Richard Ambrosini*

# *The Transatlantic Connection: R. L. Stevenson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry James*

Robert Louis Stevenson's transatlantic literary conversation with Nathaniel Hawthorne was necessarily one-sided, since the former was born the year *The Scarlet Letter* appeared and was in his early teens at the time of the latter's death. But it must have been a fruitful one for the Scottish writer, since he ended up basing his own theories on the art of fiction on a study of the American Master's romances. And this is why I believe their conversation is relevant to the study of Hawthorne's reception in Europe.

Those who have investigated the relationship between the two authors have for the most part elaborated the notion that «the closest cultural analogue for Stevenson the Scot may be the New Englander Nathaniel Hawthorne» (Jolly, 2009: 22, n. 60; see also MacCulloch, 1898). Stevenson was the first to recognize this analogy in a passage of his long essay on his native town, *Edinburgh: Picturesque Notes*, in which he recalls the local legend of the two spinster sisters who, having fallen out on some point of controversial divinity, spent the rest of their lives living together in absolute silence. Stevenson comments:

> Here is a canvas for Hawthorne to have turned into a cabinet picture – he had a Puritanic vein, which would have fitted him to treat this Puritanic horror; he could have shown them to us in their sicknesses and at their hideous twin devotions, thumbing a pair of great Bibles, or praying aloud for each other's penitence with marrowy emphasis. […] Alas! To those who know the ecclesiastical history of the race – the most perverse and melancholy in man's annals – this will seem only […] a figure so grimly realistic that it may pass with strangers for a caricature. (Stevenson, 1924: XII, 309)

In Stevenson's works, moreover, we find strategic references to the famous scene in *The Custom-House* in which two «stern and black-

* Università degli Studi Roma Tre.

browed Puritans» voice their shame at the idea that a descendant of theirs, Nathaniel, has become an artist, that is an «idler»; «What is he?» asks one of them, «A writer of story-books! What kind of a business in life […]. Why, the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler!» (Hawthorne, 2005: 12).

It is no coincidence therefore that one of Stevenson's earliest essays was an *Apology for Idlers* (1876)[1] in which he argued: «Idleness so called […] does not consist in doing nothing, but in doing a great deal not recognised in the dogmatic formularies of the ruling class» (Stevenson, 1924: XIII, 67); and was later to rebut with a certain pride Hawthorne's ancestors in *A College Magazine* (1887), the essay in which he retraced the years of his long apprenticeship: «All through my boyhood and youth,» he writes here, «I was known and pointed out for the pattern of an idler; and yet I was always busy on my own private end, which was to learn to write» (Stevenson, 1924: XIII, 211).

Echoes of *The Custom-House* surface also in *The Amateur Emigrant*, a memoir Stevenson wrote during the transatlantic and transcontinental crossings he embarked on in the summer of 1879 when he left Edinburgh to reach Fanny (Frances Matilda Van de Grift), the married American woman he had met in France; they had started an affair, but she had been forced to return to San Francisco to obtain a divorce from her husband. *The Amateur Emigrant* was published posthumously because Stevenson's father bought the galley proofs from the publisher, Kegan Paul, and destroyed them. What he found so offensive was the «subversive classlessness» (McLynn, 1993: 165) his son betrayed in his presenting as formative experiences the discoveries he made about the working class people he had lived amongst during the crossing in the ship's hold. One of these experiences in particular stands out in his memoir: that of a «white-faced Orpheus […] cheerily playing to an audience of women as ill as himself.» The emigrants

> found better than medicine in the music. […] Humanly speaking, it is a more important matter to play the fiddle, even badly, than to write huge works upon recondite subjects. What could Mr. Darwin have done for these sick women? But this fellow scraped away; and the world was positively a better place for all who heard him. (Stevenson, 1924: XV, 20-21)[2]

[1] Stevenson is bringing back to life here a familiar figure of the essayist in eighteenth-century letters: *The Idler*, *The Rambler*, *The Spectator* and *The Tatler* (see Lopate, 1994: xxxiii-xxxv).

[2] «I remember having a fancy once for a sort of Hawthorne sketch,» Stevenson wrote in

The lesson learned from watching that fiddler performing aboard the emigrant ship was soon to be applied by the young essayist, upon arriving in the U.S. A few months later, we find Stevenson writing from San Francisco to his mentor, Sidney Colvin, to announce: from now on «I'll stick to stories […]. My sympathies and interests are changed […]. I care for nothing but the moral and the dramatic, not a jot for the picturesque or the beautiful, other than about people» (Booth & Mehew, 1994-1995: III, 59-60). The following year, back in Scotland, he wrote his first novel, *Treasure Island*, which he intended for working-class or lower middle-class readers. We know this because the publisher he had in mind was George Routledge, whose Railway Library, a series of cheap novels aimed at train commuters, was in Britain a byword for mass readership.

While Stevenson's use of terms such as 'idler' and 'fiddler' may well have been a way to invoke Hawthorne as a fellow artist struggling in a society hostile to art, his case was different: his predicament was more familiar than cultural or religious. His beloved father, Thomas Stevenson, a lighthouse engineer who had designed more than thirty lighthouses himself and a pillar of the Church of Scotland, generously financed his beloved son's literary career, suggested a number of stage props for *Treasure Island*, and was extremely proud of his achievements. But the son was forced to live with the burden of knowing that in pursuing his artistic vocation he was *de facto* the black sheep of the celebrated 'Lighthouse Stevensons,' a dynasty of engineers that generation after generation erected lighthouses all along the Scottish coasts, perhaps the most dangerous in the world (see Bathurst, 1999). This is why he did not feel he had to defend himself from the accusation of his «stern and black-browed Puritan» ancestors, as Hawthorne had done. The Scottish writer could fantasize instead that there was a continuity between the two crafts – as he did in one of his best poems, published in the collection *Underwoods* (1887):

> Say not of me that weakly I declined
> The labours of my sires, and fled the sea,
> The towers we founded and the lamps we lit,
> To play at home with paper like a child.
> But rather say: In the afternoon of time

July 1873 to a young friend, Elizabeth Crosby, «how some spoony, sentimental yokel in the country gets a small legacy from a distant relative and, his heart being very full and his head very empty, imagines the life of an organ grinder the most pleasant on earth» (Booth & Mehew, 1994-1995: I, 278).

A strenuous family dusted from its hands
The sand of granite, and beholding far
Along the sounding coast its pyramids
And tall memorials catch the dying sun,
Smiled well content, and to this childish task
Around the fire addressed its evening hours.
(Stevenson, 1924: XVI, 152)

Ultimately, the Hawthorne-Stevenson cultural analogue obscures the contents of Stevenson's conversation with Hawthorne. And this because critic after critic have used it to explain their choice to write romances rather than realistic novels as a reaction to their Calvinistic cultural backgrounds[3]. But it seems at least anachronistic to keep using still today the realism/romance opposition, which dates from the Victorian era – hardly the Golden Age of literary theory. One must look elsewhere to understand the relationship between the two. In fact, I suggest, at the heart of their conversation was the young essayist's projective identification with the American novelist, based on his admiration for the formal quality of his fiction.

*Treasure Island* or *Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* should be read, among other things, as attempts to come up with a theoretical model for this narrative form in the author's time and age. For the first half of his career, Stevenson observed the editorial market and its main commodity, fiction, with the detachment of a writer whose identity as an artist in words was founded on a literary prose both elegant and free of an explicit moral burden. When still in his mid-twenties, he succeeded in bringing the style-vogue associated with Walter Pater «well beyond the confines of academic appreciation» (Merritt, 1968: 27). His first travel book, *An Inland Voyage* (1878), was adopted at Eton for translations from English into Latin, and a society at Oxford chose the slim volume as the «best specimen of the writing of English of this

[3] Critics at the time were quick to make the connection. Richard Holt Hutton, in *The Spectator* of March 12, 1887, suggested that we should call *Markheim* «a study after Nathaniel Hawthorne […] and so successful a study in the school of that great master, that if it had appeared among his *Twice-Told Tales*, we should have selected it as one the best and most original of the series»; James Ashcroft Noble, in *The Academy*, January 23, 1886, wrote instead: «I do not ignore the many differences between the genius of the author of *The Scarlet Letter* and that of the author of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* when I say that the latter story is worthy of Hawthorne» (quoted in Maixner, 1981: 253, 204). See Bunge (2009), who reviews similarities between Stevenson's masterpiece and Hawthorne's tales about scientists with laboratories in their homes, transforming potions and mirrors. See also Norquay (2007: 40).

century» (Maixner, 1981: 8). From 1873 to 1883 (the first half of his career, since he died in 1894) Stevenson wrote only essays and short stories, even though someone, like Leslie Stephen, the legendary editor of *The Cornhill Magazine*, felt that he had the potential to continue the tradition of the great Victorian novelists:

> It has occurred to me lately that you might possibly help me in an ever recurring difficulty. I am constantly looking out rather vaguely for a new novelist. I should like to find a Walter Scott or Dickens or even a Miss Brontë or G. Eliot. Somehow the coming man or woman has not yet been revealed. Meanwhile I cannot help thinking that, if you would seriously put your hand to such a piece of work you would be able […] to write something really good and able to make a mark in the "Cornhill" (Leslie Stephen to Robert Louis Stevenson, June 7, 1878, in Booth & Mehew, 1994-1995: II, 257, n. 1).

But Stevenson refused, and preferred remaining an 'idler', while enjoying the «fantastic critical and popular prominence» he had achieved, as the standard-bearer of the «new cult of prose stylism» (Merritt, 1968: 28).

In an essay we have already encountered, *College Magazine*, Stevenson recalls the kind of study his dream of becoming an artist of the word had required: «Whenever I read a book or a passage that particularly pleased me,» he recalls, «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»; this is how, he explains, he acquired «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 Montaigne, to Baudelaire and to Obermann» (Stevenson, 1924: XIII, 212)[4] – an impressive list of poets and essayists – and to only two novelists: Defoe and Hawthorne[5].

[4] He didn't fear that by aping these authors he could end up clipping «the wings of my originality,» since, as he writes in *A College Magazine*¸ all he was acquiring was the «lower and less intellectual elements of the art, the choice of the essential note and the right word» (Stevenson, 1924: XIII, 212, 214). Gustave Flaubert's quest for *le mot juste* would have left him cold. The «sedulous ape» phrase was to be used so often to denigrate him that Max Beerbohm said the printers kept it always in type (Maixner, 1981: 21).

[5] There is a rare trace of Hawthorne's presence in Stevenson's apprenticeship, a phrase which is interesting not in itself but because he first used it in a letter to his mother

The lessons learned sedulously aping the latter must have been crucial, since in the literary essay that marked the end of his apprenticeship he expounded a personal theory of the novel in which Hawthorne played a key role.

In January or February 1874, in Mentone, where he was spending the winter, Stevenson started writing an essay on Victor Hugo whose last novel, *Quatrevingt-treize*, appeared in mid-February of that year. A couple of months later, his friend Colvin, who had come to visit, was asked by Leslie Stephen to review the novel for *The Cornhill Magazine*; Colvin suggested to let Stevenson write it instead and Stephen accepted[6]. The actual review, *Victor Hugo's Romances*, takes up only eleven out of the essay's twenty eight pages; the other are devoted to discussing that «line of literary tendency» which connects Scott's and Hugo's romance, and should be seen as «definitely separated from others», by which he means «"the novel with a purpose" as familiar to the English reader» from Fielding and Richardson down to the so-called 'realist' novel, that «model of incompetence» in which «the moral [is] clumsily forced into every hole and corner of the story, or thrown externally over it like a carpet over a railing»; crucially, Stevenson is contrasting here a national novelistic 'tradition' with a transnational novelistic 'form', in which it is possible to distinguish «an advance in [artistic] self-consciousness» (Stevenson, 1924: XIV, 41-42) from Sir Walter Scott to Victor Hugo.

At a certain point in the review essay Stevenson inserts an aside to specify that another novelist would perhaps have been even more suited than Hugo to his «design» of illustrating a theory of the artistic romance.

written in the summer of 1869: «The whole place looks dreary and wretched; for here, nature, as Hawthorne would have said, has not sufficient power to take back to herself what the idleness and absence of man has let go. There is no ivy for the ruined cottage; no thorn or bramble for the waste way-side» (letter to his mother, 20 June 1869, in Booth & Mehew, 1994-1995: I, 186) and then *verbatim* in a strategic essay he wrote in 1874, *On the Enjoyment of Unpleasant Places*, which, as its title suggests, was to be a manifesto of the poetics he aimed at with his 'walking-tour' essays of the 1870s: «Even the waste places by the side of the road were not, as Hawthorne liked to put it, "taken back to Nature" by any decent covering of vegetation» (Stevenson, 1924: XXI, 103). Nancy Bunge notes that this phrase definitely does not come from any of Hawthorne's novels since it does not appear in *A Concordance to the Five Novels of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Bunge, 2009: 179).

[6] When the review essay *Victor Hugo's Romances* appeared, an anonymous critic in *The Spectator* attributed the unsigned article to Stephen and praised it lavishly as «masterly» and «full of thought and appreciation» (see Swearingen, 1980: 13-14). All this name dropping is only to give a sense of the authoritative voice with which Stevenson first declared publicly his indebtedness to Hawthorne.

«At the present moment,» he writes,

> we can recall one man only, for whose works it would have been equally possible to accomplish our present design: and that man is Hawthorne. There is a unity, and unwavering creative purpose, about some at least of Hawthorne's romances, that impresses itself on the most indifferent reader; and the very restrictions and weaknesses of the man served perhaps to strengthen the vivid and single impression of his works. There is nothing of this kind in Hugo. (Stevenson, 1924: XIV, 26-27)

It was only natural that while staying in Mentone he indulged in dreams of becoming an artistic Walter Scott thanks to the teachings of Hugo and of the American master he had sedulously aped. But things did not work out that way: if seven years later Stevenson completed his transition from essayist to novelist and wrote *Treasure Island* it was not because he was inspired by his conversations with Hawthorne's splendid texts, so alive to his consciousness while wintering on the French Riviera in 1874. It was in response to a succession of culturally significant experiences he lived through during his transatlantic crossing in the fall of 1879 and the year he spent in California, the country he first put on the British literary map with *The Silverado Squatters* (1884) and *The Wrecker* (1891). It was his encounter with American society, not American literature, that made him understand, way before his British compeers, what implications the rise of a media-dominated mass editorial market was to have for a hyper-literary upper-class novelist like himself[7].

Stevenson returned to Scotland from the U.S. in August 1880 and exactly one year later he started *Treasure Island*. In between these two dates, in April 1881, he wrote an essay – *The Morality of the Profession of Letters* – in which we find a moral urgency unknown up to that moment in his public voice. «The total of a nation's reading,» he writes, «in these days of daily papers, greatly modifies the total of the nation's speech; and the speech and reading, taken together, form the efficient educational medium of youth». For all practitioners of «the art of words,» contrasting the «incalculable influence for ill» and the «public falsehood» represented by journalism should be seen as a moral duty. It is not, he explains, that the «American reporter or the Parisian *chroniquer* […] are so much

[7] Stevenson was to return to the U.S. again in 1887-1888 as a celebrity, thanks to the two million pirated copies of *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* he knew nothing about. He hated it so much that he escaped to a log cabin in the Adirondacks, where he spent the winter before leaving in June 1888 for a cruise in the Pacific.

baser» than English journalists: they are far more dangerous because they are «so much more readable» and therefore «their evil is done more effectively, in America for the masses, in [France] for the few that care to read» (Stevenson, 1924: XXII, 278-279). In this sense, we may say that the lessons Stevenson learned in America motivated the eighteenth-century 'idler' to become a nineteenth-century 'fiddler'.

Having set Hawthorne upon a pedestal at the beginning of his career, Stevenson apparently lost interest in him once he started writing his own romances – thus entering a new phase in the transatlantic continuum that was his conversation with American literature and culture. A couple of years after *Treasure Island* he brought together different strands already present in his short stories and essays to create another boys' adventure story, *Kidnapped* (1885), set in post-1745 Scotland, that is in Walter Scott territory. If he succeeded in doing so, he admitted, it was thanks to *Huckleberry Finn* (see Ambrosini, 2001: 184).

Briefly: in both novels an orphan – Twain's Huck and Stevenson's David Balfour – escapes from a close relative, spends a few days on a desert island close to land and then starts on a journey across his native country in the company of an adult of a 'primitive' race who is fleeing after being accused of a murder. All these echoes culminate in the same question: will the two boys – Huck and David – overcome the conditioning of their education and fully accept their companions (Eigner, 1966: 80-81)? Huck signals his acceptance by declaring «I knowed he was white inside» (Twain, 1918: 381). For David this recognition is more problematic: for a Protestant Scot from the Lowlands this would require questioning a psychological identity built over the centuries in opposition to a 'barbaric' other. This is why when most reviewers read *Kidnapped* as an encounter between representatives of two races, the Saxon David and the Celtic Alan, Stevenson disagreed: the two halves at the heart of Scottish national identity, he reminded them, are not racial at all (Booth & Mehew, 1994-1995: VII, 238-239)[8].

When Stevenson returned to the U.S. the following year, in September 1887, he sought out Mark Twain and the two spent «an hour or more» talking on a bench in Washington Square (Booth & Mehew, 1994-1995: VI, 162 n. 1). What their conversation was about we do not know. But fortunately another extended conversation with an American writer had already started back in Britain.

[8] A few months after publishing *Kidnapped*, Stevenson further re-elaborated upon the split between barbarism and civilization in his most famous story of the double, *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

After *Treasure Island* appeared, a clique of London publicists acclaimed Stevenson as the champion of a presumed indigenous narrative form – the romance – antagonistic to the Frenchified variety – the 'realist' novel – cultivated by the local imitators of Flaubert and Zola (Stevenson of course laughed at the idea). This clique, led by Andrew Lang, a Scottish folklorist turned literary journalist and editor of *Longman's Magazine*, found a new target for their animosity when in an 1882 essay William Dean Howells dared claim that

> The art of fiction has, in fact, become a finer art in our day than it was with Dickens and Thackeray. We could not suffer the confidential attitude of the latter now, nor the mannerism of the former, any more than we could endure the prolixity of Richardson or the coarseness of Fielding. These great men are of the past – they and their methods and interests; even Trollope and Reade are not of the present. The new school derives from Hawthorne and George Eliot rather than any others. […] It is largely influenced by French fiction in form, but […] it has a soul of its own. […] This school, which is so largely of the future as well as the present, finds its chief exemplar in Mr. James; it is he who is shaping and directing American fiction, at least. (Howells, 1950: 353)

Stevenson found Howells's essay «very good natured and sensible,» and invited his friend William E. Henley to read the article «which idiots in England have been bawling and brawling about» urging him not to «take up the cry against Howells» (Booth & Mehew, 1994-1995: IV, 74; 85). About James himself, however, he had some reservations – inevitably, one might say, since James had ended up on his blacklist for having mistreated his beloved Hawthorne in his 1879 monograph, which Stevenson had found «the most snobbish and (in his own word) provincial – provincialism inside out – thing in the world. I have dug up the hatchet; a scalp shall flutter at my belt ere long» (Booth & Mehew, 1994-1995: III, 83). Stevenson asked Leslie Stephen if he was interested in a written defence of Hawthorne intended to «blast» James but Stephen politely demurred (Swearingen, 1980: 54). Stevenson had to be content with circulating among his friends this brief doggerel:

> Not clad in transatlantic furs,
> But clinking English pence
> The young republic claims me hers
> In no parochial sense.

A bland colossus, mark me stride
From land to land, the sea
And patronize on every side
Far better men than me.

[…]

Yet I'm a sentimental lot
And freely weep to see
Poor Hawthorne and the rest, who've not
To Europe been, like me.
(Booth & Mehew, 1994-1995: III, 245)

When the two had met at a luncheon in September 1879, they had disliked each other: James defined Stevenson «a shirt-collarless Bohemian and a great deal (in an inoffensive way) of a *poseur*» (letter to T. S. Perry, September 14, 1879, in James, 1975: 255), and Stevenson branded the American «a mere club fizzle» (Booth & Mehew, 1994-1995: III, 159).

But the love for literature moves in mysterious ways, and when Andrew Lang tried to have them joust on the columns of *Longman's Magazine* as champions, respectively, of Realism and Romance the two writers discovered how similar in fact were their ideas. A venomous testimony as to the similarity between these two votaries of artistic prose can be found in Thomas Hardy's remark that they were the Polonius and Osric of novelists (cf. McLynn, 1993: 250).

But what do the Langs of the world know? When James read Stevenson's response to *The Art of Fiction* – an essay tongue-in-cheekly titled *A Humble Remonstrance* – he picked up the pen and wrote to him straightaway: «It's a luxury, in this immoral age, to encounter someone who *does* write – who is really acquainted with that lovely art» (cit. in Booth & Mehew, 1994-1995: V, 42 n. 1). When the Stevensons moved to Skerryvore, a house in Bournemouth, a town James visited quite often to see his invalid sister Alice, the American became their favourite guest. Indeed, Stevenson came to value so much James' conversations that he bought a blue armchair reserved only to him. James on his part presented his friend with a mirror that inspired a poem, *The Mirror Speaks*, in which Stevenson imagines how much the looking glass enjoyed their conversation:

Now with an outlandish grace,

> To the sparkling fire I face
> In the blue room at Skerryvore;
> Where I wait until the door
> Open, and the Prince of Men,
> Henry James, shall come again.
> (Stevenson, 1924: XVI, 126)

James then, we can say, turned out to be the flesh-and-blood counterpart for the kind of conversation Stevenson had had in his youth with Hawthorne. In James, Stevenson found a confirmation of the truth he had discovered while sedulously aping the American Master of the romance: British novelists who wished to engage on a quest for the art of fiction were to look not only across the Channel but across the Atlantic as well.

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