mean a stain or even a scar. It might also indicate a score, a grade. This ghost, therefore, haunts, hurts and judges both the poem and the poet. The published final stanza does not mention a ghost but asks:

Is it a brace or a fetter,
never to be set quite free
from vanished elms we took for granted,
(*Poems*: 35)

The trees have become a metaphor for the poet and her past. She will always be held to this past by a ghostly thread and wonders whether this thread will sustain or restrain her.

The final lines endorse this ambivalence:

and further down, remote as Greek,
foundering in sadness I crossed
to get away from, Mister Blake?
(*Poems*: 35)

Although sad to leave, she does so. She must avoid any romantic attachments to place. Blake's painting, *Styx*, represents his version of Dante and Virgil's entrance to the fifth circle of Hell in *The Divine Comedy*. Here the wrathful fight on the surface, while the miserable and the lazy lie beneath the sludgy, slimy water of the river Styx. In the painting the surface of the lake is covered in bubbles to show the sobs of those trapped below which recalls the watery imagery of the earlier stanzas of Stevenson's poem. Now the 'foundering in sadness' of the final verse takes on a greater significance as it seems to suggest that Ann Arbor has the power to drown her in sorrow and to become more of a 'fetter' than a 'brace'. Less literally, however, this reference to Blake also alerts us to the artistic nature of not only this return to Ann Arbor but Ann Arbor itself. While Blake paints over Dante's poem, Stevenson lays her text over this town. It becomes a sight of on-going artistic negotiation rather than a topographical feature although the questioning tone of the poem's last line seems to suggest a certain wistfulness about the actual city of Ann Arbor and the memories it holds.

While there is uncertainty and pensive contemplation, there does not appear to be any fear expressed about the shadowy ghost in Ann Arbor. Returning to the poem 'Coming back to Cambridge', the ghosts that appear here also seem to both sustain and challenge but not frighten. Here too ghosts are personal:

Casual, almost unnoticeable,
it happens every time you return.
Somewhere along the flat road in
you lose to voluptuous levels
between signposts to unnecessary dozing villages
every ghost of yourself but Cambridge.
Somewhere— by Fen Drayton or Dry Drayton,

by the finger pointing aimlessly to Over--
you slip into a skin that lives
perpetually in Cambridge.

It knows where you are.
(*Poems*: 59)

Each skin represents a ghostly layer of the self. The two concepts of 'ghost' and 'skin' appear to be contradictory. A ghost is an apparition, a 'nebulous image' (Oxford Concise English Dictionary), while skin is an outer, visible layer of something material and, as such, is anything but nebulous as it delineates an edge, an outline. However, a shed skin becomes a nebulous image, and the duality of a shed skin and a living skin presents the possibility of the self existing alongside its own ghost. The ghost, in this case, is not a revenant, an apparition of one who is dead, but rather an alternative, extra form of one who still lives. An early draft of this poem refers to 'the voluptuous levels' (CUL MS Add. 9451 Poems), which appears to attach them to the 'flat road in'. However, the version in *Poems* does not include the definite article which subtly alters the reading of the stanza, for now it suggests that in losing 'to voluptuous levels' every 'ghost of yourself', successive layers of skin are shed until the speaker is virtually naked. Furthermore, there is the suggestion that this is a pleasurable process. The poem is beginning to propose, in answer to the question posed in 'Going Back', that a ghost that exists in a particular place sustains rather than restrains. There is no element of fear or regret here. Indeed the easy slide of 'slip' into 'skin' suggests a hint of a pleasant intimacy, an intimacy that appears to be symbiotic. The pronoun 'it' in the line 'It knows where you are' (*Poems*: 59) seems to refer to the noun Cambridge, which is surprising, a surprise heightened by the line's solitary position in the poem suggesting the possibility that Cambridge itself is possessed of its own spirit.

However, while the pronoun shift disconcerts us, it also emphasises both the existence of the ghost, or skin, that 'lives / perpetually in Cambridge (*Poems*:59) and

the existence of a spirit of place, both of which 'know where you are'. The next stanza continues:

As you drive you watch a workman
wheel a bicycle around a stile,
hump onto the saddle and
ride off past a field of cows.
A few stop chewing to stare.
And you know where you are even before
the landmarks (beautiful to the excluded)
begin to accumulate.

(Poems: 59)

As the speaker enters Cambridge, she does not need to be guided by the city's famous landmarks, for 'you know where you are'; you have an 'intimate alias' that is forever in Cambridge with which the speaker fuses as she sheds every other layer of skin. There is, too, the possibility that the second person might refer to the spirit of Cambridge, which then unites with the personal ghost to create a unification of person and place. This place then becomes the poem in the second half of this stanza:

The stump of the Library.
The lupin spire of the catholic Church.
Four spikey blossoms on King's.
The Round Church, a mushroom in this
forest of Gothic and traffic and
roses too perfect to look alive.

(Poems:59)

The city is described in a series of botanical associations which echo the pastoral scene set in the early part of the stanza. 'Spikey' emphasises 'spire', while 'stump', 'blossoms' and 'mushroom' create an echo which draws on 'hump' and 'accumulate' in the previous lines. Together, the poem asserts its own textuality despite the references to well known sights in Cambridge.

The poem's tone then changes in the next stanza:

The river is the same- conceited,
historic, full of the young.
The streets are the same. And around them

the same figures, the same cast with a
change of actors, move as if concentric
to a radiance without location.
The pupils of their eyes glide sideways,
apprehensive of martyrdom to which
they might not be central.
They can never be sure.
Great elations could be happening without them.

(Poems: 60)

The city appears to become the shining centre of a universe around which its inhabitants orbit like planets round the sun. They are held by some mystical force that exerts a powerful gravity. Stevenson believes that cities can provide ‘energies’ (‘An Interview with Anne Stevenson’ 1985: 212), a belief which finds an echo in this poem. However, the inhabitants are not sucked in. The city bathes its inhabitants in an attractive, and attracting, glow, but it does not engulf them, or claim them for itself. Moreover, this glow does not offer, or demand, permanency because it is ‘without location’. It is somewhere but nowhere. The city of Cambridge in this poem has ceased to be a geographical certainty, and has become, instead, a force field emitting its own indefinable, and invisible, power. It has become a paradox. It draws towards, but radiates out. It exerts an influence, but does not overpower. There is nowhere to send down roots, and it can be shrugged off like the skin of a snake. Yet, this skin remains. It ‘lives/ perpetually in Cambridge (*Poems: 59*). Despite the absence of roots, therefore, there is still some vestige of the poet’s earlier presence in the form of a skin which waits to re clothe the returning traveller in order to make her more at home. While it does not nourish or stabilise like a root, it offers a surface of familiarity that temporarily comforts.

The poem then suggests that there is a centre to this unfixed ‘radiance’:

A city like any other, were it not for the
order at the centre and the high
invisible bridge it is built upon,
with its immense views of an intelligible human landscape
into which you never look without longing to enter;

into which you never fall without the curious struggle back.

(*Poems*: 60)

This centre takes the form of a tidiness, an organisation. It might also take the form of a call or command. Either way this centre is, like the radiance, rather mysterious, because it can only be accessed by an 'invisible' bridge. Whatever form it takes, however, it is a place that beckons yet repels, beguiles yet alienates. Furthermore, we are drawn into this place while the speaker is distanced from it by the repetition of 'you' in the last two lines of the stanza. The result is an uncertainty, about both place and person, that is deeply unsettling.

However, the concept of a 'radiance without location' takes on a different hue in relation to the line 'You can walk in and out of the picture' (*Poems*: 60).

Furthermore there are 'mild facades' that are like 'stereographs' (*Poems*: 60). These references to artistic creativity suggest that the radiance is the force field created by the poem itself. Cambridge the city becomes a metaphor for art. The poem has usurped the place of the title to become its own place. The spirit of Cambridge is the spirit of the poem. The 'order at the centre' is the poem's own authority, its own 'weird tyranny' ('A Few Words for the New Century' 2000:183). Stevenson herself believes that 'art of any kind, if it really is art, moves us towards... a release of the spirit' ('Interview with Anne Stevenson' 2000: 7), which creates an interesting dialectic, in the case of 'Coming Back To Cambridge' between the spirit as in the ghostly, and the spirit in the sense of the will or the essence. The 'spirit' of the poem and the place are held in a state of constant negotiation.

In 'Coming Back to Cambridge', the spirits of place, poet and poem are challenging and unsettling, but not frightening. Indeed, they exist in harmony with both other spirits and themselves. The ghosts that haunt 'The Traveller' (1968) are not so inoffensive. This poem, written as the poet began the many of her transatlantic crossings, was originally published in Stevenson's first volume, *Living in America*, and it is interesting that such an early poem should reveal so much of her

later preoccupations about place. In the book's introduction, X.J. Kennedy suggests that 'Anne Stevenson has it in her to scare us when she so desires' (Kennedy 1965:12), although I suggest that in this poem she also scares herself. The poem's speaker attempts to expel her existing ghosts, in the hope of replacing them with 'each older, wiser one I met' (*Poems*: 323), but ultimately the original spirits are not to be abandoned in this way:

Outside the rain began to fall
While pieces of a yellow tree
Broke off and smashed like pottery.
I watched them drop, I ate, I rose,
I looked beneath my hair. I froze.
My ghosts were standing there in rows.
(*Poems*: 323)

The speaker is horrified, and not even the regular rhythm and neat end-rhymes can contain the poem's terror. Instead they lead us inexorably through a crescendo of verbs which are topped by the short statement 'I froze'. At this point we do not know what to expect, but we expect something. Our nerves are strained, set on edge by the crashing branches of the tree which are so easily shattered that we fear there are supernatural forces at work. Paradoxically, however, these unearthly presences should not be frightening, for the traveller appears, in the first stanza, to be very familiar with them, and even refers to them as 'my ghosts' (*Poems*: 323). The traveller's terror lies, perhaps, in the horror Kristeva discusses when she suggests that:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the unthinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. ... Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself.
(Kristeva 1982:1)

The idiomatic expression 'beside himself' certainly evokes a sense of fear and anxiety

but, read literally, it is even more eerie, for it suggests that 'I' can be next to myself, indeed even outside myself. Kristeva continues:

When I am beset by abjection, the twisted braids of affects and thoughts I call by such a name does not have, properly speaking, a definable *object*. The abject is not an ob-ject facing me which I name or imagine. ... What is abject is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject has only one quality of the object- that of being opposed to *I*.

(Kristeva 1982:1)

In a state of abjection, the 'I' resides next to the 'I', but the abject is also opposed to the 'I', for the abject is all that the 'I' rejects. Kristeva explains that the abject is that which we reject of ourselves. Peter Brooker neatly summarises the abject as that which 'the subject seeks to expel in order to achieve an independent identity' (Brooker 2003:1). However, because the abject is also 'beside myself', there therefore exists 'an undecidable boundary line between the inside and outside of the body' which results in a fractured and 'divided self' (Brooker 2003:1). The ghosts in Stevenson's poem are both within and without, they are both inside and outside the traveller's skin. Her hope of achieving an independent sense of self by moving from one place to another proves to be fruitless. Geographical location cannot define what we are, or are not. Indeed, it can play no part in defining the sense of self. Place may appear to contribute to it as it offers a degree of security through familiarity. Indeed, the poem appears to suggest that without this familiarity, she might be able to change:

You'd think that in this foreign place,
More strange with every word and face,
Where taste and touch and sight demand
New habits of the eye and hand,
It would be easy to repeal
The laws by which we know and feel.

(*Poems*: 323)

The traveller hopes that by moving away from all that is known, she will be able to construct a new version of the self. The skin, the outward and visible sign of the self,

is 'emptied out' (*Poems:323*) in order that new ghosts will move in and thereby create a new person. Once in a new location, the individual's transformation will be complete. However, this proves not to be the case. A change of place cannot obliterate a past self, for it cannot dislodge 'the undecidable boundary line between the inside and the outside of the body' (Brooker 2003:1). The very concept of a unified, desirable self is impossible, for the boundary between the inside and the outside is not only 'undecidable' (Brooker 2003:1), it is also undefinable and, therefore, transcends geographical borders. Travelling from one place to another has not freed the traveller from the horror of the abject, for the ghosts that she attempts to reject are no longer under the skin but are 'standing there in rows' (*Poems: 323*). The traveller has moved from one state of abjection to another. Place has become irrelevant but the poem, with its rhymes and images, has assumed a significance in its stead.

Place, as a concept, has now become as uncertain and as ephemeral as the ghosts that inhabit Stevenson's poetry. Nevertheless, the voice of 'The Traveller' tells us about 'a town I loved at sight':

I found a town I loved at sight.
(The streets danced deep into the night
And all the cottages were white.)
I found an inn, I found a room
With casements criss-crossed like a loom,
And beams and ivy and a faint
Perfume of wine mixed with the paint.

Unpacked and clean, I ordered tea
And waited for my company.
No one came. The room grew tall.
(*Poems:323*)

The room grows tall for it is the tall tale of myth. No-one comes to this place of settlement, of stability, for it does not exist. The white cottages are the cottages of fairy tales and the poet plays on the homonym 'inn'. An inn is a temporary resting place, a place en-route, so while the traveller believes that she has found an 'in', a

way in, that 'in/inn' does not offer the permanency the traveller would like to believe she has found. The 'room' that grew tall' however, is also the room of writing, the tall story, which draws on the mention of 'new habits of the eye and hand' in stanza one. The criss-crossing of stanza three is, perhaps, the writing, and rewriting of letters, so that figuratively the poem becomes a metaphor for writing itself. The rhyming of 'loom' with 'room' emphasises the weaving together of a textual house. The multiple vowel sounds in 'casements criss-crossed like a loom' are further advertising the room's written construction. Place cannot define the self nor can it define the writing, even if the poem is about a particular place. Instead the poem itself is defined. although in doing so, the ghostly presence of the poet is reinserted in the 'rows' of the final line.

The ghosts and spirits in Stevenson's poetry are not all identical. While some sustain, others restrain. Some coexist to challenge but not to frighten, while others terrorise and bring fear and loathing. The ghosts that exist in Cambridge and haunt the traveller coexist with the speaker. However, in the poem 'Temporarily in Oxford', the ghost takes the form of one who has died. This time the ghost is a revenant and a wanderer. It only comes into existence after the death of the speaker, but as the poet has not yet died this creates an interesting dialectic between the present and the future:

Where will they bury me

I don't know.

Many places might not be
sorry to store me.

The Midwest has right of origin.

Already it has welcomed my mother
to its flat sheets.

The English fens that bore me
have been close curiously often.
It seems I can't get away from
dampness and learning.

If I stay where I am
I could sleep in this educated earth.

But if they are kind, they'll burn me
and send me to Vermont.

I'd be an education for the trees
and would relish, really,
flaring into maple each October—
my scarlet letter to you.

Your stormy north is possible.
You will be there, engrossed in its peat.

It would be handy not
to have to cross the whole Atlantic
each time I wanted to
lift up the turf and slip in beside you.

(Poems: 61)

Not only is time dislocated in this poem, but place becomes a series of impermanencies both for Stevenson and her future ghost. The autobiographical details in the poem suggest that the 'I' is her, but the gap between the poem's first and second line reinforces a sense of disconnectedness with any one particular location. Even the speaker's internment becomes more a place of storage than of disposal. The poem's title means that we cannot know which side of the Atlantic the speaker will be on as she is merely 'temporarily' in Oxford. It is impossible to place the poem's geographical position. This in turn makes the pronouns uncertain, as 'you' takes on a multiplicity of identities. It would perhaps be easy to think that the 'you' that is 'engrossed in its peat' refers to her mother, which rashly assumes that the 'stormy north' refers to the United States, but earlier drafts of this verse suggest otherwise:

Scotland is always possible.
You will be there
engrossed in your peat
(CUL MS Add. 9451 Poems)

All the poem's deictic references are unclear and confound any one perspective or

view point. 'Engrossed' suggests total immersion and total involvement which together offer the only position of permanency and rootedness in the poem, but the speaker does not want to commit to such fixedness. Furthermore, 'engrossed' implies a fatness and a solidity, a concentration of flesh that highlights the ethereal, will-of-the-wisp nature of the future ghost. The revenant spirit of the speaker wants to be able to flit between places, to 'slip in' for a while, as if merely going to bed, ready to move on after a space of time. The speaker's final destination is unclear, an echo of the uncertainty surrounding her beginning. The Midwest 'has right of origin' but it was the 'English fens that bore me' (*Poems*: 61). The point of birth and the point of origin are not the same. There is, therefore, not the same degree of hold, of engrossment, attached to place for the speaker as there is for the 'you' that lives in Scotland. For the poem's speaker, the beginning and the ending, the points of departure and destination, are fluid, moveable and even interchangeable. Although it might speak about Stevenson's demise, she sees herself being resurrected in the form of a 'scarlet letter'. There can be little doubt that this alludes to Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Novel* in which the events recorded in an old manuscript marked by a red letter A are rediscovered after some two hundred years. While Stevenson's poem plays with the colours of the Autumn trees, 'flaring' not only emphasises their red and gold hues, but also suggests both the work of a distress signal and an aptitude for creativity. There is a yearning here, a plea, but it is less for any permanency of place, and more for a need for the poem to survive. However, the reference to Hawthorne's novel highlights the poem's position as a text which, like the manuscript in the novel, will be reworked each time it is re-read. Furthermore, just as the letter 'A' in the novel loses its initial position as a symbol of shame, the reference to *The Scarlet Letter* reminds us that meaning shifts as time moves on. Stevenson might seek to be buried in one particular place but her poetry cannot remain fixed to, or in, that place. As a text it defies any sense of permanency.

Place is an important part of Stevenson's creative process and many of her poems of place refer specifically to particular locations. However, once these places are transformed into poetry, they are overwritten by the poem itself. The original place is replaced. Autobiographical associations are further interrupted by the ghosts that stalk these poems but these associations are not altogether disrupted. While the voice of 'The Traveller' appears to move from one state of abjection to another, the emphasis on the opposed 'I' paradoxically highlights the existence of an 'I'. The 'alias' in 'Going Back' is still 'half mine' and there are 'survivals' as well as 'erasures' within the 'underwater palimpsest'. (*Poems*: 33). The restless ghost in 'Temporarily in Oxford' hopes for an afterlife in the form of her poetry. Her presence within her placed poems, therefore, while discreet, is not altogether absent. She has not written herself out of the poems entirely, even though the poems are released from their point of origin. However, it is not an insistent presence, and, like a ghost, it is transparent rather than opaque. It does not demand attention, but, instead, offers possibilities which invite further exploration.

Chapter Four

‘shelves of ourselves’: Poetry and the natural world.

Anne Stevenson’s nomadic lifestyle has not only seen her living in a bewildering number of places, but has also exposed her to a wide variety of landscapes and countrysides. Welsh and American mountains, English border valleys and Scottish coasts all feature in her poetry. In an interview she states that ‘I’ve always liked the sea and the deepest kind of countryside’, and admits that ‘I’m drawn to natural landscapes as a moth is drawn to the candle’ (‘An Interview with Anne Stevenson’ 1985: 212). This suggests that not only does she need to relate to the world around her, but also that there is some form of compulsion within her to do so. In a personal e-mail she explains that ‘I feel loyal to the landscape and the people of our Welsh valley and to many aspects of the North East, but otherwise I have no national affinities’. She continues ‘the landscapes I respond to— especially these days— are more geological than geographical’ (E-mail 2003). Her engagement with the physical nature of a particular landscape often leads to a probing and questioning of the origins and structure of the earth itself. This, perhaps, is a reflection of her interest in the work of Charles Darwin, an interest she originally attributes to Elizabeth Bishop and, later, to her husband Peter Lucas:

Elizabeth Bishop first alerted me to the importance of Darwin, but I didn’t read either the *Voyage of the Beagle* or *The Origin of Species* until I married Peter, who has become quite an authority on Darwin, particularly on his relationship with Wales. By now, I must have read almost everything that Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Dawkins have written about evolution.

(E-mail 2003)

In one of her essays, Stevenson confirms that she is a ‘convinced Darwinian’ (‘Purifying the Cistern’ 2000: 350). In a letter to Geoffrey Dutton, she writes ‘as we begin to understand our tiny uniqueness in the universe we gain rather than lose potential’ (CUL MS Add. 9451 Letter, 18/02/03). This potential is given a voice in

her poems of landscape. Her collection *Granny Scarecrow* was originally to be entitled *Darwinian Etudes* in recognition of Darwin's importance in her work.

In his introduction to *The Way You Say The World* (2003), Peter Lucas comments on Stevenson's Darwinian journey. He explains that she is a:

poet of many places: Belsize Park and Langley Park; Edinburgh ... Grantchester, Cambridge; and, from 1998, Western Hill in Durham. Yet through these years she has also been anchored at Pwllymarch in Cwm Nantcol, the 'great cwm' of the geologist Adam Sedgwick (1832), a valley in Ardudwy in Gwynedd with which Peter's family is linked through three quarters of a century. In this amphitheatre of geological time— and with an interest in Charles Darwin quickened by his passage through the cwm in late August 1831 (somewhat as Elizabeth Bishop's had been by his presence in Rio seven months later— a sense of time and man, which can already be glimpsed in *Sierra Nevada* (written in the summer of 1963), is finding its fullest expression.

(Lucas 2003: 4-5)

Here Lucas draws an interesting parallel between both Bishop and Stevenson, and their relationship to Darwin and his travels. In a letter to Pearl Kazin, Bishop writes: ' I've been having a wonderful time reading Darwin's journal on the *Beagle*— you'd enjoy it too. In 1832 he is saying , "Walked to Rio (he lived in Botofogo); the whole day has been disagreeably frittered away in shopping" ' (Bishop in Giroux 1994:255). However, while both poets enjoy the sense of sharing a geography with Darwin, it is Lucas's link between Darwin and the act of writing that is particularly telling. Brett Millier records that Bishop:

complained often in early letters that she found herself unable to write about Brazil, but there she was doing it, "working" in the best sense to learn what she thought about the country to discover what tone she would take when she did come to write formal prose and poetry. As she always did, Elizabeth waited to acquire knowledge about Brazil — plunged into Darwin and Burton and *A Naturalist in Brazil*— before she wrote.

(Millier 1993: 259).

There is, therefore, evidence of some form of relationship for Bishop between the work of Darwin and her own creative process, a relationship that Lucas also observes

in Stevenson's own poetry. In a letter dated 8 January, 1964. Millier records Bishop's admission that for a poet a "Lack of observation seems to me one of the cardinal sins" (Bishop in Millier 1993:352). In her second study of Bishop's work, *Five Looks at Elizabeth Bishop*, published first in 1998 and again in 2006, Stevenson notes this aspect of Bishop's poetry stating that:

Bishop's understanding of how humans and animals exist in separate spheres of ignorance and knowledge, and of where these spheres overlap and where they do not, was instinctive with her and not just a theory she picked up from reading Darwin. What she found in Darwin was confirmation of her belief that the proper procedure for anyone who seeks knowledge is to begin by *looking* for it. To further her own excited explorations of an exotic topography resplendent with new flora and fauna, she had absorbed herself in *The Voyage of the Beagle* and probably *The Origin of Species* on first coming to Brazil. Like Darwin, she was determined to describe what she saw honestly and modestly, and if important truths could be 'pulled down from underneath' the natural material, so much the better. (*Five Looks* 2006: 81-82).

Observation, and the knowledge it imparts, is therefore crucial in Bishop's approach to creating poetry. However, Stevenson notes that Bishop did not rely solely on the act of looking when writing her poems. Instead, she suggests that Bishop was 'far too much of an artist to repel, in the interest of scientific detachment, those precious, irrational glimpses of what she called ... 'the surrealism of everyday life' '(*Five Looks* 2006: 82). The artist, she suggests, needs to rely on more than her powers of observation, and Bishop gave this response to Stevenson's questions on the relationship between observation and creation in the now famous passage of a letter written in January 1964:

Dreams, works of art (some) glimpses of the always-more-successful surrealism of everyday life, unexpected moments of empathy (is it?), catch a peripheral vision of whatever it is one can never really see full-face but that seems enormously important. I can't believe we are wholly irrational— and I do admire Darwin, one admires the beautiful solid case being built up out of his endless heroic observations, almost unconscious or automatic— and then comes a sudden relaxation, a forgetful phase, and one feels the strangeness of his undertaking, sees the young man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or

sliding giddily off into the unknown. What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration.

(Bishop in Stevenson, *Elizabeth Bishop* 1966:66)

The creation of art, Bishop suggests, requires more than mere observation. It is important, but there is the need to gradually escape into the unknown landscape of the imagination as well. The natural world can no longer be seen merely through the eyes, but must also be sensed, felt and responded to. At the same time, however, the emotional self cannot interfere with the art. Ellis suggests that this letter is 'frequently cited out of context to support the notion that Bishop's aesthetic is based on little except accurate description' (Ellis 2006:63). Instead Ellis draws on Bishop's reference to the 'forgetful phase' and proposes that for her 'observation is only heroic when there remains the threat of forgetting oneself, of "sinking or sliding" under emotion' (Ellis 2006: 63). Deryn Rees-Jones uses this letter in her essay on Bishop, and suggests that:

Here the poet's concentration on the object becomes an examination of the perceiver as well as the object perceived. Not only does the subject construct the object under its scrutiny, but the construction of the object in its turn contributes to the construction of the subject describing it, and this dialogue between self and other, poem and poet, establishes a dynamic relationship which breaks down hierarchical positions between the subject and the object.

(Rees-Jones 2005:220)

This recalls Stevenson's analogy of the reflection of herself in a window in the dark. Like Bishop's 'surrealism of everyday life' (Bishop in Stevenson, *Elizabeth Bishop* 1966:66), Stevenson's own description of seeing 'through your face' while also seeing your reflection ('An Interview with Anne Stevenson' 1985:214) positions her in the role of observer and observed. She is both in, and not in, the view, with the result that the poet and the poem are held in a delicate, and almost tense, negotiation of her location.

This negotiation is made more complicated because it is conducted through

the medium of language. In an essay entitled 'The Way You Say the World is What You Get', Stevenson discusses her own reaction to a particular landscape: the Harlech hills of Wales. She confesses that 'The timelessness and placelessness of that country also, somehow, implies wordlessness' (*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 161). There is not the vocabulary available for the breadths and depths that she observes in the natural world. She believes that 'Upon poets even more than upon psychiatrists has devolved the burden of finding language to express the inexpressible' (*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 169). Not only are there not enough words to describe what she sees, there are not enough to describe her responses to her observations. The imagination is a dimension without boundaries. It too is placeless and timeless, so the poet must resort to figurative and metaphorical forms of discourse in order to find the language she needs. Darwin himself faced the same difficulties with language. He too had to resort to figurative and metaphorical ways of expressing himself in order to overcome language's constraints. Faced with a particularly spectacular vista, Darwin writes in *A Naturalist's Voyage Round The World*:

When we reached the crest and looked backwards, a glorious view was presented. The atmosphere resplendently clear; the sky an intense blue: the profound valleys; the wild broken forms; the heaps of ruins, piled up during the lapse of ages; the bright-coloured rocks, contrasted with the quiet mountains of snow; all these together produced a scene no one could have imagined. Neither plant nor bird, excepting a few condors wheeling around the higher pinnacles, distracted my attention from the inanimate mass. I felt glad that I was alone: it was like watching a thunderstorm, or hearing in full orchestra a chorus of the Messiah.

(Darwin 1845 (1907): 326-327).

He has to resort to a highly imaginative simile in order to express himself precisely because he has to find language for something so sublime that it is beyond his existing vocabulary. Stevenson understands that 'words, of their very essence, have to be *nonreal*; they can only express human forms of consciousness. That is their power and their limitation' (*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 169). Their power lies in their ability to represent the world, to permit communication, and to create expressions

for the otherwise inexpressible through the use of figurative language. Their limitation is their inherently anthropocentric bias. Any representations of geologies and geographies are inevitably going to position a human consciousness upon a landscape as in the case of the 'quiet' mountains in Darwin's description. Language, with its inability to meet Darwin's needs, and its inevitable anthropocentric bias, creates a paradox which Beer summarises:

So Darwin is in a creationist dilemma. He wishes simply to record orders which in no way depend upon him. But because of his highly-charged imaginative language and the need to invent fresh terms and to forge new metaphorical connections, he appears to undertake an individual creative act. His text has a progenitive power. He seeks to express the equivalence of man with all other forms of life but the power of his writing and the novelty of his narrative make it appear that Darwin, man's representative, has as much created as described.
(Beer 1983:103)

Stevenson faces this paradox too. As a poet she rewrites the landscape she sees before her. Bound by language's anthropocentricity, and yet liberated by its imaginative potential, she too begins to take on the role of the creator, a role Darwin's theories denied. Furthermore, poetic language that personifies the landscape seizes a control over it that flies in the face of evolutionary thinking.

However, while Stevenson is very aware of language's ability to hijack nature's autonomy, she also reveals how sometimes, in the face of a particular place at a particular moment, she does begin to feel a sense of release from herself and her own consciousness. She muses 'I don't know why slant light on coppery grass, spreading upward toward rounded, eroded, barren relics of the Ice Age moves me so much. But move me it does, so much so that it liberates me from a desire to explain myself' (*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 161-162). It is at this point that she believes that 'once released from anthropocentric obsession, any poet, any observant person of whatever race or gender, can become, for moments anyway, that eye – e-y-e, not the ubiquitous capital I' (*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 173). It is, however, only for a moment, for the 'I' can never be far away. However, the identity of this 'I' is not

always stable. Stevenson the person is a 'convinced Darwinian' but Stevenson the poet is driven by the demands of the poem. She cannot resist letting words 'have their heads in a play of meaning' (*Between The Iceberg* 1998:131). She is faced by the view before her, but also by the different view of the poem.

Returning to Stevenson's essay 'The Way You Say The World Is What You Get', she discusses the work of Wallace Stevens and proposes that: 'Bare rock is a recurring symbol in Stevens, standing for the world as given, what is "there" within and beneath and beyond human imaginings' and then continues 'But Stevens's rock is always a place of possibility, a foundation for whatever meanings our imaginations choose to create' (*Between the Iceberg* 1998:164). I believe that, in Stevenson's own poetry, the same possibilities exist alongside her Darwinian beliefs. The creative process involves more than observation and reproduction. Language and the imagination intervene and imprint their influence on both the poetic and literal landscape. The natural world, therefore, is constantly in danger of becoming a metaphor for human existence. Stevenson says that she 'doesn't see nature as metaphorical' and prefers instead the word 'transparent' ('An Interview with Anne Stevenson' 1985: 214). However, looking out from ourselves inevitably means looking through ourselves. An early, unpublished poem entitled 'To a Lady Poet' plays with this dilemma:

In the glass
of the window
the light condenses,
punishes
the girl in the blue
bathrobe who, using
her head, forgets to
be grateful.
However
important it is to say
that the black cows
look like crows
on the green hill,
poet,

don't be arrogant.
They like the
taste of whatever
can't help being
green; the sun, too,
would be walking
without you.
Get out of the way.
(CUL MS Add. 9451, poems.)

The indented lines suggest a constant nudging of the poet out of the scenery.

However, despite the poem's final command, she cannot remove herself altogether.

Looking and language, landscape and poetry, theory and art are all set to become held in a delicate, and thoughtful, tension in her poems of the natural world, a world that denies the poet's authority even as the poet simultaneously takes textual command of what she sees before her.

'Sierra Nevada' (1965) is a very early poem that embraces this contradiction. It was written after Stevenson had been walking in the mountains of the Western United States where she spent the summer of 1963 after the death of her mother:

Landscape without regrets whose weakest junipers
strangle and split granite,
whose hard clean light is utterly without restraint,
whose mountains can purify and dazzle
and every minute excite us, but can never offer us
commiseration, never can tell us
anything about ourselves except that we are dispensable...

The rocks and the water. The glimmering rocks, the hundreds
and hundreds of blue lakes
ought to be mythical, while the great trees, soon as they die,
immediately become ghosts,
stalk upright among the living with awful composure.
But even these bones that light
has taken and twisted, with their weird gesticulations
and shadows that look as if
they'd been carved out of dust, even these
have nothing to do with what we have done or not done.
(*Poems*: 30-31)

As Peter Lucas points out, the poem resounds with the echoes of evolutionary

theory (Lucas 2003:4-5). In *A Naturalist's Voyage Round the World*, Darwin notes the fact that 'Daily it is forced home on the mind of the geologist that nothing, not even the wind that blows, is so unstable as the level of the crust of this earth.' (Darwin 1845 (1907):325). Stevenson echoes this geophysical uncertainty in the poem's opening lines, for even the 'weakest junipers' have the power to 'strangle and split granite' (*Poems*: 30). These mountains may be formed of the most durable rock, but their stability and solidity is a delusion. Furthermore, they form a 'landscape without regrets' (*Poems*: 30). It is a landscape entirely of itself, without human feeling. Stevenson possibly omitted the line 'this country, too brilliant and strong willed' (CUL MS Add. 9451 *Poems*) from an earlier draft in order to avoid its anthropomorphic connotations. This is a landscape formed over millennia, without reference, or relationship, to any other being, either supernatural or human. The negatively repeated 'o's in the final line of stanza two create a static emptiness that leaves us out of the picture.

However, despite these changes, the poem soon begins to personify this landscape. The power of the most fragile plant to break through rock and concrete is noted, but Stevenson uses the verb 'strangle' to describe the action of the junipers. This suggests that the landscape is possessed of some sort of bodily form, and that the plants have a determination of their own. The 'bones' of the dead and decayed trees 'stalk' and display an 'awful composure', while their 'gesticulations' suggest limbs and language. The trees are further personified in the lines:

the tip of each tree resembling an arm
extended to a drooping forefinger
(*Poems*:31).

However, the effect is less to bring them alive and more to dehumanise the human form. The embodiment of the landscape and the old trees serves not only to bring the landscape alive, but also to reduce the human to nothing more than a form in the evolutionary process. The poem further illustrates human beings as diminished and

reduced by the repetition of the word 'down':

down, down, over the whole, dry, difficult
train of the ascent, down to the lake
with its narrow, swarming edges where little white boats
are moving their oars like waterbugs.
(*Poems*: 31)

Indeed, we are poetically returned to our roots in line with Darwin's most controversial conclusion that 'all the living forms of life are the lineal descendants of those which lived long before the Cambrian epoch' (Darwin 1859 (1900): 669).

Stevenson repositions the human 'I' as little more than 'waterbugs', whose activities on a lake 'hardly seem to touch its surface' (*Poems*: 31). The result is a poignant wondering that anticipates a time when 'we would forget our names', and shed the assumed authority language offers us:

We think
if we were to stay here for a long time, lie here
like wood on these waterless beaches,
we would forget our names, would remember that
what we first wanted
had something to do with stones, the sun,
the thousand colours of water, brilliances, blues.
(*Poems*: 31).

Stevenson proposes that 'If we were to consider language, also, in a more humble light, as evolved from animals over many thousands of years, we might perhaps gain a truer estimation of what it can and cannot tell us about reality' (*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 171). By relinquishing the command and possession naming implies, we would become 'something to do with' the 'brilliances' of that world. We would, therefore, effectively reposition ourselves as part of the 'wood on these waterless beaches' not the pinnacle of, the created world as the poem puts us, at least aurally, in our place.

We are, therefore, in relation to the natural world, 'dispensable', yet we continue to allocate names to the features, flora and fauna we observe, because we have the language to do so. 'Sierra Nevada' notes that our possession of language allows us to give names to what is not actually ours to name:

Nothing but the wind makes noise.
The lake, transparent to its greeny brown floor,
is everywhere else bluer than the sky.
The boats hardly seem to touch its surface. Just as
this granite cannot really touch us,
although we stand here and name the colours of its flowers.

The wind is strong without knowing that it is wind.
The twisted tree that is not warning
or supplicating, never considers that it is not wind.
(*Poems*: 31)

Heidegger proposes that 'Names are originating words. They present what already is to the act of representation. Names attest to their measure- giving command over things through the power of origination' (Heidegger in White 1978: 24). Despite the fact that humans are latecomers on the evolutionary scene, language makes us believe that we are the inventors, the originators. Indeed, as a name 'commands how that entity is represented and experienced when we discourse about that entity' (White 1978: 25), we appear to be constantly in control. However, the line 'The wind is strong without knowing it is wind' reminds us that the wind, as a phenomenon, has no knowledge and needs none. Stevenson's poem tells us that this landscape is in no way influenced or commanded by us, despite the fact that language appears to offer us the ability to name and claim that which exists. In an interview with Richard Poole, she says of the Welsh scenery she has adopted as a second home:

Cwm Nantcol ... represents a retreat to a timeless, glacier-sculpted topography. Its ancient stumps of mountains have survived hundreds of millions of years drifting across oceans, being folded in and out of land masses, carved and smoothed by ice age after ice age. The place puts us in our place.

(*Between the Iceberg* 1998:175)

This landscape, and the American landscape of 'Sierra Nevada', literally 'puts us in our place'. The third person pronoun positions us as a nameless whole. We are no longer individuals, merely a species. Furthermore, we are both utterly powerless and insignificant in relation to the unfolding history of the physical world. Nevertheless,

at the same time, we are not altogether displaced but instead appear to be well placed to observe the world around us. We can look and we can see, although our vantage point may remain uncertain. Although Stevenson positions humans metaphorically at the lowest point, the poet herself appears to be above this point. She is looking down at the view below her. Instead of being reduced to the 'waterbugs' far below, she is now in a position of supremacy from which she writes:

If we stand in the fierce but perfectly transparent wind
we can look down over the boulders
over the drifted scree with its tattered collar of manzanita,
over the groves of hemlock,
(*Poems*: 31)

The position of the collective we is both above and below. 'I' may be diluted but not reduced. Human consciousness cannot resist reinstating us at the pinnacle of creation.

This stanza also reminds us that the poet is not only looking down over the terrain, but is also writing over the terrain. The poem gradually exerts its own creative control over the landscape, even though the mountain scenery is positioned as being beyond any human interference. Alan Robinson discusses the dialectic this gives rise to in his chapter on Stevenson in his book *Instabilities in Contemporary British Poetry*. In his discussion of the poem 'Sierra Nevada', he proposes that:

Against this emphasis on the cyclical self-sufficiency of natural process, in the third stanza Stevenson characteristically opposes a delicate, redemptive lyricism. Responding to the germinal plenitude of the flowers rising out of their hostile environment, she projects into the landscape an imaginative order: phrasal parallelisms, alliteration and assonance imprint a stylistic balance, most exquisitely in the mellifluous 'gilia and harebells, kalmia and larkspur', whose syllabic mirroring is accentuated by their pleasing consonance.
(Robinson 1988:164)

The language, the sound and the form of the poem exert an artistic and imaginative control over the landscape, so robbing it of the very autonomy the poem simultaneously emphasises. There is in it, therefore: 'a tension between our rationalisation and imaginative pretensions to dominate nature and nature's capacity

to remind us of the futility of our endeavours' (Robinson 1988:164). This tension is created by the very medium in which Stevenson works. As the poet 'recreates' the landscape she sees before her, she begins to assume the role of creator, a role Darwin's theories denied. As the poem takes on its own form, it too exerts an artistic shaping of a landscape which denies the assertion that it 'has nothing to do with what we have done or not done' (*Poems*: 31). These repeated empty and negative 'o's stress no thing and therefore no body but the carefully alliterative imagery in 'wild lupin's tight blue spires and fine-fingered/ handshaped leaves' (*Poems*: 31) not only beautifully personifies this landscape but also rebuilds it in another form as it creates the lupin's 'spires'. This landscape has been reinvented in the form of a human development. The poem rejects the authority language offers but by its use of language reasserts that authority. It cannot help but do so. 'Fine-fingered' suggests the careful work of the artist or musician, but it also hints at light-fingered as the poet steals the autonomy of this landscape and transforms it into her poem. In the final stanza the tentative tone of the verbs, 'were' and 'would' resist the conviction of the sentiments of the first stanza. The poem's line breaks interrupt almost all of the sentences as if this landscape resists any human order, but the short, emphatic line 'We think' emphasises the power of the human brain to reinsert itself into this order and disorder. Also this positive assertion stands in contrast to the repeatedly negative not knowing the poem expresses. While it poem speaks of an evolved landscape that is devoid of human interference, the language of the poem takes that landscape and writes over it. She even dresses up this landscape when she observes the 'tattered collar of manzanita'. The landscape is humanised again, and becomes clothed in a word that echoes the sound of 'transparent' in the first line of this stanza. Stevenson the poet is caught in a double-bind that is unresolvable. Robinson suggests that this 'discrepancy is a recurrent theme in Stevenson's work and surely motivates her desire to find in nature a transcendent significance that would redeem

our insufficiencies' (Robinson 1988:164-165). This was a sensitive reading of Stevenson's early work, but his choice of the word 'insufficiencies' is not strong enough to describe the sense of human arrogance in the face of our insignificance that this poem explores. Furthermore, this particular poem does not speak so much of redemption but rather of a delicate questioning of the position of humanity in, and on, the landscape.

Nevertheless, despite these tensions, Stevenson's meticulous and knowledgeable observations of the mountain's flora and fauna reminds us of Darwin's careful observations. 'I observed' (Darwin 1845 (1907): 359) is his most frequent opening phrase, and is the very basis of his theory. Indeed, *A Naturalist's Voyage Round The World* includes an extract from the preface to the 1845 edition of this work. In it he states: 'This volume contains, in the form of a Journal, a history of our voyage, and a sketch of those observations in Natural History and Geology which I think will possess some interest for the general reader' (Darwin 1845 (1907): vii). The key terms here are 'sketch' and 'observations', as Darwin attempts to reproduce the world that he observes. His writing is largely a careful record of details and colours, heights and depths, as he lists and describes all that is before him. The following is an extract from a journey in the Andes:

As we descended the valley, the vegetation, with the exception of a few pretty Alpine flowers, became exceedingly scanty; and of quadrupeds, birds or insects, scarcely one could be seen. The lofty mountains, their summits marked with a few patches of snow, stood well separated from each other; the valleys being filled up with an immense thickness of stratified alluvium. The features in the scenery of the Andes which struck me most, as contrasted with the other mountain-chains with which I am acquainted, were— the flat fringes sometimes expanding into narrow plains on each side of the valleys; the bright colours, chiefly red and purple, of the utterly bare and precipitous hills of porphyry; the grand and continuous wall-like dykes...

(Darwin 1845 (1907): 322)

Stevenson's later poem 'If I Could Paint Essences' (1982) echoes Darwin's wish to

produce a 'sketch' of his observation.

Another day in March. Late
rawness and wetness. I hear my mind say,
if only I could paint essences.

Such as the mudness of mud
on this rainsoaked dyke where coltsfoot
displays its yellow misleading daisy.

Such as the westness of west here
in England's last thatched, rivered
county. Red ploughland. Green pasture.

Black cattle. Quick water. Overpainted
by lightshafts from layered gold
and purple cumulus. A cloudness of clouds

which are not like anything but clouds.

But just as I arrive at true sightness of seeing,
unexpectedly I want to play on those bell-toned
cellos of not-quite- flowering larches

that offer, on the opposite hill, their unfurled
amber instruments— floating, insubstantial, a rising
horizon of music embodied in light.

And in such imagining I lose sight of sight.
Just as I'll lose the tune of what
hurls in my head, as I turn back, turn

home to you, conversation, the inescapable ache
of trying to catch, say, the catness of cat
as he crouches, stalking his shadow,

on the other side of the window.

(Poems: 24)

Here Stevenson lists, like Darwin, the world she observes. There are the colours and the shapes, the earth and the animals. There is the same rapid succession of geographical features and careful attention to detail that we see in Darwin's writing. She wants to capture, linguistically, the essential qualities of what she observes, which are the very qualities for which there is no language. She is forced to invent

words such as ‘mudness’, ‘westness’ and ‘cloudness’, words that signify something more than merely mud and clouds. The poet is seeking to present not only the visible but the invisible as she attempts linguistically to capture the unseen quiddity of the natural phenomena around her. This ‘essence’ is never visible but is always going to be an intangible ‘somethingness’ that escapes definition and capture. In an interview with Sandra Barry, Stevenson refers to Elizabeth Bishop’s poem ‘Sandpiper’:

The world is a mist. And then the world is
minute and vast and clear. The tide
is higher or lower. He couldn’t tell you which.
His beak is focussed; he is preoccupied,

Looking for something, something, something.
(Bishop *The Complete Poems* : 153)

It is the last line that Stevenson finds particularly memorable (‘An Interview with Anne Stevenson’ 1998:6), and it is this element of looking for something else, something in the ‘mist’, something that is not visible even when the world is ‘minute and vast and clear,’ that illustrates her wish to ‘paint essences’. She wants to uncover what is ‘overpainted’ (*Poems*: 74), to strip off the overlays in order to expose what lies within, to find what is hidden.

Stevenson, in her quest to find not only the language she needs but also to turn that language into poetry, faces the dilemma that, although she is a Darwinian in belief, she is a poet by craft. This dichotomy emerges clearly in the second half of ‘If I Could Paint Essences’. ‘Poetry’, she believes ‘is a way of finding language to reveal hidden insights’ (CUL MS Add. 9451 Outline for a Talk for Northwich, Cheshire, 12.09.1991). While she attempts to find the language she needs to isolate the ‘essence’ of what she sees, she is bound by the demands of poetry itself. Reiterating the importance of music in her work, she explains that she is ‘wedded to pulse and sound’ (‘Purifying the Cistern’ 2000:39), with the result that she wants to ‘play’ literally, musically and linguistically, with, and on, what she sees, in order to create the poem. In an essay, she discusses the idea of T.S Eliot’s ‘auditory imagination’

(CUL MS Add. 9451 'Music of the Muses' 2000:3), and draws on his definition that:

What I call the 'auditory imagination' is the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word, sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end.

(Eliot 1953:94)

Eliot's explanation finds an echo in Stevenson's belief that 'imaginative writing *feels*, when one is engaged in it, like the eruption of some unknown material into the known- the pressure of unconscious knowledge, if you like, on consciousness' (CUL MS Add. 9451 'Outline for a talk for Northwich' 12/09/1991). The poet needs to play on the musicality of words as she seeks to describe the invisible 'innerness' of what she observes around her. Furthermore, poetry, as she emphasises, is not 'a 'cut-up piece' of prose' ('Interview with Anne Stevenson' 2000:16-17). The language of poetry is a musical language which exerts a demand on writing, a demand to which Darwin was not subject. However, in responding to this demand, Stevenson faces again the 'creationist dilemma' Beer voices. If the demands of poetry are to be met, the poem begins to write over the landscape it describes, and even begins to recreate it. The poem says that once the poet starts to 'play', it is inevitable that 'in such imagining I lose sight of sight', and the strangely echoing 'rising horizon' becomes 'floating' and 'insubstantial'. It then deserts the landscape altogether, and becomes a landscape of its own, full of imaginings.

But just as she is lost in these imaginings, the poem begins to turn around:

And in such imagining I lose sight of sight.
Just as I'll lose the tune of what
hurls in my head, as I turn back, turn

home to you, conversation, the inescapable ache
of trying to catch, say, the catness of cat
as he crouches, stalking his shadow,

on the other side of the window.

(*Poems*: 24).

The speaker turns towards home where she attempts to put into words the sights and sounds that hover in her imagination. As she watches the cat playing with its own reflection, however, she is reminded that she herself will stalk any language she uses because words 'can only express human forms of consciousness' (*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 169). The 'conversation' here takes place between the poet and the poem. She struggles to 'catch' the innate 'catness of cat', but language defies her. She wants to record accurately what she sees, but she also wants to 'play' with language, and let words 'have their heads in a play of meaning' (*Between The Iceberg* 1998:131). Language, imagination and observation come together, and wrestle with each other, in the creation of the poem.

An earlier poem, 'The Sun Appears in November' (1977), also looks at this relationship, and explores the anxieties to which it gives rise. The poem was published in *Enough of Green* which includes many of the poems Stevenson wrote while living in a cottage near the Tay estuary.

When trees are bare,
when ground is more glowing than summer,
in sun, in November,
you can see what lay under
confusing eloquence of green.

Bare boughs in their cunning
twist this way and that way,
trying to persuade with crooked reasoning.
But trees are constrained from within
to conform to skeleton.

Nothing they put on
will equal these lines of cold branches,
the willows in bunches,
birches like lightning,
transparent in brown spinneys, beeches.

(*Poems*: 18-19).

We are told here of what we can observe once autumn has robbed the trees of their

leaves. The branches are predestined to 'conform' which echoes Stevenson's own belief that:

In a Darwinian sense, everything that happens is the result of selections from previous happenings; the events of history are determined by previous events, and these by events that preceded them. So each story "is foretold" by the "code" of history— as a beech leaf is "foretold" in the bud by its genetic code

(CUL MS Add. 9451 Draft essay 'Religion and the Creative Vision').

However, an earlier draft of this poem contradicts this notion of predetermination. A discarded first line reads 'You can see the trees scheming' (CUL MS Add. 9451 Poems), which personifies the branches, and rebuffs the concept of genetic authority. Also in this early draft an extra stanza follows a different version of verse two:

Bare boughs in their cunning
twist this way and that way,
trying to persuade by
a discourse of crooked reasoning.

Here's the sun that peers through them
persistently shaping
their confused taut gapping
their confessions of veins and of honesty
(CUL MS Add. 9451 Poems)

This personification of the branches offers them a voice, and the removal of these verses suggests that Stevenson is tussling with the inevitable intervention of her own human consciousness as she observes these trees. She attempts to distance herself from the poem by using the pronoun 'you', but while the 'bare boughs' of the published version still attempt to 'persuade', and are apparently possessed of 'crooked reasoning', I suggest that this reasoning ultimately belongs to the poet. The alliteration and assonance in the poem is evidence of the poet's 'auditory imagination' once again exerting a form of creative control over this landscape. In the second stanza 'bare boughs' echo the 'bare' in the poem's first line and 'cunning' is reinforced by 'crooked reasoning' which in turn echoes the earlier 'confusing' as the

poem itself twists its way backwards and forwards like the boughs it speaks of. This bare scene is richly textual so that the 'eloquence of green' (*Poems*: 18) becomes not just the green leaves of summer foliage, but also the poem itself. The word 'eloquence' suggests an articulate and graceful use of language, and the poem is hinting that poetry itself inevitably camouflages the very thing it is celebrating. However, the poem concludes, no amount of camouflage, nothing that can be 'put on' the bare boughs' will alter the preordained shapes of 'these lines of cold branches'. The 'crooked reasoning' is the poet's tussle with herself, her Darwinian beliefs and her poetry. In a clever play on words, the poem argues with itself because the branches create their own 'lines' of 'writing' which can never be completely erased, no matter how they may be temporarily disguised by the language of poetry although paradoxically it is only the lines of the poem we see now.

'Binoculars in Ardudwy' (1993) is a much later poem that not only returns to the relationship between poetry and landscape, but also appears to give landscape its own language. The poem bewails the insufficiencies of language, and begins with a description of a rural Welsh landscape as seen through a pair of binoculars. Every detail is clear until a moment of doubt intervenes:

All this through the lens of a noose
I hold to my focusing eyes,
hauling hill, yard, man, house
and a line of blown washing across

a mile of diluvian marsh.
I see every reed, rust-copper,
and a fattened S-bend of the river.
Then, just as I frame it, the farm

wraps its windows in lichenous weather
and buries itself in its tongue.
Not my eyes but my language is wrong.
And the cloud is between us forever.

Under cover of mist and myth
the pieced fields whisper together,
'Find invisible *Maesygarnedd*...

Y Llethr...Foel Ddu...Foel Wen'
(*Poems*: 71)

Initially, it appears that the problem here is the inadequacy of the English language to deal with a Welsh landscape. Nevertheless, this poem reinforces the inadequacy of language altogether, because the poet feels strangled (the 'noose' of the binoculars) by the aporia between the view through the binoculars and the language available to represent that view. She is prevented from presenting a wider view as words are squeezed 'through' the echoing 'noose' of language. The internally rhyming 'pieced fields' exhort her to find the right words, but the 'cloud' between what is out there and the words available to her, denies her any sense of clarity and lucidity. As she attempts to find the words to express the 'essence' of what she observes, the 'language is wrong'. However, at the same time, there is almost a suggestion that the landscape is resisting her desire to capture its very 'something' (Bishop *The Complete Poems*: 153). For 'just as I frame it', the picture before her 'buries itself in its own tongue'. It will not release the language of itself for the poet to use, and as the landscape goes 'under cover of mist and myth', it is as if there is even an element of war or espionage between the poet, language and the landscape before her. In a letter to Peter Redgrove, Stevenson wrote:

What one chiefly wants from poetry is illumination— not only 'light' of course, but a kind of clearing away of preconceived ideas— a continual dispersal of the fog our senses limit us to living in'
(CUL MS Add. 9451 letter, 12 June 1985)

The mist in this poem is a metaphor for the limitations we impose on landscape because we can only see it through our own perspective. Our observations and our language are inevitably bound up in our own consciousness, which creates a barrier between the poet and the landscape she views. By comparison, the sun has the capacity to illuminate the 'ice-smoothed stone' by painting it with fresh green turf, which further serves to emphasise the mistiness language imposes. At the same time,

however, while the poem might express the poet's difficulty with language, she nevertheless creates the poem. The 'lean season' in the first line of the first stanza suggests the meanness of the winter months, a harshness emphasised by the vowel clash of 'lean season' and 'ewes'. The 'drifting' sheep remind us of the possibility of snow, while the gentle sound of 'ice-smoothed stone' describes the stone's polished surface but paradoxically belies the thousands of years of grinding that produced this result. The stanza break between the fourth, fifth and sixth stanzas emphasise the gaps in the poet's vision and the use of 'frame' turns this scene into an artistic reproduction. However, the word 'frame' can also suggest a fabrication, a misrepresentation. She cannot tell the whole story. Once again her 'language is wrong'. Now the fields are given a voice. They 'whisper' the last two lines of the poem. They become humanised as they talk together. The poet is writing over the landscape, but the landscape in the poem is answering back.

This juxtaposition challenges our imposition of ourselves on the natural world. We become displaced, and our observations become skewed, because the 'focusing eyes' cannot be altogether trusted. Furthermore the position of the 'I' in the poem is no longer certain. We become unsure of both the poet's and our own place within the poems. In Darwin's writing his position was clear. He is the subject, and the landscape the object of his observations. Writing in the Cordillera mountains he notes: 'I frequently observed, both in Tierra del Fuego and within the Andes, that where the rock was covered during the greater part of the year with snow, it was shivered in a very extraordinary manner' (Darwin 1845 (1907) :322). Later, in the Valley of Guasco in Northern Chile he writes: 'I saw traces only of one living animal in abundance' (Darwin 1845 (1907): 351). There is no ambiguity between subject and object, between Darwin and the countryside he views. However, in Stevenson's poems that relationship is challenged. Furthermore, her repositioning of the 'I' becomes complicated by her frequent use of the second and third person pronouns.

This interrupts the relationship between the poet and the landscape, and the landscape and the poem. It has the effect of removing the 'I' from the centre of the natural world and repositioning it on the very edge, as if to remind us that the sheer scope and depth of the landscape must push us out of the way. Our place shifts again and again.

Stevenson's negotiation of our place becomes more radical in her poem 'North Sea off Carnoustie' (1977). Instead of suggesting that it is uncertain and unstable, this poem hints that we have no place at all. While looking out on a cold seascape, there is an anxious tone in the first stanza:

You know it by the northern look of the shore,
by salt-worried faces,
an absence of trees, an abundance of lighthouses.
It's a serious ocean.

Along marram-scarred, sandbitten margins
wired roofs straggle out to where
a cold holiday fair
has floated in and pitched itself
safely near the prairie of a golf course.
Coloured lights have sunk deep into the solid wind,
but all they've caught is a pair of lovers
and three silly boys.
Everyone else has a dog.
Or a room to get to.

(Poems: 22-23)

The 'look' of the landscape immediately challenges our position, for here it is the shore that is looking at the same time as we are. In an earlier draft the second line reads 'rippled salt-worried faces' (CUL MS Add. 9451 Poems), which puts us under, rather than by, the sea, a position reinforced by the echo of 'shore' in 'serious ocean'. The landscape and the ocean are both personified, which creates the potential for dialogue, but the poem immediately becomes more complex. The fair has paradoxically 'floated in' while the wind is 'solid' (*Poems: 52*), as we both gaze at the scene yet are part of that scene, for we are included in the conspiratorial 'you know' of the first stanza. We are, however, unsure of our position as the ground is

no longer firm under our feet.

As the poem develops, a subtle change of language continues to challenge the shifting perspectives of the early stanzas:

The smells are of fish and of sewage and cut grass.
Oystercatchers, doubtful of habitation,
clamour *weep, weep, weep*, as they fuss over
scummy black rocks the tide leaves for them.

The sea is as near as we come to another world.

But here in your stony and windswept garden
a blackbird is confirming the grip of the land.
You, you, he murmurs, dark purple in his voice.
(*Poems: 23*)

The 'smells' of human existence are picked up in the 'scummy' black rocks while 'cut grass' and 'fuss' draw together the futility of the human need to tidy up our environment in the face of this desolation. The repeated 'weep, weep, weep' of the oystercatcher recalls Blake's poem 'The Chimney Sweeper'. It is as if the bird's sound is also a human cry, and the 'black rocks' of this coastal margin remind us of the black soot and bleak times faced by contemporary workers. We are no longer sure who 'we' are, or where we are. The single line 'The sea is as near as we come to another world' leaves us feeling strangely isolated and homeless. In addition, the blackbird's dark call of 'you, you' is uncanny because we cannot be sure any more who 'you' signifies. Here Stevenson's suggestion that the landscape ultimately 'puts us in our place' (*Between the Iceberg* 1998:175) is no longer just about place but actually leaves us wondering about 'us'. However, the final stanza returns to questioning our own position:

And now in far quarters of the horizon
lighthouses are awake, sending messages→
invitations to the landlocked,
warnings to the experienced
(*Poems: 23*)

The pause of hyphen and the verse break highlight the warring and therefore

incomprehensible, nature of these messages. The poem challenges our understanding, as we expect warnings for the inexperienced, not a siren-like call from what is supposed to be a beacon of safety. We are forced by this juxtaposition to look both ways, out to sea and back to land. We are not just put 'in our place' but rather have been put out of our place altogether.

This sense of dislocation is also given a voice in 'On the Edge of the Island' (1974). However, this early poem introduces another dimension to Stevenson's landscape poetry. While language and landscape, poet and poem find themselves at odds with each other, this poem suggests that Stevenson might even be at odds with herself. The poem opens with the extraordinary line: 'Wherever there is land breaking, and an ocean begins' (CP: 51). This wittily plays on the word 'breaking'. It is usually waves, not the land, that break. Indeed, waves are often referred to as breakers, so it would, perhaps, be more usual to attach 'breaking' to the sea and 'begins' to the land. The effect, however, is to question the position of the speaker. It is not clear whether she is looking towards land or sea, with the result that we feel we are looking in both directions at once. Indeed, we are further perplexed when we look up and see where 'the sea stands up like a level hill' (CP: 51). This inversion of the natural world reminds us of Stevenson's words on Bishop when she notes: 'Although, as she says, there is no "split", Miss Bishop often attempts to reconcile psychic and physical experiences by treating them as if they were inversions or even correctives of each other. Such an inversion appears in the first stanza of "Sleeping Standing Up", a poem which poses the whole sleeping-waking paradox as if it were a fairy tale' (Stevenson *Elizabeth Bishop* 1966: 67). Stevenson's own inversion suggests that she is attempting to reconcile a conflict between the real and the imaginary, the physical and the emotional, but ultimately it is a conflict that cannot be resolved. The beaches are 'in their death-frills' (CP: 51) as they decorate the coastline. However, sand is evidence of the water's eroding power. The land is

actually 'breaking' under the power of the repeated pounding of the ocean, so the poem switches its perspective again. The rest of the poem is a series of uncertainties and contradictions:

there are always one or two taken in,
there are just a few who go back,

just a few who hanker still
for the peephole through the mortar of the will
that shows you you needn't be at all.
There, at the end of the uncertain road
where the sea stands up like a level hill,
a lighthouse dispenses its marginal salvation.
White birds without names call and call.

(CP: 51)

There is no 'I' in this poem, but the sudden 'you' in the second stanza takes us by surprise. We are not sure who is talking to us, nor whom the nameless white birds are calling. Their very namelessness increases our uncertainty until we feel not merely on the edge, but utterly displaced. Furthermore, the 'peephole through the mortar of the will' suggests that we can see even less than the eyes focussing through the binoculars in 'Binoculars in Ardudwy'. Our observations are restricted because we do not know where 'we' are. This is compounded by the symbolism of the 'mortar of the will'. The self impedes observation because it erects such a strong wall around the 'I' that the 'eye' can no longer see. Conversely, however, the 'peephole through the mortar of the will' hints at a chink in the poet's will. Instead of looking out, she could be looking in. It is the 'I' that is unsure, an uncertainty that is voiced in the line 'that shows you you needn't be at all'. The poem has to turn to the pronoun 'you' to explore the human position because the 'I' that is peeping in on itself is too problematic.

Seeing is also problematic in 'Walking Early by the Wye' (1982), a poem written while Stevenson lived in Hay-on-Wye, a time she describes as being 'happy' ('An Interview with Anne Stevenson' 1985: 212). O'Callaghan suggests that this

poem fails 'to transcend' its 'trivial beginnings (O'Callaghan 1997: 25), but he has not appreciated the conflict that lies within the cruelly beautiful scene:

Through dawn in February's wincing radiance,
every splinter of river mist
rayed in my eyes.

As if the squint of the sun had released light's
metals. As if the river pulsed white,
and the holly's

sharp green lacquered leaves leaped acetylene.
As if the air smouldered from the ice of dry
pain, as if day

were fragmented in doubt. As if it were given
to enter alive the braided rings Saturn
is known by

and yet be allied to the dyke's heaped mud.
I will not forget how the ash trees stood,
silvered and still,

how each soft stone on its near shadow knelt,
how the sheep became stones where they built
their pearled hill.

(Poems: 64)

Despite the poem's chilly tone, its title reminds us of Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey', which enables us to place it, both literally and textually. After recalling the beauty of the scenery by the banks of the river Wye, Wordsworth writes of the 'tranquil restoration' and guiding 'influence' this beautiful landscape offers him (Wordsworth *Selected Poems* 201). Instead of being icy and harsh, nature for him, in this particular poem, is a source of guidance and encouragement. Indeed, nature almost assumes the role of a guardian in being a source of moral prompting. In Stevenson's poem there first appears to be only a cold antagonism, but this is challenged by moments of hesitation. Despite the cruelty of this landscape, it is possessed of a 'radiance' so brilliant it is described as 'wincing'. Now humanised, observer and observed are united in the same verb for the speaker's eyes respond to

'every splinter' of sharpness that assails her. It is as if the landscape actually hurts itself in the knowledge of the hurt it causes. Such 'radiance' recalls the 'radiance without location' in the poem 'Coming Back To Cambridge':

And around them
the same figures, the same cast with a
change of actors, move as if concentric
to a radiance without location'.

(*Poems*: 60)

This 'radiance' is like the sun as it maintains those around it in a fixed orbit. Yet, at the same time, it is more than the sun. It is actually holding living beings in its domain, as if possessed of supernatural powers which hold those around it in its thrall.

Returning to 'Walking Early By The Wye', this 'radiance' too is not merely another word for the sun or the icy light of a winter's day. Instead it suggests that a form of inner life, or even a deity, pervades the scene. The personification continues as the sun possesses a 'squint', linking it to the shrouded eyes of the observer, and the river is given a heart that 'pulsed white'. Nature is personified but is cold, not warm, blooded. At its heart there is no emotion. The multiple sibilants illustrate the sharpness of the air and the crispiness of the ice, and the repeated vowel sounds, especially 'i', break up the words into shivery gasps. 'Light's / metals' turn the 'splinters' of stanza one into something much more dangerous and this anticipates the 'acetylene', a welding gas, of the next stanza. The broken line emphasises the aggressive garishness of the green holly leaves amidst all this whiteness. The air is described as having 'smouldered', which suggests that it smokes without a flame, unlike the bright flame of the acetylene. However it also hints at suppressed anger and rage. Eventually the day gradually becomes 'fragmented in doubt', (*Poems*: 64) a doubt reinforced by the repetition of 'as if'. Stevenson then uses a dyke as a synecdoche for the planet. The dyke represents the earth's basic beginnings, and its proposed affinity with the diaphanous rings of Saturn is very striking. Although the

space between the stanzas serves to reinforce the incomprehensible time span involved in the evolution of the planet, it also silently suggests a moment of reflection, even doubt, as the diaphanous rings of Saturn seem so improbably removed from the 'dyke's heaped mud' (*Poems*: 64). The half rhyming 'dry' and 'day', and the broken line reinforces the sense of 'fragmentation' in the fourth stanza and alerts us to the hiatus in her poem. We begin to expect a snag as the development of our universe from the muddy primeval slime is shown to require a phenomenal leap of understanding.

This questioning of an apparent certainty is deepened by the poem's language, which repeatedly hints at difficulties in seeing. Splinters occlude vision, eyes close partially as they wince, and the shadows in the final stanza leave us wondering about the poet's ability to see anything clearly. In addition, the landscape here, just as in the poem 'Binoculars in Arduwy', is hiding itself from view as it is shrouded in a smoky and hostile mist. The repeated 's' sounds in the fifth stanza echo the cold antagonism of the earlier stanzas, and 'silvered' sounds close to shivered. Even nature feels this cold. Furthermore, the use of silver in describing the ash trees reminds us of the metallic imagery of verse three. Warring doubts about the earth and evolution are held in conjunction with Stevenson's description of the piercing cold. Even the verb 'allied' then takes on military overtones as if one set of thought is fighting with another. The 'braided rings' of the planet Saturn reinforce the presence of a higher, organising deity who created, or wove together, the world, echoing the presence of the 'radiance' of the first stanza. Observation and rationalisation, science and poetry are very much at odds.

The poem's questioning of the creation of the universe takes a different turn in the final stanza. A religious murmur invades the outward hostility of the scene by the river, and the speaker notes that 'each soft stone on its near shadow knelt' (*Poems*: 64). Nature itself is possessed of an inner essence, a spirit. The 's' sounds

now become modified as they become 'sh'. They become more like whispers, soothing rather than hostile. The earth has become 'soft'. Stevenson, the evolutionist, knows she cannot rely on nature as a spiritual mentor, yet, at the same time, Stevenson, the poet, appears to be attributing to nature a spiritual element she theoretically knows does not exist. Stevenson has said that she does not 'try to draw sermons from stones' but at the same time she has also admitted that she was 'wide open in Hay, so Welshness and Wales poured in on me' ('An Interview with Anne Stevenson' 1985:212). While she may dismiss any form of religious guidance from nature herself, the poem appears to offer nature a degree of spiritual significance. Then, however, we are reminded that she cannot see very clearly. The 'sheep' appear as stones on the hillside. Furthermore, their presence appears to decorate the hill, it becomes 'pearled'. It is not only dressed up but becomes valuable. The poet appears blinded by the poetic potential of the scene. While the language and imagery of the final stanza is more gentle than the poem's earlier hostility, the conflict between the poet's scientific and spiritual beliefs and her desire to write poetry remains evident.

There is, however, an even stronger spiritual dimension to Stevenson's landscape poetry in her poem 'Resurrection' (1977). The title is overtly religious, and the poem carries echoes of Wordsworth's sense of nature's ability to sustain human beings during times of difficulty and tribulation. In 'Resurrection' the first line of the poem half-echoes Wordsworth's 'Surprised by Joy' in its offer of encouragement and consolation:

Surprised by spring,
by the green light fallen like snow
in a single evening,
by hawthorn, blackthorn, willow,
meadow-- everything
woken again, after how many thousand years?
(*Poems*: 116)

The original version in *Enough of Green* includes the last line 'As if there had been no years' (*EG*: 30), which adds a further sense of wonder to the miracle that is Spring.

Interestingly, in this version, there is no question mark after this line, suggesting that it was a quiet, private conclusion that the poet later did not trust. In this poem the birds are returning, programmed by the 'air they're made for' (*Poems*: 116). The rhyming 'air' and 'they're' situates the birds cleverly within their own environment, but they are nevertheless personified by possessing 'generous throats'. The poem then asks 'Whom do they sing for?' (*Poems*: 116) as if there was an element of choice. Perhaps it is for the 'old man by the river' (*Poems*:116), since he too has survived the winter:

Old man by the river—
spread out like a cross in the sun,
feet bared at and stared at
by three grubby children— you've made it again,
and yes we'll inherit a summer.
Always the same green clamouring fells you that wakes you.
And you have to start living again when it wakes you.
(*Poems*: 116)

The use of the pronouns 'you' and 'we' makes this stanza both personal and collective. The suggestion that Spring offers hope and encouragement becomes rather prosaic but the clever pun on the word 'fells', here acting as both noun and verb, reminds us that we are powerless in the face of the landscape. Nature might encourage but it can destroy. Nevertheless, this poem appears to present nature as a sustaining deity that has the power to raise humans if not from the dead, then at least from spiritual hibernation.

The natural world, therefore, is never a merely observed phenomenon, but is instead a landscape that is infused with human possibilities because the poet can only view what is out there through herself. Despite the fact that the human 'I' is sidelined from Stevenson's landscapes, the poet nevertheless turns to the natural world in order to explore the human condition. Parini introduces the concept of a 'mental terrain' (Parini 1978:1) in relation to this landscape poetry. Taking Wordsworth's claim, in *The Recluse*, that 'the Mind Of Man' is the 'main region of

my song' (Wordsworth *Selected Poems* 226), Parini suggests that, in a similar way, Stevenson is using landscape to explore 'the Mind of Man' as she 'establishes a landscape, bitter, usually autumnal, and this setting rapidly becomes metaphorical ... a mental terrain wherein various possibilities for existence can be discerned' (Parini 1978:1). Stevenson's statement that she does not 'see nature as metaphorical' but rather as 'transparent' is thus being severely tested ('An Interview with Anne Stevenson' 1985: 214).

In the later poem, 'Green Mountain, Black Mountain' (1993), the natural world again becomes personally, rather than geographically or geologically important, for here Stevenson uses the landscape as a metaphor to explore her own life as shaped by the mountains of Vermont and Wales. The first part of the poem includes a series of punchy short stanzas:

White pine, sifter of sunlight,
Wintering host in New England woods.
Cold scent, icicle to the nostril,
Path without echo, unmarked page.

...

Beech bole, cheekbone of the interior,
Sugaring maple, tap of sour soil.
Woody sweetness, wine of the honeybark,
Mountain trickle, bitter to the tongue.

(*Poems* : 182)

Here our senses are assailed by the sights, smells and taste of the Green Mountain while at the same time we are bowled over by the range of textual sounds and patterns the poem offers us. 'White', 'pine' and 'sunlight' become condensed into 'Wintering', and the sugary offerings of this forest remind us of the 'sifter' and the 'host' in the first stanza.

In between these verses are longer, discursive stanzas of introspection and reflection that both endorse Darwinian theory but immediately undermine it by giving the land its own voice. The lines 'You acquired me out of wilderness' and 'Terra there was before *Terra Nova*' (*Poems*: 182) remind us that while America was

christened the new world, it existed long before it was named and colonised:

You brought to my furred hills
Axes, steeples; your race split
Hugely on the heave of the Atlantic...
(*Poems*: 182)

Past and present are cleverly juxtaposed in the stylistic differences of the stanzas. However, as the poet gives the land a voice that asserts 'I formed you', we are reminded of the poet's own past, a past that is being transformed into the poem. Raised in this part of America, a curious dialectic emerges between not only the past and present of the land itself, but the poet's own past and present. Although now settled in England, she is, nevertheless, still partly possessed by the land she grew up in which now keeps a vestige of her 'like a fossil'. Fossils, and their distribution, provide vital evidence to support Darwin's theories: 'It is an old story, but not the less wonderful, to hear of shells which were once crawling on the bottom of the sea, now standing nearly 14,000 feet above its level' (Darwin 1845 (1907): 324). 'Green Mountain, Black Mountain' vividly draws on this aspect of Darwin's writing but, once again, challenges it:

I formed you, you forgot me,
I keep you like a fossil.
The air is full of footprints.
Rings of the sycamore spell you.
Your name spills out on April ground
with October leafmould...
(*Poems* :182)

Life and death is a cycle, as the 'April ground' nurtures us before we decay and become part of the 'October leafmould'. As we flourish and wither, we become part of the very ground that sustained us. 'The air is full of footprints' as we journey through this never-ending cycle. Fossils predate human existence by millions of years, yet the poem's figurative language takes the theory and introduces a human element, which, while inaccurate, adds a dimension to this poem that is beyond the merely observable and the merely theoretical. It becomes an artistic creation, the

poem too is 'formed'. 'The words' fossil', 'spell' and 'spill' echo and spread their way through this verse, and 'formed' and 'forgot' draw attention to each other which question the nature of this formation. We must remain buried if we are looking up to an air which is 'full of footprints' as the poem once again writes over the land from which it is hewn.

Stevenson's admission at the end of 'Green Mountain, Black Mountain' does, however, make it virtually impossible not to read the poem as autobiography:

The poem was conceived in April 1980, when I spent some cold weeks in the Green mountains of Vermont (known to me since childhood), leaving the lush Black Mountains of South Wales (rich in history and myth, but new to me) behind.

(*MGM*: 29)

Nevertheless, Stevenson does not place herself at the centre of the poem, but replaces herself with the landscape she is describing. Furthermore, the poem stresses that this landscape has its own identity. No 'axes' or 'steeple' can obliterate its innate features. In the same way, the poem suggests that the land retains a vestigial mark of the poet's early years despite all the other influences in her life. It is interesting to note that the speaker is not claiming her American origins but, instead, allows the land to do it for her. Origins are important, the poem says, for:

Dry wind-eaten beechleaves
Flutter under their birch arch.
Steeplebush and blackberry
Stoop to beginnings.

(*Poems*: 182)

Here 'beginnings' are an aged force to be recognised. They cannot be ignored, obliterated or even colonised. The Green Mountain 'with its shadow future' is a paradoxical mix of past and future in which the past casts a long shadow over whatever is to come. Although she distances herself from the poem, this imaginative intermingling of the human and the landscape nevertheless continues to confront the very Darwinian theories the poem expresses.

The second section of this long poem turns to the Welsh landscape, and the change of scenery is reinforced by a change in style. Now a series of longer, more discursive stanzas link the past and the present: Welsh mythology on the one hand and Dai Morgan, a living Welsh farmer, on the other. Time becomes timeless in Wales where ‘invisible hankerings of the dead’ exert their influence and Dai is ‘Teyrnon still, or Pryderi the colt-child’ (*Poems* :183). In this section of the poem, the poet is aware that the influence of national and regional myth is very powerful. This adds a significance to the metaphorically fossilised poet of the first section as she herself becomes a product of that land’s history. ‘Green Mountain, Black Mountain’ begins as a poem of landscape but soon develops in a different direction. Stevenson herself admits that:

As I wrote, the Green Mountains and Black Mountains grew more than geographically significant, and it became clear that the poem would be an elegy for my American parents, to whom it is dedicated.
(*MGM*: 29)

While evolutionary theory makes humans insignificant in the natural world, the myths associated with landscape help to make some sense of human history. In an interview with Helena Nelson, Stevenson states:

I believe most people live in stories... myths, religions, fantasies, the very stuff of literature. And rather than reject such fictions, I think we should rush to embrace them so long as we understand they have no substance ‘out there’ beyond human consciousness. The universe is indifferent to us, there is no afterlife except for versions of us that are remembered and celebrated on earth.

(‘Anne Stevenson in Conversation’ 2000:59))

It is as though Stevenson herself needs the stories and myths that contribute to the breadth of human life, even though she knows that such a need has no ‘substance’.

She supports this belief saying:

A bad habit we’ve acquired over the past two hundred years is that of separating *science*– knowledge– from *poetry*, a word derived from the Greek *poiein*, to make or create. ... I think it’s important for poets now to follow Wordsworth’s injunction and carry “sensation into the midst of Science itself”. No myth, however much we pray, can ever

again claim to be the literal truth.
(*Between the Iceberg* 1998: 176).

Stevenson appears to suggest that the moment 'sensation' or emotion is introduced into science, the result is the inevitable, but desirable, creation of myth and legend. 'Green Mountain, Black Mountain' personalises these tensions between science and myth and explores their role in the making of poetry. This gradually becomes a crucial element of her landscape poetry. Returning to the first two stanzas of 'Green Mountain, Black Mountain', the line 'Path without echo, unmarked page' throws a new light on the first line of the next verse. 'I formed you' returns us to writing and poetry. The formation of letters by the poet enables her to reform the landscape in the form of the poem, even though she knows that it will make no lasting impression on the landscape itself. Nevertheless, she uses the word 'forgot'. In the three words 'you forgot me', her play on language simultaneously removes her, the person, from the landscape but reinstates her, the poet, into the poem as she personifies the landscape once again.

The poem 'Trinity at Low Tide' (1993) refers to the process of writing as it explores the relationship between Stevenson the poet and Stevenson the person:

Sole to sole with your reflection
on the glassy beach,
your shadow gliding beside you,
you stride in triplicate across the sand.
Waves, withdrawn to limits on their leash,
are distant, repetitious whisperings,
while doubling you, the rippling tideland
deepens you.

Under you, transparent yet exact,
your downward ghost keeps pace—
pure image, cleansed of human overtones:
a travelling sun, your face;
your breast, a field of sparkling shells and stones.
All blame is packed into that black, featureless
third trick of light that copies you
and cancels you.
(*Poems*: 273).

The 'in triplicate' of the first stanza refers not only to the three shadows cast by the person on the beach, but alerts us to the fact that this poem is self consciously referring to the writing of poetry. Indeed 'in triplicate' suggests writing that needs to go on record, to be preserved and kept for future reference. It is as if the poet wants to stress the importance of this poem's assertion, in the second stanza, that the land does not, and cannot, reflect the human self. Instead, the 'downward ghost' is 'cleansed of all human overtones' (*Poems*:273). While the shadow might appear to 'copy' us, to bear some resemblance to us, ultimately it cancels us out altogether. It even returns us to our origins, according to Darwin, as this shadow is formed from the 'sparkling shells and stones' that lie beneath the water. The use of the word 'cleansed' adds a degree of religious fervour to this belief, a belief that defies the need to accept the 'blame' of original sin. The myth of creation is dispelled, yet, paradoxically, and in contradiction to Stevenson's own beliefs, the waves appear to be controlled by a hidden, divine hand which holds the 'leash' that controls them. At the same time the poem humanises the waves. They are described as 'repetitious whisperings' (*Poems*:273). The natural world is personified as the human form is dehumanised, and the whispering reminds us of the whispering fields in the poem 'Binoculars in Ardudwy'. Once again, the natural world appears to be in some form of dialogue with itself. However, the poem's witty reference to writing suggests that this dialogue is perhaps between language and landscape, poem and person. The poem's own 'weird tyranny' ('A Few New Words for the New Century' 2000:181), coupled with language's inevitable anthropocentrism, together undermine the poet's own beliefs. Poet and person become divided in order to ensure the poem's existence. Stevenson's suggestion that poems can 'turn around and bite me' ('Saying What We Mean' 2004:169) then finds an echo in the poem's first line. 'Sole to sole', while referring to the walker's reflection in the water, also plays with the homonymic 'soul to soul'. It is as if Stevenson the person and Stevenson the poet are

engaged in a heart-to-heart discussion within the poem as she negotiates the demands it makes on her.

This exploration is continued in Stevenson's conversational pair of poems 'Why Take Against Mythology 1 and 2' (2003). She says that these poems are 'a key to my recent work', and together create an 'argument, a dialogue between two people, man and wife, who speak from divergent parts of myself. I do not reject either side of this affectionate argument— but probably in the end I side with the husband' (E-mail, 2003). The poems are light-hearted, but nevertheless telling. In the first of the pair the discussion negotiates the powers of the imagination to see 'a skull/ crushed into the hill' of a 'twilight skyline' (*Poems*: 78). The second poem replies that personification is not 'imagination' but arrogance' (*Poems*: 79), and rejects the imposition of a human form on a landscape shaped millions of years earlier. The final stanza of the first poem, however, negotiates this arrogance in relation to art:

But make him art, not fact.
For when daylight comes back
it will tear him apart.
And how could I love,
dear, a Wales
made of ice-cut rock? No tales
in the making of mountains,
no mind in the dark.

(*Poems*: 78)

The dehumanised figure cut in the landscape is an artistic creation. It is the product of that moment Bishop describes as 'a forgetful phase', a 'moment of slinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown' (Bishop in *Elizabeth Bishop* 1966:66).

Empirical theory, rational thought, are not enough in the creation of art. An earlier draft of this stanza reads:

And how could I love,
dear, a Wales
made of Cambrian rock? No sleep
in the reason of mountains,

no mind in the dark?
(CUL MS Add. 9451 Poems).

I suggest that the removal of the technical terminology, the substitution of 'sleep' for 'tales', and the replacement of the word 'reason' by 'making' transform this final stanza into an allegory for the making of poetry. Science and art, as Stevenson suggests, need not be separated but can, instead, exist one within the other.

The final stanza of the second poem extends this debate. It states:

Before art, lichens delicately
etched that cliff-face.
Millions of millennia formed
bracken, heather, gorse.
Facts? They'll be minted by imagination
once daft mankind
stops conjuring out of mass and force
false spirit-shadows of his own mind.
(*Poems: 79*)

Even before the creation of the art the first voice speaks of, the second poem suggests that art already existed. Nature had already 'etched' its own delicate patterns on the landscape. While the first poem asks for 'art, not fact', the second sneeringly replies that once humans can rid themselves of their own 'false spirit-shadows', they will begin to appreciate new possibilities for imaginative and artistic exploration. The imagination, this poem explains earlier, is what is required to understand the concept of 'continents travelling and clashing' while 'a grinding/ plain of ice' reshapes mountains and valleys (*Poems: 79*). The 'minted by imagination' suggests the possibility of a newly shaped imagination that would create new art in new books. Their value would be their ability to free the imagination from the need to locate itself in the 'mind in the dark'. Instead it would better be able to explore the plains and the valleys, the depths and the mountains without imposing a human consciousness on them. However, this poem, even though it is in the voice of the second speaker, is still art. Its status as a text which has been 'minted by imagination' is reinforced by the 'n' sound that runs through the entire stanza. The

clever repetition in 'Millions of millennia' suggests an ongoing eternity, and while the terms 'mass' and 'force' attempt to bring scientific language to this stanza, they are outweighed by the poem's own 'clashing' and 'grinding' as form and content argue with each other.

Stevenson the person agrees with the voice of the husband in the previous poems, but for the poet this is much more difficult. However, an earlier poem offers a possible way through this dilemma. Although evolutionary theory does not position humans at the pinnacle of creation, we are a part of that creation. We too have evolved through the millennia. Darwin's conclusion that 'all the living forms of life are the lineal descendants of those which lived long before the Cambrian epoch' (Darwin 1859 (1900) :669) suggests that humans are a part of the landscape. We cannot remove ourselves altogether. Stevenson's poem 'Shale' looks at our evolutionary history:

Shale

that comes to pieces in your hand
like stale biscuit; birth book
how many million years
left out in the rain. Break back

the pages, the flaking pages,
to reveal our own hairline habitations
the airless museum in which we're
still chained into that still ocean,

while all this burly and stirring water—
motion in monotonous repetition—
washes with silt our Jurassic numbness,
shelves of ourselves to which we will not return.

(Poems: 83)

The vowel rich phrase 'motion in monotonous' emphasises the fact that the letter 'I' is the only letter that exists in 'motion' but not in 'monotonous'. We were in existence, somehow, while evolution rolled on through the ages. The 'shelves of ourselves' position us within the 'flaking pages' of the earlier stanza, and the break

between verses one and two opens wide the 'birth book' wherein our beginnings lie. The 'stale' biscuit that flakes in our hands holds our genesis. We are present both now and then. The poem looks at a fossil and wonders:

There is so little sheltered, kept, little
and frail, broken in excavation, half
buried, half broken, poor real child in the boulder
that finds the right shape of its mind

only at the moment of disintegration.
And yet, this clear cuneiform in rock,
this sea-urchin humping its flower under
'low flying phantoms'— this flowing anemone.

(*Poems* : 84).

At first it seems that we can only find our 'right shape' when our evolutionary ancestors disintegrate, but the poem introduces a doubt in the questioning 'and yet'. We cannot eradicate the presence of ourselves within the natural world. It is only through evolution that we can 'flower'. However, this poem, like 'Why Take Against Mythology' engages with not only evolution, but how evolution and landscape are represented poetically. The pleasant, but vulnerable, sounding 'hairline habitations' reminds us that our existence only constitutes a hair's breadth on the evolutionary time line. The rhyming connection between 'Hairline' and 'airless' reinforces our relatively recent position in the ocean's mud. The rocks and fossils become a text that we can read. The poem in its turn becomes a text that flowers on those very rocks. The 'fan-shaped tracery of vertical ridges' not only refers to a 'Venus shell', but also reminds us that the poem too is created from a 'tracery' of letters. Nevertheless, while the rock becomes 'a place of possibility, a foundation for whatever meanings our imaginations choose to create' (*Between the Iceberg* 1998:164), it simultaneously embeds us in that rock.

On the ninth of November, 2005, Stevenson read a poem to celebrate Bill Bryson's installation as Chancellor of Durham University. The poem is entitled 'An Even Shorter History of Nearly Everything', and engages with the relationships

between humans, the earth, evolution and art. The poem begins with the monument of the Angel of the North, a giant, metallic angel that stands at the southern approach to Gateshead.

Should you find yourself today on the road to Newcastle,
You couldn't miss, nailed to the horizon,
The armed wings of the north's super-angel
Smelted from the embers of its past.
Part phoenix, part satellite, part Lucifer,
Faceless and sexless, it embodies vast
Crowds of miniature working people
Welded into an elevated whole,
As if to cancel evolutionary nature
And replace it with a single global soul.
(Appendix p.234)

The Angel is 'Smelted from the embers of its past', the past of the coal mining industry that once thrived in the North-East. Risen as if from the ashes, the poem suggests that it is part Christ, part devil. The Angel's wings are its outstretched arms, but the poem plays with the paradox of an angel ready for warfare. 'Nailed to the horizon', it appears to represent Christ, yet its origins in the smoky fires of the coal industry hint at the devil from the fiery furnaces of hell. Constructed from the mass of 'working people', the poem suggests that evolution is denied. Instead, art is telling the human story on, and over, this north-eastern terrain.

The poem then changes direction. Even the angel has evolved:

The angel electronically stores the dead,
Communicates by radar, commands
Through the computer in its head.
You will notice that it has dispensed with hands,
So never could have built the stone Cathedral
Whose shoulders, a short nine hundred years ago,
Shoved aside the coal seams, that still stands,
A Rock of Ages in the evening glow,
Shrugging off raids by pylon and power cable...
Our world the hands that raised it couldn't know,

Any more than they could know the local stones
They shaped with mathematical exactness
For luminous Cuthbert and Bede's stolen bones

Were seas squeezed solid long before man's genesis,
Were relics, world upon world, beneath a crust
They reckoned sixty centuries in the making—
Thin as a tissue dropped on Everest,
But packed, like New York, with nearly everything
That translates time into language for us.
We need to name the images we trust.

(Appendix p.234)

The angel symbolises the passage of time, and the relentless march of progress. However, because of this progress, it 'could never have built the stone Cathedral' erected 'a short nine hundred years ago'. In the poem, knowledge and time become held in a series of strange, and disturbing, juxtapositions as it moves swiftly between the old and the modern. The Cathedral, built to house the bones of dead men, was erected to honour their short lives from stones that had formed over centuries. However it was constructed by men who did not know that these rocks 'Were seas squeezed solid long before man's genesis'. By comparison, the presence of humans on this earth is illustrated as being 'Thin as a tissue dropped on Everest'. This delightful, snowy simile however, betrays not only language's human bias, but also human arrogance. It assumes that human beings were placed at the very pinnacle of creation. We erect monuments on the earth to celebrate that supremacy, yet these monuments are created from rocks and minerals which predate us by millions of years.

Suddenly, however, the poem turns to speak of language. After a long sentence, which reinforces the vast span of the earth's history, a short, single line expresses the belief that 'We need to name the images we trust'. It is language's inevitable anthropocentricity that allows us to write over nature's autonomy like the tissue on Everest. Just like the Angel of the North and Durham Cathedral, the poem becomes a monument, only now it is a monument made of words. The origins of the word tissue lie in the old French *tissu* meaning 'rich material', from the past participle of *tistre*, which is derived from the Latin *texere*, meaning weave. (*Oxford*

Concise English Dictionary and Sacks 1985:18-19). The tissue that the poet lays on top of the world is her text, woven from the words at her disposal. The word 'sea' is 'squeezed' into the word 'solid', evolution is 'squeezed' into five stanzas of poetry. The fourth stanza repeats 'ourselves' three times as if to stress our autonomy, our supremacy, but we must 'read the rocks' the poem warns. The final verse compares fossils to 'snowflakes' which are 'adrift with the continents. While this emphasises uniqueness and randomness, vastness and infinity, it also returns us to the poem itself in the form of the snowy 'tissue' on Everest. It is language which forces the poet to defy evolutionary theory, and to place herself and her poem, like a 'tissue', over the top of the rocky landscape she engages with.

This creates a challenging predicament for Stevenson. 'An Even Shorter History of Nearly Everything', like the earlier poem 'Shale' reminds us that our genesis lies in those same rocks:

What faith, what story, what fact is more remarkable
Than this resurrection of the dead that represents
The life in us, the strangeness of it all.

(Appendix p.235)

Stevenson's use of shifting pronouns and dislocating perspectives attempts to reposition, if not remove the human 'I' from the landscape while language perpetually reinserts us in the poems. At the same time, she appreciates that the earth she describes holds the history of our beginnings. Her landscape poems, which I believe to be amongst her finest because of their vivid descriptions and careful evocations of a wide variety of terrains, become more interesting because they contain this ongoing negotiation of her own position. Language positions her at the pinnacle of creation, able to recreate textually the world she sees. It cannot help but lay a distinctly human imprint on the earth it writes over. While the poem's content tries to resist this position, it is cannot always do so, a difficulty that is compounded by humankind's prehistoric origins. Autobiographical associations, often highlighted

by references to particular landscapes remain very evident. The poems do not attempt to separate the poet from the place because this relationship is superseded by Stevenson's attempts to poetically explore her, and our, position within the rocks of the landscapes she observes. This becomes the experience of the poems, rather than her experience of the landscapes themselves.

Chapter Five.

'I had the last word first': Elegies for Poets.

The relationship between art, experience and autobiography takes on a different complexity in Stevenson's poetry written to mourn the dead. In a lecture entitled 'Elegies and Love Poems' given at the University of Hull, she proposed that 'elegies are, by definition, written to honour or commemorate the dead' ('Elegies and Love Poems' 2002:1). According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 'commemorate' means to 'celebrate in speech or writing', 'preserve in memory by some celebration', and '(of a stone, plaque, etc.) be a memorial'. In the light of these definitions, the elegiac house of words becomes a form of textual monument erected to keep alive the memory of its occupant. However, Angela Leighton notes that elegy 'is writing bereft of its object ... The dead are far off, out of reach, absent' (Leighton 2007: 126), so as a memorial, even as it celebrates and honours the life of the deceased, it nevertheless heralds its occupant's absence.

However, Stevenson is very much present in the elegies that speak of her diverse experiences of grief and loss. In the same lecture at the University of Hull, Stevenson also argued that 'all elegies are to some extent love poems', and that the 'connection between elegies and love poems, it seems, springs from some fundamental strata of human passion in which sadness and joy, memory and desire, longing and fear are not always distinguishable, one from the other' ('Elegies and Love Poems' 2002:1), views which emphasise the intimate nature of her accounts of the death of her contemporaries or near contemporaries. The autobiographical element of these elegies now renders the mourned less remote, for as David Kennedy notes 'our dead remain a part of us.... 'their story' continues with ours' (Kennedy 2007:57-58). Once a poem speaks of personal loss it cannot but reinvoke the dead back into the text. Under these circumstances, elegy ceases to be an empty tomb and, instead, becomes an emotional meeting place for the elegist and the elegised.

However, in the writing of elegy, Stevenson is not only expressing personal emotion, she is also creating a work of art. This creates a dilemma similar to the one she faced when writing about the domestic house, yet now there is the added anxiety of a third person. Instead of expressing her concern over the relationship between the poetic and the autobiographical 'I', she now attempts to explore her poetic and personal relationship with the deceased. Discussing her collection *The Fiction Makers* she analyses her role as an elegist and asks:

The collection is dedicated to Frances Horovitz, who died over a year ago, and there are other poems to dead friends of yours— ... Are those friends of yours 'fictions' now they are gone; is your relationship to them 'fictional'?

She answers herself by saying:

I hope my poems are celebrations of their lives, not their deaths. And love is one of the 'good' fictions we keep in memory. But this is a book of poems, not a book of philosophy or theology.
(*Imagination and Reality* 1985:5)

Stevenson's reply is rather evasive and highlights the complexity of the autobiographical and textual relationship between the poet and her subject. Peter Sacks examines this aspect of elegy, and he suggests that it should 'be regarded, therefore, as a *work*, both in the commonly accepted meaning of a product and in the more dynamic sense of the working through of an impulse or experience— the sense that underlies Freud's phrase "the work of mourning" (Sacks 1985:1).

In his essay, 'Mourning and Melancholia', Freud proposes that:

In what, now, does the work which mourning performs consist? I do not think there is anything far-fetched in presenting it in the following way. Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition— it is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even when a substitute is already beckoning to them. This opposition can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis. Normally, respect for reality gains the day. Nevertheless its orders

cannot be obeyed at once. They are carried out bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathectic energy, and in the meantime the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged.

(Freud 1917(1991):253).

The writing of elegy finds some echoes in Freud's understanding of mourning, for although reality demands that all attachment to the mourned be withdrawn, it is a process that can only happen gradually. For the poet to write an elegy is perhaps to prolong, 'psychically', the existence of the one who has died, while simultaneously endorsing the reality of their death. The final production of the elegy completes the mourning process which, Freud believes, ultimately requires the mourner to withdraw his or her affection for the one that has died. However, Freud also suggests that 'In the first place, normal mourning, too, overcomes the loss of the object, and it, too, while it lasts, absorbs all the energies of the ego' (Freud 1917(1991): 264). This rather suggests that during the period of mourning there is no room for creativity, for all available energy is directed towards the process of dealing with the death. It is only when the mourner has accepted his or her loss that it is possible to turn to any form of substitute. It is difficult, Freud admits, to abandon the loved one 'even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning' (Freud 1917 (1991):253). This difficulty is compounded when the substitute is poetry. The elegiac poem then becomes both a substitute for the lost loved one, and a means of prolonging the life of that very same person during the process of its creation. The elegy both replaces and conserves the same lost object, creating a confusion of emotion and understanding while, paradoxically, restoring rationality to the mourner.

However, Freud's belief that 'when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again' (Freud 1917 (1991):253) is open to challenge. Using this model, the completion of the elegiac poem can be seen to signify the end of mourning and the mourner's detachment from the lost love object. Celeste Schenck, however, questions the possibility of such a detachment, particularly in

relation to the female elegist, and argues that while the 'masculine elegy marks a rite of separation ... the female elegy is a poem of connectedness' (Schenck 1986 (1990): 192). Schenck later modifies her argument by conceding that such a generalisation applies to ' "some" ' women poets' (Schenck 1990: 201), but her approach highlights the elegist's ability to maintain a form of relationship with the deceased even though the elegy is written in response to their death. However, Schenck also claims that 'refusal of consolation ... is perhaps the female elegist's most characteristic subversion of the masculine elegiac' (Schenck 1986 (1990): 200). Jahan Ramazani disputes this claim arguing that 'women poets from Bradstreet to Sigourney write elegies that are just as consolatory as those of their male counterparts, if not more so' (Ramazani 1994: 298). Ramazani suggests that Schenck may have 'mistake[n] a historical trend for a gender distinction' (Ramazani 1994: 298), but perhaps the greatest problem here is the definition of consolation. Schenck appears to argue that a poetry of attachment reflects an unwillingness to 'get over' a death (Schenck 1986(1990): 200), while 'succession and transcendence' are the consolatory outcomes of the masculine elegy (Schenck 1986(1990): 200) because they herald the complete detachment of the mourner from the mourned.

However, such distinctions deny individual responses to the loss of a loved one. Attachment and detachment each have the potential to offer, or deny, differing forms of consolation, but from a poetic point of view they provide a further challenge for elegy. M. H. Abrams notes that consolation in general is often an integral aspect of the genre (Abrams 1999:72), but consolation cannot be quantified or qualified. Stevenson notes 'how immense, how challenging the possibilities for writing elegy are in these late, faithless days of Western civilisation' ('Elegies and Love Poems 2002:1) because death becomes much more final without the promise of some form of religious afterlife. Quoting Ben Jonson's poem 'On My First Sonne', she explains that:

seventeenth-century religion instilled resignation, not imaginative escape, perhaps because acceptance through faith of an allotted fate was tantamount to a promise of heaven. ... In this late, decadent stage of Western civilization, though, it is hardly possible for a poet to write of an afterlife in ways that Ben Jonson would have approved. ('Elegies and Love Poems' 2002:3-4).

Denied a satisfactory theology, Stevenson introduces the concept of the 'imaginative escape' as a form of consolation. However, this places the one mourned at the mercy of the elegist's imaginary powers, for without a shared belief system the subject of the elegy is displaced even beyond death. The hope of an afterlife resurrects the lost loved one, whereas any form of imaginary escape repositions the lost person, but, ultimately, cannot bring that person back to life. The elegy is able to console the poet, in that it is the poet who avoids the reality of death via this imaginary escape, a possibility denied to the elegy's subject.

Sacks notes this apparent divergence, and suggests that:

Few elegies or acts of mourning succeed without seeming to place the dead, and death itself, at some cleared distance from the living. Hence, in part, the sense of distance marked by the processions in elegies or by such related items as the catalogued offering of flowers. These offerings, apart from their figurative meanings and their function of obeisance, also add to the temporal or spatial respite within the rites, or within the poem itself; and the flowers, like the poetic language to which they are so often compared, serve not only as offerings or as gestures for respite but also as demarcations separating the living from the dead.

(Sacks 1985:19).

The poem that seeks to mourn and remember the dead separates and widens the gulf between the mourner and the mourned. This creates the peculiar dialectic inherent to elegy. While its purpose is to remember and to mourn, there is the ever-present danger that it actually can only ever, as Sacks proposes, 'draw attention, consolingly, to [the writer's] own surviving powers' (Sacks 1985:2). Kennedy alerts us to Sacks's 'elision of poet and mourner' (Kennedy 2007:53), but in Stevenson's poems such an elision is cogent, particularly, for example, in her elegies for her friend

Frances Horovitz. Sacks's reference to the relationship between flowers and poetry reminds us that not only does elegy have the power to transfer attention from the dead to the living, but it is death that initially feeds and nurtures the flowery language of the poems. They flourish, and in doing so, grow over and disguise what lies beneath them. However, for as long as they are seen to hide the dead, the dead paradoxically, continue to remain visible so that mourner and mourned become locked into a seemingly endless game of hide and seek.

Many of Stevenson's elegies are written for poets, a burden which adds to the complexity of this already vexed genre. Eric Smith notes that elegy 'may itself be felt to have power to defeat time, to bestow a sort of immortality comparable to the 'Fame' of which the dead poet has been deprived by his early demise' (Smith 1977:11). However, this creates a disturbing dilemma. Smith also suggests that such a lament will not only bestow fame on the deceased poet, but it 'will inevitably achieve also a similar immortality for the mourner' (Smith 1977:11). The surviving poet flourishes professionally at the expense of the dead poet. Schenck sees this relationship differently in her argument for a female brand of elegy by proposing that the female elegist achieves 'poetic identity in relation to ancestresses, in connection to the dead' (Schenck 1986 (1990):192). Schenck's argument for a more ongoing relationship between the elegist and her subject appears less opportunistic than the male elegist's need to perform 'an act of identity that depends on rupture', an act that removes his forbear 'out of the poem, and out of the successor's way' (Schenck 1986(1990): 192), but when the elegised is a poet there remains the possibility that the living poet may gain from the work or reputation of the dead even if only by association.

Ramazani offers a further perspective on this relationship. He introduces the concept of 'homolinguistic imitation' (Ramazani 1994: xii), or imitating the poetic style of the dead poet. He proposes that this is a way of 'bridging the gap'

(Ramazani 1994: xii) between the two poets which, in Schenck's terms, has the potential to maintain the attachment between them. The dead poet's voice is not silenced by death as the elegy forges an artistic collaboration that offers both poets a future together, and recalls Smith's comments on the mutual 'immortality' the genre can offer. However, this technique could also be exposed as a macabre form of grave digging. Elegy's ability to provide 'aesthetic profit from loss' (Ramazani 1994:6) takes on a yet more ghoulish significance when the elegist's art not only flourishes in response to death but also potentially hijacks the voice of the silenced poet.

Elegy, therefore, as a genre, is complex, contradictory and even predatory. Stevenson's work is no exception. Her poems written to commemorate the dead, particularly those for poets, are, therefore, a site of perpetual negotiation of the relationship between herself as the elegist and those she elegises. In her *Poems 1955-2005*, she created a section entitled *In Memoriam* which includes her elegies for Frances Horovitz, Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. However, her poem 'The Fiction Makers', while also dedicated to Horovitz, is presented in the prologue along with other of her key poems such as 'Making Poetry' and 'If I Could Paint Essences'. This suggests that 'The Fiction Makers' is Stevenson's poem of choice to introduce her elegiac works, even though 'Willow Song', also written to mourn Horovitz, is the more anthologised, and therefore well known work.

Horovitz died of cancer of the ear in October, 1983, shortly after her second marriage to Roger Garfitt who went on to edit her posthumously published *Collected Poems* (1985). It was a long and painful illness, and a sense of the wasting nature of the disease, coupled with the waste of life and talent occasioned by such an early death is particularly evident in 'Willow Song' and 'Red Rock Fault', another poem written in Horovitz's memory. However while 'The Fiction Makers' introduces an element of the destruction this illness wreaked, it engages more with the theoretical dilemmas faced by the elegist. 'The Fiction Makers' (1985) opens

with a collective 'we':

We were the wrecked elect,
the ruined few. Youth,
youth, the Cafe Iruna
and the bullfight set,
looped on Lepanto brandy
but talking 'truth'.
Hem, the 4 a.m. wisecrack,
the hard way in,
that story we were all at the end of
and couldn't begin —
we thought we were living now
but we were living then.

(*Poems: 20*)

This 'we' beguiles us into thinking that we, and Stevenson, were part of the Hemingway set, and the final two lines of this stanza, which become a form of chorus, create a questioning of the relationship between the past and the present with their sudden juxtaposition of 'now' and 'then' that only increases our delusion. The echoing rhyme and challenging articulation of the words 'wrecked elect', and the alliteration and drunken dizziness of 'looped on Lepanto brandy' also alert us to the textual nature of this relationship, so we are not surprised to find the word 'truth' in inverted commas. This first stanza is an account of Hemingway's past that has been condensed into certain key facets of his life, and recalls Stevenson's early play *Tempus Immutabile* in which she explores how particular episodes of the past shape the way in which people will be remembered. Hemingway, a frequent visitor to the Cafe Iruna in Pamplona, used the city, and its fiesta, as the backdrop to his novel *The Sun Also Rises* (1926 and published in England as *Fiesta* in 1927). Fact and fiction literally become intertwined, and this theme continues throughout the rest of the verses. The poem moves quickly between its subjects, a speed created by the short lines of the stanzas, as name after literary name is encapsulated in a brief moment that defines them or their era. Simultaneously, time is constantly being questioned in the repetition of 'now' and 'then' and the poem's contradictory use of the past and

present tense in each verse's final two lines.

The poem then abandons the 'we' and moves into a third person narrative. Ezra Pound is accused of 'squeezing the Goddamn iamb/ out of our verse' (*Poems*: 20) which has the effect of closing the involvement of the 'we' of the first stanza. However, there is a more shocking change in the middle of stanza four as Stevenson suddenly addresses Frances Horovitz:

Out of pink-cheeked Cwmdonkin,
Dylan with his Soho grin.
Planted in the fiercest of flames,
gold ash on a stem.
When Henry jumped out of his joke,
Mr. Bones sat in.
Even you, with your breakable heart
in your ruined skin,
those poems all written
that have to be you, dear friend,
you guessed you were dying now,
but you were dying then.

(*Poems*: 21)

As the poem moves from Dylan Thomas to John Berryman's characters in his sequence *Dream Songs*, the real and the imagined become increasingly intertwined which reinforces the poem's engagement with the inevitable process of fiction making that occurs when a work of art reworks the past either in terms of an event or an individual. Stevenson's mid-stanza apostrophe to Horovitz places her not only in the poem's line of famous poets but also in its questioning of the relationship between art and reality. The rhyme pattern in 'ruined skin' strangely recalls 'wrecked elect' and repeats the 'ruined' in line two of stanza one so that, despite the sudden turn to Horovitz, the poem appears to have included her in its anxieties over the fictionalising of the past all along. This inclusion is supported by the pronoun 'those' which at first appears to refer to the work of the poets already mentioned. However the two lines, 'those poems all written/ that have to be you, dear friend', attach the poems to Horovitz and position her and her work as being synonymous.

Stevenson, in effect, textualises her friend but even as she does so the line break suggests an element of resistance to this synonymy. Once Horovitz becomes a text within a text, she will inevitably fall doubly prey to the fictionalising powers of her elegist who will be able to raid both her life and work for her own poetic purpose. At the same time the line break emphasises the fact that the poems are all that remain. The 'dear friend' is no longer present.

However, in addressing Horovitz personally, Stevenson is writing as if Horovitz has not died. Furniss and Bath explain that the 'apostrophic address to the dead in elegies ... harks back to primitive feelings about the continuing existence of the dead, and even serves to maintain the illusion that they are still alive (Furniss and Bath 1996:128). This illusion is maintained in the use of the present tense of the final stanza:

Here is a table with glasses,
ribbed cages tipped back,
or turned on a hinge to each other
to talk, to talk,
mouths that are drinking or smiling
or quoting some book,
or laughing out laughter as candletongues
lick at the dark.
So bright in this fiction
forever becoming its end,
we think we are laughing now,
but we are laughing then.
(*Poems*: 21)

Stevenson appears unable to 'render up' her dead (Schenck 1986 (1990): 192) but any consolation offered by the possibility of her enduring presence is undermined by the skeletal imagery of 'ribbed cages'. There is an eery sensation of the living and the dead coexisting across time and text as the cafe scenes of the final stanza recall the poem's opening lines. The repetition of 'talk' paradoxically emphasises the silence of the dead, yet it is a visible silence in the form of 'candletongues' which 'lick at the dark'. The consonantly rhyming 'talk', 'book' and 'dark' draw together life, death

and art to create the 'fiction' the poem speaks of. The dead are now only textually present. However, there is no end point to this text for it is only 'becoming its end' with its strange conjunction of future possibility and ultimate finality. The poem's last two lines with their reference to 'now' and 'then' completes the confusion. The mourner and mourned, the dead and the living appear to be collectively united in the final 'we', but the use of the present tense, 'are', in these lines stands out in contrast to the past tense used in the last two lines of the other stanzas. Suddenly we are unsure whether Horovitz is included or not. All we can be certain of is that 'we' continue to exist. It is this certainty in the face of the uncertain position of, and troubled relationship with, the dead that creates much of the tension within Stevenson's elegies.

The 'Willow Song' is arguably the most famous of Stevenson's elegies. It was first published in *Tenfold*, Seitre Press, in 1983, the year of Horovitz's death, before appearing in *The Fiction Makers* in 1985. Written as a song, its sighing words, with no reference to Horovitz in the actual text, render it a timeless and universal expression of grief which perhaps accounts for its popularity amongst anthologists. It begins with a series of absences and presences:

I went down to the railway
But the railway wasn't there.
A long scar lay across the waste
Bound up with vetch and maidenhair
And birdsfoot trefoil everywhere.
But the clover and the sweet hay,
The cranesbill and the yarrow
Were as nothing to the rose bay
 the rose bay, the rose bay,
As nothing to the rose bay willow.

I went down to the river
But the river wasn't there.
A hill of slag lay in its course
With pennycress and cocklebur
And thistles bristling with fur.
But ragweed, dock and bitter may
and hawkbit in the hollow

Were as nothing to the rose bay,
the rose bay, the rose bay
As nothing to the rose bay willow.

I went down to find my love.
My sweet love wasn't there.
A shadow stole into her place
And spoiled the loosestrife of her hair
And counselled me to pick despair.
Old elder and young honesty
Turned ashen, but their sorrow
Was as nothing to the rose bay
the rose bay, the rose bay,
As nothing to the rose bay willow.
(*Poems*: 378).

While the ravaged north-eastern landscape and the wild flowers are tropes for the death, and loss, of Frances Horovitz, the repeated 'I' stresses the personal experience of loss this poem expresses, and firmly establishes the presence of the grieving Stevenson in this scarred and damaged world. The repetition of 'lay' and 'down' emphasises the despair of defeat, and the sighing end- rhymes of 'there' and 'everywhere', 'cocklebur' and 'fur' increase the poem's mournful tone. However, there is new life in the form of the wild flowers which are recolonising this wasteland. The words 'Bound up' suggest their ability to bandage together the scars left by the railway, while the ugly sounding 'hill of slag' has created a habitat for numerous plants to thrive. They appear to signify healing and regeneration.

The gently sighing repetition of 'the rose bay, the rose bay' provides each stanza with a wistful chorus. Sacks suggests that 'repetition is ... one of the psychological responses to trauma' and 'creates a sense of continuity, of an unbroken pattern such as one may oppose to the extreme discontinuity of death' (Sacks 1985: 23). In this way, the chorus of this song attempts to smooth over the hiatus created by a sudden absence, as well as filling the void it creates. Furthermore, Sacks proposes that 'the repetition of words and refrains and the creation of a certain rhythm of lament have the effect of controlling the expression of grief while also

keeping that expression in motion' (Sacks 1985: 23). After the second stanza we look towards the chorus, we are expecting it. We are, therefore, reminded of Stevenson's grief, while at the same time feeling that the poem is at least attempting to control the shock of that grief. However, while the chorus, and the regular rhyming pattern of the last four lines of each stanza, have the effect of controlling the sentiment of the poem and appear to exert a form of textual authority over the shock of death, they also have the potential to trivialise death. The song-like tone can also turn this poem into a sing-song. It is an easy poem to read, and is perhaps another reason why it is the preferred choice of anthologists, rather than 'Red Rock Fault', which I believe to be the more interesting poem.

The rose bay willow, and other wild flowers with their punning names, create a further contradiction that is exposed in the line 'O I remember' in stanza four. The poem turns back to the time before Horovitz's death when the flowers seemed to grow in sympathy with the course of her illness. The rhyming 'grief' and 'thief', represented by the 'crimson' poppies and the 'sick henbane', highlight not only sorrow but also a sense of injustice at a life robbed of its full potential. The crimson 'little pools' have become the blood of life lost through the 'scar' in stanza one, and their long vowels stand in contrast to the short sharp vowel sounds in 'sudden poppies' as if to express the sudden finality of death even when it is already anticipated. The 'little pools' also speak of tears as the elegist and elegised become united in their pain and grief. Although the 'self-heal' and 'mignonette's light yellow' appear to offer a ray of consolation, it is short lived, and as Horovitz 'grew thin and grey' the rose bay's white seeds empathetically shroud the landscape in mourning. However, this empathy does not last long. As we return to the poem's first three stanzas we find that the rose bay is thriving. Just as Sacks observes, the flowers have become an emblem of survival (Sacks 1985: 19). They are both feeding on, and blooming over this landscape of mourning. They are winding themselves around the

scar 'across the waste', so that they are not just mending but hiding the wound. They, and the flowery language of the poem, are in danger of colonising, and disguising the very loss they wish to signify. In addition, the poem begins with the mourner going 'down'. There is a powerful sense that the speaker in the poem is looking over this landscape of poetic mourning, which leaves Horovitz beneath and below. She has become lost beneath all its artistic floweriness. Now the clouds of seeds that appeared so empathetic are merely emblems of nature's ability to continually reproduce itself and to survive. As Smith suggests:

The one thing which appears to be exempt from rebirth is conscious being. Thus the conservation of Nature's store in endless cycles is not calculated to inspire confidence in the immortality, the eternal significance, of the individual.

(Smith 1977:5)

Horovitz will not return even though the landscape will be repopulated by these tenacious wild flowers.

However, paradoxically, the seeds that are dispersed have the potential to offer the possibility of consolation. In a later poem, 'Naming the Flowers' (1986), Stevenson draws an analogy between seeds and names:

In winter time my bare patch
will be heavy with names.
I am only a namer.
Names, all alone, are seeds.

(*Poems*: 282)

Although the wild flowers and their seeds represent the process of mourning, the mourned poet herself is not named in the poem itself. It is as if the names/seeds connection must remain unresolved, particularly as the names of the flowers themselves are listed at length and with precision. Derrida suggests that:

In calling or naming someone while he is alive, we know that his name can survive him and *already survives him*; the name begins during his life to get along without him, speaking and bearing his death each time it is pronounced in naming or calling, each time it is inscribed in a list, or civil registry, or a signature.

(Derrida 1989:49)

Brault and Naas explain that 'the name is always related to death, to the structural possibility that the one who gives, receives, or bears the name will be absent from it', so they conclude that 'Mourning thus begins already with the name' (Brault and Naas 2001:13). In 'Willow Song' the seeds, the representatives of her absent name, are disseminated in 'cloudy wreaths'. The seeds carry away the name so that it cannot be pinned down, for once that happens, and the mourned one is named in her absence, then death must be accepted and mourning must begin. While the seeds are scattered, the name cannot be attached to the one who is absent. It cannot even be referred to, so the reality of the loss can be denied. Now the 'cloudy wreaths of summer snow' take on a different significance. These wreaths are not solid, they are temporary like clouds and 'summer snow'. They are wispy and insubstantial and thereby deny the reality and permanence of death.

The elegist, therefore, appears to be mourning the death of Horovitz before she has accepted her death. Even as she writes the elegy, the lost one is still evident as 'a shadow'. This is not a ghostly 'other', but rather a gentle remaining of what once was. The shadow of death is a common euphemism, but at the same time a shadow is an inseparable companion and an extension of oneself. The elegist cannot yet cast off her mourned friend completely. The elegy is attempting to mourn a death, yet at the same time is prolonging the existence of the dead woman as the poet travels through the process of mourning as described by Freud. The elegist cannot withdraw altogether from her relationship with 'the lost object', but is going through the process 'bit by bit' (Freud 1917 (1991): 253). The elegy is failing to commemorate the dead, for it does not actually allow the dead to die.

Just prior to the publication of 'Mourning and Melancholia', Freud wrote a brief essay 'On Transience'. Here, as Kristeva explains, Freud links the themes of 'mourning, transience and beauty', and suggests that 'sublimation might be the counterpoise of the loss, to which the libido so enigmatically fastens itself' (Kristeva

1989: 98). Kristeva develops this idea and suggests:

Sublimation's dynamics, by summoning up primary processes and idealization, weaves a *hypersign* around and with the depressive void. This is *allegory*, as lavishness of that which *no longer is*, but which regains for myself a higher meaning because I am able to remake nothingness, better than it was and within an unchanging harmony, here and now and forever, for the sake of someone else. Artifice, as sublime meaning for and on behalf of the underlying, implicit nonbeing, replaces the ephemeral. Beauty is consubstantial with it. Like feminine finery concealing stubborn depressions, beauty emerges as the admirable face of loss, transforming it in order to make it live.

(Kristeva 1989:99)

The elegy is just such a hypersign as it wraps itself around both the lost loved one and the poet's sense of loss. The poem stands in to provide something where there is nothing, and so brings life to death. 'Sublimation', Kristeva believes, 'withstands death' (Kristeva 1989:100), and she further explains that this state of sublimation can be approached through 'melody, rhythm, semantic polyvalency, the so-called poetic form, which decomposes and recomposes signs' (Kristeva 1989:14). 'Willow Song' is just such a 'hypersign' as it sings around the subject of death. It attempts to approach a state of sublimation in order to withstand the desolation of loss through the use of a regular rhythm and rhyming scheme, wasteland metaphors and flower and seed analogies.

Stevenson, therefore, is dressing up her grief in the beauty of her art.

Kristeva suggests that the 'beautiful object that can bewitch us into its world seems to us more worthy of adoption than any loved or hated cause for wound or sorrow' (Kristeva 1989:100). The elegy has the power to exert its own spell on the elegist as it engages her with its artistic possibilities. Kristeva explains that 'In the place of death and so as not to die of the the other's death, I bring forth— or at least I rate highly— an artifice, an ideal, a "beyond" that my psyche produces in order to take up a position outside itself' (Kristeva 1989 :99). In the same way, the poet turns her energies towards her poem in order to prevent herself from being engulfed by the

death of her friend. She can stand to one side and look at the poem, rather than face the absence of the one mourned. Ostensibly erected as a memorial for the dead, the elegy has become a means of diverting Stevenson from the reality of her loss.

'Red Rock Fault' (1985) is an anniversary poem written two years after Horovitz's death. Here too Stevenson turns to the landscape of the North-East to reflect on the loss of her friend:

This is the South-West wind
the North-East breathes and knows;
that lifts linoleum under kitchen doors,
that bends thorned trees one way on the moors,
that hooks back little white knots of the Irthing
in shaggy impermanent weirs
by the empty farm at the river's turning
where spiders make nets for the silted windows
and machinery rusts in byres.
Fran, has it been two years?

I see you again in your boy's coat
on that sudden and slithery hill of stones
where we ducked from the wind one afternoon
when slant light cut and shone
through glass-white arcs of October grass.
It was just by the Red Rock Fault
where limestone meets sandstone, lass.
You carried your love of that rushy place
in the candle of your living face
to set in the dark of your poems.

And now we have only the poems.
While snow-light, water-light winters still
will come to that ridge of Roman stones,
Spadeadam, Birdoswald, high Whin Sill,
where so many trees lose uncountable leaves
to this wind- one breath from uncountable lives.
Shrill clouds of gathering jackdaws, starlings,
storm an enormous sky.
That huge split ash by the ruined steading—
Cocidius, life-keeper, live eye.

(Poems: 377).

The poem is largely written in the present tense, giving a paradoxical sense of ongoing loss and sadness accompanied by an enduring impression of presence. In the

poem, she can, metaphorically, see again her lost friend, for like the wind, invisible but apparent, she is still manifest in the lives of those who knew her. In an early draft, the first line of the second stanza read 'I see you gaunt in your boy's coat' (CUL MS Add. 9451 Poems), and the change from 'gaunt' to 'again' in the published version reinforces not only her presence, but her presence before the ravages wrought on her by her illness. It is as if she is restored to health so that not only is death denied, but also the suffering she endured. In a haunting echo of the 'candle tongues' in 'The Fiction Makers', an earlier draft of the penultimate line of the second stanza of 'Red Rock Fault' speaks of the 'living candle of your face' (CUL MS Add 9451 Poems), but the published line leaves us in no doubt of Horovitz's presence rather than absence. Instead of the 'living candle', it is her face that is 'living' (*Poems* 377).

However, despite the consolation this appears to offer Stevenson, once again the landscape offers a different perspective. The river and the wind bring movement and life but only to reinforce the absence of human habitation. The weirs are 'impermanent' in their tumbling hurry, and the farm, a seemingly solid sign of human existence is falling into decay. The turning river moves on and leaves behind the desolate building as if to reinforce its isolation and lack of purpose. The 'spiders' make 'nets', not webs, across the windows so that the farm seems to have been caught like a fish in the river and then abandoned. The spidery net curtains and the silt turn the house into a dark, impenetrable tomb that encloses, enshrouds, a non-presence. The multiple 's' sounds add a poignant sibilance that reminds us that we must whisper our words. We are in the presence of death which creates a contrast to the ever blowing, and breathing, wind which is heard in the lively alliteration of 'lifts linoleum'. The alternating vowels in the line 'hooks back little white knots of the Irthing' emphasises the tumultuous movement of the swirling water, a movement that is utterly absent in the mournful line 'and machinery rusts in the byres'. The irregular rhyming pattern and the number of half-rhymes emphasise human mortality.

Full rhymes suggest control while the half rhymes of 'knows' and 'doors', 'byres' and 'years' suggest that human life is fragile and uncertain. The red rust that colonises and damages the machinery is echoed in the red of the rock that is introduced in the second stanza. Neither the life-affirming breath of the wind nor the vitality of the river can halt the inexorable process of human decay.

If the first stanza speaks of slow decline, the second speaks of sudden rupture. There is now emerging a powerful dialectic that cuts across the poem just as sharply as the Red Rock Fault cuts across this landscape. This geological feature illustrates the instability of the earth's surface, yet it endures. Human life, once fractured, does not and the Red Rock Fault becomes a metaphor for human mortality while continuing as a testament to the natural world's durability. The alliteration in the line 'that sudden and slithery hill of stones' forces us relentlessly forwards. We cannot help but fall towards our death. Nevertheless, in contrast to the dark desolation of the farm, the landscape is now bathed in light. However, the repeated 't' sounds in the line 'slant light cut and shone' make this scene icily brittle even as the 'glass-white arcs of October grass' create an ornate, heavenly, scene. Horovitz is almost resurrected in the form of an angel with her 'living face' bathed in a halo of candlelight. However, the scene's brittleness prepares us for the worst, and inevitably this bright, glassy paradise is quickly shattered by the introduction of 'the dark' of her poems in the stanza's final line.

The last three lines of stanza two and the first line of stanza three create a stark challenge to the earlier line 'I see you again in your boy's coat', a challenge that is emphasised by the stanza break. Literally the poem notes how Horovitz translated her love of the north-eastern landscape into her writing, but the poem's language suggests something more sombre. The gentle, comforting hum of 'candle' and 'living' is brought to an abrupt halt by the short, sharp 'set' and its introduction of a sense of congealed finality. The permanence of the poems signify Horovitz's transience.

Stevenson's wistful line, 'we have only the poems' appears to voice her resignation to the fact that she can only ever possess her friend as words. The elegy then turns to the landscape Horovitz loved, and with its lilting rhythm and alliterating repetitions illustrates the now textual nature of their relationship. There appears to be some consolation after all, but then the mood of the stanza alters. The light liveliness of the stanza's early lines are checked by the long vowel sounds in 'trees' and 'leaves'. 'Shrill' echoes the earlier 'still' and 'Sill' and introduces a sharp hostility to this poetic scene. Neither poetry nor the natural world offer lasting solace for they remain and Horovitz does not. The half-rhyming 'leaves' and 'lives' reminds us that nature renews itself. The leaves will return but lives will not. The wind of stanza one also continues to blow in this final verse. It continues to breathe while Horovitz does not. However, while the poem speaks of 'Shrill clouds' of birds, the next line, 'storm an enormous sky' creates a more plaintive tone with its rhyming nasal and liquid consonants and long vowel sounds. The poem appears to be undercutting itself in an attempt to find some solace in the natural world but as the poem returns to the 'ruined steading' of the first verse we are reminded that it is decaying in the midst of all nature's activity. The absence of a verb in the poem's final two lines further emphasises the contrast between the finite nature of human existence and the cyclical activity of nature's regeneration.

Ultimately, therefore, while this elegy addresses Horovitz as if she were still alive, and even briefly resurrects her and names her, its words provide mere 'fictions of consolation' (Sacks 1985:2). The deity Cocidius, whose altars are found along sectors of Hadrian's wall, is associated with both the Roman gods of Silvanus and Mars. As the 'life-keeper, live eye', he is nevertheless buried within the wall. This elegy attempts to deny the finality of death, but fails to do so. The elegist is the 'live-eye', or even the live 'I', but she cannot be the 'life-keeper', a conclusion that finds a distinct echo in Sacks's suggestion that the elegy ultimately becomes a

testament to the elegist's 'own surviving powers' (Sacks 1985: 2) rather than a devotion to the dead. In the second stanza, the poem voices the mourning of 'I', a personal 'I' that is reunited with Horovitz in a wistful 'we'. In the final stanza, the 'we' that is left with only the poems is a more general group. The personal 'I' is again a part of a 'we', but it is a 'we' that does not include her mourned friend. Furthermore, the rhyming 'sky' and 'eye' in lines eight and ten in this stanza, lines that do not rhyme in the previous two verses, bring an air of finality, of tidy closure to the poem. Despite Horovitz's apparent presence in the second stanza, the final verse appears to acknowledge the finality of her absence. While this challenges Schenck's understanding that female elegists cannot abandon their dead, the poem nevertheless supports her claim that a 'refusal of consolation' is a particular feature of their writing (Schenck 1986 (1990): 200). 'Red Rock Fault' offers little consolation for Stevenson because nature's endless powers of endurance and renewal serve only to reinforce the irrevocability of Horovitz's untimely death. While a Kristevan reading of 'Willow Song' appears to suggest that this elegy has the power to deflect the pain of loss, the resignation in the line 'we have only the poems' in 'Red Rock Fault' seems to propose that ultimately she has been textually replaced by her own work and, by extension, Stevenson's poem. Their artistic beauty can no longer withstand the reality of her death.

The relationship between beauty and death, art and loss, is given a further voice in 'Poem for Harry Fainlight'. Published in 1985 in *The Fiction Makers*, the poem consists of eight short stanzas divided in two by a Latin motto:

Tree, a silence
voiced by wind.

Wind, breath
with a tree's body.

Axe the bole,
plane the boards.

Here is Art,
the polished instrument,
casket and corpse.

Dum Vixi Tacui
Mortua Dulce Cano
(When alive I was silent.
In death I sweetly sing)

The harp's motto
will do for the harpist's apology.

But your poems, Harry,
those Welsh oaks
stunted by the wind's scream?

They were always
transforming your wrong life
into their live silence.

(Poems : 382)

Fainlight died in 1982, and it was his sister Ruth who edited his *Selected Poems* which was published posthumously in 1986. Stevenson's poem begins by exploring the relationship between destruction and creativity before turning to Fainlight's life and work. Death, the final silence, appears to have been defeated by the surviving life of his poetry. There is some consolation, some hope following the despair of his early death.

However, there is an uneasiness in this poem that emerges in stanza four. 'Art' is says is both 'casket and corpse'. Here Stevenson is playing on the word 'casket' which can refer to a decorated box for holding jewels or letters, a coffin, or a receptacle for cremated ashes. As an analogy for poetry, this line, with its light vowels in 'casket' followed by the long, funereal sound of 'corpse', suggests that art has the power to richly decorate and disguise both life and death. Fainlight is addressed as if still alive, but there will be no response. The word 'silence' is repeated in the first and last stanza and is both emphasised and challenged by the 'scream' in stanza seven In earlier drafts of this poem the word 'scream' was

originally 'force' and 'voice' (CUL MS Add. 9451 Poems), which would have considerably weakened the poem's troubled tone. The 'but' in the penultimate line alerts us to an impending contradiction, and the question mark at the end of this stanza leaves us wary. The line break between 'always' and 'transforming' in the final stanza introduces a note of caution, not only about the redemptive possibilities of Fainlight's creativity but also about the personal legacy of his work. Stevenson's elegy seems to suggest that while his poetry offers him a form of afterlife, it reconstructs him in the process. We cannot trust the poems to tell us everything about the poet. It is not only the elegist who has the power to fictionalise her subject.

However, Stevenson's inclusion of a Latin motto creates something of a diversion. While convention demands that this be written in italics, the lines look alienated on the page, an alienation reinforced by their construction in a language no longer spoken. They 'secretly sing' their own message as if to suggest that the poem as a whole is doing the same. As an elegy though, it not only sings about Fainlight, it sings because of his death. It too is a beautified casket within which Fainlight is poetically buried.

The artistic riches of elegy are also evident in Stevenson's poem for Gordon Brown, a poet and friend who committed suicide in 2002. 'Passifloraceae' is dedicated to his memory, and positions him as 'Poetry's guardian angel/ spirit of the Tower' (*Poems*: 398), which refers to the Morden Tower where, Stevenson explains 'he initiated and arranged poetry readings over many years' (*Poems*: 398). However, this offers a form of the imaginary escape from death that Stevenson herself introduces ('Elegies and Love Poems' 2002:3-4), as his transformation to an angel allows her to believe that this man still lives, albeit in a different form. This escape is denied to Brown himself, so while the elegy is written in his memory, it appears to offer Stevenson some consolation despite the fact that the poem's opening line

firmly places him in the past. The poem continues:

There is always a reason to refuse reason,
then choose to act.
The gorgeous corolla of the passion flower
huddled in its sack
Chooses or doesn't choose a minute or an hour
to unclench, fold back,
Reveal to its secret sharers the marvel
of a story
Esoteric and erect amid wild, predictable
filaments of glory.
(*Poems: 398*)

The passion flower is so called because it was believed by early Spanish missionaries to symbolise Christ's Passion and its presence in this poem reinforces Brown's resurrection as a form of poetic saviour.

However, while the randomness of its impulse to flower becomes an analogy for the unpredictability of human behaviour, its exotic beauty also acts as a showy funeral emblem, drawing attention to itself as it blossoms in response to Brown's death. The flowers of this plant are short-lived as if to emphasise human mortality, but this particular blossom is immortalised on the printed page. The rhyming 'flower' and 'hour', 'sack' and 'back' highlight its textual construction so that it gradually emerges as a metaphor for the writing of the poem. It becomes its own story. The paradoxical, but vowel rich phrase, 'wild, predictable/ filaments of glory' emphasises the elegy's linguistic richness and power. 'Erect' like a memorial tablet, the poem writes over the dead man with the 'filaments' of its own text.

Furthermore, there is no 'I' in this poem, there is only a 'we', which both distances and dilutes the grief expressed in the poem. However, at the same time, this 'we' potentially controls the emotion the poem expresses, so we are left wondering how much the art controls the grief, or the grief controls the art. The showy riches of the elegy take on a new significance when they not only hide the story of the dead, but hide the story of the mourner's experience of grief.

The 'I', however, returns in 'Waving to Elizabeth' (1985), a poem written for Elizabeth Bishop. While Stevenson looks out on the landscape in her poems that commemorate Horovitz, here she looks up to the sky:

For mapmakers' reasons, the transcontinental air routes
must have been diverted today, and Sunderland's stratosphere
is being webbed over by shiny, almost invisible spider jets creeping
with deliberate intention on the skin-like air,
each suspended from the chalky silk of its passing. Thready at first,
as if written by two, four, fine felt nibs, the lines become cloudy
as the planes cease to need them. In freedom they dissolve. Just
as close observation dissipates in the wind of theory.

(Poems: 375)

Grosholz proposes that 'Memory turns into sky-writing' as Stevenson imagines Bishop in one of the planes flying overhead (Grosholz 2001:728). However, the sky-writing is more than memory. The poem is playing with one of Bishop's own poems, 'The Map', and the writing metaphors around the vapour trails in the sky, weave the poems of the two women together to create a memorial that begins to look at poetry more than it mourns the death of a fellow poet. Stevenson suggests that 'The Map' :

shows us the poet looking at a map and transforming it into poetry. In short, 'The Map' represents a three-fold process of imagination. First, in drawing his map, the map-maker had to revise the topography of the real world to produce an image of it. He created, in effect, a work of art. Next, the poet looking at this map, imaginatively interprets the map-maker's interpretation. In Elizabeth Bishop's eyes, the map becomes curiously alive. ... Finally, the reader of the poem, who knows nothing of this map except what the poet sees it as, responds to the poet's words, and to what these words reveal about her attitude to the map's projection.

(Five Looks 2006: 43-44).

As Stevenson writes over Bishop's poem, the map, or 'The Map' is redrawn. Bishop's poem states that 'Mapped waters are more quiet than the land is' (Bishop *The Complete Poems: 3*) while in Stevenson's elegy Bishop is given the words 'This high, smooth sea's more quiet than the map is' (*Poems: 375*) as if to widen the

horizon of what Stevenson calls the 'aesthetic geography' (Stevenson *Five Looks: 92*) both poems play with, while still allowing the relationship between the two poems to be emphasised. The poems and their 'aesthetic geography' (Stevenson *Five Looks: 92*) become 'imprisoned and free' as layer upon layer of poetry both merge and dissipate like the vapour trails in the sky.

Grosholz also suggests that this poem is also about friendship (Grosholz 2001:733) as it turns to consider the years that have passed since Bishop's death:

Eight or nine of them now, all writing at once,
rising from the south on slow rails, slow arcs, an armillary
prevented by necessity from completing its evidence,
but unravelling instead in soft, powdery stripes, which seem to be
the only clouds there are between what's simply here as park,
house, roof, road, cars, etceteras, and the wide, long view
they must have of us there, if they bother to look.
They have taken so much of us up with them, too:

Money and newspapers, meals, toilets, old films, hot coffee.
Yet the miles between us, though measurable, seem unreal.
I have to think, 'Here it is, June 19th, 1983.
I'm waving from a waste patch by the Thornhill School'.
As perhaps you think back from your trip through the cosmos,
'Here where I love, it is no time at all. The geography
looks wonderful! This high, smooth sea's more quiet than the map is
though the map, relieved of mapmakers, looks imprisoned and free.
(*Poems: 375*).

The two 'I's of the elegist and the elegised appear to engage in a personal dialogue, and the poem's long lines and unpoetic prosiness emphasise the casual nature of their conversation. The poem appears to challenge its own status as art, a challenge reinforced by the prosaic list at the beginning of stanza three. Grosholz suggests that 'when one's speech ... must be both one's own and that of a departed friend?' there is a danger that the poem might 'slip into irreality' (Grosholz 2001:733-734) but Stevenson's poem takes the opposite direction as it becomes more like factual prose than elusive poetry. However, in giving Bishop a voice the poem does defy the reality of death. The elegist is not yet reconciled to her loss. Grosholz's claim that

‘the poet may be tempted ... to treat the unreconcilables as phantasms’(Grosholz 2001:734.) appreciates the ghostly nature of the sky writing but fails to engage with the poem as an elegy. In Schenck’s terms this poem suggests Stevenson’s unwillingness to ‘render up’ her dead friend (Schenck 1986 (1990):192). She is not presented as a ghost, but a speaking being that is still very much engaged with both Stevenson and the nature of art.

Stevenson’s elegies for Sylvia Plath take a very different tone. These poems, from her collection *The Other House* (1990), published one year after her publication of *Bitter Fame*, reflect many of the anxieties and contradictions Stevenson has expressed over Plath and her work. There are three elegies, the first of which is ‘Nightmares, Daymoths’:

A glass jar rattles its split peas and pasta.
Those cysts look innocuous, but they weave
through kernels, hatching into terrible insects.
Something’s on the floor there,
buzzing like a swat wasp.
A belly like a moist rubber thimble
sucks and stings my finger. *Ach*,
my heel reduces it to sewage.

*String the creatures up , then
Hang them on the Christmas tree.*
(*Poems* : 383)

The title not only immediately warns of contradiction, but also introduces a play on words as the familiar term ‘nightmare’ becomes the unfamiliar ‘daymoths’. The oversized and emphasised features of the night become Christmas tree ornaments, horribly beautiful to look at while being symbolically significant. Gradually everything begins to metamorphose into a pattern. The frightening shapes and figures are only the designs in the ‘paisley curtain’. Slowly, but sharply, order is ordered and achieved. The patterns become letters, finally marshalled into a finite alphabet and a text emerges from the apparent chaos. The patterns are the merging of the ‘moths, paper moths or horses’; they are a jumble of the legacy of Plath’s life and writing .

These require order and, as 'the flying words want paper to nest in', this elegy demands to be written.

The first stanza draws on images and events from Plath's life and poetry and even sounds very Plathian. The 'glass jar' of this verse resonates with all that filled Plath's own bell jar, and the distorted perceptions of this poem echo the distortions that Plath herself records in her poetry and prose. The vicious sounds in the first line warn us that all is not, and cannot, be well. The German exclamation and the reference to the foot recalls Plath's poem 'Daddy' (Plath *Collected Poems*: 222) while, at the same time, echoing the line 'My heart under your foot, sister of stone' in 'The Beekeeper's Daughter' (Plath *Collected Poems*: 118). The sting at the end of the stanza evokes 'Stings' in which, as Stevenson suggests, Plath encounters 'the disquieting image of herself' (*Bitter Fame*: 263). In this poem, the speaker gradually emerges in a new form:

They thought that death was worth it, but I
Have a self to recover, a queen.
Is she dead, is she sleeping?
Where has she been ,
With her lion-red body, her wings of glass?

Now she is flying
More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet
Over the engine that killed her-
The mausoleum, the wax house.

(Plath *Collected Poems*: 215)

Here is the day moth of the title of Stevenson's poem, but it is a moth of frightening proportions that soars above and beyond death, and bears little resemblance to the gentler Man-Moth of Elizabeth Bishop's poem from whom 'one tear, his only possession, like the bee's sting, slips' (Bishop *The Complete Poems*: 16). Stevenson appears to be inviting a comparison between these two poems in order to criticise Plath. The Man-Moth 'does not dare look' at the mysterious 'third rail, the unbroken draught of poison' which is a 'disease/ he has inherited the susceptibility

to' (Bishop *The Complete Poems: 16*), a disease Stevenson suggests might be 'Sexuality? Suicide?' (*Five Looks* 2006:70). He tries to ignore it and to 'keep/ his hands in his pockets' (Bishop *The Complete Poems: 16*). He therefore cannot write about this poison. The final line of *The Man-Moth* describes his tear as 'pure enough to drink' (Bishop *The Complete Poems: 16*). Any form of his self-expression has been carefully edited, even sanitised, so as not to infect any one else. Stevenson therefore appears to construct this elegy from layers of both Bishop's and Plath's work in order to highlight the very different stances these two poets took in regard to their negotiation of the art/life dialectic.

This dialectic, however, becomes more sinister, for Stevenson's apparent plundering of Plath's own poems suggests that this poem is not only criticising but also feeding off Plath's own life and work. The poem is flourishing out of , and surviving at the cost of, Plath's death. In the final stanza the poem says 'the dream asks meaning to patch its rags' (*Poems: 383*), for in the nightmare, Plath's poetry has been torn and misshaped. The elegist seems to hope that by writing the elegy she will heal the distorted images of the first stanza. However, it is the elegist herself who has carved up the poems, so it is due to her that the 'rags' need mending. In organising the dreams and nightmares of Plath's poetry, Stevenson stops the passage of the poems to a perceived chaotic infinity by nailing them to the floor of her own poem. The elegy does, to an extent, commemorate the dead, but in doing so appropriates Plath's poetry, and achieves its own existence by usurping the place of the dead woman. It is perhaps even a form of very Plathian cannibalism.

The third poem of the three written for Sylvia Plath, 'Hot Wind, Hard Rain', carries echoes of 'Willow Song', as the landscape once again becomes a trope for exploring loss:

The joy of the rowan is to redden.
The foxglove achieves the violence of its climb.
This summer gale flattens the flower
and deforms the tree.

The dog trots at a queerer angle
to the disused railway.
The tabby seizes the fledgeling blown to the midden.
From the river, gaseous with weed, a reek of decay.

Hot winds bring on hard rain, and here in Durham
a downpour tonight will probably allay
whatever has got the willows by the hair,
shoving light under their leaves
like an indecent surgeon.

Now light's in every particular of air,
acetylene wind that blows too hard and clear.
Who sifts the saving from the killing terrors.

O my dear?
(*Poems*: 387)

The first stanza speaks of creation and decay. The lovely sound of the words 'rowan' and 'redde' are suddenly checked by the 'violence' in line two. This is strangely positioned as an achievement so we are prepared for the 'saving' and the 'killing' later in the stanza, which, in turn, exposes, like the cold light air, the paradoxical nature of elegy, a paradox emphasised by the matching tense of the two verbs. The 'indecent surgeon' exposed by the wind, recalls Plath's poem 'The Surgeon at 2 am' even though they are very different:

The white light is artificial, and hygienic as heaven.
The microbes cannot survive it.
They are departing in their transparent garments, turned aside
From the scalpels and the rubber hands.
The scalded sheet is a snowfield, frozen and peaceful.
The body under it is in my hands.
(Plath *Collected Poems*: 170).

The crucial reference here is the line 'the body under it is in my hands', for it is the same for the elegist. The writers of any elegy hold the physical body of the one mourned in the body of their own poetry. In the case of the poet elegising a poet, the body of the dead poet's work also falls into, and under, her hands where it can be celebrated or dishonoured. In either case it offers grist to the elegist's mill.

"Letter to Sylvia Plath" is a much longer, personal poem by Stevenson. The

third stanza, in particular, speaks of the relationship between the biographer and her subject:

Dear Sylvia, we must close our book.
Three springs you've perched like a black rook
between sweet weather and my mind.
At last I have to seem unkind
and exorcise my awkward awe.
My shoulder doesn't like your claw.
(*Poems*: 384)

Although an elegy, and despite its personal address and unifying use of 'we', this poem seems to want to reject, rather than commemorate, its subject. Yet the poem engages with Plath's life and adopts a great deal of 'homolinguistic imitation' (Ramazani 1994: xii), which bridges the gap between the elegist and her poet subject. Although the poem speaks of Plath's continuing 'half-life' (*Poems*: 384), the elegy maintains her as the abject other whom Stevenson must reject if she is to break free of her 'claw'. This offers an interesting reflection on the nature of elegy itself. Sacks' suggestion that elegy is more to do with the survival of the elegist than the subject of the poem (Sacks 1985:19) leads to the possibility that the elegy itself becomes abject. Kristeva believes that the 'abject has only one quality of the object— that of being opposed to I' (Kristeva 1982:1). She further proposes that the 'abject and abjection are my safeguards' in the face of 'non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me' (Kristeva 1982:2). The elegy as the abject saves the elegist by reassuring the poet of her survival in the face of the death. Stevenson has admitted that she saw a 'version of myself' (CUL MS Add. 9451 Notes on *Bitter Fame*) in Plath, which means that as she rejects Plath she rejects part of herself. In relation to this particular poem, the elegy as the abject becomes not only poetic but personal.

Returning to the poem, the first stanza addresses Plath, although not yet by name, and immediately launches into the tensions between her life and death:

They are great healers, English springs.

You loved their delicate colourings—
sequential yellows, eggshell blues—
not pigments you preferred to use,
lady of pallors and foetal jars
and surgical interiors.
But wasn't it warmth you wanted most?
(*Poems*: 384)

Plath created her poetry from these very tensions, and Stevenson's poem's sudden change in rhythm between lines four and five highlights the mismatch between the colours of an English Spring and the sterile barrenness of medical laboratories and operating theatres, a break that is foregrounded by the noun 'jars' which then takes on the action of a verb. The lines 'An owl in a petalled dress?/ The gnarl at the root of a distress?' (*Poems*: 384) echo Plath's line 'I am a root, a stone, an owl pellet,' in 'Poem for a Birthday' (*Plath Collected Poems*: 132), an echo which is emphasised by the rhyming 'dress' and 'distress' which positions Plath as a figure clothed both in poetry and heartache.

Although opposed to the concept of the poet as 'doomed heroine' (*Between the Iceberg* 1998:182), Stevenson nevertheless casts Plath as the 'fiercest poet of our time' and seeks her forgiveness for wanting to reject her:

Yet first, forgiveness. Let me shake
some echoes from old balled eyed Blake
over your grave and praise in rhyme
the fiercest poet of our time—
you with your outsized gift for joy
who did the winged life destroy
and bought with death a mammoth name
to set in the cold museum of fame.
(*Poems*: 384).

This verse is highly problematic. The self-conscious referral to rhyme draws the reader away from the subject of the elegy and instead focuses on the elegist. The reference to 'outsized gift for joy' does not appear to be in accordance with the first two verses, until it seems that this gift is 'outsized' because it does not fit her. The moments of joy Plath expresses in some of her poems did not, according to

Stevenson, sit comfortably upon her and, as such, left a space around her that was empty. It is into this gap that the elegy inserts itself, wrapping itself around its subject both linguistically and metaphorically and simultaneously drawing attention to and from Plath herself.

The fourth stanza of this elegy adopts much of the imagery Plath herself uses. The 'dissolute nun' is paradoxically powerful as it speaks of a female who, on the one hand, rejects any sexual activity and defines herself in terms of celibacy, but who, on the other hand, rejects such constraints and in doing so destroys her own identity. The 'demon muse' relates to Plath with its sinister undertones of catastrophic creativity, and while the 'archetypal statues' that 'stood/ rooted in air and in your mind' recall Plath's own poem 'The Disquieting Muses', the words also echo an earlier poem of Stevenson's called 'The Traveller'. Here the speaker freezes on realising that 'my ghosts were standing there in rows' (*Poems*: 323). These ghosts are the traveller's abject other, ghosts she must reject to maintain her own sense of self. In 'Letter to Sylvia Plath', the 'demon muse' is perhaps the force Stevenson must reject if she is not to fall prey to its destructive drives.

This rejection becomes more evident, in the subsequent stanzas. Initially, with its allusion to the bee poems, Stevenson appears to be taking issue with Plath's poetry :

Sylvia, I see you in this view
of glassy absolutes where you,
a frantic Alice, trip on snares,
crumple and drown in your own tears.
You were your cave of crippled dreams
and ineradicable screams,
and you were the pure gold honey bee
prisoned in poisonous jealousy.

(*Poems*: 385)

She believes that Plath's poems were 'glassy absolutes' of Plath herself. However, any 'glassy absolute' is easily shattered, a sentiment echoed in the shrill tone of this uneasy pairing. Her poems became a 'cave' into which she crawled, using her life for

their life. Her agonies became 'ineradicable' as they became the words of the printed poem. At the same time, this stanza begins to play with Plato's allegory of the cave and its exploration of an alternative reality so that Stevenson appears to be suggesting that it was Plath's understanding, or misunderstanding, of her reality that led to her untimely death.

The poem then becomes yet more personal:

Because you were selfish and sad and died,
we have grown up on the other side
of a famous girl you didn't know.
The future is where the dead go
in rage, bewilderment and pain
to make and magnify their name.

Meanwhile, the continuous present casts
longer reflections on the past.

(*Poems*: 385)

Although Stevenson admits that Plath's poetry can never be silenced, this constitutes a severe critique of Plath herself. To criticise the dead challenges Stevenson's understanding of elegy as a means of honouring and celebrating the lives of those lost but in a strange, or clever, *volte-face*, she is drawing on Plath's own legacy. Ramazani believes that 'Plath more than any of her forebears intensifies the mourner's aggression toward the dead' (Ramazani 1994: 262) so Stevenson's anger could be seen to honour Plath's radical aesthetic. Furthermore, the echoing engagement in this poem with William Blake's poetry, in particular his song 'The Sick Rose' and 'Auguries of Innocence' appears to emphasise Stevenson's appreciation of the visionary content and poetic novelty of Plath's work, while at the same time recalling Plath's nervous negotiation of life's sorrows and challenges. Stevenson seems, therefore, to both praise Plath's poetic talent while simultaneously re-emphasising the biographical details of Plath's life, and death, which, paradoxically, she believes, should not stand at the centre of her poetry.

The final part of this 'Letter to Sylvia Plath' looks beyond Plath's death.

'Nothing has changed much' it proclaims' (*Poems*: 385). Nature renews itself and even life 'maunches on' (*Poems*: 386). The elegy appears to 'place the dead, and death itself, at some cleared distance from the living' as Sacks suggests (Sacks 1985:19). However, the final two stanzas draw on the 'reflections' (*Poems*:385) of the elegist. In an interview with Michael O'Siadhail, given the year after this poem was written, Stevenson says that Plath gives us 'little more than the myth of her own entrapment. Not only entrapment in her culture but in her own bell jar of ambition' ('An Interview with Anne Stevenson' 1989:9-10). In a later interview, Stevenson appears to contradict herself:

But I will say this about Sylvia Plath: she always tucked that pocket of air between herself and her poems. Her poems are powerful because she was essentially an artist before she was a woman or an American or anything else. When she wrote, she had this wonderful hard-headed objectivity.

(*'Interview with Anne Stevenson'* 2000:11)

There is a gap, a space, between these two critiques of Plath's work and 'Letter to Sylvia Plath' posts itself into this gap. It addresses the death of Plath while attempting to understand the poetic legacy she bequeathed to subsequent generations. It appropriates her life and her poetry, linguistically imitating her vocabulary and hijacking her metaphors. The very title of the poem, 'Letter to Sylvia Plath', raises its own questions. Here, there can be no reply, so the letter becomes a form of note to the self, a note that is negotiated in Stevenson's own poems of the house. The elegy's title also resonates with the memory of Plath's *Letters Home*, but this time home is Heptonstall where Plath is buried. The elegy asks:

Tell me, do all those weeds and trees
strewing their cool longevities
over the garden of your bed
have time for you now you are dead.

(*Poems*: 386)

The elegy is, like these weeds and trees, growing off, and over, Plath's final resting place, while the 'cool longevities' remind us we are in a textual rather than a literal

arena as the poem plays with a series of long and short vowel sounds that are suddenly completed in the shockingly rhyming 'bed' and 'dead'. Finally, Brault and Nass's understanding that the name of an individual bears with it the inevitability of that person's death, that 'mourning thus begins already with the name' (Brault and Nass 2001:13), emphasises this poem's role in announcing death. This elegy heralds death, resists death and then ultimately looks beyond death to a poetic review of the future. The life, and death, of Sylvia Plath and the nature of her poetry are interwoven throughout, leaving Plath 'embodying the living past', a paradoxical position that leaves us unsure and confused.

Stevenson's elegy for Ted Hughes is free of anger and bitterness and, instead, is more interested in poetry rather than personality. The poem opens with a few lines that homolinguistically play with, and on, Hughes's collections *Wodwo* and *Crow*. However, these are broken by an interruption:

*Gigantic iron hawk
coal-feathered like a crow,
tar-coated cave bird,
werewolf, wodwo,*

*you've flown away now,
where have you flown to?*

was how this poem began
before the shade of a voice
fell on my hand.
I was going to invoke
a many-sided Hughes and refer
to his poems and Sylvia's;
it was to be called 'Totem'

when I felt that faint weight
of exhaled disapproval. Was it
disappointment?
No shadow from a shaman-flight,
no daemonic revelation;
just a sad discolouring of the air,
an indefinable pressure.

(Poems: 389)

The power of the elegist to raid the poetry of the dead is even more explicit in this poem than in the elegies for Horovitz and Plath. However, it is this very explicitness that turns this poem into an examination of itself and its genre. The italicised first lines suggest the use of another language, as though Stevenson wants to stress that she is writing in a different tongue.

This section finishes with the question '*where have you flown to?*' (*Poems: 389*) which provokes the interruption the elegist senses in the form of a 'faint weight/ of exhaled disapproval' (*Poems: 389*). This too carries echoes of the poem 'Wodwo' as the 'sad discolouring of the air' (*Poems: 389*) recalls the 'faint stain on the air' in Hughes' poem (Hughes, *New Selected Poems: 87*). This playful intertwining of the poems draws together the elegist and the elegised into an intimate affinity, so it is not so surprising that Hughes, even though merely a 'shadow' and an 'indefinable pressure', is given his own voice in the poem. It is a paradoxical voice, for it is the voice of silence. Nevertheless it answers the question '*where have you flown to?*' by saying 'Please don't imagine I have/ flown anywhere' because in 'Wodwo' the 'I' is situated underneath the river bed. Hughes has not flown away but sunk far beneath, so that the 'shade' of Stevenson's poem now seems prophetic with its undertones of Hades and the river Styx. Rand Brandes suggests that in *Crow* 'Hughes looks death in the face and fearlessly follows it into the abyss' (Brandes 2003:522), so that he becomes positioned under and below. The silent voice says:

The underworld was always a metaphor,
the life after life in which poets
are remade by their interpreters
(*Poems: 389*).

However, in a curious switch of the expected phrase 'life after death' we suddenly realise the speaker is not dead, for it is a 'life after life' that is offered by the underworld. This elegy, it seems, has buried its subject alive. Elegies are a form of self-expression that find their voice from the silencing of another voice, but this is

not the case here. Hughes has not been silenced. He speaks from the grave as he angrily rails against any reinterpretations of his work by others.

Hughes's reluctance to be rewritten and reinvented by his survivors raises another anxiety for the elegist. In the poem's suggestion of 'life after life' (*Poems*: 389), it redefines the relationship between death and creativity. Hughes's voice firmly states:

I killed the fox that brought me poetry
smoking from the gun.
After that midnight encounter,
I set out for ... where I am.
Death was my leader, tormentor,
wife, adversary, friend.
(*Poems*: 390).

The aporia introduces doubt and wondering. The juxtaposition of the present and the past tense, 'I am' after an earlier 'I was', is confusing. The fox is a clear allusion to Hughes's poem 'The Thought Fox', which adds to the confusion. The sudden inspiration to write has been murdered, and replaced, it seems, by death. Death, in this poem, takes many forms, not least that of Plath, which leaves a lingering anxiety as to whether she is alive or dead. These last few lines are contained in the speech marks which signify that Hughes is talking. In a letter from Hughes to Stevenson, penned during the writing of *Bitter Fame*, he urged her to be 'the judge- not one of the barristers. Don't feel responsible for how much dislike Sylvia could provoke. Present the dangerous, extreme mix that produced those poems' (CUL MS Add. 9451 Letter, 18/ 01/1988). 'Invocation and Interruption' seems to carry an echo of these sentiments, so that this elegy for Hughes becomes less an expression of mourning, and more a discussion of the relationship between Plath and Hughes and the part that their relationship, and her death, played in the creation of their poetry.

However, the voice in the poem ultimately belongs to Stevenson. The voice attributed to Hughes demands:

So please, no more poems about me,

grateful as I am for the compliment.
I had the last word first, remember.
I'm going to keep things like this'.
(*Poems*: 390)

The final line virtually reproduces the final line of Hughes's poem 'Hawk Roosting': 'I am going to keep things like this' ((Hughes *New Selected Poems*: 30). The silenced subject of the elegy does not wish to be robbed of the last word. But in writing the elegy, Stevenson has done just that. She has directly opposed the wishes that she herself attributed to Hughes. She has cancelled out his voice and replaced it with her own. She has replaced his text with hers in his absence. Sacks notes that 'few readers would need to be reminded how the word *text* refers back to a woven fabric rather than to an intrinsically more solid substance', and 'To speak of weaving a consolation recalls the actual weaving of burial clothes and shroud, and this emphasises how mourning is an action, a process of work' (Sacks 1985: 18-19). The writing of poetry is also work, a word which also refers to the poet's total output. The text of Stevenson's elegy works itself around Hughes's work and, in doing so, weaves together a work of her own that wraps itself around its mourned subject like a shroud. Hughes, in 'Invocation and Interruption', does not want to be wrapped in a textual shroud, does not want to be the subject of an elegy, but instead wants to remain 'an invention of my own imagination' (*Poems*: 390). While the voice attributed to Hughes might exclaim that 'I had the last word first', a possible reference to *Birthday Letters*, the mourned poet is denied that prerogative when the 'last word' is replaced by the words of the elegist. The inclusion of the qualifier 'first' appears to recognise that there will be a succession of last words as the elegy lives on only to be appropriated in its turn.

Hughes's death was both a personal and a professional loss for Stevenson. In a letter to Olwyn Hughes, she wrote 'But even as we mourn him, we can celebrate his strong and wonderful poems that will never die' (CUL MS Add. 9451 Undated

and unsigned letter). These are comforting words. They express sorrow and a hope for consolation in the legacy of Hughes's poetry. However, they also carry an echo of the line in 'Red Rock Fault': 'now we have only the poems' (*Poems*: 377). The poetry survives, but the poet does not. Stevenson's elegies defy any singular model in their construction of the dead and in their exploration of the relationship between the elegist and the elegised. However, these poems speak of Stevenson's personal experience of loss so that while Kennedy claims that 'our dead remain a part of us ... 'their story' continues with ours' (Kennedy 2007:57-58), it is perhaps more pertinent to suggest that their stories actually become Stevenson's story. The elegiac house of words, while constructed to honour the memory of the dead, gradually emerges as an artistic monument that is inhabited more by the mourner than the mourned.

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This study has examined the relationship between autobiography and art in Anne Stevenson's work by exploring her poetic negotiation of her own presence and position within her poems, or 'house of words'. This negotiation takes a variety of forms. The poems that speak of the domestic house reveal a dialogue between the autobiographical and the poetic 'I' prompted by her anxieties over the nature of confessional poetry. Her later work reflects a relaxing of these concerns, and a less fraught and more personal 'I' is allowed to inhabit her poetry.

Her poems of place are often situated in one or other of the many locations in which she has lived. However, as the poems textually replace their points of origin, they reveal a sense of unrootedness that does not sever, but certainly questions, autobiographical associations. Stevenson herself emerges as a ghostly wraith that threads her way through these poems, so that, while her presence remains discreet, she is not absent. Her life story is built into this particular 'house of words', but her transparent presence there invites, rather than demands, attention.

Stevenson's landscape poems offer a wealth of carefully observed descriptions of the various geographies and geologies she has experienced. In these textual panoramas the tension lies in the relationship between a poet who is Darwinian by belief but who, as a poet by trade, cannot help but linguistically lay a human presence upon an indifferent universe. She is a presence within the poems, but it is a divided presence, so that her negotiation of the dilemma she faces becomes more the experience of the poems than the landscapes themselves.

In contrast, the 'I' remains cohesively Stevenson in her poems written in memory of the dead. Instead it is their position that becomes hauntingly uncertain as Stevenson negotiates her relationships with them and her experiences of loss. The elegised are hijacked by the elegist who signifies her own presence even as she mourns their absence. However, created as works of art as well as works of mourning, these poems become decorative monuments that have the potential to divert us from both the reality of death and the sorrow of the living. They draw attention to their own artistic beauty so that Stevenson's personal story becomes moderated by their careful construction, particularly in the elegies for Frances Horowitz. In her poems for Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, this story emerges as more of a personal engagement with poetry, even as it responds to the deaths of these particular poets.

Therefore, in conclusion, Stevenson's position within her 'house of words' both challenges and endorses the autobiographical origins of her poems. The presentation of her work in *Poems 1955-2005* appears to reflect a wish to disrupt too close an association between her life and her art yet, paradoxically, it is a photograph of her isolated and private Welsh home that appears on the cover. Stevenson has said that 'I don't as a rule think abstract ideas alone lend themselves to poetry. I rarely write a poem that is wholly idea (as Wallace Stevens sometimes did). On the other hand, I almost never simply describe or emote' (*Between the*

Iceberg 1998: 181). Her 'house of words' is erected somewhere between these two oppositions but, as complex and contradictory structures, they resist any fixed location. Her work is founded on her life experiences, but it is her poetic negotiation of these experiences that give her poems their inbuilt strength.

Appendix

1. A copy of the poem 'Forgotten of the Foot' as it appeared in *The Fiction Makers* (1985).

This poem is included because it is significantly different to the version in Stevenson's collection *Poems 1955-2005* which replaces all her previous collections. I refer to both versions in my text.

2. Copy of the poem 'An Even Shorter History of Nearly Everything'.

This poem is included because it had not been published at the time of the submission of this thesis.

‘Forgotten of the Foot’
as published in *The Fiction Makers* 1985 (Oxford University Press)pp. 44-46

Equisetum, horsetail, railway weed
Laid down in the unconscious of the hills;
three hundred million years’ dream still buried

In this hairsoft surviving growth that kills
Everything in the glorious garden except itself,
That thrives on starvation, and distills

Black diamonds, the carboniferous shelf,
That was life before the animals,
Before trilobites and shellfish,

A stratum of compressed time that tells
Truth without language, is the bodystore
Of fire, light, a night without intervals,

That becomes people’s living only when strange air
Fills out the folded lungs, the inert corpuscles...
Into the mute dark, loud life once more.

*Proggie mat, proggie mat,
Who will mend my proggie mat?
Lay it down and squash it flat
And find your knickers after that.*

*

So the hills must be pillaged and cored.
Such evidence as they hide must be hacked out
Urgent as money, the buried black seams uncovered.

Rows of stunted houses under the smoke,
Sootblack houses pressed back hard against pit,
By fog, by smoke, by the cobra hood of smouldering coke

Swayed from the nest of ovens huddled opposite.
Families, seven or ten to a household,
Growing up, breathing it, becoming it.

On winter mornings, grey capped men in the cold,
Clatter of boots on tarmac, sharp and empty,
First shift out and thick frost simple as gold

On the sulphurous roofs, on the stilted gantry

Crossing to engine house and winding gear.
Helmet, pick, lamp, tin bottle of tea.

*Night by day and
Night by night.
Bituminous night
Is the miner's light.*

*

A Nan or Nora servant to each black grate.
Washing on Monday, water kept warm in its well.
Iron and clean on Tuesday, roll out and bake

Each Wednesday, that cokeish hot bread-smell
No child who grew up here forgets.
Thursdays, the Union and the Methodist circle.

Fishday on Friday (fryday), a queue of kids,
Thin, squabbling by the chippy. The men out for pool
After pay day. Later, swearings and broken heads.

Wheels within wheels, an England of working Ezekiels,
Black dangerous water boiling in pits, for cooling,
Forges roaring and reddening, the black irons
glowing like jewels.

No more, no more. They've swept up the workings
As if they were never meant to be part of memory.
A made way of being. A working place. Living a living.

*You get the fish,
I get the bone,
You get the apricot
I get the stone.*

*

Prim Esh looks down on the red-tiled brick town's soul
Streaming from its roofs in the smoke of a lost century—
A veil of breath in which to survive the cold.

When the mine's shut down, habits prolong the story,
Habits and voices, till grandmothers and old ways pass,
And the terraces fold back into themselves, so black, ugly

And unloved that all but the saved (success

Has spared them, and the angel of death-by-money) move
away.

The town is inhabited by an alien, washed up innocence.

Children and animals and people too poor to stay
Anywhere else stray, dazed, into this slum of Eden.
The church is without glass saints or statuary.

The memorial is a pick, a hammer, a shovel, given
By the men of Harvey Seam and Victoria Seam. May
Their good bones wake in the living seams of heaven.

*He breaketh open a shaft away from where men sojourn.
They are forgotten of the foot that passeth by.*

'An Even Shorter History of Nearly Everything'

A poem read on the 9th of November, 2005, to celebrate Bill Bryson's installation as Chancellor of Durham University.

Should you find yourself today on the road to Newcastle,
You couldn't miss, nailed to the horizon,
The armed wings of the north's super-angel
Smelted from the embers of its past.
Part phoenix, part satellite, part Lucifer,
Faceless and sexless, it embodies vast
Crowds of miniature working people
Welded into an elevated whole,
As if to cancel evolutionary nature
And replace it with a single global soul.

The angel electronically stores the dead,
Communicates by radar, commands
Through the computer in its head.
You will notice that it has dispensed with hands,
So never could have built the stone Cathedral
Whose shoulders, a short nine hundred years ago,
Shoved aside the coal seams, that still stands,
A Rock of Ages in the evening glow,
Shrugging off raids by pylon and power cable...
Our world the hands that raised it couldn't know,

Any more than they could know the local stones
They shaped with mathematical exactness
For luminous Cuthbert and Bede's stolen bones
Were seas squeezed solid long before man's genesis,
Were relics, world upon world, beneath a crust
They reckoned sixty centuries in the making —
Thin as a tissue dropped on Everest,
But packed, like New York, with nearly everything
That translates time into language for us.
We need to name the images we trust.

How is it that we alone among breeding creatures
Feel compelled to create for ourselves,
Again and again in the image of ourselves,
A sacred exoskeleton, claiming for ourselves
Powers to preserve our uniqueness? Not as we are,
But as shells leave signs in the sand:
Relics of Christian worship, Christian war,
Reminders that 'in our beginning is our end',
Heaps of DNA in cryptic rooms,

The Nevilles hacked to pieces on their tombs,

News that this palace fortress, theatre, prison
Was achieved by some genius of the pointed arch
Who read his Bible but couldn't read the rocks
Dragged from the Carboniferous to frill a church
With storms of fossils individual as snowflakes
Three hundred million years adrift with the continents,
Locked in the ooze of an equatorial ocean.
What faith, what story, what fact is more remarkable
Than this resurrection of the dead that represents
The life in us, the strangeness of it all.

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