



'Ginger beer and earthquakes' –Stevenson and the terrors of contingency

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'We live the time that a match flickers; we pop the cork of a ginger-beer bottle, and the earthquake swallows us on the instant' – 'Aes Triplex'

This essay will trace some recurrent tropes of contingency, and even absurdity, in Stevenson's writing to argue for an existential or proto-existential element in his thought.

Recent critical approaches to Stevenson have come to see him in the context of early modernism and even as a writer who prefigures aspects of postmodernism. In his magisterial 1996 study, Alan Sandison signalled Stevenson's 'intense artistic self-consciousness', especially in 'matters of form and metafictional structures',¹ and he argues persuasively for the 'appearance' of modernism in his work.² This essay aims to trace what might be called modernist pre-echoes in Stevenson's work, without claiming him as a fully-fledged existentialist or a postmodernist *avant la lettre*.³ Having said that, of course Sandison's groundbreaking monograph did indeed serve to relocate Stevenson in modernist terms and few would dispute today that the different narrative voices in *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889) and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1885), among others, suggest that these tales have as much to say about narrative instability as they do about the more familiar figures of psychological dualism. *The Ebb-Tide* (written between 1890-3) is a proto-modernist / postmodernist text of at least as much significance as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (first published in *Blackwood's* in 1899), while *The Dynamiter* (from 1884-5), which was a precursor to *The Secret Agent* (1907), has a tone that might even persuade us – against chronology – that it is a playful postmodern *response* to Conrad's bleakly ironic text.

In particular Sandison makes an excellent case for re-assessing the modernity of tone in *The New Arabian Nights*, in which





Stevenson adopts a self-consciously modish narrative stance to generate a complex critical irony that plays against the prevailing literary tastes for both aestheticism and moral realism. Sandison argues against Richard Kiely's censure of Stevenson for behaving like a magician who is 'given to exposing his stage-machinery', in the middle of his own act.⁴ On the contrary, Sandison argues, *that is the whole point*, and he cites Barry Menikoff's observation that Stevenson's playing with generic and fictional conventions, would not surprise any reader of 'late twentieth century fiction, like Borges's *Ficciones*, for whom Stevenson's method would appear wonderfully postmodern.'⁵ All of which may take us back to our epigraph and 'Aes Triplex', which was an early essay from *The Cornhill Magazine* in April 1878, published only a few months before the *New Arabian Nights* stories began to appear in the journal *London*. This is Stevenson at his most apparently belle-lettriste – although of course Sandison and Menikoff remind us that this pose of literary ease can be very deceptive.

The reference to 'triple bronze' in the essay's title is to Horace's Third Ode (Book One), in which he worries about the safety of a friend undertaking a sea journey and goes on to reflect on the dangers of the sea and on man's presumption – heroic or hubristic – in setting himself against the winds, the rocks and the monsters of the deep:

*Illi robur et aes triplex
circa pectus erat, qui fragilem truci
commisit pelago ratem
primus*

Oak and triple bronze
encompassed the breast of him whose frail craft
he entrusted to the wild sea
for the first time





Stevenson's point, however, is that we – quite rightly in his opinion – are so caught up with the delights of 'a good meal and a bottle of wine' (p. 78), or a picnic with ginger beer on the slopes of a volcano, that we pay absolutely no heed to the perils of life around us, nor to our own inevitable extinction:

Indeed it is a memorable subject for consideration with what unconcern and gaiety mankind pricks on along the Valley of the Shadow of Death. The whole way is one of wilderness and snares, and the end of it, for those who fear the last pinch, is irrevocable ruin. And yet we go spinning through it all, like a party at the Derby.⁶

– This is hardly the tone of a Camusian existential hero who dares to gaze into the abyss, only to reject suicide and persevere. Yet the echo from Spenser's gentle knight 'pricking on the plain' from the opening lines of *The Faerie Queene* remind us of his battered armour and the passion of Christ – not exactly a picnic at the Derby. In a more overtly serious mood, in his Notebooks from around 1874, Stevenson had already reflected on mortality: 'It is very hard to think that we must cease and not continue to see the wonderful game of the universe played before us, into all eternity'.⁷ The term 'game' is revealing, and a further entry develops his thoughts on the 'impossibility' of death, in terms that Freud would revisit, and Jacques Derrida would come to develop in his discussions of *aporia*.⁸ Stevenson has own version of an existential *aporia*:

I do not admit immortality, but I can not believe in death: that is to say, in my own death. I can easily enough understand the death of others; they pass out of my field of vision, they cease to perform their respective antics before me: but how can you destroy that field of vision? How do you expect *me* to *conceive myself* as no longer existent? (my emphasis, p. 179.)





Here, (like the term ‘game’) the reference to the ‘respective antics’ of friends who are merely passing out of his ‘field of vision’ seems to offer a lighter touch, even as it actually recognises a much darker awareness of subjectivity and the ruthlessly selfish demands of the ego.⁹ Harried by ill health all his life, a life that ended at 44 after all, Stevenson may have been more than usually sensitive to such thoughts, and especially the questions they give rise to.

He returned to the theme nine years later, with yet another Horatian reference in an essay written for *Scribner’s Magazine* in 1888. Its title ‘Pulvis et Umbra’ comes from ‘*pulvis et umbra sumus*: we are but dust and shadow’ from Ode Seven in Book Four. Stevenson described it as his ‘Darwinian Sermon’, adding ‘it is true, and I find it touching and beneficial, to me at least’.¹⁰ ‘Touching and beneficial’ are scarcely apposite if you know the essay, except in so far as it does, this time, make an existential commitment to meet the abyss face to face:

And as we dwell, we living beings, in our isle of terror and under the imminent hand of death, God forbid it should be man [. . .] that wearies in well-doing, that despairs of unrewarded effort, or utters the language of complaint. Let it be enough for faith, that the whole creation groans in mortal frailty, strives with unconquerable constancy: surely not all in vain.¹¹

The struggle may not be in vain, but any ameliorating possibility is completely overwhelmed by the sheer crepitating horror of Stevenson’s vision of existence, and most especially by the disgust evinced for matter itself on every page of the text:

We behold space sown with rotatory islands, some like the sun, still blazing; some rotting, like the earth; others, like the moon, stable in desolation. All of these we take





to be something called matter: a thing which no analysis can help us to conceive; to whose incredible properties no familiarity can reconcile our minds. This stuff, when not purified by the lustration of fire, rots uncleanly into something we call life; seized through all its atoms with a pediculous malady; swelling in tumours that become independent, sometimes even (by an abhorrent prodigy) locomotory; one splitting into millions, millions cohering into one, as the malady proceeds through varying stages. This vital putrescence of the dust, used as we are to it, yet strikes us with occasional disgust, and the profusion of worms in a piece of ancient turf, or the air of a marsh darkened with insects, will sometimes check our breathing so that we aspire for cleaner places. But none is clean: the moving sand is infected with lice; the pure spring, where it bursts out of the mountain, is a mere issue of worms; even in the hard rock the crystal is forming. (p. 61)

(‘Pediculous’ means louse-like, so ‘life’ is seen to be seething with atoms as with lice, or with lice like atoms)

In the light of life described as a ‘malady’ and that phrase about our checked breathing, it is not irrelevant, perhaps, to recall that this piece was started – like *The Master of Ballantrae* – when Stevenson was convalescing under the care of Dr Edward Livingstone Trudeau in the sanatorium at Saranac Lake. Stevenson visited Trudeau’s laboratory, with its diseased organs, and its carefully cultured dishes of the tuberculosis bacillus, and was revolted by the experience.¹² Stevenson’s position is ultimately a philosophical one, but it is still possible to wonder what part his own condition played in that significantly over-determined (in the Freudian sense) imagery of disease and disgust by which mankind, howsoever ‘*express and admirable*’, has become a ‘putrescence of the dust’. (I make the Shakespearean reference advisedly, for Stevenson’s text does have echoes of the





prince's jaundiced speech on 'what a piece of work is a man' in Act II, scene ii of *Hamlet*.) Having recognised that intertextual echo, Stevenson goes on to outdo Hamlet and even melancholy Jacques:

What a monstrous spectre is this man, the disease of the agglutinated dust, lifting alternate feet or lying drugged with slumber; killing, feeding, growing, bringing forth small copies of himself; grown upon with hair like grass, fitted with eyes that move and glitter in his face; a thing to set children screaming; (p. 62)

Of course the text goes on to conclude that even in such unpropitious circumstances, in a Darwinian survival of the fittest, surrounded by his own 'organised injustice' and 'cowardly violence', man still somehow manages a modicum of decency, memory and imagination – humble enough, perhaps, but all the more remarkable an achievement for its ghastly origins and its unforgiving context. But it is the terrible context that remains with us, and Stevenson's repeatedly alienated confrontation with what he sees as the horror of materiality (of hair growing 'upon' skin like grass) generates what amounts to a philosophical and indeed an existential nausea as powerful as ever Sartre imagined for Antoine Roquentin in *La Nausée*.

And yet there is also a spark of dark glee in the sheer meaning-less energy of the setting:

Meanwhile our rotatory island loaded with predatory life and more drenched with blood, both animal and vegetable, than ever mutinied ship, scuds through space with unimaginable speed, and turns alternate cheeks to the reverberation of a blazing world, ninety million miles away. (p. 62)





It is not difficult to trace this figure throughout Stevenson's work, not least in that very telling nautical metaphor,¹³ and several elements in 'Pulvis et Umbra' can be seen to have already featured in his writing only a few years earlier. This is most especially evident in *Lay Morals*, which were produced between 1879 and 1883, but not published until the Edinburgh Edition of 1896, two years after the author's death:

We inhabit a dead ember swimming wide in the blank of space [. . .] Far off on all hands other dead embers, other flaming suns, wheel and race in the apparent void; the nearest is out of call; the farthest so far that the heart sickens in the effort to conceive the distance. Shipwrecked seamen on the deep, though they bestride but the truncheons of a boom, are safe and near at home compared with mankind on its bullet.¹⁴

This trope appears more than once in *Lay Morals* and we shall return to the final implications of this, but first let us trace some examples of the same figure in Stevenson's fiction.

In *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) for example, a significant part of Jekyll's horror comes from his realisation of 'the trembling immateriality, the mist-like transience, of this seemingly so solid body *in* which we walk attired.'¹⁵ Our physical selves, our whole identity, is strangely challenged and objectified if we think of the body as merely clothing. Of course conventional Christian teaching regularly likes to think of the body as merely the material house for an immutable soul. But Stevenson's insight speaks for the independent agency of the purely physical, and indeed for the un-Christian and proto-Sartrean possibility that 'existence *precedes* essence'. So Jekyll's new 'attire' actually grants him 'a more generous tide of blood' and the 'incredibly sweet' sensation of release from all moral and social obligations. And the influence of the purely physical (or





rather the impurely physical), leads to a nightmare vision of the return of the abjected, of bestial energy, and of something 'not only hellish but inorganic':

This was the shocking thing; that the slime of the pit seemed to utter cries and voices; that the amorphous dust gesticulated and sinned; that what was dead, and had no shape, should usurp the offices of life. And this again, that the insurgent horror was knit to him closer than a wife, closer than an eye, lay caged in his flesh [. . .] (p. 73)

There are post-Darwinian anxieties in this passage, of course, but the prevailing theme is one of utter nausea at the gross materiality of physical being. The same puzzle engaged Stevenson in Chapter III of *Lay Morals* with a different account of the duality of man, as a kind of being who may be engaged with thoughts of 'America, or the dog-star, or the attributes of God', while his body is busily 'digesting his food with elaborate chemistry, breathing, circulating blood, directing himself by the sight of his eyes [. . .] How am I to describe the *thing* I see? Is that truly a man [. . .] or is it not a man and *something* else?" (pp. 23-4, my emphasis).

Nor is art free from this terror, for the tropes of matter and inconceivable energy that 'no analysis can help us to conceive', also featured in Stevenson's discussion of the nature of fiction and the difficulties of his vocation in 'A Humble Remonstrance', published in *Longman's Magazine* in 1884. In this essay, as part of his debate with Henry James, Stevenson explained why no writing, not even 'realistic' prose fiction, can ever, in James's phrase, 'compete with life'.¹⁶ Yet this is more than a matter of technical skill, as Stevenson sees it, for the 'dazzle and confusion of reality' is nothing less than blinding in a 'welter of impressions, all forcible but all discreet':

To 'compete with life', whose sun we cannot look upon,





whose passions and diseases waste and slay us – to compete with the flavour of wine, the beauty of the dawn, the scorching of fire, the bitterness of death and separation – here is, indeed, a projected escalade of heaven (p. 135).

Lay Morals had made a similar point by comparing life ‘not to a single tree, but to a great and complicated forest’:

Circumstance is more swiftly changing than a shadow, language much more inexact than the tools of a surveyor; from day to day the trees fall and are renewed; the very essences are fleeting as we look; and the whole world of leaves is swinging tempest-tossed among the winds of time. (p. 11)

So Stevenson’s ‘humble remonstrance’, speaking as one novelist to another, is that life is both unknowable and uncatchable:

Life is monstrous, infinite, illogical, abrupt and poignant; a work of art, in comparison is neat, finite, self contained, rational, flowing and emasculate. *Life imposes by brute energy, like inarticulate thunder.* (‘A Humble Remonstrance’, p. 136, my emphasis.)

Exactly that ‘brute energy’ had been a key factor in the novella *The Merry Men* published by the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1882. Fanny Stevenson recollected that her husband was not entirely satisfied with the plot, but felt that ‘he *had* succeeded in giving the terror of the sea’.¹⁷ With added elements of romance and mystery, the story centres on the protagonist’s aged uncle, a religiously minded recluse on a remote Scottish island who plunders the ships that come to grief on his shore. But its most memorable aspect is indeed its evocation of the ‘terror of the sea’, by which ‘God’s ocean’ and the ‘charnel ocean’ become one and the same





thing in the demented Calvinistic imagination of the old man, who sees every wreck as God's will – and thrills at the sight. By the end of the story his nephew, too has been vouchsafed a terrifying vision of the sea in the roost of the 'Merry Men':

A world of blackness, where the waters wheel and boil,
where the waves joust together with the noise of an explosion,
and the foam towers and vanishes in the twinkling
of an eye

[. . .]

Thought was beaten down by the confounding uproar; a
gleeful vacancy possessed the brains of men, a state akin
to madness;

[. . .]

I have always thought drunkenness a wild and almost
fearful pleasure, rather demoniacal than human; but
drunkenness, out here in the roaring blackness, on the
edge of a cliff above that hell of waters, the man's head
spinning like the Roost, his foot tottering on the edge of
death

[. . .]

'Eh, Charlie, man, it's grand!' he cried. 'See to them!' he
continued, dragging me to the edge of the abyss from
whence arose that deafening clamour and those clouds of
spray; 'see to them dancin', man! Is that no' wicked?' (pp.
41-2.)

The Merry Men is of interest because, via the Calvinism of the old uncle, the Christian God is closely associated with a 'world of blackness where the waters wheel and roar' which is ultimately the universe, indeed, of our own crowded rotatory island.

I want to pursue this thread a little further. No modern cosmologist would contradict Stevenson's vision of infinite energy and creative chaos, but for Christians, it may well raise questions





about the nature and character of a supposedly benign Creator. Stevenson's complex and contentious relations with his father, and with his father's religious faith are well known, but there was a stark and unforgiving side to Scottish Christianity that was not unattractive to him. We remember, of course, that his nurse Cummy brought him up on tales of the Covenanting martyrs, and that he saw John Knox as a major unifying force in the Scottish nation. Thus in the 'Selections from His Note Book' Stevenson notes with approval that 'all the rose-water theology in the world cannot quench the great fire of horror and terror that Christianity has kindled in the hearts of the Scottish people' (p. 192) and he sees this as no more than a proper preparation for final truths and 'the grim reality that must be faced at last, of a thwarted and painful existence, haunted by vain aspiration after impossible good and fated, generation after generation, to settle down into mournful recognition of the inevitable evil' (p. 192). 'Calvinism is the religion of the strong' he concludes.

This insight is strikingly close to what Stevenson would have Attwater say in *The Ebb Tide*, published eleven years later in 1893:

They think a parsonage with roses, and church bells, and nice old women bobbing in the lanes, are part and parcel of religion. But religion is a savage thing, like the universe it illuminates; savage, cold, and bare, but infinitely strong.¹⁸

In *The Ebb-Tide*, Herrick is initially overcome with the force of Attwater's demented will:

'O, it's no use, I tell you! He knows all, he sees through all; we only make him laugh with our pretences—he looks at us and laughs like God!' (p. 109)

Certainly Attwater's universe, the unmapped, spectral island





where he holds the power of life and death, is a spiritually cold and savage place, and the final force of that brilliant novel is to suggest that this may indeed be a model for the universe, and even a model for God's own relationship with His creation. – Without 'Grace' cries Attwater, on fire with a Calvinist certainty:

'There is nothing here,' – striking on his bosom – 'nothing there' – smiting the wall – 'and nothing there' – stamping – 'nothing but God's Grace! We walk upon it, we breathe it; we live and die by it; it makes the nails and axles of the universe' (p. 88)

But Stevenson's vision of the material world, those 'nails and axles of the universe', where we breathe, what we are made of, and what we stand on, is not, as we have seen, a comfortable one. Nor is Attwater's Christianity convincing, for this is the man who sees grace like a diving suit that lets him kill his workers, plunder the sea, and rise up again with a dry conscience. So the final effect of this speech, is to generate a terrifying vision of nothingness itself, of an existential emptiness already so powerfully invoked in the symbolic blankness of that giant, white, stranded, female figurehead on the shore.

Writing elsewhere, I have argued for the same existential hollowness in *The Master of Ballantrae*, which seems to be establishing the master as a 'devil' only for us (and eventually Ephraim Mackellar) to recognise the futility of such thinking.¹⁹ It was the Master's 'causeless duplicity' that led Stevenson to remark that he was 'all I know of the devil'²⁰ and causelessness and contingency haunt the novel. Thus the Master makes his most serious decisions on the toss of a coin "to express my scorn for human reason".²¹ And the final cause of the fatal enmity between the two brothers is shown to be equally closed to human reason by way of the text's repeated references to the Biblical tale of the twins Jacob and Esau who left the womb already at war with one





another, equally causelessly, but still (presumably) according to the will of God – doubtless the same mad God who presides over the uproar of Stevenson’s universe.

I want to close my pursuit of this trope by turning to ‘Pan’s Pipes’, an early text from *Virginibus Puerisque*, first published in the journal *London* in 1878 and hence contemporary with ‘Aes Triplex’, and only three years before *The Merry Men*. Here, again, we find Stevenson writing about the volcano upon whose slopes we while away our time:

The kindly shine of summer, when tracked home with the scientific spy-glass, is found to issue from the most portentous nightmare of the universe – the great conflagrant sun: a world of hell’s squibs, tumultuory, roaring aloud, inimical to life. The sun itself is enough to disgust a human being of the scene which he inhabits; and you would not fancy there was a green or habitable spot in a universe this awfully lighted up. And yet it is by the blaze of such a conflagration, to which the fire of Rome was but a spark, that we do all our fiddling, and hold domestic tea-parties at the harbour door.²²

But here the vengeful Old Testament God of *The Merry Men* has given way to Pan, the god of Nature as a ‘goat-footed piper’ in the woods, who is the prevailing spirit in a place where ‘There is an uncouth, outlandish strain throughout the web of the world [. . .] Things are not congruous and wear strange disguises’ (p. 125). ‘Strange disguises’, indeed, for the tone of this essay is curiously unstable, and indeed typical of Stevenson in this vein. On the surface he plays the sophisticated essayist, conjuring up familiar paradoxes by which beautiful flowers arise from and return to dung, and children make mud pies (as Hamlet reminds us) with Caesar’s ashes (p. 125), only to conclude that life is still worth living and that we should embrace ‘the charm and terror





of things' (p. 128) in a spirit of giddy exhilaration. The essay certainly celebrates 'the song of hurrying rivers; the colour of clear skies; the smiles and live touch of hands and the voice of things, and their significant look' (p. 126), and yet the tropes of destruction he has called up along the way cannot disown their own significantly contrary force:

In the random deadly levin or the fury of headlong floods, we recognise the 'dread foundation' of life and the anger in Pan's heart. Earth wages open war against her children, and under her softest touch hides treacherous claws. The cool waters invite us in to drown; the domestic hearth burns up in the hour of sleep, and makes an end of all. Everything is good or bad, helpful or deadly, not in itself, but by its circumstances. [. . .] And when the universal music has led lovers into the path of dalliance, confident of Nature's sympathy, suddenly the air shifts into a minor, and death makes a clutch from his ambush below the bed of marriage. For death is given as a kiss; the dearest kindnesses are fatal; and into this life, where one thing preys upon another, the child too often makes it entrance from the mother's corpse. (p. 127.)

In the face of venereal infection and infant mortality, 'Everything is good or bad, helpful or deadly, not in itself, but by its circumstances' may seem like a markedly unhelpful truism, and yet its recognition of the power of context, and its implicit suspicion of any stable definition of 'good' or 'bad', takes us out of the realm of conventional value systems and Christian morality and into the much more ambiguous (Dionysian) realm of the great god of the woods. Stevenson's adoption of the essayist's light touch is equally ambiguous, for although the play of artifice and literary ease would seem to engage and amuse the reader in advance of a comforting conclusion, the end result is rather





different. The terrors recounted are just a little too vividly realised to be entirely balanced by the charm of paradox, while the reciprocal play between the two remains restless and unstable until the conclusion is more of a rhetorical punctuation than a resolution, in a kind of writing whose fluid playfulness may actually be rather disturbing. The effect is not unlike experiencing the wilderness at the end of *The Master of Ballantrae* during the course of a chat at the Savile club.

‘So we come back to the old myth, and hear the goat-footed piper making the music which is itself the charm and terror of things’ (p.128). I would argue that the passages I have been tracing in Stevenson’s fiction and essays suggest that he was haunted by the charm and terror of things in what amounts to a proto-existential experience of contingency, material nausea and absurdity. The essays may adopt a playful tone, as in ‘Pan’s Pipes’, but those serially recurring tropes of shipwreck, complexity, distance, the grossness of matter, terror and accident reveal a significant anxiety about human agency, ultimate meaning and existence itself.

NOTES

- 1 Alan Sandison, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Appearance of Modernism: A Future Feeling* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1996), pp. 4-5.
- 2 Sandison’s title is not unambiguous, for it suggests both the *arrival* of modernism in aspects of Stevenson, and the fact that elements in his writing may *look* like modernism, without necessarily being so.
- 3 In similar fashion, the seeds of modernism can be traced in the poetry of Rimbaud and Mallarmé, the conclusion to Walter’s Pater’s *Renaissance* and Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* all of which prefigure the shift to what would become a ‘modernist’ sensibility in the next century.
- 4 Sandison, p. 88. Kiely sees this as a fault. See Robert Kiely, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Fiction of Adventure* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 120.





- 5 Sandison, p. 90. Barry Menikoff, 'New Arabian Nights: Stevenson's Experiment in Fiction', in *Nineteenth Century Literature*, vol 45, 3, 1990, p. 343. Sandison's chapter 'Arabesques' usefully develops this aspect of Stevenson's writing and its critical reception.
- 6 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Aes Triplex', in *Virginibus Puerisque and Other Essays in Belles Lettres*, (London: William Heinemann, 1924), Tusitala XXV, p. 75.
- 7 'Selections from His Notebook' in *Memories and Portraits. Memoirs of Himself. Selections from his Notebook*, Tusitala XXIX, p. 173.
- 8 'at bottom nobody believes in his own death, or to put the same thing in another way, in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality.' Sigmund Freud, 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol 4 (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), pp. 304-5. See also Jacques Derrida, *Aporias: Dying – awaiting (one another at) 'the limits of truth'*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993). For a full discussion of 'the impossibility of death' and Derrida's differences from Freud and Heidegger on this complex topic, see Iain Thomson, 'Can I Die? Derrida on Heidegger on Death' in *Philosophy Today*, Spring 1999, especially, pp. 33-4.
- 9 See Jacques Derrida 'Aphorism Countertime 16', on how Romeo and Juliet overcome this 'impossibility', *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 422. If the sophistication of Stevenson's thought is in question, other passages in the Notebooks show a clear understanding of the principles that Saussure would soon be formulating on how language controls thinking and how meaning is a product of context and culture: 'We can never argue on anything beyond the relations between certain words; and if you and I understand by our words a different substrate of thought – if we have different values for the same symbols [. . .] we cannot wonder that we reach different solutions' (pp. 175-8).
- 10 Letter to Sidney Colvin, November 1887, Saranac Lake, in *Selected Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. by Ernest Mehew (New Haven & London: Yale University Press), p. 353.
- 11 Pulvis et Umbra' in *Ethical Studies*, Tusitala, XXVI, p. 66.
- 12 See Mary B. Hotaling, 'Trudeau, tuberculosis and Saranac Lake', in *Journal of Stevenson Studies*, 4, 2007, pp. 4-19.





- 13 One thinks, for example, of the blood-stained planks aboard ship that have featured in *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped*, *The Master of Ballantrae*, *The Ebb-Tide* and *The Wrecker*.
- 14 'Lay Morals' in *Ethical Studies*, Tusitala XXVI, p. 21.
- 15 *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Tusitala V, p. 59.
- 16 'A Humble Remonstrance' in *Memories and Portraits*, Tusitala XXIX, p. 134.
- 17 'Prefatory Note', *The Merry Men and Other Tales*, Tusitala VIII, p. xiii.
- 18 *The Ebb-Tide*, Tusitala XIV, p. 89.
- 19 Roderick Watson, 'You cannot fight me with a word': *The Master of Ballantrae* and the wilderness beyond dualism' in *Journal of Stevenson Studies*, vol 1 (2004) pp. 1-23.
- 20 Stevenson, *Letters III*, Tusitala XXXIII, p. 171.
- 21 *The Master of Ballantrae*, Tusitala X, p. 57.
- 22 'Pan's Pipes' in *Virginibus Puerisque*, Tusitala XXV, p. 125.

