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To cite this version:


HAL Id: hal-01599380
https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01599380
Submitted on 5 Oct 2017

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Stevenson’s literary utopia

Nathalie Jaëck

Je n’avais pas du tout de lieu; ça me rendait léger.
Gilles Deleuze, *Pourparlers*.

‘Locating’ Stevenson appears to be a critical task – a necessary issue and a highly paradoxical process. Indeed, Stevenson is both over-defined and very evasive. On the one hand, he is easily shelved within specific library sections – the novel of adventure, literature for children, travel literature – and fixed in the canon by two highly-identifiable texts that have become immutable literary references, namely *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Treasure Island*. On the other, he is constantly circulating among and playing with these different genres, invariably experimenting upon and destabilizing them. Both canonical and evading, localized and ubiquitous, Stevenson poses indeed a literary enigma as regards location.

My proposal here is that if it is so problematic to actually locate Stevenson, it is because he is crucially interested in *dislocation*, in constantly finding a way out of the different genres he chooses, and not allowing them to settle in their typical form – this seems to be specifically true for the adventure novel. He remarkably writes in and out of that genre, he comes up with texts that feature among its most celebrated references, and yet that deviate from its typical elements, texts that are thus oxy-moronic institutional dissidents. Such bivalence and paradoxical positioning is most obvious in the decisive spaces of beginnings and endings that I will concentrate upon to prove the point: Stevenson consistently elaborates very spectacular processes of delocalisation, as the prefaces and conclusions contradict their official traditional functions, and take the text along lines of escape instead of bounding it.

And the thing is he is not the only one: it seems to be the case
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for many of his celebrated literary neighbours, at the turn of the twentieth century, particularly Conrad, Doyle, Stoker, Wells, all canonical writers who seem to give notice, or rather to radically redefine, Realism and Adventure, while they still work within their theoretical frame. It might seem a little artificial to try and assimilate writers whose works are apparently so different: Doyle and Stoker, arguably even Wells, were operating within genre fiction at a time when such fiction would not have been regarded as ‘high literature’, not in the same league as Conrad’s and Stevenson’s. Yet, and despite such formal differences, I would like to show that they all seemed to be aware that they were writing in a kind of no text’s land, in a transient and liminary period, when Realism was beginning to be contested, and when Modernism was not yet codified – in a period when the aim of literature was to explore new textual ways. It reads as if they had made the collective decision to locate themselves precisely within such a theoretically vacant or ‘neutral’ space, and to explore the formal possibilities offered by it. Along with Stevenson, and each in their own specific ways and forms, they all seemed to choose indeterminacy, transition, imminence and suspension as the perfect historical setting for an ideal literary space. Thus their novels explore their own ability to escape stabilisation, to build forces of deterritorialisation and to invent dislocating forms. As such, it seems to me that they manage to create, at the turn of the century, and squeezed between the literary heavyweights of Realism and Modernism, a furtive yet highly autonomous and original movement, even a kind of literary Utopia that I will try to outline and characterize.

Before dealing with this literary space, it is interesting to note that geography is never quite at rest with Stevenson: locations and places are rarely used to stabilize or situate the action, as is typically the case with the Realist novel. With Stevenson, the décor is invariably ambiguous and mysterious, iridescent and
multiple. In *Jekyll and Hyde*, for example, and as Jenni Calder remarks, ‘the setting is London. But the ambiance is without a doubt that of Edinburgh’. Similarly, in the *New Arabian Nights*, initially published in *London*, a journal edited by Henley, the capital becomes a rather fantastic crossbreed city, in between solid Victorian London and exotic Utopia, where identities fluctuate and places are unsettled. In many novels, places are so multiple and their succession is so quick that the privileged setting actually becomes movement itself, as journeys replace settings and directions dislocate positions – in a much quicker and more systematic way than in traditional adventure or even picaresque novels. *Treasure Island* starts in an inn, typically at the crossroads, and then becomes a journey to an unknown place; in *Kidnapped*, after an initial *qui pro quo* about places, and after David has managed to leave a *pseudo* deserted island that was no more than a fantasized mirage, David and Alan keep moving, and three successive chapters are actually titled ‘The Flight in the Heather’, the actual places coming second (the rocks, the Heugh of Corrynakiegh, the Moor), totally subordinated to the notion of movement itself. In *The Master of Ballantrae*, places actually seem to gain momentum, and the novel accelerates the process of dislocation that characterizes other novels. In the first sentence of his dedication to Percy and Mary Shelley, Stevenson makes it clear that ‘here is a tale which extends over many years and travels into many countries’, but also that ‘the writer began, continued it, and concluded it among distant and diverse scenes. Above all, he was much upon the sea’. The anonymous editor of Mackellar’s papers defines himself as ‘an exile’ in the Preface, and in the Appendix, Stevenson describes his intention this way: ‘I was to carry the reader to and fro in space over a good half of the world’. Quite obviously then, Stevenson admits to being more interested in fluxes than in positions, in dynamic courses than in stabilised situations: the ‘to and fro’ movement that he favours in *The Master of Ballantrae* speaks for his desire to disorientate the
reader more than to help him get his bearings, as all the reference points are transitory, as the avowed aim is to keep moving, from one unsettled place to another, quite close to Conrad’s ideal, who similarly defined his novels as ‘free and wandering tales’.3

The same desire to prevent easy localisation is quite apparent in Stevenson’s own descriptions of his fiction. Commenting upon his situation within tradition is obviously one of his favourite games, and he regularly returns to it, making sure to cloud the issue. In Kidnapped for example, he professes to define where and what his books are not – not material for academics: ‘This is no furniture for the scholar’s library,’ he claims as early as the dedication of the novel to Charles Baxter. Similarly, in the introductory stanzas of Treasure Island, intended ‘To the Hesitating Purchaser’, Stevenson situates himself right within the tradition of typical adventure novels, in the literary wake of Kingston, Ballantyne and Fennimore Cooper: ‘And all the old romance, retold / Exactly in the ancient way’5 – a position obviously questioned by contemporary critics, who situate the novel in a different place altogether, still undefined, still furtive: ‘Needless to say there is no resemblance between Mr Stevenson and any other boys’ writer, and his romance is told in anything but the ancient way’.6 In The Master of Ballantrae, as the lawyer proposes that the editor should make a novel out of the raw material provided by Mackellar’s papers, and thus insert his text in a specific and well-codified genre – ‘Here […] is a novel ready to your hand: all you have to do is work up the scenery, develop the characters, and improve the style’ – the editor insists: ‘It shall be published as it stands.’7 The result is an unidentified literary object, a multiple, heterogeneous and unclassifiable mixture, ‘like a sample card, a display of the writer’s best wares’, said André Gide.8 ‘The Suicide Club’ offers a final example of such dislocation, both geographic and generic: as we saw, the story takes place in a kind of ‘delondonised’ London, in a virtual space where improbable oyster bars suddenly turn up for the characters to indulge their taste in ‘ways
of life more adventurous and eccentric'.They explore this virtual space at random and passively – ‘One evening in March they were driven by a sharp fall of sleet into an oyster bar’ (p. 26) – and the lack of spatial definition brings about generic indecision as well. The text wanders just as much as the characters, it is completely deterritorialised, in between a comedy and a tragedy: ‘The farce of the cream tarts began to have very much the air of a tragedy in disguise’ (p. 31), as the oxymoronic title inscribes.

Stevenson thus explicitly situates himself in tricky literary territory, on extremely unstable grounds, seemingly ready to be quitted as they are entered. Places perpetually become somewhere else, genres collide into one another or lose their specific characteristics, creating what Schwob called ‘un réalisme irréel,’ or Chesterton, dealing with Florizel, ‘a sort of solid impossibility’.11

Such instability and self-deterritorialisation is nowhere more obvious than in beginnings and endings, where Stevenson completely upsets the codes and dissolves the traditional frame, for the text better to wander off its limits. Beginnings and endings are crucial literary spaces in the Realist system: they are stable and necessary forms that bound the text, and organize reality within the closed space of narration, according to a causal and linear pattern, from an identifiable origin to an ending that brings about a sense of closure. Yet Stevenson flagrantly problematises the beginnings and endings of his novels, he gives them explicit theoretical density, as he experiments on diverse strategies to exceed the limits of the text, to create what Derrida calls ‘an uncontrollable overflow’.12 In La Dissémination, Derrida analyses the function of prefaces in literary modernity, and he proposes that prefaces should help materialize the exterior of the text, its intimate excess, that it should be an obstacle to the consistency of form, and inscribe ‘the wish to find a matter that should no longer have a reassuring form, neither that of a fundamental and totalising principle, nor that of a final instance’.13 According to
him, a preface should be ‘an outside-the-text, able to stop the concatenation of writing.’ As it is materially necessary that narrations should begin and end somewhere, Stevenson’s ideal formula seems to be to change the nature of beginnings and endings, to underdetermine them, and turn them into accidental and arbitrary breaks. In his texts, beginnings and endings are often textual incidents, they unsettle and dislocate the text more than they stabilize or anchor it in a context – and seemingly ‘regular’ ones are more often than not exposed as ironic decoys, as in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

The beginning of the novella – ‘Mr. Utterson the lawyer was a man of a rugged countenance [. . .]’ – is ‘regular’, it is told by an omniscient narrator through a retrospective and authoritative point of view, and as such it immediately locates the text within the safe bounds of Realist conventions: the central character is introduced, the setting is established, and the text is set, smoothly inserted within its familiar literary context. Yet as is well-known, such obvious positioning does not resist the mutation of the text into something much more mobile, much less localised: the omniscient narrator is ousted from his controlling position, dislodged by Lanyon and then by Jekyll, and the end of the story radically upsets the early narrative positions: the stable third-person narration is replaced by an extremely unsteady first-person narrative, by a wandering ‘I’ pronoun whose grammatical bounds are totally dissolved, until it becomes an empty grammatical function, totally unable to fasten the text to a reliable or even steady standpoint. Instead of bringing the sense of closure that is typically expected of a conclusion, the ending presents itself as unintentional and indiscriminate, indeed as an ending, characterized by randomness: ‘I bring the life of that unhappy Henry Jekyll to an end’.

But it is mainly in *The Master of Ballantrae* and in *Kidnapped* that beginnings and endings most explicitly dislocate the text, in two complementary ways: scattering and displacement.
In *The Master*, Stevenson dislocates the text in the sense that he disperses and disseminates it, he shatters the harmonious textual integrity, the linearity and causality that discipline the facts along an established narrative pattern. Instead of writing the 'novel' that is 'ready at his hands' as the dutiful lawyer demands of the editor, he decides to provide the reader with a bunch of loose sheets, with missing pages and additions from different hands. The lawyer's effort to confine the text -- 'a packet, fastened with many seals and enclosed in a single sheet of strong paper' -- cannot prevent its irrepressibly scattering: the self-contained packet is turned into miscellaneous sheets, into a literary hybrid, a collage of odds and ends that resist the lawyer's wish that a synthesis should be written. The preface becomes an extremely insubordinate demolition site that totally upturns its institutional function, and breaks up the text instead of building its liminal unity.

The very voice of the narration contributes to this sense of dispersion and disfunctioning, as the third-person anonymous voice that is in charge is clearly quite unbalanced and even heavily dislocated. Indeed, the narrator gets mixed up on the focalisation he adopts: at times the reader is presented with a regular third-person narration, at others with a kind of narrative mask that is obviously a first-person narration in disguise -- until the whole shaky construction breaks down, and the 'I' erupts as a totally heterogeneous form, breaking a hole in the narrative fabric, 'the editor', 'I' and 'the other' impossibly referring to one and the same instance:

'A great deal better than nothing,' said the editor. 'But what is this which is quite in my way?'
'I was coming to that,' said Mr Thomson. [ . . .]
'A mystery?' I repeated.
'Yes,' said his friend, 'a mystery [ . . .]'  
'I think I rather heard a more obscure or a more promising annunciation,' the other remarked. (p. 8, my emphasis.)
Finally, the preface also illustrates the other meaning of ‘dislocation’, i.e. ‘displacement’, as it encroaches on the function of the conclusion through a dashing prolepsis, and rashly announces the death of the two brothers, thus virtually cancelling the pertinence of the text to come: ‘Yes, the lamentable death of my lord Durrisdeer and his brother, the Master of Ballantrae’ (p. 7). Dislocation is complete: the text is both scattered, and radically displaced.

In *Kidnapped*, the introductory paragraph is unusually usual – ‘I will begin the story of my adventures with a certain morning early in the month of June’, doubly locating the story in time, 1751, and place, Essendean, Scotland – and it thus lulls the reader’s vigilance. Yet, it is here the conclusion that constitutes the privileged site of dislocation. Quite flippantly titled ‘Goodbye’, it keeps its off-hand promise, and confronts the reader to a spectacular decision, as he is dismissed just before the actual ending, just before the text has achieved closure and stabilisation, ‘to the very doors of the British Linen Company’s bank’ (p. 219).

In a totally unexpected and disorienting way, David halts just there, in front of the doors of the bank, and leaves the reader stranded just before the advent of the final event, right in the middle of nowhere, in a state of suspension and imminence, on the threshold of a new text to come – a new text that will not come until the publication of *Catriona* in *Atalanta* in 1892, the opening sentence of which takes up where David’s narration ended in *Kidnapped*. The conclusion thus reads as a totally improbable threshold, wide open, and settles in transition and inbetweeness instead of locking the text.

To complete the dislocating process, the narration is then trusted to a hitherto unheard-of ‘editor’, who breaks in the text with a paragraph in brackets, making it clear that a conclusion is in no way a logical and necessary step, but a pure convention, a matter of artistic decision. The conclusion thus merely
‘intervenes’, it happens as an incident, and it indeed highlights its arbitrariness: ‘Just there, with his hand upon his fortune, the present editor inclines for the time to say farewell to David.’ (p. 219) Such is thus the final location of the text: ‘just there’, to emphasize the fact that positions do not matter, they are illogical and capricious, certainly not necessary. The text is thus defined as a course and as a flux, and it should not renounce its taste for permanent ‘becoming’, it should never reach its aim or be localized. Indeed, the temporal mode chosen of the editor is one of projection and becoming, of anticipation and openness: ‘How Alan escaped, and what was done about the murder, with a variety of other delectable particulars, may some day be set forth’ (p. 219). The conclusion opens up the text, it initiates many lines of escape that deterritorialise the present narration and direct it towards a new text to come. The conclusion chooses modality, it replaces typical stable preterit by an abundant use of the modal ‘may’, and this is typically the time of adventure as Jankelevitch defined it, the time of the imminent ‘advent of the event’: ‘Minimal adventure is linked to the advent of the event [. . .] Adventure is the impending event, the present about to happen.’ Stevenson indeed endeavoured to imagine a text that would favour perpetual deferring or postponement, a text that would endeavour to remain in a state of suspension instead of trying to solve all suspense, a text that would refuse to settle in any fixed interpretation, in any stabilized position.

It seems to me that making such a theoretical choice actually situates him somewhere, in a very intense and valid literary space that is still quite fugitive in literary criticism. Along with some accomplices in that deterritorialisation task, Stevenson redefines adventure, takes it closer to its etymology, res adventura, a thing about to happen: he thus displaces literature, and settles it precisely in that space of transition and imminence. ‘Here are the crossroads’, as the young man with the cream tarts warns Florizel and Geraldine.19
George Steiner underlines the fact that the end of the nineteenth century was characterised by a sense of imminence, ‘a hunger for new colours, new shapes, new possibilities of nervous discoveries, to set against the morose properties of Bourgeois and Victorian modes’, and authors like Stevenson, Conrad, Wells, Doyle indeed seemed to share the desire to work on an alternative to the Realist movement that dominated the literary scene, and to redefine the link between reality and representation. In that crucial period of incubation and mutation, they expressed the same feeling that they had to exploit the position of imminence History had placed them in, and to come up with a text that would be just as open, just as multiple and unsettled as its historical context of production.

In a letter to Henry James, Stevenson expressed that idea that literature was at the crossroads, and needed to reinvent itself: ‘It seems as if literature were coming to a stand.’ Indeed, the contemporary French critics of the NRF sensed the bright possibility of collective literary renewal on the other side of the Channel – while the French novel was stuck in the ruts of determinist Realism and the proliferation of different short-lived schools, like Bourget’s subjective novel: ‘We need to admit it: the novel we are waiting for will not have that beautiful linear composition, that harmonious causality, that simplicity of narration that have so far been the virtues of the French novel.’ To them, renewal was located in Britain: though they had a distinct preference for Stevenson, who had been introduced to the journal by Marcel Schwob, they found a family air to British authors, and they defined it as the generic air of Adventure, as developed by Henri Ghéon: ‘Under cover of Realism and human logic, the French writers have exiled the Unexpected from the novel, the Unexpected that is nearly all there is in life, or at least that gives life its flavour, and is the very reason for our desire in life. [. . .] A Dickens, a Stevenson have got a passion for adventure: they
bathe their characters in it, as in a vividly coloured reagent. Adventure, imminence and the unexpected: this is precisely Stevenson’s literary agenda as he words it in a letter to his cousin: ‘O the height and depth of novelty and worth in any art! And O that I am privileged to swim and shoulder through such oceans! Could one get out of sight of land – all in the blue. Alas not, being anchored here in the flesh and the bonds of logic being still about us. But what a great space and a great air there is in these small shallows where alone we venture!’ Stevenson’s intoxication with that ideal wandering text is echoed by Jacques Rivière: ‘It is free space on all sides! Ah! I can’t see anything! Yet, it is peopled with my impending adventures; here they are, only two steps away; they threaten me with their invisible smiles; I don’t know it yet... A whole future that I very gradually enter.’

For Stevenson, the aim of adventure was thus no longer to discover those geographical virgin territories that Conrad dreamt about in his childhood, and that no longer exist. He endeavoured to reschedule adventure elsewhere, in form itself: it was the text that had to get rid of all the pre-written paths, of all the necessary contents, of the whole writing structure Realism had imposed upon it, to re-become that ‘white patch’ Conrad described, free and wandering, a space of empirical and nomadic formal exploration. – In that sense, the actual treasure in Treasure Island is arguably the Captain’s fragmented logbook, a mere succession of nearly white pages, only partially inscribed with dynamic directions and coordinates, latitudes and longitudes, an invitation to randomly explore the text as an open and opaque surface.

It is interesting to note that Dickens proposed, thirty years earlier, the same reduction of the text to its minimal version, with Mr Dick’s constant and compulsive return to the blank page in David Copperfield. Whereas David manages to write the model realist autobiography, starting with the beginning, ‘I am born’, the title of Chapter I, and finishing with the end, ‘And now my written
story ends’, the sentence opening the final chapter, organising all the random elements of his life into a coherent causal pattern through the linearity of language, Mr Dick’s chaotic memoir is quite another story. It heavily questions the validity of such an enterprise as David’s, and nullifies the key belief that reality can be mastered and ordered through language. As he endeavours to write his own memoirs – in the form of a Memorial addressed to the Lord Chancellor to complain about the bad treatments he received from his family, he can never manage to write a full statement, as the story of King Charles I, obviously a fellow in losing one’s head, unexpectedly but consistently intrudes into and collides with his own story. He is thus compelled to start afresh every morning, and the text thus regularly returns to the blank page, as the first-person narration proves so poorly assured, so untrustworthy and insecure a standpoint, as facts are ungraspable, and as language is an active source of deterritorialisation. Any attempt at achieving a totality, a homogeneous and synthetic representation of the self is thus denounced as an illusion, as the narrator becomes a random variable, and his language a delirium. The compact and complete narration of David is thus presented against the blank page of Mr Dick, which heralds the advent of a new modern text, characterized by casual exploration versus causal linearity, by fragmentation versus completeness, by precariousness versus self-assurance, and by constant rewriting and repetition versus one authoritative version. Trusted to Mr. Dick, language is defined as an active unsettling force and no longer as a passive stable form, it liberates from the facts of life more than it records and fixes them. It centrally refuses to signify, as Mr. Dick insists, ‘What does it signify to me?’ – it thus confirms Aunt Betsy’s reading: ‘He is memorializing the Lord Chancellor, or the Lord Somebody or other – one of those people, at all events, who are paid to be memorialized, about his affairs. [. . .] But it don’t signify; it keeps him employed.’

Static testification thus gives way to a never-ending process of
textification, and as Mr. Dick inscribes in the text this alternative version of the memoirs, he becomes Dickens’s self-contradiction, and marks the solid institutional novel as a much more open literary site of experimentation. Stevenson can be located still more clearly within this context, with a desire for dislocation, seeking to write a text that perpetually hesitates on its own edge. To him, writing is writing out or writing away: he looks for the formation of novelty, for the emergence of formal incidents; writing seems to explore its capacity for precariousness, and to treat each position as temporary, each location as arbitrary. In this way he helped to create a new literary landscape, even although the central theme of that impetus was deterritorialisation itself.

NOTES

3 ‘It was only then that I perceived that the pilgrim ship episode was a good starting-point for a free and wandering tale’ in Joseph Conrad, ‘Author’s Note’, Lord Jim (New York and London: Norton, 1996), p. 5.
7 Stevenson, Master, p. 8.
8 Quoted by Adrian Poole in his introduction to The Master of Ballantrae, p. vii. Gide actually wrote in his journal, on Nov. 17th, 1913: ‘Curieux livre où tout est excellent, mais hétérogène, au point qu’il semble la carte d’échantillons de tout ce où peut exceller Stevenson’.
9 Robert Louis Stevenson, ‘The Suicide Club’ in The Complete Short
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13 Ibid., p. 11: ‘volonté de trouver une matière qui ne devrait plus avoir de forme rassurante, [. . .] ni celle d’un principe, fondamental ou totalisant, [ni celle] d’une instance dernière’.

14 Ibid., p. 11: ‘ce hors-texte qui arrêterait la concaténation de l’écriture’.


16 The Master of Ballantrae, p. 7, henceforth cited in the text.


19 ‘The Suicide Club’, p. 37.


23 Sous prétexte de réalisme et de logique humaine, les écrivains français ont exilé du roman l’imprévu, l’imprévu qui est presque toute la vie, et qui est tout au moins la saveur de la vie et la raison


25 ‘L’espace est libre de tous côtés! Ah! Je ne vois rien! Pourtant il est peuplé de mes aventures prochaines; elles sont là à deux pas de moi; elles me menacent de leur sourire invisible; je ne sais pas encore [. . .] Tout un avenir où j’entre peu à peu,’ in Jacques Rivière, p. 28.

26 ‘Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all looked like that) I would put my finger on it and say, When I grow up I will go there’, in Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 21.

27 ‘By this time, [Africa] was not a blank space anymore. It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery – a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over’, Ibid., p. 22.


29 In the Epilogue to The Wrecker, Stevenson indeed likens his method to that of Dickens in his later work: ‘After we had invented at some expense of time this method of approaching and fortifying our police novel, it occurred to us it had been previously invented by some one else and was in fact – however painfully different the results may seem – the method of Charles Dickens in his later work.’ The Wrecker (London: William Heinemann, 1928), p. 405.