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Familiar style in *Memories and Portraits*

Alex Thomson

Dedicating the book to his mother 'in the name of past joy and present sorrow', Stevenson describes *Memories and Portraits* in his prefatory Note as accidentally autobiographical.[1] The collection that would eventually bear this title had been under discussion for two years prior to its eventual British publication on 21st November 1887, and the illness and death of Stevenson's father early that year made the period during which *Memories and Portraits* was assembled an unsettled and unsettling one.[2] Indeed, at first sight the preoccupation of the collection with personal and national pasts is striking: *Memories and Portraits* seems a troubled farewell to his Edinburgh youth, his family, and many of his friendships.

Moreover, the circumstances of the book's final production span his final Atlantic crossing; for its reader, as perhaps for its author, the volume can become emblematic of the closure of one phase of Stevenson's life and work. Writing to his publisher shortly before setting out from Bournemouth to London in August 1887, Stevenson stresses how 'anxious' he is 'to have the proofs with me on the voyage' (L5: 441). He made landfall in New York in September; proofs of *Memories and Portraits* were returned to London, then the printed sheets made their way back across the Atlantic for near-simultaneous publication of the American edition. The dedication to Stevenson's mother was completed on the voyage, and is signed as from 'SS. "Ludgate Hill", within the sight of Cape Race'. 'Cape Race' in Newfoundland was typically the first landfall of an Atlantic crossing, so the location is significant. The dedication, last element of the volume to be completed, frames *Memories and Portraits* as a set of backward glances at a passing world Stevenson would not rejoin in his lifetime.

Yet the value of an essay stands on its ability to transcend any

revelation of self. The personal is the occasion of the familiar essay, but if this serves to dramatise the relationship between author and reader as one of intimacy, it should not be seen as the final end or purpose of the form. The familiar style, given its central critical definition in the English tradition by Hazlitt, is a complex form whose success depends upon such artful disavowal of its designs upon the reader. The preparation of *Memories and Portraits* underlines Stevenson's awareness of such generic attributes. Originally conceived as a companion volume to *Virginibus Puerisque*, it would feature essays published in magazines since *Virginibus* had appeared in 1881. The sole exception was 'An Old Scotch Gardener', the only essay to receive significant editorial attention, revised from its 1871 appearance in the Edinburgh University Magazine. The deal with Chatto was for *Virginibus* to be republished alongside the new volume, so that the two books might be sold in identical formats, and for a while they were slated to appear as twin volumes of 'Familiar Essays'.[3] This generic marker is significant. Those essays from the period that Stevenson chooses to leave out are too technical ('On Style in Literature: Its Technical Elements'), too political ('The Day After To-morrow') or too much a critical study (the two essays for *The Magazine of Art* on 'The Byways of Book Illustration') to adequately fit the definition.

In the case of his essays, the general critical neglect of Stevenson in the twentieth century is compounded by the decline of the familiar essay as a central literary genre.[4] Our assumption that the essay must be a subsidiary literary form to the novel, verse or drama is a recent one. As Graham Good puts it, the essay is 'the "invisible genre" in literature, commonly used but rarely analyzed in itself'.[5] This reflects one of the fundamental problems of critical reading. Both writer and critic work against a complex set of changing background assumptions about particular genres. Those genres and styles bring with them sets of attitudes that may prescribe the tonal range of the work, suitable style and

appropriate subject matter. Moreover they define the conventions against which stylistic innovation is deployed. The case for generic criticism is that it helps us isolate and understand the attitudes that we can ascribe to the writer, as distinct from those embodied in the form they choose. Commenting on Stevenson's approach to biography, Liz Farr argues that he 'draws upon recent psychological models to eschew objective judgements and focus on the ways in which the subjective discriminating mind might treat the world as a resource through which it should quest after pleasurable impressions'.[6] But it is just as plausible that Stevenson's use of the familiar essay form actually brings with it this subjective approach, for the essay has been associated with the subjective and personal response to experience, and hence with a scepticism about objectivity, since Montaigne.

My aim in this article is to explore the strong presence of such conventions of the familiar essay in *Memories and Portraits*. In the first section I will discuss the history of the familiar essay, drawing attention to three points of contact between that tradition and Stevenson's own use of the form, and illustrating this generic argument with evidence from the volume. In the second section I will examine the structure and themes of the volume at greater length, paying particular attention to the essays 'Old Mortality', 'Pastoral' and 'The Manse'. The conjunction in the title of 'memories' with 'portraits' hints at both an autobiographical and biographical dimension. Indeed, almost every essay is both a portrait and a memory, as Stevenson lends an immediacy to his memories, and qualifies the tendency towards solipsism of the essayist, through specific, if fleeting, engagement with the lives and characters of others. It is precisely through his mobilisation and qualification of their autobiographical dimension, and in the subjection of reminiscence to the strictures of reflexive self-criticism, that the distinctiveness of Stevenson's familiar essays can be understood, and I will conclude with a short comparison between these essays and less self-critical contemporary modes

of Scottish literary reminiscence.

I

There are two distinctive characteristic features of the familiar essay that are particularly helpful for understanding Stevenson's use of the genre in *Memories and Portraits*. The first is the association of the essay, since its inception in Montaigne's writing, with scepticism and humanism; the second is the stabilising of the familiar style in the early nineteenth century around the idea of conversational form. Finally, these features taken together shed light on the relationship between Stevenson's prose and what literary historians have seen as the late nineteenth century revival of a self-conscious interest in the concept of style, especially visible in the familiar essay and in the writing of a stylistically distinguished prose.[7] In this section I will explore each point in turn.

As Montaigne characterises his technique in 'On Experience', his introspective method is linked to a sense of the limitations of human knowledge: 'I who make no other profession but getting to know myself find in me such boundless depths and variety that my apprenticeship bears no other fruit than to make me know how much there remains to learn. [...] It is from my own experience that I emphasize human ignorance which is, in my own judgement, the most certain faction in the school of the world'.[8] In Stevenson's time the same equation of the perspective of the essayist and the limited knowledge gained from experience holds, and it can be confirmed in the commonplace identification of Montaigne with both the form of the essay and the sceptic disposition. Hazlitt had identified Montaigne (and identified with him) as having the 'courage' to throw off dogma and prejudice, and to write not to persuade others of his beliefs, but to 'satisfy his own mind of the truth of things';[9] for Emerson he is the exemplary Skeptic, 'the considerer, the prudent, taking in sail, counting stock, husbanding his means';[10] for Pater he is

'representative essayist because representative doubter' in an age which is 'the commencement of our own'.[11]

Pater bears citation in this context not only as he is often classed with Stevenson as a progenitor of the late-Victorian revival of style in prose, but also as exemplary of a larger nineteenth century interest in scepticism and what has more recently been called relativity.[12] In his 1866 essay on Coleridge, he had explicitly linked modern science, philosophy and experience: the relative spirit, characteristic of the modern as opposed to the ancient world, has spread from observational sciences into moral philosophy. This passage is worth quoting at length because it captures a set of issues that fascinate Stevenson:

> Hard and abstract moralities are yielding to a more exact estimate of the subtlety and complexity of our life. Always, as an organism increases in perfection the conditions of its life become more complex. Man is the most complex of the products of nature. Character merges into temperament; the nervous system refines itself into intellect. His physical organism is played upon not only by the physical conditions about it, but by remote laws of inheritance, the vibrations of long past acts reaching him in the midst of the new order of things in which he lives. When we have estimated these conditions he is not yet simple and isolated; for the mind of the race, the character of the age, sway him this way or that through the medium of language and ideas. It seems as if the most opposite statements about him were alike true; he is so receptive, all the influences of the world ceaselessly playing upon him, so that every hour in his life is unique, touched altogether by a stray word, or glance, or touch. The truth of these relations experience gives us; not the truth of eternal outlines effected once and for all, but a world of fine gradations and subtly linked conditions, shifting intricately as we

> ourselves change; and bids us by constant clearing of the organs of observation and perfecting of analysis to make what we can of these.[13]

Pater's argument suggests a revival of humanism, combining scepticism towards the authority of rationalist philosophy, with tolerance and acceptance of the conclusions of modern science, not as a substitute for more tradition moral teaching, but as pointing to the difference and difficulty of moral philosophy because of the complexity of human experience. What is distinctively nineteenth century is the emphasis not on human nature, but on 'remote laws of inheritance'. The material flux of existence revealed by modern scientific philosophy has been generalised to the realm of culture, and it will never be clear whether that knowledge invalidates or makes more urgent the work of interpretation, the traditional arts of historical understanding and 'analysis'.

Stevenson is better considered as a contemporary rather than a follower of Pater, and commentary on Pater's technique in his own 'portrait' essays suggest that his interests are more strongly focused on the artistic mediation and expression of these difficulties. Pater's 'portraits' develop from the Victorian tradition on which Stevenson's critical and character studies in *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* also draw, and in them his 'purpose [is] a tentative, personal, synoptic view of the artistic personality, conveyed dialogically through a mixture of imaginative and discursive features'.[14] For Stevenson's familiar essays, on the other hand, our impressions are fleeting, transient and incomplete, but that need not bring us to an impasse of the sort that requires empathy rather than imagination. The currency of this sort of view can be shown through comparison with an essay by Fleeming Jenkin. Stevenson reviewed the text of 'Fragment on Truth' while writing his *Memoir of Fleeming Jenkin*, and passed it on to Colvin for the collection of Jenkin's works (L5: 344-5). In the essay, Jenkin takes it as axiomatic that:

> Words can express no truth wholly, and again no impression corresponds wholly with the fact; and again we may say that no man can honestly say that which is untrue, for if he says that which he believes, his words express that which he perceives or conceives. [...] So again we may say that our senses never deceive us, for given all the circumstances, the impression must be that which it is. We might desire to leave out some of the circumstances, as in trying to spear a fish we might desire to leave out the refractive power of water, but our senses tell us all the fact. They even tell us their own imperfection, the impression made being partly the result of the fact and partly the result of our own organism. In this sense every impression is true, being the inevitable result of the whole complex circumstances.[15]

Jenkin here testifies to the continued presence of Scottish Common Sense principles in Victorian science.[16] Our impressions are the starting point for scientific or philosophical enquiry, and the question of the existence or otherwise of reality can be ruled out as metaphysical or absurd. The limited knowledge of reality we acquire through the senses is a sound enough basis for further experiment and doesn't as such require theoretical underpinning; while the theories we build through abstraction or simplification from the complexity of reality are not confirmed through their correspondence to natural fact, but tested by their effectiveness in its manipulation (as when we try to 'spear a fish'). As in Pater, so for the scientist we see an emphasis on complexity, a frank admission that we know reality only through impressions, which does not contravene the authority of applied and natural sciences in their own proper fields.[17]

For Stevenson, in *Memories and Portraits*, as in many of

his earlier and later essays the world's complexity is axiomatic, emerging most clearly when he contrasts life and art in the concluding essay 'A Humble Remonstrance': 'Life goes before us, infinite in complication' (p. 281); to make a kind of provisional sense of the world 'Man's one method, whether he reasons or creates, is to half-shut his eyes against the dazzle and confusion of reality' (p. 283). Our experience is of 'the welter of impressions, all forcible but all discreet which life presents' (p. 284); 'Life is monstrous, infinite, illogical, abrupt and poignant' (p. 285). This complexity is implicit from the opening of the volume: 'The Foreigner at Home' equally throws us amidst diversity, of 'local custom and prejudice, even local religion and local law' (p. 3), of language, and of landscape. The appropriate response is not to hunker down with our limited range of vision. Both a wider range of experience and a strong sense of the limits of that experience are required to rescue our thinking from small-mindedness, 'pride and ignorance' (pp. 3-4); and rather than 'partial, parochial', our vision should be 'raised to the horizon' (p. 5).

Despite Montaigne's longstanding association with the form, the familiar essay had undergone a recognisable generic shift by Stevenson's time. In a recent study exploring this tradition in nineteenth-century Britain, Uttara Natarajan argues that conversation becomes 'the defining model of the familiar essay'. She identifies Hazlitt as the key figure in the formation of this mode: 'What Hazlitt provides us is a theoretical context for understanding a genre of which he is the primary, but not the only practitioner'.[18] Indeed, we know of Stevenson's admiration for Hazlitt – from his 1871-2 list 'Catalogus Librorum Carissimorum' (Yale B 6073), to his instructions to Baxter in 1880 concerning the books from his library not to be sold (L3: 49), to his 1887 essay 'Books Which Have Influenced Me' (where he says that Hazlitt's essay 'On the Spirit of Obligations' 'was a turning-point in my life') – and his acknowledged sedulous exercises in imitation of him ('A College Magazine'). However, the larger point is

not to identify a specific debt, as the association goes beyond the English romantic essayists. Adorno, whose focus in his famous 'The Essay as Form' is much more on the European tradition, identifies Sainte-Beuve as the writer 'from whom the genre of the modern essay derives'.[19] Sainte-Beuve also derives the essayistic from the conversational:

> There are two literatures: an official written literature, conventional, professional, Ciceronian, laudatory; and the other – oral, talks by the fireside, anecdotic, mocking, irreverent, correcting and often undoing the first, and sometimes scarcely surviving contemporary life.[20]

An essay is not confession or soliloquy, but one side of a conversation; it presumes and requires not an audience but an addressee.

The connection of the familiar essay with the idea of conversation might draw our attention to the two papers on 'Talk and Talkers', first published in *The Cornhill* and reprinted in *Memories and Portraits*. In the first, itself recognised as a model of style, if the response in *The Spectator* is to be trusted: 'a paper which a century since would, by itself, have made a literary reputation',[21] Stevenson makes a similar distinction to that of Sainte-Beuve, but the contrast he draws is between the stasis fostered by the solitude of the writer and the fixity of the written text, and the dynamic mutual correction and stimulation of conversation:

> Literature in many of its branches is no other than the shadow of good talk; but the imitation falls far short of the original in life, freedom and effect. There are always two to a talk, giving and taking, comparing experience and according conclusions. Talk is fluid, tentative, continually 'in further search and progress;' while written words remain fixed, become idols even to the writer, found wooden dogmatisms, and preserve flies of obvious error

in the amber of the truth. (p. 145)

Here Stevenson associates the informality and mobility of talk with a search for truth, with echoes of Hazlitt's response to Montaigne, hinting at the possible appeal of a form that might allow him to join the common sense tradition of his Edinburgh upbringing to admired French stylistic models.

The priority of talk in the worldview of Stevenson's essays suggests the limits of his scepticism. Custom and social experience guarantee what reason alone cannot provide. In 'The Foreigner at Home' Stevenson had posed the question of the Shorter Catechism: 'What is the chief end of man?' (p. 15). In 'Talk and Talkers' we get his own answer: 'the first duty of a man is to speak; that is his chief business in this world' (p. 146). Through conversation we enlarge our stock of experience; we test, challenge and develop new ways of shaping and generalising from our experience.

> Masses of experience, anecdote, incident, cross-lights, quotation, historical instances, the whole flotsam and jetsam of two minds forced in and in upon the matter in hand from every point of the compass, and from every degree of mental elevation and abasement – these are the material with which talk is fortified, the food on which the talkers thrive. (pp. 150-1)

Here Stevenson's Edinburgh ancestry is showing – a tradition in which the moderating force of sociability counters religious enthusiasm, and in which the problem of scepticism is a challenge only to metaphysics, and not necessarily to common life. This exchange of 'flotsam and jetsam' is generative; it is not committed to the discovery of truth, but the production of fresh experience. A social virtue is the appropriate counter to metaphysical perplexity.

Both Pater and Stevenson can be situated within the self-conscious revival of an essayistic style drawing on the legacy of the Romantic familiar essay.[22] That is to say, both have an investment in the essay as a specifically literary form, and hence to be found at a certain distance from the communication of information or opinion. Each is prepared to risk the sense of artificiality that comes with heightened style, as part of a deliberate intervention into a culture that seems to be neglecting the specific difference that defines literary writing. Linda Dowling, who has traced the connections of this prose style revival with contemporary attitudes towards literary and cultural history, cites Newman: 'why may not language be wrought as well as the clay of the modeller? why may not words be worked up as well as colours?'.[23] Whatever their own cultural politics, for the inheritors of Sainte-Beuve a self-consciousness about style identifies the writer in contradistinction to the dominant forces of the age. This struggle is to be fought out within the very citadel of what Hugh Miller called 'periodicalism', what he saw as the 'dissipating effect' on culture of the fact that the magazine essay had become 'the main vehicle for directly communicating new ideas in nineteenth-century Britain'.[24] These are the terms in which George Saintsbury responded to Stevenson's non-fiction, noting 'a style sometimes curiously "tormented," never entirely free from labour, but always of the most ambitious kind, and constantly on the verge of success, from which it was only debarred by the prominence of struggle and reminiscence'.[25] This imputes a kind of vulgarity to conspicuous struggle, at odds both with Stevenson's habitual vocabulary for moral experience – the word 'battle' is repeatedly associated with life in Stevenson's essays – and his frank confession in 'Some College Memories' of the years of imitative rehearsal on the basis of which his own stylistic achievement is founded.

The traditional formal features of the familiar essay allow for a comparison with modern lyric poetry on a number of grounds:

reflexive concern with the experience of self in its apprehension of the external world; detachment from any expectation of narrative development; dramatisation of the relationship between reader and writer through the marked presence of an authorial persona. Aspects of this parallel were certainly recognised in Stevenson's time, although the personal lyric had not yet acquired the dominance it would in the twentieth century.[26] Alexander Smith, in an essay much cited in the period and described in 1915 as 'one the best essays on the art every written', suggests that the essay 'resembles the lyric, in so far as it is moulded by some central mood – whimsical, serious, or satirical. Give the mood, and the essay, from the first sentence to the last, grows around it as the cocoon grows around the silkworm [...] the essay should be pure literature as the poem is pure literature'.[27] While this idea of tonal unity as a compositional principle is undoubtedly evident in Stevenson's essays, it is hard to imagine the latter reaching for the idealist vocabulary of 'pure literature' in place of the more practical sense of good writing. The comparison with lyric is misleading if it leads us to think of the familiar essay as a conciliatory mode in which a redemptive power is found in reflection on the commonplace. Instead, we might consider that the lyric reflexivity of the modern essay constitutes it as a critical form: engaged not simply with the representation of experience, but with reflection on the limits of experience, and implicitly contesting more naïve ways of orienting ourselves within the social world. Susan Stewart suggests: 'lyric specifically both produces and reflects upon conditions of subjectivity'.[28] Clifford Siskin has argued further that the 'conjuncture' between criticism and lyric is a definitive feature of the modern evolution of the generic system and comments on 'the capacity of the lyric – as a mixed genre – to be used as an experimental form'. He concludes: 'the experimental functioning of the lyric and the essay helped to occasion related forms of differentiation: the division of writing into the literary versus the nonliterary; and the accompanying division [...] of

eighteenth-century moral philosophy into, on the one hand, the cultural domain of the arts – including the deep narratives of aesthetics and English – and, on the other, the social scientific deep narratives first generated within political economy'.[29]

The concern of the familiar essayist with his or her own self is not then simply a matter of biographical interest; rather it is the effort to conduct an experiment on one's self, the attempt to press towards the limit of possible knowledge, and hence to seek to demarcate of the knowable from the unknowable. What can be easily caricatured as the indulgence of self should in fact be considered the opposite – the emphasis on the transformation of the self over time and the consequent partial impenetrability of our past experience to our present self is fundamental to the essay as a mode.

II

The purpose of the preceding section was to establish a sense of those attributes of the familiar style that Stevenson inherits. The conscious experimentation and scepticism of the early essay have become, by the late nineteenth century, attributes of the familiar essay more narrowly defined. Its craft and poise marks the familiar essay off from the mass of periodical journalism that acts to shape the general social and intellectual climate of the time. In this section I offer a partial reading of *Memories and Portraits* that aims to isolate one of the ways in which the essays do put into play something like a critical technique towards aspects of the larger culture of the age.

With the exception of 'An Old Scotch Gardener', those essays in *Memories and Portraits* that had been previously published remain largely identical to their magazine form. But in composing new material during the period of the volume's assembly, Stevenson has an eye not only for the thematic unity of the volume, but also for its developmental sequence. The collection of a set of essays together represents a form of prestige for the essay-

ist, signalling a permanence and interest beyond the ephemeral transaction of the periodical marketplace; but here at least it also adds an additional layer of artistic intentionality – the essays chosen, their arrangement and any linguistic, thematic or stylistic connections we can find between them, all signal a further layer of complexity.

In thinking about the collection as a whole, the choice of 'Foreigner at Home' to introduce the collection might be considered significant; the positioning of 'Penny Plain, Twopence Coloured' at the crucial point of transition, or at least at a change of emphasis between the more biographical and the more critical essays, could also be of interest. The arrangement of an earlier cluster of essays around Stevenson's university days is equally marked. However the most revealing essays for my purposes are those composed shortly before publication: 'The Manse', 'Pastoral' and 'Memoirs of an Islet'. It seems reasonable to suppose that these were drafted once the themes of the volume as a whole had become apparent to its scrupulous arranger. Highly elaborate in themselves, each could be considered the nascent element of a larger constellation in a manner that might seem counterfactual in relation to essays composed much earlier in the 1880s.

In his prefatory note, written on board the S.S. Ludgate Hill, Stevenson suggests that we 'read through from the beginning' (p. v) – that there is a single trajectory plotted through the sequence of essays. This seems to offer us a straight autobiographical reading of the text. To some extent this is the burden of the volume's narrative structure, as successive essays pick up incidents and episodes in the life of the writer. The argument of 'Foreigner at Home' depends for its exemplary force on the memory of childhood impressions of a strange country, and thus on the opening of the possibility of comparison between different cultural environments. The cluster of essays around Stevenson's University days, with 'Old Mortality' at their centre, explicitly depicts the established 'man of letters' (Stevenson's own phrase in 'The Manse') looking back on his formative years with a critical eye. The youth's literary ambitions are gently ironised in the light of two factors: the forging of manly attitudes in the crucible of friendship and loss; and the subsequent accomplishment of the man of letters, assumed by the persona of the familiar essayist, but also demonstrated through the artful and effective use of the personal essay itself.

Read attentively, Stevenson's prefatory note is itself complex. Stevenson writes that a thread of memory binds the essays – but binding can be tight or loose; it can be simply what holds a set of essays together at the spine of the volume, suggesting a connection at one end, but not a consistent pattern throughout, as the leaves fan out from the point where they are bound together. The autobiographical elements of the essays are used anecdotally – they are vignettes – and the familiar style is quite distinct from forms of autobiography in the period. There is little sense of teleology – past and present selves are distinct, but this is not subsumed into a fuller narrative development, and there is no temporal fulfilment of the earlier time in the later. There is no biblical or religious narrative available within which to organise experience, and the constant use of evolutionary metaphors places the life of the individual within a cosmic scale. There is a Wordsworthian quality to a number of scenes – these are idle moments, moments of absorption in nature, to which the grown self returns as to the sources of its own imaginative power – but characteristically these moments of self-absorption are swiftly followed by the drawing of a portrait, a return to the social world which always qualifies the inwardness of the essayist.

It is also true that weaving requires more than one thread, and two other themes also make prominent contributions to the thematic coherence of the volume. The first is the connection between a memory and a memorial. A number of the essays seek to commemorate the lost – 'those who have gone before us in the

battle' (p. vii) – and it is tempting to see the centre of gravity of the volume lying in the short and formal obituary for his father Thomas Stevenson, written for *The Contemporary Review*, a relatively heavyweight intellectual magazine. Mourning was much on Stevenson's mind as the book was planned. He was also working on his memoir of Fleeming Jenkin, friend to both Louis and Thomas, and carried on an extensive correspondence with Jenkin's widow, Anne. Jenkin had been one of the pseudonymous 'Talkers' of the *Cornhill* essay; now deceased, he was identified in a footnote to the republished essay. The title of the volume links memories to portraits, and the memories in a number of the essays become most vivid when they linger on specific named individuals: not just contemporaries drawn from his Edinburgh social world, professional men and amateur literati like his father, Jenkin, and Walter Ferrier, but figures who stand closer to the land, such as the shepherd Robert Young and the gardener John Todd, or to a passing world such as Sheriff Robert Hunter, for whom 'Scott was too new' (p. 120), and Old Lindsay, P. G. Tait's laboratory assistant: 'when he went, a link snapped with the last century' (p. 28).

'Old Mortality' is an example of the way the autobiographical and memorial themes are closely linked. The essay was written closely after the death of his friend Walter Ferrier and deals explicitly with the question of the legacy we leave behind us. This is not just a theme of the essay, but something Stevenson was acutely conscious of in the period leading up to publication. At the time of writing he had been aware of the risk of reminding readers of the fall and not the recovery; a letter from Ferrier's sister reassured him that the essay was printable. The essay is also an example of how the familiar form might be deployed to stabilise and manage the experience of personal loss, since the drift of the form towards balance and poise leads not to acceptance or reconciliation, which risks entombing the absent friend beneath the successful execution of the prose elegy, but to the

dramatisation of the conflicting claims of the memories of the fallen and the life that has to be lived in their absence.

In 'Old Mortality' Stevenson juxtaposes his memories of Ferrier with a recollection of his own younger self, and the essay is structured in terms of the return of the experienced self upon youthful inexperience. Stevenson portrays his younger self as a mawkish haunter of graveyards. He turns to books, but it is his observation of people that brings him out of himself. The essay passes sharp judgement on the author's younger self – 'the ground of all youth's suffering, solitude, hysteria and haunting of the grave, is nothing else than naked, ignorant selfishness' (p. 48). The most decisive factor in the transition from solipsism to a more sympathetic relationship with the social world is the company of friends: 'they stand between us and our own contempt, believe in our best [...] they weave us in and in with the fabric of contemporary life' (p. 49). Framed within the play of Stevenson's view back at his adolescent self, Ferrier is also seen in terms that contrast youthful promise with the subsequent disappointment of his friends' hopes. The further twist of the essay's structure is that it is only through his fall that his real character comes to be revealed.

The wise view from experience is that life is a 'difficult but not desperate' struggle (p. 55). Our sense of this comes not from the 'foolish monuments' but from our living memories of the dead (p. 55). Whereas the young Stevenson aspires to the immortality of renown, and sees most of the monuments as attesting to a futile attempt to live on in the public record, the elder man understands that each tomb reflects an individual struggle, still alive in memory for those who knew the life. What is important is not the survival of one's name after death, but the example of one's conduct in life. That example will be forgotten; but to those for whom it matters, it will indeed matter, while it lasts. The essay gives a vivid demonstration of what is stated elsewhere in the volume as the essential nature of historical flux – 'A thousand

interests spring up in the process of the ages, and a thousand perish; that is now an eccentricity or a lost art which was once the fashion of the empire; and those only are perennial matters that rouse us to-day, and that roused men in all epochs of the past' (p. 103).

Aspects of this set of problems recur throughout the book. Our partiality for our own pasts is neatly dramatised in 'Some College Memories', which also makes play of the solipsism of the essay form in relation to the vanity of young men and flaunts the reputed egocentricity of the essayist. Stevenson implies that the distortion of memory we call nostalgia may in fact be a constitutive condition of our access to the past: 'I had the very last of the very best of *Alma Mater*; the same thing, I hear (which makes it more strange) had previously happened to my father; and if they are good and do not die, something not at all unsimilar will be found in time to have befallen my successors of today' (p. 26). With his own departure, the interest of the institution fades. Stevenson's openness about the distortion of memory allows the essay to become a reflection on, and hence a moderation of, our partiality towards our own experience. Just as Stevenson does not see the younger self as replaced by the older – each holds its own place in time – so the younger cannot fully be said to be superseded by the elder. We cannot escape the selfishness of our younger selves, and something of this moral danger haunts the volume, as Stevenson's essays revolve again and again on the allure of memories stored up in deep childhood. The recurrent reference to the 'charm' of these images suggests both their attraction, but also their hold over us. The consequence is that the way Stevenson deploys these images in *Memories and Portraits* must also reckon with the force of this pull, but without giving in to it.

The centrality of commemoration, the point at which public and private memory intersect, to the volume as a whole is signalled in a dense passage in 'A College Magazine', also written

specifically for the volume, as an introduction to 'Old Scotch Gardener' and its companion piece 'Pastoral'. The essay follows 'Old Mortality' and remarks this continuity with a reference to Ferrier, 'Of the death of [whom], you have just been reading what I had to say' (p. 66). Remembering a conversation held within the rooms of the Speculative Society beneath 'the mural tablet that records the virtues of Macbean, the former secretary', Stevenson records his own complacency and that of his friends – 'we would often smile at that ineloquent memorial, and thought it a poor thing to come into the world at all and have no more behind one than Macbean' (pp. 70-1). This prompts Stevenson to remark that 'this book may alone preserve a memory of James Walter Ferrier and Robert Glasgow Brown' (p. 71). Ferrier certainly haunts the volume in more allusive ways. The following reflection in 'A Gossip on a Novel of Dumas' must call him to mind for the reader who has, as Stevenson requests, read straight through: 'Honour can survive a wound; it can live and thrive without a member. The man rebounds from his disgrace; he begins fresh foundations on the ruins of the old; and when his sword is broken, he will do valiantly with his dagger' (p. 242). Yet the gesture must remain ambiguous – like Macbean's tablet, the tribute paid by *Memories and Portraits* will only be eloquent to those who also knew his friends.

The third theme, which might be said both to overlay and conflict with the autobiographical and memorial strands, is that of modern evolutionary thinking. 'Pastoral', and 'The Manse', significant here because composed last and so exemplary of how Stevenson sees the volume as a whole, both return repeatedly to the challenges posed to our evaluation of memory (itself already placed in question by the action of time and forgetting) by the possibility of ancestral or trans-individual memories. While Stevenson's participation in the general intellectual response to evolution has often been emphasised, what these essays show clearly is the concern of his work not simply to confirm

or underwrite the scientific hypothesis, but to explore what this theory might mean in practice for our moral engagements. The fact that his work was published in the same journals in which these matters were debated (and that the history of this discussion goes back two decades before the publication of *Memories and Portraits*) again prompts us to ask about the difference a choice of genre makes, and how the familiar style assumes a different response from its imagined audience than the rhetoric used in the interest not merely of communicating the latest ideas, but of proselytising for the value of a scientific education. The familiar style, with its heightened conversational tone enlivened by constant variation of diction and syntax, and its characteristic exploitation of antithesis and balance, suggests something more like a play of ideas. The essay dramatises but does not exhort; ultimately it appeals to those values of patience, attention and care that it takes to read the essays, and thus affirms the combination of pleasure and instruction to be found in the essay as a form.

'Pastoral' frames its central 'portrait' of John Todd, the Swanston shepherd, between attempts to bring the speculations of the anthropologist and natural scientist about the descent of man into a more human scale. If we had to extract an argument from the essay, we might begin with the closing of the portrait, and the comment that 'A trade that touches nature, one that lies at the foundation of life, in which we have all had ancestors employed, so that on a hint of it ancestral memories revive, lends itself to literary use, vocal or written' (p. 102). Stepping back from the realm of personal reminiscence, the essayist exposes the significance of what he has just written to the largest possible scale. A portrait of a shepherd must bring us into contact with the origins of the race; hence its literary interest. Concomitantly, literature itself becomes not the summit, but merely the latest form of culture to exploit these associations. This shifts the implication of the title 'Pastoral' from a generic description to a statement

of the essay's topic – not just a work of pastoral, this is about the survival and persistence of the pastoral mode. We also get a fragmentary hint of the larger thesis being worked up through the volume as a whole, that the power of narrative art in particular derives from, and hence revives, age-old preoccupations whose origins in our lives may not be easily identifiable, handed on as they are in direct experience, written or oral narration, or even 'inherited experience', that is passed on in the blood: those matters ('fighting, sailoring, adventure, death or child-birth' – p. 102) are the tropes of romance.

The first sentences of 'Pastoral' are an excellent example of the texture of Stevenson's prose, and his full exploitation of the of characteristics of the familiar style:

> To leave home in early life is to be stunned and quickened with novelties; but when years have come, it only casts a more endearing light upon the past. As in those composite photographs of Mr. Galton's, the image of each new sitter brings out more clearly the central features of the race; when once youth has flown, each new impression only deepens the sense of nationality and the desire of native places. (p. 90)

The sententious opening, with its conspicuous balance of parallel clauses recalls the early modern origins of the essay in rhetorical exercises. By contrast, the second sentence brings in a contemporary reference point shared between the essayist and a reader assumed to be familiar with the very latest innovations, implying a shared modernity of vision. In both sentences temporal reference is forward (the stunned encounter with the new; a succession of images laid on top of each other) and backwards (a softening light cast upon the past; the accretion of the new gives depth to our appreciation of the old). The grammatical ambiguity of 'desire of native places' (our desire for native places, or

the desire stemming from, belonging to native places) works to underscore the sense of the passage as a whole, that the temporal predicament of the self is not resolved but intensified with the passing of time. The remainder of the paragraph develops this dynamic into universal statement – the rivers of home are dear in particular to all men (p. 91) before offering an example of the individual experience by which we confirm this. Of course, this example confirms not the authority of the statement, but the possibility of our own partiality, hence unreliability: 'the streams of Scotland are incomparable in themselves – or I am only the more Scottish to suppose so' (p. 91). So comparability itself is drawn into the play of the essay. The passage throws out suggestions and possibilities, some of which are picked up later in the essay, some of which chime with earlier essays – 'The Foreigner at Home' – and some with later – 'the exquisite cunning of dogs' points us to the 'Character of Dogs'. When at the end of 'The Manse' our unconscious memories are compared to 'undeveloped negatives' (p. 119) the shock of associating the ancestral with the modern technological image is exploited again.

This echo of 'Pastoral' in 'The Manse' seems deliberate, and the two essays interlock conspicuously, albeit awkwardly. When read in the volume the first line of the latter refers directly ('I have named...' p. 106) to the list of rivers in the opening of the former; perhaps because this will appear a non-sequitur without the context provided by the previous essay, 'The Manse' was given the subtitle 'A Fragment' on first magazine publication. But if for that reason 'The Manse' must come second, the introduction of 'Probably Arboreal', Stevenson's name for the ur-human, perched at the top of the race's ancestral tree, seems to be in the wrong place. Used twice as a proper name in 'Pastoral', the derivation of the phrase only becomes clear in the subsequent essay.

Like 'Pastoral', 'The Manse' is concerned with the perspectival problems implied if we were to take seriously the question of the inheritance of characteristics from one's family. Beginning from

his grandfather's house beside the Water of Leith, Stevenson allows his imagination to play over the possible interactions between ancestors on both sides of his family in earlier times; but if his empathy expands the range of experience to which he can lay claim ('I have shaken a spear in the Debateable Land' – p. 117) it also dissolves any sense of the priority of his own conscious experience, and even of present experience: 'our conscious years are but a moment in the history of the elements that build us' (p. 117). The consequence of this is to dissolve, not only our own sense of self, but also the power of the evolutionary account to do more than reconfirm the scepticism we have already discussed about the limits of both our knowledge and our presumption to hold a prominent place in the world. So the thread of memory that 'binds' the essays becomes finally supplanted by the image of 'the threads that make me up' which 'can be traced by fancy into the bosoms of thousands and millions of ascendants' (p. 118). This is a comic vision, 'ascendants' exposing the complacency of our habitual metaphors of descent and ancestry in contrast with the imagined struggle to climb back up the family tree.

We've already begun to pick away at the complexity of Stevenson's prefatory note. Glancing at the interweaving of these three themes in the volume – the autobiographical, the memorial and the evolutionary – confirms this. Time in *Memories and Portraits* accompanies the growth of the child into the man, a movement accomplished at least in part through the exercise of our memory in recollection; equally our memories themselves exert a compulsion or charm on our present, which we cannot outgrow and whose extent and depth we cannot fully fathom. In his prefatory note, Stevenson suggests that taken together, the essays may reveal more than he has intended: 'My grandfather the pious child, my father the idle eager sentimental youth, I have thus unconsciously exposed' (p. viii). He has written about his grandfather, and about his father; but also about his own childhood and youth. Re-reading, Stevenson retraces his own growth

forwards, but also travels backwards into a past that is not his alone, but that of his family, and ultimately of his species. Both his familial and developmental experiences may be said to have been formative, but by collapsing one into the other, he reminds us that the growth of the child's mind is – like the Scotsman's partiality for the rivers of his homeland – both the most unique and the most common thing.

The inevitable partiality for our own self leads us to a moral crux. In exposing the solipsism of youth in 'Some College Memories' and 'Old Mortality', Stevenson entertains the charge most often made against the personal essayist: the passage from adolescent narcissist to mature writer suggests the difference between the merely self-indulgent and the successful familiar essay. This transition cannot be a renunciation of self, as the intimacy and charm of the personal reminiscence authorises the lightness of touch with which the familiar essayist can handle demanding themes. Yet when he remarks in the preface that 'my own young face' 'is a face of the dead also' (p. vii) Stevenson sets these two aspects of the genre against each other: pitting the self-reflection of the essayist against the tribute he wishes to pay to his subjects. Our sense of propriety tells us that the merely metaphorical death of one's younger self must be less grave a matter than the deaths of his father, Ferrier and the other lives memorialised in the volume. Stevenson here seems to deliberately court offence: which ought to remind us that the characteristic dynamism of his essays stems not only from the syntactical and semantic balancing of antithetical clauses at the level of form, but also from the competing moral demands that this must put into play within the shared social world presupposed by the fiction of conversation between reader and essayist. Rather than seek to resolve the interplay between past and present, between the charm of nostalgia and the resolution required to face present struggles, Stevenson dramatises it. We might also conclude that the essays in *Memories and Portraits* refuse to finally decide on

the moral implications of the form itself, caught between reflection on one's self and concern for the other: as if memories and portraits cannot be linked as easily as the title promises.

III

Consideration of the genre and reflexivity of *Memories and Portraits* has some bearing on one of the persistent historiographical problems of reading the Scottish nineteenth century. In 1844 Henry Cockburn linked the decline of spoken Scots amongst the upper and professional tiers of society to the loss of a distinctively Scottish experience. Subsequently the association of changing social conditions and altering habits of mind with the spread of spoken and written English has been a commonplace. Cockburn's *Memorials* record historical experience, but their form dramatises historical time largely in terms of the effort to hold on to that which stands out for its apparent obsolescence. The recurrence of this structure can be seen in another classic of the genre, Dean Ramsay's *Reminiscences of Scottish Life and Character*, first published in 1857, and reissued successfully throughout the rest of the century. Ramsay claims: 'Causes are at work which must ere long produce still greater changes, and it is impossible to foresee what will be the future picture of Scottish life, as it will probably be now becoming each year less and less distinguished from the rest of the world'.[30] In this light, national character resembles Stevenson's childhood impressions – that which we perceive as characterful is that which stands out in our experience as threatened with decay, or as belonging to the passing of time.

While at first sight *Memories and Portraits* bears comparison to these classics of what Karl Miller has called 'anecdotal biography', the most conspicuous non-fictional genre of Scottish Victorian prose, there is a more self-critical reflection on the experience of memory and its relationship to cultural history in Stevenson than there is in Cockburn or Ramsay.[31] Rather than

relating passing experience to a historical narrative framework, Stevenson knows that such a narrative is itself merely one of many possible generic forms within which our sense-making can take place. His use of the form of the familiar essay to qualify our natural partiality for the native, and hence for the national, suggests that he is also alive to the danger represented by the charm of early experience. The temptation to see change as national decline becomes only one of the strands in the cultural environment that Stevenson describes; his essays acquire a critical force by juxtaposing the experience of specific felt loss in relation not to history, but to the general flux and mutability of temporal life.

The value of the essay as opposed to reminiscence is not simply the foregrounding of the remembering self, and hence the activity of remembering, but the critical distance it creates from second-order reflection on, rather than mere presentation of, one's memories. This is a practical rather than a theoretical lesson. It bears comparison with the Aristotelian emphasis on judgement and phronesis – intelligence understood not as the disinterested contemplation of the world but as manifest through decision-making in concrete situations – and also with the orientation of philosophy to experience to be found in the phenomenological and hermeneutical traditions in twentieth century philosophy. As Gadamer notes in *Truth and Method*, 'real experience is that in which man becomes aware of his finiteness. In it are discovered the limits of the power and the self-knowledge of his planning reason. [...] Thus true experience is that of one's own historicality'.[32]

Notes

Quotations from Stevenson's letters, ed. by Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Mehew (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) are cited in the text by 'L' followed by 'volume number: page number'.

1 Dedication, p. v; note, p. vii. All subsequent page references to *Memories and Portraits* will be given parenthetically in the text, and

are to the first edition (London: Chatto, 1887).

2 See L5: 156.

3 Stevenson refers to 'both volumes of the *Familiar Essays*' in a letter to Chatto of August 1887 (L5: 437).

4 See Leslie Graham elsewhere in this volume.

5 Graham Good, *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. ix.

6 Liz Farr, 'Stevenson and the (Un)familiar: The Aesthetics of Late Nineteenth-Century Biography', in *Robert Louis Stevenson: Writer of Boundaries*, ed. by Richard Ambrosini and Richard Dury (University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), pp. 36-47 (p. 42).

7 On prose 'stylism' in Pater, Stevenson and George Saintsbury, see Travis Merritt, 'Theory, Taste and Opinion in Victorian Prose Stylism', in *The Art of Victorian Prose*, ed. by George Levine and William Madden (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 3-38. The judgement that English prose style declines in the period before a conscious revival towards the turn of the century can already be found in Saintsbury; it is renewed in recent histories such as that of Alastair Fowler, *A History of English Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), p. 284.

8 Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003), pp. 1220-21.

9 'The Periodical Essayists', excerpt in *Essayists on the Essay*, ed. by Carl H. Klaus & Ned Stuckey-French (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), pp.15-18 (p. 17).

10 'Montaigne; Or, the Skeptic', in *Selected Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 313-336 (p. 320).

11 Walter Pater, *Plato and Platonism*, excerpt in *Essayists on the Essay*, pp. 29-31 (p. 30).

12 On relativity see Christopher Herbert, *Victorian Relativity: Radical Thought and Scientific Discovery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). Herbert stresses the contribution of the Scottish Common Sense thinker Sir William Hamilton, now neglected but one of the major philosophers of the century. For cogent and informed reservations about Herbert's argument see the comments by Suzy Anger and Bernard Lightman in *Victorian Studies*, 45 (3), Spring 2003, pp. 485-511.

13 Walter Pater, 'Coleridge's Writings', *Westminster Review*, 84, Jan 1886, pp. 48-60 (p. 49).

14 Ed Block Jr., 'Walter Pater, Arthur Symons, W. B. Yeats, and the Fortunes of the Literary Portrait', *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 26 (4), Autumn 1986, pp. 759-776 (p. 767).

15 Fleeming Jenkin, 'A Fragment on Truth', *Papers Literary and Scientific* (London: Longman, 1887), vol I, pp. 264-8 (p. 266).

16 For more detailed discussion of this intellectual history, see Richard Olson, *Scottish Philosophy and British Physics, 1750-1880* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

17 On science and the religious culture of nineteenth-century Scotland, see Crosbie Smith, *The Science of Energy: A Cultural History of Energy Physics in Victorian Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); for a discussion of the political implications of similar arguments, see Anthony Quinton, *The Politics of Imperfection* (London: Faber, 1978) and chapter 5 of Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

18 'The Veil of Familiarity: Romantic Philosophy and the Familiar Essay', *Studies in Romanticism*, 42 (1), Spring 2003, pp. 27-44.

19 'The Essay as Form', in *Notes To Literature. Vol 1*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 3-23, p. 5.

20 Cited A. G. Lehman, *Sainte-Beuve* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 287.

21 'The Restfulness of Talk', unsigned essay in *The Spectator*, 2805, 1 April 1882, pp. 420-1: 420.

22 See Merritt, 'Theory, Taste and Opinion in Victorian Prose Stylism', in *The Art of Victorian Prose*, and Fowler, *A History of English Literature*, pp. 248-9.

23 Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 116.

24 Hilary Fraser and Daniel Brown, *English Prose of the Nineteenth Century* (Harlow: Longman, 1997), p. 6, Hugh Miller quote from p. 12.

25 *A Short History of English Literature* [1898] (London: Macmillan, 1937), p. 756.

26 'Lyric poetry has stood for the power of art in a way that other genres have not' notes Robert von Hallberg, *Lyric Powers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 6. For a partial historical account of this development in relation to the literary field see Marjorie Perloff, 'Postmodernism and the Impasse of Lyric' in *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1985), pp. 172-200.

27 Alexander Smith, 'On the Writing of Essays', *Dreamthorp* (Andrew Melrose: London, 1906), pp. 20-43, p. 24. Smith's publishers used an abridged version of this essay as the introduction to their anthology *The English Essayists* (Nimmo, Hay & Mitchell: Edinburgh, 1885). The praise for Smith's essay comes from Hugh Walker, *The English Essay and Essayists* (London: J.M. Dent, 1915), p. 3.

28 Susan Stewart, 'Preface to a Lyric History' in *The Uses of Literary History*, ed. by Marshall Brown (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 199-218 (p. 200).

29 Clifford Siskin, *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain, 1700-1830* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 138, 139, 140. On the origin of the essay as a mixture of earlier genres see also Alastair Fowler: 'the essay assembled elements of the treaties, the colloquy, the adage, the exemplum or sentential collection, the encyclopedic gathering of authorities and the Humanistic letter of informal instruction', *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1982), p. 157.

30 Dean E. B. Ramsay, *Reminiscences of Scottish Life and Character* (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1862), p. 474.

31 Karl Miller, *Cockburn's Millennium* (London: Duckworth, 1975), p. 274. See also Ian Campbell, 'Nineteenth Century Non-Fictional Prose', *History of Scottish Literature, Vol 3 Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Douglas Gifford (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988), pp. 169-188.

32 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1979), pp. 380-1.