Connotations
Vol. 34 (2025)

Intertextual Stevenson: A Brief Introduction

LENA LINNE AND BURKHARD NIEDERHOFF

Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate, Vol. 34 (2025): 90-95.
DOI: 10.25623/conn034-linne-niederhoff-1

Abstract

The writings of Robert Louis Stevenson have been extensively adapted and rewritten, in particular *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. However, Stevenson also imitated and transformed the works of others, as he admits very frankly in his essays and prefaces. He describes his literary apprenticeship as an exercise in imitation and pastiche, and he points out the sources that he used in such works as *Treasure Island* and *The Master of Ballantrae*. The pervasive intertextuality of Stevenson's writings may be related to his aestheticism, the view that a literary text is based on other literary texts and structural principles much more than on reality and experience.

In 1887 Robert Louis Stevenson wrote an autobiographical essay titled "A College Magazine," in which he mockingly recalls his efforts as co-editor of the *Edinburgh University Magazine*, a short-lived monthly that expired after its fourth number. He also describes his apprenticeship as a writer, making no secret of the fact that it was primarily an exercise in imitation:

> Whenever I read a book or a passage that particularly pleased me, in which a thing was said or an effect rendered with propriety, in which there was either

> some conspicuous force or some happy distinction in the style, I must sit down at once and set myself to ape that quality. I was unsuccessful, and I knew it; and tried again, and was again unsuccessful and always unsuccessful; but at least in these vain bouts, I got some practice in rhythm, in harmony, in construction and the co-ordination of parts. I have thus played the sedulous ape to Hazlitt, to Lamb, to Wordsworth, to Sir Thomas Browne, to Defoe, to Hawthorne, to Montaigne, to Baudelaire and to Obermann. I remember one of these monkey tricks, which was called *The Vanity of Morals* […] written (which is my reason for recalling it, ghostlike, from the ashes) no less than three times: first in the manner of Hazlitt, second in the manner of Ruskin, who had cast on me a passing spell, and third, in a laborious pasticcio of Sir Thomas Browne. (29: 29)[1]

Stevenson is well aware of the intertextual origin of his own writing. He also points out that the "sedulous ap[ing]" of other writers is the way to become original, because originality requires mastery of the entire field of expression, including all of its different registers and styles:

> Before he can tell what cadences he truly prefers, the student should have tried all that are possible; before he can choose and preserve a fitting key of words, he should long have practised the literary scales; and it is only after years of such gymnastics that he can sit down at last, legions of words swarming to his call, dozens of turns of phrase simultaneously bidding for his choice, and he himself knowing what he wants to do and (within the narrow limit of a man's ability) able to do it. (29: 30-31)

In "A College Magazine," Stevenson focusses on the intertextuality of style. Elsewhere, he acknowledges the intertextuality of other elements of his works. In "My First Book," another autobiographical essay, he recounts how *Treasure Island* came into being, and again makes no secret of his debts to other writers, this time focussing on setting, character and motifs:

> I am now upon a painful chapter. No doubt the parrot once belonged to Robinson Crusoe. No doubt the skeleton is conveyed from Poe. I think little of these, they are trifles and details: and no man can hope to have a monopoly of skeletons or make a corner in talking birds. The stockade, I am told, is from *Masterman Ready*. It may be, I care not a jot. […] It is my debt to Washington Irving that exercises my conscience, and justly so, for I believe plagiarism was

> rarely carried farther. I chanced to pick up the *Tales of a Traveller* some years ago, with a view to an anthology of prose narrative, and the book flew up and struck me; Billy Bones, his chest, the company in the parlour, the whole inner spirit and a good deal of the material detail of my first chapters—all were there, all were the property of Washington Irving. (2: xxvii)[2]

Stevenson composed a similar essay about *The Master of Ballantrae*, focussing on the sources of this novel, and he contemplated writing a series of such essays as prefaces to his novels for the first collected edition of his works, the so-called *Edinburgh Edition*.[3]

Stevenson's emphasis on the intertextual dimension of literature is related to the position that he took in the literary debates of his time. He lived in the heyday of realism when many of his fellow writers believed that they had to present faithful pictures of ordinary experience and everyday reality. Stevenson, by contrast, rejects the mimetic view of literature and the obligation to represent reality. He insists on the autonomy of literature, subscribing to an aestheticism not unlike that of Walter Pater or Oscar Wilde. A paradigmatic instance of the opposition between realist and aestheticist views of literature in the late nineteenth century is provided by Henry James's "The Art of Fiction" and Stevenson's "A Humble Remonstrance," a response to James's essay. While James argues that "[t]he only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life" (25), Stevenson claims that life and literature are worlds apart from each other. Instead of representing life, the writer should create a structural pattern based on formal principles and a rigorous selection of motifs; the literary text is a "figmentary abstraction" (29: 135), not unlike a "proposition of geometry" (29: 136). A similar instance of the opposition between realism and aestheticism can be found in the review essay that James wrote when a volume of Stevenson's letters was posthumously published in 1899. James is intrigued by Stevenson's references to literature, in particular the remarks on the books he was writing or planning to write. Characteristically, what James finds lacking in these remarks is the subject, i.e. the slice of life to be represented:

> I remember no instance of his expressing a subject, as one may say, *as* a subject—hinting at what novelists mainly know, one would imagine, as the determinant thing in it, the idea out of which it springs. The form, the envelope, is there with him, headforemost, *as* the idea; titles, names, that is, chapters, sequences, orders, while we are still asking ourselves how it was that he primarily put to his own mind what it was all to be about. ("Robert Louis Stevenson" 12)

The passage indicates the difference between James's realist imagination and the formalist imagination of Stevenson. Because of his anti-mimetic stance, Stevenson emphasises the elements of literature that are not bound up with a commitment to experience and reality. These include, to borrow James's terms, "[t]he form, the envelope […] chapters, sequences, orders," but also the literary canon, the previous texts that any new text is derived from.

In "A College Magazine" and "My First Book," Stevenson focuses on the debts he owes to previous writers; however, there are also the debts that later writers owe to him. As is well known, Stevenson is the author of two texts that have become modern myths: *Treasure Island* and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Both have been adapted for the screen many times, and the latter has also inspired a number of rewritings, including Emma Tennant's *Two Women of London* (1989), Valerie Martin's *Mary Reilly* (1990) and David Edgar's play *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1991).[4] Some of Stevenson's lesser-known works have also been rewritten by others. Arthur Conan Doyle's first Sherlock Holmes story, *A Study in Scarlet*, is based on one of the tales in *More New Arabian Nights*: *The Dynamiter*, which was co-authored by Stevenson and his wife Fanny. Doyle also expressed his great admiration for Stevenson by following the latter's "The Pavilion on the Links" very closely in *The Mystery of Cloomber*.[5]

"Intertextual Stevenson" is evidently a rich (and under-explored) field, which is why it was chosen as the topic of a conference held at Ruhr University Bochum in June 2024, organised by the writers of this introduction. The conference topic was understood very broadly by the participants. "Text" was not limited to strings of words; there were papers on illustration and film. "Intertextual" was likewise not defined in

a restrictive manner. Using the terminology proposed by Gérard Genette, it included intertextuality in the narrow sense (the selective use of another text, as in allusion and quotation), hypotextuality (a rewriting of an entire text, as in parody), architextuality (the affiliation of a text with a genre and thus with many other texts of the same sort) and metatextuality (the explicit reference of one text to another).[6] Some participants pointed out Stevenson's "autotextuality," his tendency to echo and rewrite his own works; others explored his "interdiscoursivity," a recourse not to specific texts or genres but to more generally defined discourses (this concept can be related to "A College Magazine" and the way Stevenson imagines mature writers knowing their "literary scales" or discourses, with "legions of words" and "dozens of turns of phrase" at their disposition). A selection of articles based on the papers given at the conference will now be published in *Connotations*.

Ruhr-Universität
Bochum

NOTES

[1]References are to the so-called Tusitala Edition edited by Stevenson's wife Fanny and his stepson Lloyd Osbourne, with volume and page numbers.

[2]Relevant passages from the sources indicated here are printed in an appendix of Peter Hunt's edition of *Treasure Island* (195-202).

[3]This project was not carried out, perhaps because of the opposition of Stevenson's friend and mentor Sidney Colvin, who was also the editor of the *Edinburgh Edition*; see *Letters* 8: 226-27. For the various drafts and versions of the essay on *The Master of Ballantrae*, see the appendix of Adrian Poole's edition of the novel (221-28).

[4]A general filmography of Stevenson adaptations (not limited to *Treasure Island* and *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*) is available on the Stevenson website initiated by Richard Dury and now hosted by Edinburgh Napier University (https://robert-louis-stevenson.org/richard-dury-archive-film/). For a book-length study of literary rewritings of *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, see Dierkes.

[5]For an analysis of Doyle's rewritings of Stevenson's texts, see the two articles by Brian Wall and Sarah Ames, and by Anton Kurenbach and Burkhard Niederhoff.

[6]Genette uses *transtextuality* as a generic term for the relations between texts, and discerns the four types summarised here as well as paratextuality: the relation between a text and the texts that are adjacent to it, such as titles, prefaces, notes and blurbs (see 7-48).

WORKS CITED

Dierkes, Andreas. *A Strange Case Reconsidered: Zeitgenössische Bearbeitungen von R. L. Stevensons* Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009.

Dury, Richard. "The Richard Dury Archive: Film Versions (and Filmscripts) of Works by Robert Louis Stevenson." *The RLS Website*. https://robert-louis-stevenson.org/richard-dury-archive-film/. 11 Mar. 2025.

Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsestes: La littérature au second degré.* Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1982.

Kurenbach, Anton, and Burkhard Niederhoff. "The Exotic Other and the Other Within: A Comparative Reading of A. C. Doyle's *The Mystery of Cloomber* and R. L. Stevenson's 'The Pavilion on the Links.'" *Literaturwissenschaftliches Jahrbuch* 61 (2020): 233-51.

James, Henry. "The Art of Fiction." *The House of Fiction: Essays on the Novel by Henry James*. Ed. Leon Edel. London: Mercury Books, 1962. 23-45.

James, Henry. "Robert Louis Stevenson." *Notes on Novelists*. London: Dent, 1914. 1-19.

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*. Ed. Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Mehew. 8 vols. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1994-1995.

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Master of Ballantrae: A Winter's Tale*. Ed. Adrian Poole. London: Penguin Books, 1996.

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Treasure Island*. Ed. Peter Hunt. 2nd ed. Oxford: OUP, 2011.

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*. Tusitala Edition. Ed. Lloyd Osbourne and Fanny Van de Grift Stevenson. 35 vols. London: Heinemann, 1923-1924.

Wall, Brian, and Sarah Ames. "Parallel Prosecutions: Mormon Polygamy and Evidentiary Doubt in *The Dynamiter* and *A Study in Scarlet*." *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Great Affair: Movement, Memory and Modernity*. Ed. Richard J. Hill. London: Routledge, 2017. 180-201.