Familiar Studies: Stevenson's Multiple Voices

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Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate, Vol. 34 (2025): 96-108.
DOI: 10.25623/conn034-dury-1

This article is the first entry in a debate on "*Familiar Studies*: Stevenson's Multiple Voices" (http://www.connotations.de/debate/familiar-studies-stevensons-multiple-voices). If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to editors@connotations.de.

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Abstract
Stevenson's ten essays collected in *Familiar Studies* (1882) differ stylistically from other contemporary studies of history, literary criticism, and literary history. They lack the single, authoritative, and impersonal voice that readers would expect of such methodical examinations of a restricted topic. The adjective in the title, on which Stevenson insisted, shows they are a hybrid combination of formal study and Stevenson's familiar (or personal) essays. These essays are clearly organized and based on documentary evidence (three of them have scholarly footnotes), yet are written in an informal style with traces of the writer's distinct personality: he allows himself essayistic digressions and uses language that draws attention to itself and typically uses extended meanings of words that involve the reader in an intuitive search for meaning. This style of variety, surprise, and foregrounding of the writer can be seen not only in all of Stevenson's works but also in his letters and conversations. His "discontinuity of discourse," even in these formal studies, can be seen as a way of reflecting a reality that is constantly changing, in opposition to the fixed beliefs of his authoritarian father. It is also a performance designed to give pleasure to the reader.

Stevenson's *Familiar Studies of Men and Books,* published in 1882, is a collection of ten studies in history, literary criticism, and literary history, originally published in periodicals between 1874 and 1881.[1] They differ notably from similar studies produced in this period, and in what

follows, I will attempt to identify some of their distinctive stylistic qualities, in particular those they share with the familiar essay, evoked by Stevenson in the title that he chose for the volume.

Despite their subject matter, the essays in *Familiar Studies* do not conform to what the reader expects of typical critical and historical discourse; in particular, they are not characterized by a single authoritative, impersonal voice with a formal and serious tone. Instead, they combine the scope of the study (a methodical examination of a restricted topic) with the style of Stevenson's own multi-voiced, polyphonic familiar essays. They are, as the title declares (on which Stevenson insisted), not "studies" but "familiar studies."[2]

The adjective "familiar" here corresponds to the *OED* definition "unceremonious, as among close friends; free, casual, informal" (I. 1. A). We can see it as derived from one of the meanings of Latin *familiaris*: "intimate," "friendly."[3]Applied to a text genre, its meaning is close to "personal," and indeed in the early eighteenth century we find collections of *Familiar Letters*, which now would be called "personal letters."[4] The meanings of the two adjectives in the case of the essay are also very close, and no strong distinction can be made between a "familiar" and a "personal essay," except that the latter is "defined by the personality of the writer, which takes precedence over subject" (Werner 655) and "tends to put the writer's […] idiosyncratic angle more at center stage" (Lopate xxiv). A "familiar essay," by contrast, will have an informal style (often humorous), a conversational tone, and contain traces of the author's personality, without being dominated by it. We can see evidence of such qualities in these *Familiar Studies*, where Stevenson's style mimics that of "an intimate, private, and often judgemental, conversation among confidantes" (Clydesdale 263), and yet lacks the dominant focus on the essayist's experiences and thoughts that we find in the "personal essay."

What we do not find in Stevenson's *Studies* is the familiar essay's casual procedure by association of ideas. These studies have a clear organization: either announced at paragraph beginnings (in "Hugo"), or by numbered sections ("Whitman," "Thoreau," "Charles of Orleans") or

subtitles ("Burns," "Villon," "Pepys").[5] Within this structure, however, Stevenson (like Montaigne before him) allows himself digressions, essayistic passages of personal thought, as, to take one example, in the essay on Knox, when he develops his thoughts on the special relationship between men and women, a relationship which includes

> not love only, but all those other ways in which man and woman mutually make each other happy—by sympathy, by admiration, by the atmosphere they bear about them—down to the mere impersonal pleasure of passing happy faces in the street. For, through all this gradation, the difference of sex makes itself pleasurably felt. Down to the most lukewarm courtesies of life, there is a special chivalry due and a special pleasure received, when the two sexes are brought ever so lightly into contact. (Stevenson, *Familiar Studies* 224)

Stevenson's idea of the familiar essay would have been influenced, not only by the example of Montaigne, but also by Hazlitt's essay "On Familiar Style," defined as "to write as any one would speak in common conversation" who is able to "discourse with ease, force, and perspicuity"; avoiding "pedantic and oratorical flourishes," "the solemnity of the pulpit," and "the tone of stage declamation" (Hazlitt 338). Hazlitt also recommends the avoidance of "[a]ll provincial or bye-phrases" that the author "invents for his own sole use and convenience" (340). In this final aspect, Stevenson differs—indeed, his unusual and unexpected word-choices are one of the distinctive marks of his style (see Dury 57-71).

Stevenson's combination of elements of a familiar style with the subject matter of critical and historical writing can be seen in his earliest book reviews—short studies that would also be expected to be formal and impersonal. In June 1874, he received an offer to contribute to a weekly broadsheet specializing in such reviews, the *Academy*. True to its name, it aimed to be intellectually rigorous and authoritative and, to this end, its founder and editor, Charles Appleton, an Oxford don, recruited eminent contributors from Oxford and the Savile Club (see Dawson, Introduction).

When Appleton read Stevenson's first submission together with his earlier published works, he was, as Colvin writes, "a little disturbed" in his "academic conscience" (Colvin, *The Letters* 175). This was not the

kind of writing of academic formality typical of his journal. He asked for advice from their mutual friend Sidney Colvin, and when he was passing through Edinburgh in mid-July 1874 and was invited to dinner at the Stevensons' holiday home just outside the city in Swanston, he took the opportunity to discuss the matter directly with Stevenson himself. His intention was to persuade Stevenson to adapt his style, but Stevenson remained unpersuaded. Despite this, Appleton was clearly anxious to recruit him and finally conceded, telling him that, after all, his articles would be acceptable if they were signed and therefore presented as personal. Stevenson knew that, except for a few editorial items, *all* contributions to the *Academy* were signed, and he was amused by this casuistic solution, which he called an argument of "tranquil dishonesty."[6]

Appleton most probably thought Stevenson's style was not formal and neutral enough for serious writing. The work on which he based this opinion would have been (apart from the submitted first book review for the *Academy*) "Lord Lytton's *Fables in Song*" (published the month before in the *Fortnightly Review*), and the *Cornhill* proofs for "Victor Hugo's Romances" (about to be published, and later to be included in *Familiar Studies*).

Appleton was doubtless troubled by passages such as the following in "Lord Lytton's *Fables in Song*": "[T]here lay […] at the bottom of this primitive sort of fable, a humanity, a tenderness of rough truths" (139). Here, one finds an unexpected choice of preposition: "the tenderness of rough truths," must, from the context, mean "tenderness *concerning*," a tenderness *adopted when dealing with* rough truths. With this strange use of "of" we get a momentary idea of a voice that is archaic or influenced by another language or dialect—an effect we repeatedly find in Stevenson's prose in his odd uses of prepositions and definite articles.

Taking examples from *Familiar Studies* (here with added italics), in "Samuel Pepys" he writes, "His familiar spirit of delight was not the same *with* Shelley's" (189), where we normally expect "the same *as*," but "the same *with*" might conceivably be archaic or dialectal. In "Yoshida-Torajiri," we read that Yoshida's hair "was not tied more than

once in *the* two months" (113). The unusual use of the article ("in the two months" rather than "every two months") could be Scots, or French, or archaic—one cannot quite place it. Content words, too, often stand out when they are used in slightly different ways from normal. In the essay on "Walt Whitman," for example, he writes "you may flatter the portrait" (62), where we normally only flatter a person. In the same essay, he writes that "to show beauty in common things is the work of the rarest tact" (75), and in the essay on Burns he says the poet "used language with absolute tact" (50). As with "flatter," the reader is called into play, is required to make an intuitive search for meaning, to be involved in a heightened way in the act of interpretation. The word "tact" is familiar in the context of interpersonal relations: "skill or judgement in dealing with men or negotiating difficult or delicate situations" (*OED* I. 2.), but is here being used with application to an unusual semantic class (not people but language), and could be understood as "artistic judgment" or "skill in choice and ordering." Stevenson's stylistic practice of giving new extended meanings to words in this way reminds us of Wittgenstein's *dictum*: "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (*Philosophical Investigations* §43), except that here Stevenson is indulging in creating new uses that are *ad hoc* and (like a ball thrown in an unusual way in the game of catch) playfully involve the reader in stretching a little in order to "get" the meaning.

Another cause for Appleton's concern was probably Stevenson's unexpected metaphors and comparisons. The passage from "Lord Lytton's *Fables in Song*" continues:

> Moreover, there lay, perhaps, at the bottom of this primitive sort of fable, a humanity, a tenderness of rough truths; so that at the end of some story, in which vice or folly had met with its destined punishment, the fabulist might be able to assure his auditors, as we have often to assure tearful children on the like occasions, that they may dry their eyes, for none of it was true. (139)

In this sentence, there is an unexpected shift from abstract moral categories to a homely comparison with assuring tearful children. In "Victor Hugo's Romances," later collected in *Familiar Studies*, Stevenson makes the following comparison:

> Men who are in any way typical of a stage of progress may be compared more justly to the hand upon the dial of the clock, which continues to advance as it indicates, than to the stationary milestone, which is only the measure of what is past. (Stevenson, *Familiar Studies* 1)

Such bold and thought-provoking comparisons, reminding us briefly of the metaphysical poets and the prose writers of the same period, create a moment of heightened attention for the reader as the slightly complicated (but not opaque) comparison is understood, in the presence of a writer who does not proceed smoothly and conventionally but is involved too in a process of intense thought.

Stevenson in his early book reviews and essays, then, adopts a style of unexpected elements: not a single neutral voice or tone but one of constant surprises, where the reader cannot be guided by the expectations associated with the genre. To get an idea of how different Stevenson's style of writing must have seemed, let us compare the two opening sentences of his first review with those of the reviews preceding and following it in the same issue of the *Academy* (8 August 1874). The review placed before Stevenson's begins as follows:

> Joseph Williamson was the son of a Cumberland clergyman. While yet a boy, he acted as secretary to the county member, who commended him to the tuition of Dr. Busby, of Westminster fame. (*Academy* 141)

Here we have a simple impersonal summary of the early life of the subject, together with a reference to Dr Busby, presented as part of shared cultural knowledge of writer and reader.

The review that follows begins:

> Both these translations are very useful additions to our knowledge of Central Asian affairs. The first on our list is written by a Russian, and reveals the spirit in which Russia's advance towards our Indian frontiers is viewed by the writer, who stands, it would seem, in the light of an apologist before a section of his fellow-countrymen, and therefore the excuses and extenuation for her policy which he urges will be studied with interest by us. (143)

In this instance, we have a measured appreciation and an overview in a series of Chinese-box subordinate clauses.

Now let's hear how Stevenson opened his review of *The Ballads and Songs of Scotland*:

> This book with the tempting title is a prize essay reprinted for some occult reason. Probably there never was published anything with less result, anything that left the reader more entirely where he was. (142)

He then continues to establish the inadequacy of the book in a series of accurate observations. Such a subject, he begins, needs to be treated by the comparative method (which he deftly defines as "a systematic exhibition of identities and differences" [Stevenson, "*Ballads and Songs*" 214]), but the author knows nothing of any other ballad literature and only offers "a few sporadic references to Tom Thumb or Thor's hammer" (214). He says nothing of how these earlier songs and ballads stand with regard to "the proud, self-reliant, democratic sentiment […] in Burns" (215), nor to the typical metre of the Scottish tradition. Although he sets out to link traditional poetry and Scottish culture, he "refuses, with singular discretion, to commit himself to any definite opinion on the subject" (215). Modesty is a good thing, "but the same modesty which withholds a man from resolving a question, should certainly keep him back from publishing the fact of his indecision to the world in more than two hundred pages of type" (216). Instead of the expected neutral summary or overview, Stevenson surprises the reader of the journal by entering directly with his bold ironic voice and clear judgment, followed by a perceptive analysis, the voice not of the scholar but of the orator, of the charismatic debater who is nevertheless not second to the scholar in his knowledge of the subject.

A similar unexpected personal voice is found in the ten essays collected in *Familiar Studies* (four of which are review articles, beginning with a brief evaluation of a recent publication). The first reviewers immediately commented on the "familiar" quality of the writing, and not everyone was pleased. George Saintsbury complained in the *Pall Mall Gazette* about Stevenson's "extremely personal attitude," inappropriate in a literary essay, and on how the essays "positively bristle with 'you see,' 'you remember,' 'I say,' 'I fancy,' and the rest of it" (Maixner 95).[7]

Apart from such direct references to the writer and the reader, the "extremely personal attitude" no doubt included the relaxed admission of uncertainty where a conventional scholar would have searched out the reference. In his essay on Burns, he writes:

> [Shenstone] has a description, I remember, of a gentleman engaged in sliding or walking on thin ice, which is a little miracle of incompetence. You see my memory fails me, and I positively cannot recollect whether his hero was sliding or walking. (Stevenson, *Familiar Studies* 50)

Stevenson's point is that, unlike Shenstone, Burns, thanks to his forceful, appropriate, and memorable words, leaves "a clear impression," so that a reader's inability to remember the description of Shenstone is relevant to his argument. Here we have moved beyond conventional critical discourse and follow the nonchalant voice of the personal essayist, who gives us his thoughts on his direct experience, not here of life in general but of his *reading* experience.

The endings of three essays in *Familiar Studies* provide another typical feature of the varying voice of the familiar essayist: we find, not the expected summing up of the study, but a sudden focus on the writer or the reader and on concerns of human existence. This has been called the "vertical drop": "the essayist's moment of 'dropping down' to a deeper level of confession or exposure" (Foster and Porter 254). To take an example from a familiar essay, the witty and debonair "Apology for Idlers" ends with complaints, half humorous, half indignant, about over-busy people who act as if they were important and as if the earth were the centre of the universe. We already feel the beginning of a change of tone, and this is deepened and confirmed in the last sentence: "The ends for which they give away their priceless youth, for all they know, may be chimerical or hurtful; the glory and riches they expect may never come, or may find them indifferent; and they and the world they inhabit are so inconsiderable that the mind freezes at the thought" (60). In *Familiar Studies*, the essays on Burns, Yoshida, and Knox conclude with a similar "vertical drop"; to give one example, "Yoshida-Torajiri," ends the narrative of Yoshida's heroic sacrifice by unexpectedly involving the subject with both writer and reader:

> It is exhilarating to have lived in the same days with these great-hearted gentlemen. Only a few miles from us, to speak by the proportion of the universe, while I was droning over my lessons, Yoshida was goading himself to be wakeful with the stings of the mosquito; and while you were grudging a penny income tax, Kusákabé was stepping to death with a noble sentence on his lips. (Stevenson, *Familiar Studies* 117)

Stevenson's prose style of variety and surprises resembles the style of his letters and conversation. Everyone who met Stevenson remarked on his brilliant, entertaining, and constantly varied way of talking. At their first meeting, Sidney Colvin was struck by the varying discourse styles and "the irresistible sympathetic play and abundance of his talk," and by how

> [o]ver wide ranges of life and letters his mind and speech ran like the fingers of a musician over the keyboard of an instrument. Pure poetic eloquence […], grave argument and criticism, riotous freaks of fancy, flashes of nonsense more illuminating than wisdom, streamed from him inexhaustibly. (Colvin, *Memories* 100, 104)

As he talked, he was constantly moving: his doctor in Bournemouth describes him "pacing up and down his room, gesticulating in his forcible way and talking sometimes in English, sometimes in French, and very occasionally in Latin" (Masson, ed. 212). H. J. Moors in Samoa reports that: "he walked about the room, plying me with questions, one after another, darting up and down, talking on all sorts of subjects, with no continuity whatever in his conversation" (224). This typical style of walking and talking is captured in Sargent's 1885 portrait which shows Stevenson pacing up and down while talking, in an original and restless composition that itself reflects the constant movement of the subject.

As with his familiar essays, Stevenson's "familiar studies" foreground the writer, his reading experience and his process of thinking, which in the case of Stevenson will always involve multiple voices that surprise and entertain the reader in the same way as his shifts in conversation: subjects thrown off "as some chance word or allusion set him thinking, and talking of something else" (Masson, ed. 127), his speech

running, as Colvin said, "like the fingers of a musician over the keyboard of an instrument" (Colvin, *Memories* 100).

In *Familiar Studies* he inserts essayistic passages, makes personal appearances with "I think" and "I doubt," and creates subtle shifts of assumed context of discourse in his unexpected metaphors and word choices: archaic words, Gallicisms, Scots words, Americanisms, slang words, and colloquialisms; phrases that stand out by their unusual combination of words, and words that are given a new meaning by their context of use.

What might be Stevenson's motivation for employing these various discourses? His "discontinuity of discourse" could be adopted—like that of Roland Barthes—because it "keeps the final meaning from 'taking'" (Barthes 217), from putting down roots, from becoming settled and definitive, and so from resembling the fixed and essentialist beliefs of Stevenson's father[8] and of the various stern fathers confronting a son in his works.[9] By varying his voice and bringing new meanings to words, he also reflects an opposing reality, a reality that is fluid and constantly changing, of phenomena that are in constant flux. And—remembering Stevenson's belief that writing should aim to please[10]—his constant variety, his ability to take stylistic features from different languages, linguistic registers, and literary traditions also charms the reader and produces a fresh polyphonic creation that is "Stevensonian."

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NOTES

[1]The ten essays are "Victor Hugo's Romances," "Some Aspects of Robert Burns," "Walt Whitman," "Henry David Thoreau: His Character and Opinions," "Yoshida-Torajiro," "François Villon, Student, Poet, and Housebreaker," "Charles of Orleans," "Samuel Pepys," "John Knox and his Relations to Women" (this last divided into two essays: "The Controversy about Female Rule" and "Private Life").

[2]Announcing the title to his publisher, Stevenson commented: "I thought the adjective true; and possibly engaging to the reader's idleness" (*Letters* 3: 267), presumably because an idle or curious reader would be attracted to an informal and humorous style. The publishers, however, were not convinced, and wrote to Henley: "We should prefer the title to be 'Studies of Men and Books' without the adjective 'Familiar,' which we think lengthens without strengthening it" (27 December; CW Archive, Letter Books A/15, 168). Yet, Stevenson's wishes prevailed, and the adjective remained.

[3]Clydesdale suggests that "familiar" might also refer to the familiar, domestic events of public figures that are the subject of these essays, and which might attract the idle or curious reader with the promise of what is hidden and scandalous (see 260). That said, the essays on Hugo and Whitman make no reference to domestic events, so they would be excluded from the title according to this interpretation.

[4]For example, *Familiar Letters […] by the Late Earl of Rochester* (London: Rich, 1705), and *Familiar Letters of Love, Gallantry and Several Occasions* (London: Briscoe, 1718).

[5]The short "Yoshida" is undivided, as are the twin essays on Knox, though each has its own title.

[6]"I was amused at the tranquil dishonesty with which he told me that I must put my name to all I write and then all will be well" (*Letters* 2: 33).

[7]E.g. (citing Tusitala vol. 27) "you see" (50, 70, 89, 166, 218, 221, 232); "the reader will remember" (69, 148); "you will remember" (137, 156); "I remember" (50, 176); "I say" (18, 38, 155, 197, 235, 239); and "I fancy" (125, 242).

[8]In early 1873, Stevenson was confronted by his father, a strict Calvinist, and closely questioned about his religious beliefs and suspected agnosticism (Gray 3-4). As Stevenson felt unable to evade the questions, the result was, "the thunderbolt has fallen with a vengeance," and the home became a place of "grim, wretched faces" and "real Hell" (Stevenson, *The Letters* 1: 273-74).

[9]For example, in ch. 3 of *Weir of Hermiston*, the interrogation of the son by the father: "'Archie, you and me has to have a talk.' // […] 'I have an appointment,' said he.// 'It'll have to be broken, then,' said Hermiston, and led the way into his study. // […] 'What's this I hear of ye?' he asked. // There was no answer possible to Archie. // 'I'll have to tell ye, then,' pursued Hermiston. 'It seems ye've been skirling against the father that begot ye, and one of his Maijesty's Judges in this land; and that in the public street, and while an order of the Court was being executit. Forbye which, it would appear that ye've been airing your opeenions in a Coallege Debatin' Society'; he paused a moment: and then, with extraordinary bitterness, added: 'Ye damned eediot.'" (Stevenson, *Weir of Hermiston* 29).

[10]"[M]any artists forget the end of all art: to please" (Stevenson, "Letter to a Young Gentleman Who Proposes to Embrace a Career of Art" 7).

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