

Journal of
Stevenson Studies
Volume 14

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Published by
The Centre for Literature and Writing
Edinburgh Napier University

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ISSN: 1744-3857

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Toing and froing in Stevenson's construction of personal history in some of the later essays (1880-94)

Lesley Graham

Stevenson's later essays (1880-94) are marked by a growing nostalgia for his younger self and he regularly weaves into them recollections of childhood and early adulthood experience. He had already written of his boyhood with a more overtly autobiographical style and structure in the unpublished accounts entitled 'Notes of Childhood' (1873) and 'Memoirs of Himself' (1880). In these later essays, however, as his star rises and public interest in his life reaches a crescendo, he fragments the account of his earlier self, scattering clues to the origins and development of his present personal identity across his writing. The discontinuous nature of the account is reflected in the subtitles of certain of the essays – 'Random Memories', 'More Random Memories'.

In this article, I propose to examine the somewhat unsettling effect created by a toing and froing between past, present and future presences; between the actual, lingering and virtual selves dispersed throughout the later essays.

Movement

Despite the structuring image of the thread used by Stevenson in the essay fragment 'Onlooker in Hell' (1890) when he writes: 'I must string together a few random memories, covering nearly three lustres of time, and connected only by the thread on which I string them', the account of his childhood found in these essays is non-linear and unframed. The perspective is unstable. This is not an unusual approach in modern autobiographical essays. Indeed, as Graham Good writes, 'the forms of the autobiographical essay enact the processes of disintegration and reintegration, loss and reinvention, interpretation and reinterpretation, dislocation and

relocation, which are characteristic of the modern identity.²²

For Stevenson, however, autobiographical time extends to before his birth and to after his death, as he moves to and fro between real past time, imaginary past time, putative future time and a present that brings them all together, not always explicitly, in the personage of Mr. Robert Louis Stevenson the writer, a constantly moving nexus of recollection and projection and a work in progress. The great affair, as always, is to move; to zoom in on the moment in time that seems most significant, even if that time falls outwith the author's direct experience, or to zoom out as if observing the scene from the future or from an otherwise external perspective. The autobiographical toing and froing in these essays is not limited to time but is also applied to place, to size and scale, and to personal pronouns and perspective.

The essay form is particularly well suited to this exercise of life writing in short bursts since as Lydia Fakundiny observes 'it is through various foreshortenings and dispersals of narrative that the essay, with its conventions of fragmentariness and provisionality, assimilates to its relatively short span and its characteristically discursive modes the task of recounting the writer's life.'²³ Thus in the autobiographical essay, a single meaningful episode can be explored from all sides and its significance extrapolated to the rest of the life story without having to tie in to the overarching plan required by a complete autobiography.

Situated (im)mortality

In Stevenson's autobiographical essays, that point of significance is very often spatial rather than chronological. Memories are frequently tied up in places and in the essay extracts I am concentrating on here, the setting down of these autobiographical fragments is built up around what appears initially to be an account of a significant place from which Stevenson is, at the time of writing, at some remove: namely Anstruther, Fontainebleau, Edinburgh and Colinton. The significant locale provides a sort

of individual *lieu de mémoire*, a palimpsest of stratified recollections that may be associated with several chronological topoi.

Although autobiography is traditionally primarily concerned with life, we notice that in several of these later essays Stevenson is in fact, just as concerned with death as with the recollection of his earlier life. Stevenson died young but he felt old and he was certainly more aware of impending mortality than most. In 1887, he wrote to Henley invoking the words of the First Gravedigger in *Hamlet*: 'also old age with his stealing steps seems to have clawed me in his clutch to some tune'.⁴ In the 'The Education of an Engineer' he recalls the few weeks he spent in Anstruther as a young man inspecting engineering work during the day and writing at night. In this Fife town, for the young Stevenson, as remembered by his older self, if mortality was a given, immortality was the real prize and had to be written towards.

I lodged with a certain Bailie Brown, a carpenter by trade; and there as soon as dinner was despatched, in a chamber scented with dry rose-leaves, drew in my chair to the table and proceeded to pour forth literature, at such a speed and with such intimations of early death and immortality, as I now look back upon with wonder. [...] Late I sat into the night, toiling (as I thought) under the very dart of death, toiling to leave a memory behind me.⁵

As will become evident, this notion of leaving some trace of his essence behind is central to several of the autobiographical essay passages examined here, with Stevenson's reminiscences frequently generating conjecture about the marks that his younger self has left in significant places.

Shifts of perspective

In 'Random Memories. Rosa Quo Locorum', Stevenson even as he describes his walks in Edinburgh with his nurse, Alison Cunningham, rushes forwards towards the idea of death, while at the same time he darts outside of his past body to experience it from outside: "Death's dark vale" was a certain archway in the Warriston Cemetery: a formidable, yet beloved spot; for children love to be afraid in measure, as they love all experience of vitality. Here I beheld myself (some paces ahead – seeing myself – I mean from behind) utterly alone in that uncanny passage.⁶ The shift of perspective leaves the reader wondering just who exactly 'I' is – the boy watching or the one walking?

In the continuation of the passage cited above from 'The Education of an Engineer', the to-and-fro is even more concentrated:

I feel moved to thrust aside the curtain of the years, to hail that poor feverish idiot, to bid him go to bed and clap *Voces Fidelium* on the fire before he goes; so clear does he appear before me, sitting there between his candles in the rose-scented room and the late night; so ridiculous a picture (to my elderly wisdom) does the fool present! But he was driven to his bed at last without miraculous intervention; and the manner of his driving sets the last touch upon this eminently youthful business. The weather was then so warm that I must keep the windows open; the night without was populous with moths. As the late darkness deepened, my literary tapers beacons forth more brightly; thicker and thicker came the dusty night-fliers, to gyrate for one brilliant instant round the flame and fall in agonies upon my paper. Flesh and blood could not endure the spectacle; to capture immortality was doubtless a noble enterprise, but not to capture it at such a cost

of suffering; and out would go the candles, and off would I go to bed in the darkness, raging to think that the blow might fall on the morrow, and there was *Voces Fidelium* still incomplete. Well, the moths are all gone, and *Voces Fidelium* along with them; only the fool is still on hand and practises new follies.⁷

In the space of a few sentences Stevenson moves from the point of view of 'I' the present writer (a 38-year-old living in Manasquan in 1888), travelling back in time to speak to his younger self (to 'him', 'that poor feverish idiot', 'he', 'his'), but then appears to reintegrate the body of that younger self with a move back to the first person and the simple past ('I must keep the windows open', 'my literary tapers'), and then combines them both in the final phrase recognising that the young man has become the fully adult man in the person of the 'fool still on hand' and the present tense. Furthermore, as if to symbolise both the flitting narrative movement and imagined impending death there are the moths constantly fluttering through the text and the smell of the dead roses.

Persistence and regression

In 'Fontainebleau: Village Communities of Painters' (first published in *The Magazine of Art* in 1884) the possibility of immortality is predicated not on the persistence of literary production but through the continued presence of a lingering spirit in significant haunts (the word, used as a verb in the passage in question, seems particularly laden with meaning). In the Forest of Fontainebleau, Stevenson imagines his group of artist friends as well as the generations that follow and precede them leaving behind 'A projection of themselves [that] shall appear to haunt unfriended these scenes of happiness.'⁸ But this is a reciprocal process and just as the forest shall forever be haunted by their presence so the young people themselves shall forever be inhab-

ited by the forest 'and they will return to walk in it at night in the fondest of their dreams, and use it for ever in their books and pictures.'⁹ We notice too, that the persistent presence involves a regression to childhood - the Stevenson that spent time in the forest at Fontainebleau was a young man, but the presence that he imagines leaving there is that of a child: a natural child of fancy; a fetch; an imp; an orphan; a bantling; a pleasant lad; a whipster; the child of happy hours. Paradoxically the future traces of his younger self are imagined to be an even younger iteration of the same self:

One generation after another fall like honey-bees upon this memorable forest, rifle its sweets, pack themselves with vital memories, and when the theft is consummated depart again into life richer, but poorer also. The forest, indeed, they have possessed, from that day forward it is theirs indissolubly, and they will return to walk in it at night in the fondest of their dreams, and use it for ever in their books and pictures. Yet when they made their packets, and put up their notes and sketches, something, it should seem, had been forgotten. A projection of themselves shall appear to haunt unfriended these scenes of happiness, a natural child of fancy, begotten and forgotten unawares. Over the whole field of our wanderings such fetches are still travelling like indefatigable bagmen; but the imps of Fontainebleau, as of all beloved spots, are very long of life, and memory is piously unwilling to forget their orphanage. If anywhere about that wood you meet my airy bantling, greet him with tenderness. He was a pleasant lad, though now abandoned. And when it comes to your turn to quit the forest may you leave behind you such another; no Antony or Werther, let us hope, no tearful whipster, but, as becomes this not uncheerful and most

active age in which we figure, the child of happy hours.¹⁰

Recovered memories

For Stevenson a place does not have to have been directly experienced to be part of his autobiographical trajectory and consequently a component of his present self. The memory of place can be atavistic and correspondingly the lingering presence can be genetic. In 'The Manse', Stevenson ponders the traits and interests that he may have inherited from his grandfather, and concludes that although he does not recognize anything of his grandfather in himself he nevertheless knows that he carries him around constantly: 'he moves in my blood, and whispers words to me, and sits efficient in the very knot and centre of my being.'¹¹ Towards the end of the passage, Stevenson the subject and his grandfather merge to become 'we':

The house where I spent my youth was not yet thought upon; but we made holiday parties among the cornfields on its site, and ate strawberries and cream near by at a gardener's. All this I had forgotten; only my grandfather remembered and once reminded me. I have forgotten, too, how we grew up, and took orders, and went to our first Ayrshire parish, and fell in love with and married a daughter of Burns's Dr. Smith – 'Smith opens out his cauld harangues.' I have forgotten, but I was there all the same, and heard stories of Burns at first hand.¹²

In the passage that follows, the toing-and-froing in time and perspective becomes somewhat dizzying, with Stevenson imagining himself being carried around Edinburgh as a 'homunculos' in the bodies of his various ancestors: 'from the eyes of the lamp and oil man one-half of my unborn father, and one-quarter of myself, looked out upon us as

we went by to college'¹³ (thus the modest ancestor who could just as well have been labelled as 'us', looks out upon the other 'us'). As he follows backwards the careers of his 'homunculos' and is reminded of his antenatal lives or 'the threads that make me up', the essay shifts to the first person as if the ancestors are just as deserving of that pronoun so tied up are they in his sense of autobiographical self. Thus we read 'though to-day I am only a man of letters, [...] I was present when there landed at St. Andrews a French barber-surgeon, [...] I have shaken a spear in the Debateable Land and shouted the slogan of the Elliots; I was present when a skipper [...] smuggled Jacobites to France after the '15; I was in a West India merchant's office, [...] I was with my engineer-grandfather [...] when he sailed north about Scotland on the famous cruise that gave us the *Pirate* and the *Lord of the Isles*; I was with him, too, on the Bell Rock,'¹⁴ and so on with a shift away from the first person back to the ultimate 'arboreal' ancestor. This establishment of a chain of inheritance linking past, present and future generations through their familiarity with and frequentation of a given place is a familiar move in Stevenson's essays and is also found notably in the dedication to *Catrina* (1892), in which Stevenson addresses his friend Charles Baxter and recalls the Edinburgh of their shared boyhood memories expressing the hope that there exists in Edinburgh 'some seed of the elect; some long-legged, hot-headed youth must repeat to-day our dreams and wanderings of so many years ago; he will relish the pleasure, which should have been ours, to follow among named streets and numbered houses the country walks of David Balfour.'

Remembering and weaving the memories into the text

Anne Colley notes that Stevenson 'unselfconsciously believed in the past's durability' and his own ability to 'gather up the past moments of his being 'as though it were yesterday'¹⁵ Stevenson may have been confident in his ability to call up his boyhood, but he was concerned about the past becoming tarnished through overuse. In 'Memoirs of an Islet' (1887) he writes:

After a dozen services in various tales, the little sunbright pictures of the past still shine in the mind's eye with not a lineament defaced, not a tint impaired. *Gluck und ungluck wird gesang*, if Goethe pleases; yet only by endless avatars, the original re-embodying after each. So that a writer, in time, begins to wonder at the perdurable life of these impressions; begins, perhaps, to fancy that he wrongs them when he weaves them in with fiction; and looking back on them with ever-growing kindness, puts them at last, substantive jewels, in a setting of their own.¹⁶

While it might be argued that Stevenson is hinting here at the possibility of a full-length autobiography, it seems clear that the ideal setting for these vignettes from the past is, in fact, the essay, a shorter genre in which the reader is willing to make the extra effort necessary to follow several versions of a single self, and to consider those selves from various angles; a genre in which the constraints of narration are neutralised and upturned. In a 'A Chapter on Dreams', the exercise of recollection and reconstruction of the past life is further complicated by the fact that Stevenson is remembering not his lived life, but the mock life of his dreams although the memories attached to his dream sequences are, he argues, just as real as the former.

The past is all of one texture – whether feigned or suffered – whether acted out in three dimensions, or only witnessed in that small theatre of the brain which we keep brightly lighted all night long, after the jets are down, and darkness and sleep reign undisturbed in the remainder of the body.¹⁷

Again, in this essay, we follow Stevenson's toing and froing, here performed both in relation to the images that are evoked and which the reader is invited to imagine with a mind's eye that zooms in and out with shifting focus¹⁸: 'When he had a touch of fever at night, and the room swelled and shrank, and his clothes, hanging on a nail, now loomed up instant to the bigness of a church, and now drew away into a horror of infinite distance and infinite littleness' (122-3), and in autobiographical stance when he reveals the nameless dreamer ('the poor gentleman', 'this honest fellow') to be himself and switches from he to I: 'he is no less a person than myself; - as I might have told you from the beginning, only that the critics murmur over my consistent egotism' (127). And yet the brownies, who create the stories and who are just as much a part of his intimate self as his past self since they are the creation of his dreaming brain, never make the shift and are never integrated into the selfhood of the author of *Jekyll and Hyde*.

In this essay we seem to follow Stevenson as he indulges in what Brockmeier calls 'retrospective teleology'.¹⁹ Stevenson recruits episodes from his past, as constituent parts of his life story but in selecting and forming the 'facts' in the light of his present disposition, he gives them contemporary meaning and as the life story unfolds the significance of the fact mutates apace. Rather than being objective autobiographical truths they are the malleable building blocks of one of a range of possible past selves. Thus it is the act of writing, the constantly shifting self-inscriptive process, more than the established event of the past that spins and shapes Stevenson's past life.

In moving back and forth between times, places and perspectives Stevenson as autobiographical agent is accommodating as many facets of himself as he can perceive. The network of essays becomes the distributed locus where the threads of his life histories are selected, highlighted and interwoven.

Lydia Fakundiny, examining the interaction between autobiographical and essayistic genres in the autobiographical essay, observes that 'The essay as autobiographical space attempts to accommodate and to bring into artful relation autobiography's

traditional search, by way of writing, for a significant personal past and the essay's more or less self-conscious immersion in the pleasures and aporias of writing as such.²⁰ The pleasure of essay-writing for Stevenson is plain in these autobiographical hot-spots and the aporias are clearly present too as he explores the impossibility of conciliating being both himself now and himself then, two identities entangled in the same weave, without flitting between distinct identities.

To conclude, we know the extent to which Stevenson's thoughts at the end of his forty-four years turned to recollection, but as if his one life delimited by birth and death were not enough for him, in his later essays he makes regular excursions outside of the traditional autobiographical framework. The constantly shifting perspective is the sign of a certain shiftiness. By widening the amplitude of his life story to include multiple prenatal and post-mortem existences, and by multiplying the number of texts in which those existences are inscribed, Stevenson ducks and weaves through the pages refusing to be pinned down to any single stable identity or story. I proposed in my introduction to examine the potentially unsettling effect of the toing and froing, the flitting, between various selves in these essays, but I must conclude that despite the darting movement, Stevenson's mastery of the essay form brings the various times and perspectives together in relatively happy, if deliberately random, cohabitation.

NOTES

- 1 This unpublished essay fragment along with several of the other uncollected essays mentioned in this article will be included in Graham L. (ed.), *The Essays of Robert Louis Stevenson, Volume 5: Uncollected Essays 1880-94*, by Robert Louis Stevenson in *The New Edinburgh Edition of the Collected Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*.
- 2 Graham Good, 'Identity and Form in the Modern Autobiographical Essay.' *Prose Studies*. 15.1 (1992): 99-117, p. 116.
- 3 Lydia Fakundiny, 'Autobiographical Essay' in Tracy Chevalier (ed.),

- Encyclopedia of the Essay*. (London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997), pp. 87-88.
- 4 B. A. Booth, and E. Mehew (eds), *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson: Vol. 6* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 71. The note to the allusion reads, "The First Gravedigger in *Hamlet* V. i. 79-80, quoting inaccurately from a poem by Thomas, Lord Vaux (1510-56), "The Aged Lover Renounceth Love.""
 - 5 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'The Education of an Engineer. More Random Memories,' *Scribner's Magazine*, IV, 636-640, (Nov 1888), p. 636.
 - 6 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Random Memories. Rosa Quo Locorum,' *Essays of Travel*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1912), p. 178. The essay was unpublished during Stevenson's lifetime. The manuscript is held in the Princeton Parrish Collection, Bd MS 125, Co171.
 - 7 'The Education of an Engineer', pp. 636-7.
 - 8 'Fontainebleau: Village Communities of Painters II' *The Magazine of Art*, 7, 340-345. (May 1884) p. 343.
 - 9 *Ibid.*
 - 10 *Ibid.*, p. 343.
 - 11 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'The Manse', *Memories and Portraits*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1912), p. 70. First published as 'The Manse: A Fragment' *Scribner's Magazine*, I, No. 5 (May, 1887), [611]-614.
 - 12 *Ibid.*, p. 71.
 - 13 *Ibid.*, p. 72.
 - 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 72-3.
 - 15 Anne Colley, *Nostalgia and Recollection in Victorian Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998) p.175.
 - 16 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Memoirs of an Islet', *Memories and Portraits*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1912), p. 75.
 - 17 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'A Chapter on Dreams,' *Scribner's Magazine*, *Scribner's Magazine*, III, 122-128, (Jan 1888), p. 122.
 - 18 See Richard Dury, 'Stevenson's Shifting Viewpoint' in *The Bottle Imp*, Issue 12, Nov 2012. He notes that 'Stevenson's representations in his works of perception as unstable and constantly varying, can also be seen as serving a meta-artistic purpose: like the 'jump cut' in the cinema, his sudden changes of viewpoint, by surprising the

reader, also call attention to the act of reading.’

- 19 See J. Brockmeier’s chapter ‘From the end to the beginning: Retrospective teleology in autobiography’ in Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh (eds), *Narrative and Identity. Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture*, (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2001).
- 20 Fakundiny, ‘Autobiographical Essay’, p. 87.