Robert Louis Stevenson's
Indebtedness to the
18th Century Novelists

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ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON'S INDEBTEDNESS

TO THE

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By

FAITH LELAND BARDWELL

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Daniel William Dodge

Head of Department of English
Stevenson's indebtedness

to the

eighteenth century novelists.

Critics of Stevenson have frequently recognized the fact that there exists in his work much that is suggestive of the eighteenth century novel. In the criticisms which have been available to me I have found the following references to Stevenson's work in its relation to the eighteenth century.

Charles R. Lanier in an article in The Review of Reviews, V 11, 1881, says that, when as a boy Stevenson accompanied his father on a coasting expedition about Stiffymore, he was "pouring over Sir Walter Scott, Washington Irving Poe, Cooper and Defoe." and he continues saying, "one read these parrots and these pirates, these stolen ships and hidden treasure, these one-legged and one-eyed villains, these heroes"
without even the weak help, these very improvable tangies and quite improvable unravelings— are not these the old stage properties of Defoe, of Waring of Scott and a thousand lesser showmen?"

In the living age, 1875, A. Mac Callum simply states that Treasure Island is comparable to Robinson Crusoe.

C. T. Coleland, Atlantic Monthly 78: 5-26, in speaking of the horror of Dr. Jekyll's discovery of his involuntary transformation, writes:

"There has not been such a shudder as that in our literature since Crusoe found the footprint in the sand."

Andrew Lang, in his essay on Stevenson, mentions his sense of the English idiom of the last last century.

The following is from an article in the Atlantic Monthly 68: 747 by Sophia Ish.
"J. G. (Stevenson) brings back old
chivalry and piracy, and talks
of the by-roads of today of ship
wreckers and highroadmen as if
these venerable objects of wonder
had not been superseded long
ago by merchantile heroes and
dollar coming seafaring."

Stevenson himself frankly
acknowledges his indebtedness to
the eighteenth century. In a letter
to Marcel Schwob, the French man
of letters, he wrote:

"Ah yes, you are right, I love
the eighteenth century and so do
you, and have not listened to
the voice in vain."

In the introduction to
Treasure Island (page 17) he wrote:

"No doubt the parrot once belonged
to Robinson Crusoe. No doubt
the skeletons is conveyed from
Poe."

Again in the poem which
in 40 A.D., to Treasure Island and the significance of the fact that he has borrowed his subject matter from the days of buccaneer literature.

The actual comparison of Stevenson's work with that of Defoe and Smollett reveals many noticeable resemblances. One of the strongest similarities between Stevenson's work and that of the eighteenth century, is in its spirit, and the character of the subject matter treated. The extreme bloodiness and brutality of Smollett and Defoe are still toned by Stevenson. They are made far more nearly legitimate and much less shocking, yet if we open our eyes we cannot but see that they are there still. The history of the adventure on board the Sarah Master of Ballantyne...
(p. 43 - etc) are certainly more artistic and entertaining than Defoe or Smollett were capable of writing, but there is no lack of horror there.

The circumstances leading up to the death of Coguelat (St. Dor, page 12 - 13) are better managed than any like affair in Smollett but never the less the brutality is heart-rending.

Other instances of this brutal horror may be found, Treasure Island page 193 - 201, page 33 - 4, page 108 - 109, St. Dor page 126 - 127 and Shadwell page 76.

Stevenson delights in treating seafaring life and all the reckless adventure and cruelty which went with it in the days of the buccaneers in a fond of desert islands, buried treasure and all the wild scenery and adventures which characterize the early novels. Indeed I think this subject matière is more closely analogous to that of the eighteenth century writers than
any recent novelists.

Another characteristic of Stevenson which is like Smollett and Defoe is his didacticism. In Kidnapped, David Balfour, Master of Ballantrae and Treasure Island we feel this strongly. Certainly it is very different from the cheap preaching and crude moralizing in Smollett, Defoe and Richardson. Stevenson seldom makes their common mistake of portraying evil so forcibly as to make it the most pervading element in the tone of the novel, indeed, his morals are so delicately drawn that there is almost always a question as to whether they are intentional or not. I have often heard readers contend that it was altogether unintentional, but we leave from life our own the expression of a desire to make life work a moral instrument. This is coupled with a complaint of the difficulties which beset
the path of the modern world who would preach. It is found in the letter VI 342, and reads as follows:

I have come for the moment to a pause in my moral work, for I have many more in the fire, and I wish to formulate something to bring to
before I can go on with what I think cannot till I be a
duty. It is a moral difficult work; a touch of the person will drive off those I hope to
influence; a touch of overdram
laxity, besides disgusting like a
grammar, may do harm. Nothing
that I have written even yet speaks
directly and efficaciously to young
men, and I do hope I may find
the art to fill up a gap.

In spite of Stevenson's great
superiority in the art of leading
ethics and pointing to higher
vehicles I feel that Defoe Smollett
and Richardson might have
been to him an earnest of the fact that the novel could be used as a vehicle of ethical instruction.

In the plot of Stevenson's David Balfour, I found a resemblance to Smollett's Ferdinand Count Fathom. Renaldo's faithful charge of his orphaned love Fermina, reminds one of David's guardianship of the friendless Catriona, and there is a certain resemblance in the circumstances of the elimination of the two pairs of lovers, especially in that both the unhappy maidens are kept prisoners in lonely out-of-the-way homes. The pursuit by Renaldo and David Balfour (in character) of their rightful fortunes is something the same.

Often some situation or
incident in Stevenson's story resemble another in an eighteenth century novel.

When David is wrecked upon the peninsular (Kidnapped page 8) we think of Robinson Crusoe cast away. Apart from the mere circumstance the heroic efforts of each to maintain an existence are alike.

The situation on board ship in Roderick Random, chapters XXV-XXX is much like that of David, in Kidnapped chapters VII and VIII, and that of the Master and colonel Barker in The Master of Ballantrae, pages 46--88. There is the same brutality among the crew, with walking of planks and threats from such men as Teach and Rackahome constantly endangering the lives of the helpless prisoners. The difference is that in Stevenson these things are more artistic. They make us shiver without
exciting such a disagreeable sense of disgust.

In St. Ives, page 9, the rapture of St. Ives over flora, and the rapidity with which the feeling grew is more after the fashion of the gathering passion of lovers in the eighteenth century, than our more reasonable modern sort. It is especially suggestive of the love of Frederick Random for Narcissa, (Frederick Random page 586 - 688).

The baroness died in the second chapter of St. Ives, has a decided eighteenth century flavor as has also the escape known poison, page 68. Throughout this book occur unexpected predicaments, sometimes half amusing and half shocking, which are strongly suggestive of Smollett and Fielding. Instance here, the appearance of the aunt in the dining room (page 595) the circumstance at the inn
and the adventure of the runaway culprit (page 24-4). But Stevenson's situations are always lacking in the coherence which is so common in Smollett and Fielding.

In Treasure Island the voice of Ben Gunn frightening the gold searcher (page 246-) suggests the passage where Robinson Crusoe is frightened by the voice of the parrot (page 96) and the long siren of the discovery of the footprint (Robinson Crusoe, page 79) is reproduced where Jim Hawkins discovers Ben Gunn, page 118 + 10, and where the skeleton is found, page 241.

The footprint incident is the most picturesque thing in D'Artagnan and it gives a thrill of pure, peculiar horror which is very similar to the thrill Stevenson is so fond of inducing.

The manner of working upon the imagination in the journal of the Plague (page 46-),
very faintly anticipate the terror of the cries which jin
leave in Treasure Island (page 36) and the face of Ransom
as he is carried below (Stranded
page 89).

The beginning of Kidnapped
is not unlike the beginning
of Captain Singleton, and I think
that David Balfour partakes
somewhat of the adventurous
of Captain Singleton with also
some of the sense and
approach of William.

Leslie Stephen says that
the great virtue of Defoe's work
is that his lies seem so probable.
Stevenson evidently admired
this quality in Defoe and
studied his method of producing
it; for we find that he has
used similar means for
securing verisimilitude in his
own stories, though to be sure
he is always more artful. While
Defoe used the device of a mere chain of evidence and assertion of the good character of his witnesses to make his stories seem reliable. Stevenson uses more complex means. In Treasure Island he has the hero who tells the story say that he was asked to do so by other participants in the adventure and makes him go on to explain their desire that he should back back the location of the island (Treasure Island page). On kidnapped he invents his hero with such honesty and straightforwardness that we are obliged to believe the story he tells.

Another method which Defoe uses to secure verisimilitude is minuteness of detail and cataloging. He often enumerates lists of articles and at other times he gives facts not especially important to the story but which
are of such a nature as the casual narrator of actual events would be likely to mention. Stevenson is too conscientious to do just this. He seldom enumerates, though at times, when he is certain that the catalog will be interesting, he makes it (Treasure Island, page 31), but often he rather gives the effect of detail through suggestion as for instance in Treasure Island, page 26-8 in telling about Ben Gunn's cave; I felt after reading the book that this cave had been minutely described, I could seem to see it and its contents distinctly, but when I turned back to the passage I found that only a few details were mentioned. Sometimes Stevenson allows his speaker to tell a longer story than is necessary to the plot, in order that the narrative may seem more real, for example
Stevenson, seems to have chosen to go back to Defoe in the matter of omitting character development. He is the exception of his time in that he makes almost no attempt at weaving character growth into his plots, and like Defoe, too, he depends almost entirely upon the effectiveness of incident for the interest of his stories. J. A. MacCulloch (Living Age, 218; 5-40) notes this fact and compares Robinson Crusoe with Treasure Island in this respect.

Like the early novelists, Stevenson seldom appeals to the visual sense. In his letters, IIT, page 377 he says, "My two aims may be described as

1st War to the adjective,
2nd Death to the optic nerve.

Admitted we live in an age of
the poetic name in literature. For how many centuries did literature get along without a sign of it?"

We recognize a touch of the last century in Stevenson's idiom and forms of speech. Andrew Lang speaks of Stevenson as the English idiom of the last century. He also has a skillful trick of introducing terms which have a peculiar buccaneering and supernatural flavor, as in "Treasure Island." He has made "pieces of eight" and the "dead man's chest" the very keynotes of the story.

I believe that Stevenson was only partially conscious of the resemblance which his work bore to that of the eighteenth century. Much of the eighteenth century element in his work is merely the natural and
involuntary result of the reading which he did at his most impressionable age Charles D. L. J. D. Janvier tells how, when, as a boy Stevenson accompanied his father on his coasting expedition along the north shore and about Sherrymore Lighthouse he was pouring over Sir Walter Scott, Washington Irving, Poe, Cooper and Defoe. I think he shows that he absorbed much from all of these. I believe that his work bears a closer relation to that of Scott than any other author, and my investigation has led me to think that he may owe more to him than to any other novelist. The adventure of the staircase (Kidnapped page 27) is wonderfully like Scott if not actually suggested by his description of the death of Amy Robsart. The incidents and characters of The Black Arrow seem to have been taken
right out of Scott. Indeed I have never read a novel of Stevenson's but I was reminded of Scott, while Stevenson makes such frequent reference to him in his letters that it is evident he recognized that he owed a great deal to him.

From the study of Irving Stevenson may well have learned to desire beauty of style and to aspire to that adaptation of tone to subject matter which he has so successfully attained, while Tales of a Traveler had a pronounced influence upon one of his plots as he himself acknowledges in the introduction to Treasure Island. I shall quote the passage later. Some of his short stories and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde have a tone of weird horror which might have been suggested by Poe, and the finding of the treasure
in Treasure Island (Chapters XXXI and XXXII) the part which the skeleton played, etc., remind us forcibly of the Gold Bug. From St. John's Point Stevenson may well have got some points for the grandeur of The Master in the American wilderness (The Master of Ballantrae) as well as for his sea tales.

Stevenson himself speaks of his indebtedness to "Charles Kingsley, from whose "at last" he got the idea of "The Dead Man's Chest" which was the clue to Treasure Island, and to Captain Johnson's "History of Notorious Pirates" which was a help and inspiration to him in his seafaring tales.

All Stevenson owes to the novelists mentioned above is only surer proof of his debt to the early eighteenth century novelists for, with the possible exception of Irving, every one of these
writers is a disciple of Defoe, Smollett and Fielding, and from them Stevenson naturally drew more of the eighteenth century spirit.

As I have already said, I believe that Stevenson was not altogether conscious of the influence which these authors had upon him. I think it was in a large degree merely the result of having read them so much at an age when his mind was very sensitive to impressions, so that his ideas of fiction were greatly influenced by them and resemblances inevitably occur in his own work. A quotation from his introduction to Treasures I shall find page XVII may serve to explain how this was:

"It is my debt to Washington Irving that exercised my conscience and justified, for I believe, plagiarism was rarely carried
further, 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, like chest, the company in the parlour, the whole micer spirit and a good deal of the material detail of my first chapters all were there, all were the property of Washing—"... But I had no guess of it then as I sat writing by the fireside, in what seemed the springtides of a somewhat pedestrian inspiration: nor yet day by day, after lunch as I read aloud my morning work to the family. It seemed to me original as air; it seemed to belong to me like my own right eye."

Sometimes, I think Stevenson did deliberately borrow ideas. We acknowledge in the passages we have already quoted from the
introduction to Treasure Island, that the "parrot" once belonged to Robinson Crusoe. And that the skeleton was taken from the. But he is a good illustration of Coleridge's statement, "To admire on principle is to imitate without loss of originality." When he does something which he believes he can use to good advantage he assimilates it and builds it into the organic structure of his work in such a way that it is often really his in a far truer sense than it was ever the original author. Sidney Colvin puts this way:

"he may set out to tell a pirate story for boys "exactly in the ancient way" and it will come from him not in the ancient way at all but remotely marked with a shadiness and saliency in the characters a private stand of buccaneering..."
favorite combined with smiling
humor, an energy of vision
and happy vivacity of present
ment which are shining
like stars." Letters V E page XX
It was in this way that
Shakespeare used his many
sources.

Stevenson himself
thoroughly believed in the right
of every author to borrow whatev-
er he could make worthy
use of. In The Introduction to
Treasure Island again, page XIV
he says in speaking of the
borrowed parrot and skeleton.

"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. —— These useful writers
had fulfilled the motto saying;
leaving they had left behind
them
"Footprints on the sands of time,"
Footprints that perhaps another
and I made the other."

Stevenson is not less
generous to others than to
himself. At one time he in
someway suggested that a stor
of a certain writer bore some
resemblance to one of his own
and a hungry editor immediatly
picked up the choice bit and
turned it into an article
convincing the authour of this
story of plagiarisms. I was
literally indignant and at once
wrote to the editor. The
following is an extract from
the letter.

"As if I did not borrow the
ideas of half of my own stories.
As if any one who had written
a story I had had a right to com-
plain of any other who should
have written it better."

Letters V E page 293.

Our conclusion then
must be that few authors have been more largely indebted to those who went before than Robert Louis Stevenson, and that he is especially indebted to the authors of the earliest novels of incident, i.e. Defoe and Smollett. But we are persuaded that his is not the debt of the unworthy dependent, but rather that of the child to the parent; the natural debt of blood and bone, paid already because it is essential to the perpetuation of the parent's life.
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