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The departure of the poetry of Robert Louis Stevenson for the Victorian Tradition in poetry

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THE DEPARTURE OF THE POETRY OF
ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON FROM THE VICTORIAN TRADITION IN POETRY

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
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THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

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PREFACE

This thesis is a study of the departure of the poetry of Robert Louis Stevenson from that of the Victorians by virtue of the note of naturalism embodied in his poetry.

The agreement of her advisor, Dr. William Stanley Braithwaite, with the late Professor of Poetry at the University of Oxford, H. W. Garrod, in his opinion that Stevenson's poetry, because of its studied sentiment of naturalism and its effort to quicken diction from living sources of speech, formed a bridge between the poetry of the Victorians and the Georgians, has led the writer to examine the poems of Robert Louis Stevenson in order to discover if, and in what manner, it actually departed from the Victorian tradition in poetry.

The Thistle Edition of Robert Louis Stevenson, in twenty-five volumes, published by Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1920, has been used as the text of the selections quoted and the references made to Stevenson's writings in this study.
CHAPTER I
THE VICTORIAN TRADITION IN POETRY

Robert Louis Stevenson's "unremitting effort to escape from art into nature,"\(^1\) and the impact of this effort on the Victorian tradition in literature will be the subject of this study. His poetry will supply the sources of those elements which it is intended to show distinguished his art from that of his immediate predecessors, and will herewith receive our attention and interpretation. His letters, novels, and essays will be cited only in so far as they seem to support the assertion that Stevenson's poetry did break from the Victorian tradition with a new note of naturalism.

In order to determine what the Victorian tradition in poetry was, it will be necessary, first, to present a brief summary of the political, social, scientific, and religious problems of the period which influenced English life and which were reflected in its literature; for never before, as stated by William Vaughn Moody and Robert Morss Lovett in *A History of English Literature*, had "literature been so closely in league, or openly at war, with the forces of social life."\(^2\) The processes of national life in England which led to the eventual interdependence of public and private affairs in their germinal state, and the creative

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purpose and expression of literature, are sketched in their larger movements by Percy Hazen Houston in the following quotation:

The Restoration revealed the transition; the eighteenth century saw the germination of new ideas; the first quarter of the nineteenth century was the explosive period of the new democracy; the remainder of the century became the battle of old and new.\(^1\)

The three central problems around which waged the controversies of the Victorian mind and emotion, were democracy, science and religion, and out of them developed all those forces and influences which affected the social and economic, the civil and domestic, the educational and administrative character of Victorian England.\(^2\)

The progress of democracy which began with the Reform Bill of 1832,\(^3\) and continuing with successive victories for several decades, had a profound effect upon the social and economic conditions of the English people. Beneficial as democracy proved in enhancing the power and comforts of the middle classes, it was challenged all the way by some of the most eminent men of letters. Literature was divided in its allegiance between the old traditions of the aristocracy,—the landed gentry with their privileges and wealth upon which the power and prestige of England had been built,—and the social hopes of the common people for a share in the fruits of the nation's abundant wealth.

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\(^3\)Edward P. Cheyney, *The Reform Bill of 1832* "was the first step towards the attainment of self-government by the whole mass of the English people," *A Short History of England*, New York, [1927], p. 628.
Democracy was to help realize a more equal distribution of the latter through a wider extension of the franchise among the lower classes, with its consequent participation in the government through representation. Literature in the figures of Carlyle, Newman, and Arnold protested the advance of democracy as the cure for social and political evils, nor did Tennyson, the "apostle of gradual progress," fail to become alarmed as he viewed the concentrated emphasis which had come to be placed upon materialism, an outgrowth of the practical application of scientific inventions. He did not believe that democracy could legislate social, political, and economic virtues into being, but he visioned the betterment of human conditions through the slower process of evolution by which tradition would advance the brotherhood of man from "precedent to precedent." The poetic representative of his age, Tennyson spoke for the age's poetry in its attitude towards democracy which, though not wholly able to accept democracy found the hope and demand for it too strong to be resisted, and rested finally upon the Tennysonian compromise.

Thus the ideal of democracy towards which England moved during the long reign of Queen Victoria became first, a political debate decided


3John Buchan, op. cit., p. 476.

4Alfred Lord Tennyson, "You Ask Me Why," The Poetical and Dramatic Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson, edited by W. J. Rolfe, Boston, 1898, p. 60.


by Parliamentary enactments which, in turn, when put into practice so changed the social and economic character of national life as to arouse partisan moods and antagonistic tempers in literature.¹

After the passage of the Reform Bill of 1832, the next most important Parliamentary enactment of far-reaching significance was the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846.² The repeal of the Corn Laws greatly increased the material wealth of England, largely shared by the commercial and industrial classes who, forming the middle classes, rose triumphantly "over the old aristocracy"³ of England. Democracy and industrialism were allied in a battle in behalf of the middle classes, whose possession would give them the prerogatives and privileges of the aristocracy in supporting and maintaining the solidarity of England at home and in expanding her interests and power abroad. The aristocracy did not yield without a fight, in which it had able literary champions who contested in poem and novel and essay the literature of their fellow authors who praised and encouraged the new ideals and the new order. Tennyson effected a compromise between the old and the new;⁴ Matthew Arnold was wholly on the side of the old as the embodiment of dignity and culture;⁵

¹Ralph Philip Boas and Barbara Hahn, Social Background of English Literature, Boston, 1932, p. 222.
⁴Gilbert Keith Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, New York, 1913, p. 182.
Carlyle was sourly skeptical of the fitness of the new to select and
train leaders;¹ and even Ruskin preached the sanctification of the new
order with the moral and ethical spirit of the old tradition's aesthetic
values.²

So far the results of the progressive legislation inaugurated by
the Reform Bill of 1832 and the Repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 were
materialistic in the spread of political freedom and the increase of
wealth among the masses of the English people. Literature recorded
these changes in prose and verse, centering its arguments upon the in-
dividual man and his ability to receive and profit from these civil
and social benefits. While the people were still on probation in re-
gards to the rights to the permanent exercise and enjoyment of these
material benefits, their minds and spirits were shocked and depressed
by the revelations of science in its dual role of origins and inventions,
and by religion with its opposing emphasis on faith and the various
modes of worship within the Established Church, and with which the Non-
Conformists joined in the stirring conflicts that ensued between science
and religion.

Theological discussions were precipitated, and made distressing by
the fact that many of the newly enfranchised Englishmen had brought into
their ecclesiastical affairs the same radical type of policy which they
had used in their political affairs. On July 14, 1833,³ a movement

¹Thomas Carlyle, "The Present Time," from Latter Day Pamphlets, London,

113-114.

³Ven. W. H. Hutton, "The Oxford Movement," The Cambridge History of
English Literature, edited by A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller, New York,
which sought to protect the Church from this type of policy, had its
birth in a sermon preached at Oxford by John Keble; it sought to for-
stall interference of the State in Church affairs, to defend the Church
against materialism and industrialism, to raise the morale of the clergy,
and to arouse a spiritual enthusiasm within the Church. This movement,
known as the Oxford Movement, and using the "The Tracts of the Times" as
its mouthpiece, attempted to show that the Thirty-Nine Articles of the
Anglican Church corresponded to those of the Catholic Church. Ritualism
and ceremony were encouraged, and the public took a new and controversial
interest in religious topics. However, as John Henry Newman, who became
the virtual leader of the movement, studied the situation, he came to
the conclusion that the "Church of England was a schismatical offshoot
of the true Catholic faith...."\(^1\) In 1845, he joined the Catholic Church.
The "Oxford Movement broke up;"\(^2\) and, as a "reaction against the attempt
to identify Christianity with Roman Catholicism a small but influential
body of thinkers, including Newman's own brother, were driven to skeptic-
ism."\(^3\)

The effect of the Oxford Movement upon Victorian thought and litera-
ture is described by Archdeacon Hutton in the following:

The Oxford movement certainly belongs to the history
of English religion more definitely than to the history
of English literature; but it had great influence, out-
side its own definite members, on the literary taste

\(^1\) Arthur Lyon Cross, A History of England and Greater Britain, New York,
1922, p. 1041.

\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Ibid.
of its age. It spoke from the first for a certain purity, directness and severity of style: later, the historical influences which attached themselves to it, through the study of ancient legends, and liturgies, and hymns, produced a richer vein of prose, a more florid touch in poetry. No one can think that Tennyson was wholly unmoved by its manner; but Dolben and Pater were the undoubted issue of its later life.

That the "glamour of tractarian theology extended far beyond those who were its first teachers," Dr. Hutton informs us when he adds:

...in the poetry of Digby Mackworth Dolben, only recently given to the world, and of Christina Rossetti, it formed a new life exuberant and aflame. Dolben pursued its teaching till it yielded to him a certain mediaeval richness of ecclesiastical imagery that touched at many points a religious passion which was older than Christianity, and almost hostile to it. To Christina Rossetti, the catholic theology of the English Church was the very breath of life, and she accepted its sternness without dispute...But most prominent of all was the long line of stories, exquisite in domestic portraiture, strong in moral power, keen in understanding of character and touched with a gracious humour, which issued from the parish of Hursley—where Keble was to the authoress a true guide, philosopher and friend—and were the work of Charlotte M. Yonge. The Heir of Redclyffe and The Little Duke have their place in English literature. They have had many imitators and successors but few rivals, unless John Inglesi Ant may claim to be of their company.  

Apart from the theological dialectics on matters of dogma and worship which the movement brought into being, it sought, as we have stated, to arouse a spiritual enthusiasm within the Church, and "making itself felt throughout the country had, naturally, an influence in many phases of literature."  Lord Blachford believed the Oxford Movement to be

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3 Ibid., p. 307.
"...fervent and reforming in essentials with a due reverence for existing authorities and habits and traditions;"¹ propagating "a religion which did not reject, but aspired to embody itself, any form of art and literature, poetry, philosophy, and even science which could be pressed into the service of Christianity."²

Though the Methodist movement, with its evangelical zeal, had "given back to religious feeling its rightful place,"³ it had "produced little or no theology,"⁴ a fact which moves F. E. Hutchinson to state that "Religious thought has seldom been so stagnant in England as at the opening of the nineteenth century."⁵ The Oxford Movement supplied the theology that was lacking, to complement within the Established Church, the spirit of Methodism which fired the revival of religion in England during the first half of the nineteenth century. Religion was an intensely personal matter to both Anglican and Non-Conformist alike, and the belief in God, the divinity of Christ, and the immortality of the soul could be attributed to each in the manner of their acceptance: to the Non-Conformist, by his faith and good works, to the Anglican, through his faith supported by evidence. Differences of acknowledgment and worship of a Christianity professed by all, created a battleground


²Ibid.


⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.
upon which was waged a stirring conflict of doctrine and principle. Suddenly an unforeseen and unsuspected enemy appeared to attack the antagonists, throwing the orthodox Christianity of England into a confused and chaotic defense of its faith.

The attack came with the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection*, and sustained by succeeding works of science establishing the theory of Evolution. Darwin's *The Descent of Man* and Alfred Russell Wallace's *On the Tendency of Varieties to Depart from the Original Types*, with Darwin's earlier work, did more than any other achievement of the age to change man's whole attitude towards the origin and growth of life, and in consequence, not only weakened man's religious beliefs, but through scientific proof and evidence tended to destroy the very foundations of his faith in God and immortality.

Darwin taught:

...there had been a long, slow development of things, an evolution of one type from another; that the changes in this evolution had been brought about as the result of a struggle for survival, in which some individuals or species had survived because of peculiarities which especially fitted them to succeed or survive, and that these peculiarities increasing in the course of time had constituted the changes of evolution, and brought about variation of species. There had been a long descent of species in which man could be traced back through the ape families to lower forms more distant and remote in time.

This theory "became the most important new intellectual force of the time," and Herbert Spencer, in his *Synthetic Philosophy*, sought to

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., p. 72.
explain all branches of knowledge in terms of evolution.

The theory of evolution, however, proved very damaging to theological beliefs. A few men completely ignored it. The majority of the Victorians were torn between the "old" and the "new"—the Biblical account and the scientific account of creation. A comparatively small group of men, like Wallace, were incited by the theory of evolution to loftier realms of spiritual truth.

The conflict which arose between the evolutionists and doctrinaire Christians proved especially harmful in the Anglican Church, which had fallen back into the formalism and conservatism from which the Wesleyan revival had sought to save it. "Its bishops were pompous, dignified figures who had secured their high offices through family connections, personal influence, or reputation for learning, who enjoyed ample incomes and extensive powers, and who, with little regard for purely religious work, devoted themselves to politics, to the administration of their estates, to society and scholarly leisure," while "the rank and file of the country parsons drew only meagre stipends."3

The creative literature of Victorian England was influenced by the dynamic forces of democracy, religion and science, with which it was "either closely in league or openly at war." Never before had poetry so passionately striven to realize its function as a truth-seeker; suspicious of the imagination, it sought to rationalize all the elements

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3 Ibid., p. 1040.
of an intellectual conflict to assure and assuage a troubled national mind and spirit. Tennyson stands pre-eminently the poetic leader who sought to compose the differences in ideas and ideals of life and conduct which lured the English mind and emotion in every direction. But all his contemporaries, dominated by their special moods and convictions, joined in the effort to solve the perplexities that baffled the individual and threatened the security of the nation's institutions. Browning, Arnold, Mrs. Browning, Clough, Christina Rossetti, and William Morris were poetically controversial in the spirit of their art, and the more intensely they communicated their convictions or sought to arrive at a compromise when uncertain of conviction, the less spontaneous and natural were the moods of their poems, though more subtle became their verbal artifice.

The impulsiveness and idealism of the first part of the nineteenth century had passed. Emotion had fallen to the background and logic had taken the leading role. Men everywhere sought truth and stability; and they were not content to listen to mere outbursts of magical verse.

Edmund Clarence Stedman wrote of the Victorian poets: "A thirst for more facts grows upon them; they throw aside their lyres and renew the fascinating study, forgetful that the inspiration of Plato, Shakespeare and other poets of old, often foreshadowed the glory of these revelations, and...


[neglect] to chant in turn the transcendant possibilities of eras to come. Science, the modern Circe, beguiles them from their voyage to the Hesperides, and transforms them into her voiceless devotees."

"In the search for a worthy theme, more than one of the poets...by tour de force, allied himself to some heroic mission of the day."2

Although the Victorians possessed an "easy mastery over such images... which gave to the poetry of the time a common background of rich and varied natural beauty, very bright in line and colour,"3 they no longer turned to external nature as a source of spontaneous joy and inspiration, they were "not very much concerned with the interpretation of nature in Wordsworth's prophetic sense...."4 Vida Scudder says: "Poetry subsequent to 1830 practically ignored the most significant factor in the work of the earlier poets. Nature which had been a theme of substantial and glorious independence, sank back again into a storehouse of illustrations for the experience of man."5

The success of the Victorian poets had been a triumph of culture, intellect and will power. They "no longer accept, even for its beauty, the language of myth and tradition; they know better; the glory may remain, but verily the dream has passed away."6 "In the ultra-critical

1Ibid., p. 14.
2Ibid., p. 29.
4Ibid., p. 185.
6Edmund Clarence Stedman, op. cit., p. 17.
spirit of the time, they enchanted the strength and beauty of their measures by every feasible process and the careful adaptation of form to theme. The extreme of word-music and word painting has been attained, together with a peculiar condensation in imagery and thought; so that, whereas the poets of the last era, for all their strength of wing, occupied whole passages with a single image... the Victorians express it by a single adjective or epithet.

The best models are selected by the song writers, the tale-tellers, and the preachers in verse. J. W. Mackail believes that Percy Bysshe Shelley has embodied in his treatise A Defense of Poetry, one of the "most considered and authentic utterances that poets have given about their own art." It is Shelley's contention that "Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be asserted according to the determination of the will. A man cannot say, 'I will compose poetry.' The greatest poet ever cannot say it; for... when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline...it poetry is not subject to the control of the active powers of the mind...."

The Victorian poets had evidently lost sight of this. They yielded to the search for truth and the love of fact. Tennyson "embodied within himself the temper and striving of the Victorian era," Browning probed into men's minds and souls with the analytical precision of a scientist.

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1. Ibid., pp. 25-27.
and catered to his reading public by instilling moral platitudes into his poetry. Mrs. Browning's poetry has for the most part been "im-passioned pamphleteering;" Matthew Arnold admits that:

Slave of sense
I have in no wise been;--but slave of thought;

Arthur Hugh Clough "became so to say, the mouthpiece of his own doubting age;" William Morris wrote his mother: "I will by no means give up things I have thought of for the bettering of the world in so far as it lies in me;" and even Swinburne, "the most fertile lyric poet of the Victorian era...was obsessed with fiercely cherished prejudices and...[an] unsparing condemnation of the dogmas and opinions held most sacred by his countrymen...."

Freedom, that quality which liberates men and art from restraint, was largely excluded from Victorian poetry. In the words of William Wordsworth, "a multitude of causes, unknown to former times...[have acted] with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and...[to unfit] it for voluntary exertion...." Victoriana poetry


was not "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings."¹

The rapid political, social, economic, and religious changes of the era had dimmed the vision of the poets, who were no longer content to deal with the simple, natural, unsophisticated desires and instincts of man. They consciously subjected their poetry to the determination of the will. And, as a result, they have left us prepondering, well-thought-out, didactic, intellectual, pessimistic, and frosty poetry. Louis Untermeyer says that they had produced poetry which "was, in the main, not universal but parochial; its romanticism was gilt and tinsel; its realism was as cheap as its showy glass pendants, red plush, parlor chromos and antimascasars."² They had written under a "'thousand... theories that have not truth but comfort for their end."
³

It was during this period of "pessimistic resignation...and a kind of negation"⁴ which refused "to see any glamour in the actual world,"⁵ that Robert Louis Stevenson, spiritually more akin to the romanticists than to the Victorians, set forth in the simple lyrical verse a gospel of happiness, gaiety, and courage⁶—a delight in plain, unaffected individuals and in the "open air, the fellowship of moors and roads."⁷

¹Ibid., p. 426.
³Ibid., p. 5.
⁴Ibid., p. 4.
⁵Ibid.
⁶John Buchan, op. cit., p. 563.
CHAPTER II

NOTE OF NATURALISM IN STEVENSON'S POETRY

Victorian poetry reflected, as a mirror, the activities of a complex and chaotic age. The poets were subjected to the rapid changes in the mental temper of a nation striving to follow its leaders towards the solution of problems which the nation as a whole had not hitherto been concerned with. The poets felt it their artistic duty to resolve these problems in their works, to arrive at some kind of answers to their questions, and thus lead their confused fellow countrymen out of their dilemmas. They gave allegiance to the controversies of a world created by man: a world of industry, of scientific discoveries and inventions, of religious doubts and re-asserted faiths, of democratic aspirations in conflict with aristocratic institutions and traditions, of the social changes and privileges resulting from these conditions, and produced objective, didactic, relatively cold and intellectual poetry whose very being sprang from the stirring and puzzling activities of the period. The measure in which the poets gave their intellect and their spirit to the general ideas and controversies of the era, by that much smothered their individual emotions and weakened the power of the imagination in the poet.

The didactic purpose, and the acceptance of a "mission," by the Victorians in their poetry, gave rise to formalism and dogmatic spiritual values which led, ultimately, to a sterility of ideas and conventions.
Boas and Hahn state:

After 1895 the Victorian writers, for a time, held their own. But soon the new generation began to feel that Tennyson lacked fire, energy, and charm, that Dickens and Thackeray were old-fashioned, and that Arnold was somewhat dreary... Robert Browning alone not only held his place but won more and more followers. The new generation admired his vigor and frankness of thought, his sturdy optimism, his penetrating analysis of character in moments of crisis, and his vividness of poetic expression.1

The problems which perplexed the Victorians had not been solved. They remained, but their novelty had vanished. The Victorians became aware of a need for spiritual renovation. Emile Legouis and Louis Cazamian refer to "The creative activities of the mind,"2 which,

are no longer willing to follow that narrow sunken road which imperious logic, from a position of vantage, overlooks and commands. Another way is discovered; more direct and easy at first, it then crosses unexplored regions, where errors and doubts are lurking, and cause sudden alarms; but it opens up virgin territories, in which abundant wealth lies hidden. In an endeavor to conquer spiritual freedom, the rights of intuition are proclaimed... With rapturous joy, the spirit of adventure re-awakens; the unknown, the beyond, are again invested with the attraction which they had possessed to such a degree three-quarters of a century earlier, and of which they had been robbed for a time by ambition, the assurance of knowing and understanding all. The feeling for the mysterious side of things is no longer repressed; it is accepted, and even sought for its own sake. Day-dreams are now a permissible means of refreshment for the soul, a means of knowledge even; conduct itself can be founded upon them. The novel and lyric poetry are transformed by the virtue of that freedom; they draw from it a variety, a fancy, a wealth at once more substantial and more delicate. ... The Victorian age had bowed to a strict discipline in social life and in morals; this is now relaxed, and as a consequence the repressed instincts... stimulated by a revival of the elementary powers of human nature, bend down and break the rule of repression. The senses in their turn claim their freedom; they force a bolder range of subjects, of tone and expression, upon a nation addicted

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1 Ralph Philip Boas and Barbara Hahn, Social Background of English Literature, Boston, 1932, p. 256.

2 Emile Legouis and Louis Cazamian, op. cit., p. 1256.
in principle to austerity in language and manners... A new spirit of restlessness, anarchy and adventurous experiment is tending to replace the imposing and decorous wisdom of the Victorian compromise in all things.

Among the new poets of the 1880s in England who is to be found in the possession of a new note in his song, which was to refreshen the pulse of English poetry, and in so doing, give evidence of a break from the Victorian tradition? Chief among the poets of the decade whose works became recognized as permanent contributions to the poetry of England were William Ernest Henley, Oscar Wilde, John Davidson, Robert Bridges, and Robert Louis Stevenson. Henley, for all his robustious nature, his flexibility of mood, his literal transcriptions of natural forms and colors, was essentially impressionistic. His impressionism was circumscribed by the Victorian proprieties. Wilde rooted his sensuous imageries in the aestheticism of the Pre-Raphaelites and added an enticing artifice to replace their mysticism. Davidson was a strayed mediaevalist lured by the strains of a modern world whose meaning puzzled and depressed him. Bridges with an exquisite music and meditative grace recaptured the moods and visions.

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1Ibid., pp. 1257-1258.


5Edmund Clarence Stedman, op. cit., p. 467.

of the English poets of the past. Except for certain idiosyncrasies of style every one of these poets might be merged into various phases of the Victorian poetic tradition. It is to Stevenson, then, that we look for the answer to the question beginning this paragraph.

Robert Louis Stevenson sounded the first true note of naturalism to rise over the decadence of the Victorian tradition in poetry. Quoting the following lines as a text:

Sing clearer, Muse, or evermore be still,
Sing truer or no longer sing!
No more the voice of melancholy Jacques
To wake a weeping echo in the hill;
But as the boy, the pirate of the spring,
From the green elm a living linnet takes,
One natural verse recapture—then be still.²

H. W. Garrod, the eminent critic and late professor of poetry at Oxford, comments:

It is this effort to recapture natural notes that so often makes him write the kind of verse of which all his books contain some and the New Poems a great deal; verse in which the studied avoidance of art conducts, not to nature but to prose. We shall be just to this kind of verse if we conceive it as written, not to exercise Stevenson in art, but to exercise him out of it.³

Emphasizing again this note of naturalism in Stevenson, Professor Garrod, quoting the verse "It is the Season," declares:

I am more impressed, on the whole, by its lyrical tenderness, by the natural sweetness of it; or, it may be, by the way in which these qualities wed themselves with the 'prose merits.' Familiar lyrics of this kind Stevenson wrote when Victorianism was still at the height of its

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³H. W. Garrod, op. cit., p. 185.
pretentions; and as much as any other man, I am inclined to think, he found both the notes and the words for the poets who since have done much to put us out of love with Victorian standards... The poetry of Stevenson both in its studied naturalism of sentiment, and in the pains which it shows to quicken diction from the living sources of speech, has always seemed to me to build a bridge, as it were, between the decolorated Victorianism... and the lush Georgianism... By the accident of fate... we owe to poets who were primarily novelists the disintegration in poetry of Victorian standards. For so I think it is. The poetry of Stevenson, Meredith, Mr. Hardy, has influenced the younger poets more deeply than better poetry. The best poet of the three I suppose to be Stevenson—I do not think it was in Meredith, or in Mr. Hardy, to re-capture natural notes, to sing clearly enough to be heard hereafter... he must share, I think, with Meredith and Mr. Hardy the responsibility for about half the poetry called Georgian.1

The quality of mood and reaction to life and the world which Professor Carrod finds so attractive and refreshing in Stevenson's poetry was due to the joy, and its gratifications, which the poet discovered in just being and becoming, without at the same time having a didactic concern about the why of the first and the when of the second. Sir Leslie Stephen reminds us that Stevenson desired action and freedom, that

Life, for him, is, or can be made, essentially bright and full of interest. He agrees with Mr. Herbert Spencer that it is a duty to be happy; and to be happy not by crushing your instincts but by finding employment for them.2

In support of this assumption we may apply to Stevenson's poems the statement made by Matthew Arnold concerning Wordsworth's poetry.

He believes that it is
great because of the extra-ordinary power with which Wordsworth feels the joy offered to us in nature, the joy offered to us in the simple primary affections and duties; and because of the extra-ordinary power with which, in case after

1Ibid., pp. 187-192.

case he shows us this joy, and renders it so as to make us share it.  

Stevenson draws from this source of joy, the various and alluring world of nature, and with such a natural acceptance and confidence as to make us believe that it is the truest and most unfailing source of joy accessible to man. With an ecstasy that takes on a tone of vehemence he declares the discovery which he would have us share in lines that are universally known:

The world is so full of a number of things,
I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings.  

The reality of this world was as pertinent to Stevenson as it was to the Victorian poets, but unlike them, he did not look upon it for shadows cast by his own harassed and investigating being, and confuse his conscience by attempting to account for them through causes and motives which nature herself sought to conceal and manifest deceptively. Because nature would not give direct answers, nor experience logical reasons to their questions and to their social ideals and religious hopes, the intellectual and spiritual temper of the Victorians were pessimistic, and the Victorian poets reflected this pessimism in their song. All of the major Victorian poets, with the exception of Browning, tried to dilute this pessimism with either a courage that was more a sentiment than a conviction, or a mysticism that was more a way of escape from the demand for the expression of a positive faith than the acceptance of faith of a real world beyond and outside the physical world of our sense perceptions. Robert Louis Stevenson reacted against this pessimism of the Victorians with a firm determination to be

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happy. A passage from *Aes Triplex* strikes with a satirical protest against the muddling efforts of the Victorians to settle the problems of the universe, the failure of which begets their pessimistic moods. Stevenson writes, "We live the time that a match flickers; we pop the cork of a ginger-beer bottle."

Further evidence of his attitude is given in the statement of Gilbert K. Chesterton who declared that Stevenson felt that

There was something weak about bewailing drearily the fate of the puppets of destiny, to an audience that was eagerly awaiting the joyful apocalypse of a puppet show. The Stevensonian reaction might be roughly represented by the suggestion—if we are futile as puppets, is there anything particular to prevent our being as entertaining as Punch?

To this Chesterton adds this fuller exposition of that mood and outlook in Stevenson which brought a refreshing note of naturalism to English poetry of the 1880s:

The rise or revolt of R. L. S. must be taken in relation to history, to the history of the whole European mind and mood. It was, first and last, a reaction against pessimism... Anyhow, in that period we might almost say that pessimism was another name for culture. Cheerfulness was associated with the Philistine, like the broad grin with the bumpkin. Pessimism could be read between the lines of the lightest triolet... Any one who really remembers the time will admit that the world was more hopeful after the worst of its wars than it was not long before... It is no very unreasonable claim for him that he made a better use of his bad health than Oscar Wilde made of his good health; and nothing affected in the externals of either can alter the contrast... And it really was the absence of courage in the current culture that awoke his protest or pose... But he hated chiefly the loss of what soldiers call morale rather than what the parsons call morality. All the world cowered

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under the shadow of death. All alike were travelling under the flag of the skull and crossbones. But he alone could call it the Jolly Roger. 1

The testimonies of the critical authorities just quoted agree on the general pessimism of the Victorian poets; they likewise agree upon the need of happiness in literature to dispel the gloom cast by the Victorian conventions in thought and feeling, and, with critical unanimity these authorities declare that it was Stevenson who gave to the poetry of the 1880s this new and vivid note of happiness. For man to be happy it was necessary for him to assume and express a natural relationship with the world and his fellows, and the poetry that celebrated this ideal possessed the redeeming power of naturalism. If the aspiration for happiness in Stevenson's poetry may be interpreted as a negative protest against the pessimism of the Victorian poets, his reiterated assumptions of joy in contemplating the world of nature and experience, was the positive creation of new realms for the exercise of the imagination and emotions of the poet. Professor Charles T. Copeland affirms this flight which the spirit of Stevenson took from the sombre atmosphere of Victorian pessimism in the following:

...while the century-glass yet lacked twenty years of turning...this northernteller of tales...took upon himself the different and truly romantic task of giving the world pleasure unmixed with pain. And it will likewise be observed, I think...whether for prophecy or for retrospect, that Stevenson not only quickened an admirable art, but also founded a school of more and less unsuccessful imitators of himself. 2

To this may be added Sir Sidney Colvin's opinion that

No man, in fact, was ever less inclined to take anything at second-hand. The root of all originality was in him, in the shape of an extreme natural vividness of perception.

1Ibid., pp. 69-73.

imagination, and feeling. An instinctive and inbred unwillingness to accept the accepted and conform to the conventional was the essence of his character, whether in life or art, and was a source to him both of strength and weakness. He would not follow a general rule—least of all if it was a prudential rule—of conduct unless he was clear that it was right according to his private conscience; nor would he join, in youth, in the ordinary social amusement of his class when he had once found out that they did not amuse him....

Possessed with this spirit, vouched for by one of the most intimate of his many friends, the resultant presentation of life in Stevenson's poetry, was the vivid response to a natural enjoyment of the world and human experience.

An attempt has been made in the foregoing pages of this chapter to reveal a mood and quality in Stevenson's poetry absent from the poetry of the Victorians, and characterized as a note of naturalism. An interpretation of the term naturalism as applied to the poetry of Stevenson may well serve the purpose of presenting a more definite contrast between his spirit and art and that of the Victorian poets, and thus indicate more sharply Stevenson's break from their traditions.

Naturalism, or that quality in art which "contends that art should exhibit the world as it is; that only the most accurate and painstaking consistency of representation is worthy of the artist. Even though there is much that is hideous and repulsive," is used in "both a subjective and objective sense. In the objective sense the natural, as the original and essential, is opposed to what is acquired, artificial,

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conventional or accidental." In the subjective sense it "reduces the external world to a mechanism describable in terms of matter and motion."  

In this study of the poetry of Robert Louis Stevenson, naturalism will be used in the subjective sense, and may be defined as: "Action arising from, or based on, natural instincts, without spiritual guidance; a system of morality or religion having a purely natural basis...a view of the world, and of man's relation to it, in which only the operation of natural (as opposed to supernatural or spiritual) laws and forces is admitted or assumed." In general "it refers to that which is in accordance with nature....Nature may be considered as that which is the opposite of artificial, the conventional or the traditional ....It does not deny a supernatural reality in the theological sense. It merely is not interested in the questions which turn upon a beyond and above as regards human thought and human activity." George Brandes offers as an excellent illustration of naturalism in poetry, the following famous sonnet by Wordsworth:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;

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2. Ibid.


The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not—Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have a glimpse that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.1

Adding this exposition of naturalism he remarks:

These are remarkable words to have come from Wordsworth's pen—remarkable, because they show that all sincere naturalism really is, let it be decked with as many theistic trappings as it will. In its essence it is akin to the old Greek conception of nature, and antagonistic to all the official creeds of modern days; it is vitally impregnated with the pantheism which reappears in this century as the dominating element in the feeling for nature in every literature....Christianity commanded men to love their fellowmen; pantheism bade them love the meanest animal.2

Stevenson's poetry is filled with elements of naturalism. He wrote for and to the smallest and most insignificant part of the population—the child—in an age when men were wrangling over scientific, religious, economic, and political problems. And he made also the subject of his poems such familiar figures as the guager, the gardener, and the vagabond; such creatures as birds, dogs, cats, and the buck; such features and scenes of the earth as flowers, moors, roads, rivers and the seas. There is nothing in this catalogue of animate and inanimate creatures and forms that poets have not sung about in their songs, but not since the romantic visions of the post-Georgian group

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1William Wordsworth, "The world is too much with us; late and soon," Poems by William Wordsworth, pp. 306-308.

had they been so wholly detached from a moralizing contemplation. Nor were Blake and Wordsworth, who drew, as did Stevenson, upon the simple among mankind and the more familiar and common of nature's features, for the materials of their poems, without the moralizing mood and the symbolic temper.

Free from a preoccupation with the immediate problems of man and his environment, the naturalism of Stevenson's poetry reveals itself in the simplicity, happiness, gaiety, and joy which manifest his satisfaction with the world as he found it. His poetry of the heart susceptible to simple and pure impressions. The poetry of the Victorians sprang from minds whose constant intercourse with 'The World' "had dissipated their energy and talents, and impaired the susceptibility of their hearts to simple and pure impressions."\(^1\)

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 36. George Brandes uses this phrase in his treatment of the elements of Naturalism found in the poetry of William Wordsworth.
CHAPTER III
CONFIRMATION OF STEVENSON’S NATURALISM IN HIS POETRY

The evidence of Stevenson’s naturalism lies clearly on the surface of his poetry. For notes and tendencies in art so highly suggestive and symbolic as poetry, it is often necessary to probe beneath the representation to reach the spirit and know its temper and purpose; in Stevenson the very materials he makes the subjects of his poems and the frank treatment of them opens wide the gate to our understanding of his spirit. This spirit, which was to bring back a natural mood and feeling into English poetry, reveals itself with almost a conscious determination towards the redemption of a purer emotional and imaginative expression in poetry. The Master’s admonition to “suffer little children to come unto me for of such is the kingdom of heaven,” can be said to have a meaning for Stevenson, when we think of the first collection of his poems. To regain that natural delight in the world as it is, which the Victorians had seemingly lost, Stevenson’s imagination had to be born again in the experiences of childhood; the redemption of poetry from the sin of the Victorians’ preoccupation with the knowledge of good and evil was in the imagination and the emotions becoming child-like again, and therein finding the poetic kingdom of heaven in the simple, unaffected joy and wonder of the world and experience. Stevenson, then, though mature in manhood, subjected his imagination to the memories of childhood and produced as his first collection
of poems, A Child's Garden of Verses [1885]. Indeed, from the point of view of the creative imagination, he confirmed in these verses Wordsworth's dictum "The Child is father of the Man."1 If Stevenson had written or addressed these verses to instead of for children as expressive of their thoughts, feelings, moods, wonders which they experienced but could not communicate through the art of verse, both his spirit and his art would have been less natural. Man, as he was, Stevenson sang from the heart of a child, which filled with the most spontaneous and natural feeling that human nature knows during any of the seven stages described by Shakespeare.2

Stevenson wanted, declared Emile Legouis and Louis Cazamian, "once more, to infuse into the things of the mind the limpid and fecund sap which rises from elementary experience, and from the psychology of the child."3 Describing A Child's Garden of Verses as an "unsophisticated and gay little volume,"4 John Jay Chapman states that it "has no prototype and is by far the most original thing that he did."5 Stevenson "sat down with... the children without disturbing their fancies, and... looked into the world of 'make-believe' with the children's own eyes."6

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1William Wordsworth, "My heart leaps up when I behold....", op. cit., p. 166.


3Emile Legouis and Louis Cazamian, op. cit., p. 1907.


5Ibid.

In the phrase of Wordsworth, Stevenson wrote of the "trailing clouds of glory,"¹ the period during which the child is nearest God, when the child is relatively free from sin, conventions, and traditions, and appropriating Wordsworth's state of innocence again, the period before the

Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy,²

the future man, the period of life during which one is most guided by the inclinations, thoughts, natural desires and instincts. He "seems to have remembered," Mr. Chapman continues,

the impressions of his childhood with accuracy, and he has recorded them without affectation, without sentimentality, without exaggeration. In depicting children he draws from life. He is at home in the mysteries of their play and in the inconsequent operations of their minds, in the golden haze of impressions in which they live.³

So true to childhood is his poetry that Edmund Gosse believes, "Mr. Stevenson might lead a long romp in the attic when nurse was out shopping, and not a child in the house should know that a grown-up person had been there."⁴

In the following passage from "The Little Land," Stevenson aptly depicted himself in the role of a writer of poetry for children:

When at home alone I sit
And am very tired of it,
I have just to shut my eyes
To go sailing through the skies—

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²Ibid.


⁴Edmund Gosse, op. cit., p. 247.
To go sailing far away
To the pleasant Land of Play;
To the fairy land afar
Where the little People are;
Where the clover-tops are trees,
And the rain-pools are the seas,
And the leaves like little ships
Sail about on tiny trips;¹

for, in _A Child's Garden of Verses_ Stevenson did shut his eyes to the
tawdriness and smugness of Victorian England, and to his physical pain
of which he was very tired, and travelled:

... out past the mill,
Away down the valley,
Away down the hill²

Stevenson travelled into the "Land of Play," "The Land of Nod,"³ "The
Land of Counterpane,"⁴ and "The Land of Story-Books,"⁵ to the lands
where one might find "Looking-Glass River,"⁶ a queer, yet funny, little
shadow,⁷ and "The Dumb Soldier."⁸

In "Foreign Lands," "Looking Forward," and "The Lamplighter,"
Stevenson delved into the mechanism and revealed the working of the
mind of a carefree, happy, and normal child. In the first of these
three poems he writes:

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¹Robert Louis Stevenson, "The Little Land," _A Child's Garden of Verses_,
in _Ballads and Other poems of Robert Louis Stevenson_, Vol. XVI, p. 60.

²Ibid., "Where Go the Boats," p. 15.


Up into the cherry tree
Who should climb but little me?
I held the trunk with both my hands
And look abroad on foreign lands.

I saw the next garden lie,
Adorned by flowers, before my eye.

If I could find a higher tree
Farther and farther I should see,
To where the grown-river slips
Into the sea among the ships,

To where the roads on either hand
Lead onward into fairy land,
Where all the children dine at five,
And all the playthings come alive.

While, in "Looking Forward" he embodied a thought universal among children:

When I am grown to man's estate
I shall be very proud and great,
And tell the other girls and boys
Not to meddle with my toys.

and "The Lamplighter" is no less representative of the thoughts and workings of the mind of a child:

My tea is nearly ready, and the sun has left the sky;
It's time to take the window to see Leerie going by;
For every night at tea time and before you take your seat,
With lantern and with ladder he comes posting up the street.

Now Tom would be a driver and Maria go to sea,
And my Papa's a banker and as rich as he can be;
But I, when I am stronger and can choose what I'm to do,
O Leerie, I'll go round at night and light the lamps with you?

On a windy night the child imagines that the wind is a man riding on a galloping horse:

\[1\text{Ibid., "Foreign Lands," p. 5.}\]
\[2\text{Ibid., "Looking Forward," p. 13.}\]
\[3\text{Ibid., "The Lamplighter," p. 32.}\]
Whenever the moon and the stars are set
Whenever the wind is high,
And night long in the dark and wet,
A man goes riding by.
Late in the night when the fires are out,
Why does he gallop and gallop about?1

The pensive child sees towers, cities, and valleys appear and disappear

in the flames of "Armies in the Fire":

The lamps now glitter down the street;
Faintly sound the falling feet;

Armies march by tower and spire
Of cities blazing in the fire—
Till as I gaze with staring eyes,
The armies fade, the luster dies.

Then once again the glow returns;
Again the phantom city burns;
And down the red-hot valley, lo!
The phantom armies marching go!2

The inquisitive child is depicted in "The Wind":

O you that are so strong and cold,
O blower, are you young or old?
Are you a beast of field and tree,
Or just a stronger child than me?
O wind, a-blowing all day long,
O wind, that sings so loud a song!3

In A Child's Garden of Verses, Stevenson, as has been said and shown, drew upon materials from the bright, vivid memories of childhood, that age of the human being which is most free from the controversies and problems in a world created by man. But he did not stop here in his expression and interpretation of the innocence in human character and experience, but went farther in the employment of a speech that that was spontaneous and natural. The words used in these verses are, for the

most part, monosyllabic and decasyllabic words which a normal child could readily understand. They are also, warm and colorful words, words that appeal to the child, and as often to his elders, and they weave symbols that are both simple and delightful. In the verses on the "Summer Sun," the sun

...sheds a warm and glittering look
among the ivy's inmost nook.1

The reader cannot fail to enjoy the glow of the fire in "Armies in the Fire."

The red fire paints the empty room;
And warmly on the roof it looks,
And flickers on the back of books.2

The sparkle and glow of flames had a fascination for Stevenson, and seemed to symbolize that vivid and eager spirit he possessed, because he returns again and again to this element as in "Autumn Fires," where the fire burns with a bright blaze:

Pleasant summer over
And all the summer flowers,
The red fire blazes,
The grey smoke towers.

Sing a song of seasons!
Something bright in all!
Flowers in the summer,
Fires in the fall!3

Like a child it is with an abandoned delight that he responds to colors in the various objects in the natural world. The gardener

1Ibid., "Summer Sun," p. 70.

2Ibid., "Armies in the Fire," p. 59. Stevenson did not underscore the word red; this and several of the following words have been underscored, here, for emphasis.

3Ibid., "Autumn Fires," p. 73.
...digs the flowers, green, red, and blue.\textsuperscript{1}

When the children find birds' eggs, they are either speckled\textsuperscript{2} or they are blue eggs placed in a brown nest.\textsuperscript{3} The child in "My Kingdom" discovered a "very little dell...by a shining water well" surrounded by heather, "some yellow and some red."\textsuperscript{4} In "The Little Land,"

\begin{quote}
Little thoughtful creatures sit
On the grassy coasts...
...
Some are clad in armour green—
...
Some are clad with ev'ry hue,
Black and crimson, gold and blue.\textsuperscript{5}
\end{quote}

Meanwhile the "dark brown" river and "golden" sand of "Where Go the Boats" is sprinkled with bright green leaves;\textsuperscript{6} and from the swing the child sees brown roofs against a green background.\textsuperscript{7}

Stevenson's symbols are especially appealing to the mind of the child: leaves on the river are "castles on the foam;"\textsuperscript{8} holes in the sand are "empty like a cup;"\textsuperscript{9} the cow is a "friendly cow;"\textsuperscript{10} the mill

\begin{itemize}
\item[Ibid. \textsuperscript{1}]

\item[Ibid. \textsuperscript{2}]

\item[Ibid. \textsuperscript{3}]
"Nest Eggs," p. 67.

\item[Ibid. \textsuperscript{4}]

\item[Ibid. \textsuperscript{5}]

\item[Ibid. \textsuperscript{6}]
"Where Go the Boats," p. 15.

\item[Ibid. \textsuperscript{7}]
"The Swing," p. 35.

\item[Ibid. \textsuperscript{8}]
"Where Go the Boats," p. 15.

\item[Ibid. \textsuperscript{9}]
"At the Sea-Side," p. 3.

\item[Ibid. \textsuperscript{10}]
\end{itemize}
makes a noise like the "humming of the thunder;"¹ the "bed is a boat;"² the moon is "like the clock in the hall;"³ and the haystacs are,

mountain tops
For mountaineers to roam.⁴

Stevenson has used material, ideas, words, and symbols which are those easily understood and natural to a child, and to grown-ups as well, who react spontaneously to the physical world. This naturalism consists in part of the fact, that he did take the child's mood and wonder over into the adult's sympathy and imagination, and in releasing them through his poetry created vivid, familiar and appealing pictures which, set against the darker and menacing texture of the Victorian tradition, shone with sparkle and clarity.

In Underwoods (1887), the collection of poems to follow A Child's Garden of Verses, Stevenson turned from the innocent, active, happy thoughts and feelings of childhood as the source of materials for his poems, to the thoughts and feelings of active, carefree youth. His youths are relatively free from the artifice and polish which the Victorian civilization with its conventions and traditions had imposed upon the Victorian youth. The verses of the poem, "It is the Season," establish a simple, natural, and unaffected relationship between boy and girl:

²Ibid., "My Bed is a Boat," p. 33.
³Ibid., "The Moon," p. 34.
It is the season now to go
About the country high and low,
Among the lilacs hand in hand,
And two by two in fairy land.

The brooding boy, the sighing maid,
Wholly fain and half afraid.
Now meet along the hazel brook
To pass and linger, pause and look.

A year ago, and blithely paired,
Their rough-and-tumbled play they shared;
They kissed and quarrelled, laughed and cried,
A year ago at Eastertide.

With bursting heart, and fiery face,
She strove against him in the race;
He unabashed her garter say,
That now would touch her skirts in awe.

Now by the stile ablaze she stops,
And his demurer eyes he drops;
Now they exchange averted sighs,
Or stand and marry silent eyes.

And he to her a hero is
And sweeter she than primroses;
Their common silence dearer far
Than nightingale and mavis are.

Now when they sever wedded hands,
Joy trembled in their bosom-strands,
And lovely laughter leaps and falls
Upon their lips in madrigals.

Professor Garrod has found a "lyrical tenderness...natural sweetness"² in this poem, when "Victorianism was still at the heighth of its pretention,"³ and it is just in that quality of "natural sweetness " that Stevenson instinctively discredits the "pretentions" of the poetic traditions in the midst of which his own poetry was born.

Youth, however, occupies a small portion of the poems in Underwoods.

1Ibid., "It is the Season," p. 105.
3Ibid.
In these poems Stevenson treats the adults who, like his children, and excepting his friends to whom he pays personal tributes, are the common lowly men leading simple, unpretentious lives, beings who are close to nature. Nevertheless, in Underwoods as in A Child's Garden of Verses, Stevenson's "conscience has fled...the troublesome domain of conduct."¹ He retains his enjoyment of little pleasures; he continues to be "untroubled by thoughts of 'whence, oh heaven, whither,'"² and again he presents the spectacle of a poet who "never looks away from the flowers on the domestic hearth towards the flaming ramparts of the world."³ We are re-introduced to the gardener whom he describes as the "most long-suffering master,"⁴ attending the roses and onions. The friendly gardener is pictured in "A Song of the Road," with "willing feet" who follows "The travelling mountains of the sky," while pouring from his flute the strains of "Over the hills and far away."⁵

It is Professor Garrod's belief that in the Songs of Travel, Stevenson achieves "far and away his best book of verse."⁶ Together with the best pieces in Underwoods he adds that it is "proper to think


³Ibid.


⁵Ibid., "A Song of the Road," p. 96.

⁶Ch. W. Garrod, op. cit., p. 190.
of Stevenson as more certainly a poet than any writer whose fame was founded in the same period."¹ This high estimate is supported by the following references to the particular merits of the poems:

It is in the graver lyric, in those poems where he wedded ethical reflection to lyrical expression, that Stevenson attains his purest felicity. One or two pieces in this order, the lines, for example, to S. R. Crockett, and the stanzas beginning 'In the highlands, in the country places ...' have found their way into the anthologies. For myself, I like better, and think more like Stevenson, a poem which I have not seen in any anthology, the poem entitled 'Youth and Love':²

To the heart of youth the world is a highwayside.
Passing for ever, he fares; and on either hand,
Deep in the gardens golden pavilions hide,
Nestle in orchard bloom, and far on the level land
Call him with lighted lamp in the eventide.

Thick as the stars at night when the moon is down,
Pleasures assail him. He to his nobler fate
Fares; and but waves a hand as he passes on,
Cries but a wayside word to her at the garden gate,
Sings but a boyish stave, and his face is gone.³

This poem on "Youth and Love" together with a "dozen other pieces"⁴ Professor Garrod says he could mention in Songs of Travel, show Stevenson achieving an "individual expression" and illustrating the new music in him and producing "work of pure and noble quality."⁵

The age—and in which he happened to be born—that was "distinguished by many true idealists and many false ideals,"⁶ did not attract

¹Ibid.
²Ibid.
⁴H. W. Garrod, op. cit., p. 191.
⁵Ibid.
Stevenson; and with his imagination he raised the standard of natural sentiment in poems that declared their independence of the reigning poetic order. He expresses the desires and thoughts of a natural man in these verses of Songs of Travel, which were published two years after his death, as he had expressed the heart of childhood in A Child's Garden of Verses, and the purer emotions of youth in Underwoods; and child, youth and man, governed more by their instincts and emotions, which Stevenson believed to be truer and happier in human nature, than by their intellect and mind which aesthetically he would have us believe was false and depressing.

Stevenson's poetry, then, seldom touches upon the question of God and immortality, which so obsessed the mind and imagination of the Victorian poets. He does not profess to be either Catholic or Puritan, but he lived an upright, highly responsible, and chivalrous life.  

Free from the restraints of theology and dogmatic Christianity, he learned to respect "all creeds alike as expressions of the cravings and conjectures of the human spirit in the face of the unseen mystery of things rather than to cling to anyone of them as a revelation of ultimate truth." He sang:

God, if this were enough,  
That I see things bare to the buff  
And up to the buttocks in mire;  
That I ask nor hope nor hire,  
Not in the husk,  
Nor dawn beyond the dusk,  
Nor life beyond death;  
God, if this were faith?

Stevenson accepted the world as he found it and faced it with a sensibility untroubled with the weight of doubt and fear. The best use

1Gilbert Keith Chesterton, op. cit., p. 57.

2"If This Were Faith," Songs of Travel, Vol. XVI, p. 227.
that one could make of the world since one was in it, was, if we adapt a statement he applied to another mood, better to travel than to arrive at one's destination. He believed, therefore, that "literature should be cheerful and brave-spirited, even if it could not be made beautiful, and pious and heroic;" and that "true realism, always and everywhere, is that of the poets; to find out where joy resides, and give it a voice far beyond singing." Despite the fact that Stevenson suffered all his life from physical pain and that he lived in a chaotic and confused world, a world peopled with many skeptics and pessimists, he preached the doctrine of optimism and good cheer. Sustained by the strength supplied by his natural instincts he conceived and practiced a self-convincing philosophy of joy, courage, and adventure in his poems.

His poetry was in essence of the very spirit of the supplication in the prayer he wrote:

Give us to awake with smiles, give us to labour smiling. As the sun returns in the east, so let our patience be renewed with dawn; as the sun lightens the world, so let our loving-kindness make bright this house of our habitation.

The radiation of the aspiring mood in this prayer from his poetry was the highest purpose in the exercise of metrical expression, and


4John Buchan, op. cit., p. 563.

spreading joy and happiness, helped the initial efforts of escape from
the tawdriness and smugness of the Victorians.

In his own life Stevenson attained a spirit of freedom and action
which gave to his relationships with nature and his fellowmen a natural
and spontaneous character, and he wished the same for other men. In
prose his wish took the form of those inspiring prayers so long
cherished by the entire English-speaking world, but in verse the wish
takes expression through the example of his own feelings and conduct.

He cannot help but believe that the example he sets will put one in
possession of those riches which make life sweet and sound. And riches,
to Stevenson, are not only nor wholly the material wealth for which men
labor, and which labor, dulls the instincts and saps the capacity for a
natural enjoyment of living; his concept of riches is the bountiful
blessings that lie all around in the world for man to enjoy if he had
but the wisdom to discover them. Out of his "loving kindness"¹ in the

"Envoy to Underwoods, he names some of these blessings that he wished:

...to all
Flowers in the garden, meat in the hall,
A bin of wine, a spice of wit
A house with lawns enclosing it,
A living river by the door,
A nightingale in the sycamore!

Stevenson's desire for his fellowmen was that they have in abundance all
of the beauties of nature, the comforts of life, and in as much as they
may no longer possess a great amount of childlike wonder, admiration,

¹Ibid.
and surprise, he wished them the armour of wit, all of which he felt would make their lives fuller and happier.

About these hopes for a more natural life by his fellowmen, hopes which must have lain close to his heart and mind as profound principles of thought and conduct, was Stevenson ever solemn in his pronouncements. His writings, whether in prose or verse, were keyed to that quality of which John Jay Chapman writes: "There was, moreover, in everything he wrote an engaging humorous touch which made friends for him everywhere, and excited an interest in his fragile and somewhat elusive personality supplementary to the appreciation of his books as literature." This is well demonstrated in the following poem in which Stevenson gives us a glimpse of himself:

At mankind's feast, I take my place  
In solemn, sanctimonious state,  
And have the air of saying grace  
While I defile the dinner plate.

I am 'the sipper with the knife,'  
The battener upon garbage, I—  
Dear Heaven, with such a rancid life,  
Were it not better far to die?

Yet still, above the human pale,  
I love to scamper, love to race,  
To swing by my irreverent tail  
All over the most holy place;

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1Robert Louis Stevenson,

"We make to ourselves day by day, out of history, and gossip, and economical speculations, and God knows what, a medium in which we walk and through which we look abroad. We study shop windows with other eyes than in our childhood, never to wonder, not always to admire, but make and modify our little incongruous theories about life....The pleasure of surprise is passed away...." "Child's Play," The Travels and Essays of Robert Louis Stevenson, Vol. XIII, p. 133.

And when at length, some golden day,
The unfailing sportsman, aiming at,
Shall bag, me—all the world shall say:
Thank God, and that's an end of that!1

The delicate child who grew into a frail man and who wrote William Archer: "To me the medicine bottles on my chimney and the blood on my handkerchief are accidents; they do not color my life,"2 seems never to have been quite serious when he expressed his ideas about life. "No doubt his ill health made him feel that all his life was a little unreal, and that the best philosophy, for one so eager for the fulness of life and so seldom able to experience it, was to content himself with games,"3 therefore he played the natural man, the strong, healthy, happy man, and in his poetry has instilled the thoughts and ideas of that man, the man who accepts the world as he finds it, and proceeds to press from every moment all of the joy that it contains. This fact becomes evident when we consider the "Requiem," which he wrote to be engraved upon the stone marking his resting-place on the mountain-top in Samoa:

Under the wide and starry sky,
Dig the grave and let me lie.
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.

This is the verse you gave for me:
Here he lies where he longed to be,
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.4

In this epitaph we find none of the self-imposed concern and worry about death, a topic so important to his contemporaries. Here the question of


"Is life worth living?" and the possibility that this life ends all is absent. Stevenson, in his imagination, at least, had lived to the full a happy life, and accepted death as inevitably associated with it and about which there should be little concern. In this calm acceptance of death along with life he offers a striking contrast to Tennyson who is troubled for the assurance that after death,

I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crost the bar;¹

or to Browning who is troubled lest his trumpeting conviction of life after death is not believed:

Greet the unseen with a cheer!
Bid him forward, breast and back
as either should be,
'Strive and thrive!' cry, 'Speed--fight on,
fare ever
There as here!'²

Stevenson, the descendant of a "strenuous family"³ did not build lighthouses to guide tired and baffled sailors safely to shore. Instead

¹Alfred Lord Tennyson, "Crossing the Bar," op. cit., p. 753.


³Robert Louis Stevenson,

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
A strenuous family dusted from its hands
The sands of granite, and beholding far
Along the sounding coast its pyramids
Smiled well content, and to this childish task
Around the fire addressed its evening hours.

"Say not of me that weakly I declined....," Underwoods, Vol. XVI, p. 152.
he wrote simple, often prosy verses filled with happiness, whose music beckoned men towards realms of joy and play, and thus back to a natural life. The Victorian poets, like death, had lost their way. They were stranded amidst materialism, science, economics, and politics; but the songs of Stevenson like a benediction, released poetry's preoccupation with the realism of inanimate facts to the truths of animate nature and a wholesome existence.

Although in later life Stevenson tended to become "more ready, in daily life, to use the language and fall in with the observation of the faith in which he had been brought up," the attitude displayed in his poetry through his acceptance of the natural world, its order and beauty, offers sufficient evidence of his belief in God and immortality. This idea of his belief has confirmation in the following verse:

I know not how it is with you--
I love the first and last,
The whole field of the present view,
The whole flow of the past.

C. T. Copeland,

Life's Angel shining sat in his high place
To view the lands and waters of his globe;
A leaning Shape came through the fields of Space,
Stealthy, and touched the hem of his white robe.

The Angel turned: Brother, what ill brings thee
Like thieving night to trespass on my day?
Yonder, Death answered him, I cannot see;
Yonder I take this star to light my way.

op. cit., p. 547.

One tittle of the things that are,
    Nor you should change nor I—
One pebble in our path—one star
    In all our heaven or sky.

Our lives, and every day and hour
One symphony appear:
One road, one garden—every flower
And every bramble dear.¹

In the words of Edmund Clarence Stedman: "as a minor but genuine
eexample of poetic art, not alone for art's sake, but for dear nature's
sake,—in the light of whose material smile all art must thrive and
blossom if at all,"² Stevenson's came at the height of the Victorian
poetic conventions in the habiliments of naturalism to lead English
poetry out into the open realms of imagination and the emotions.

²Edmund Clarence Stedman, op. cit., p. 468.
CHAPTER IV
SUMMARY

In the foregoing pages of this thesis we have endeavored to present three stages in the development of the subject: first, we stated those forces in democracy, religion and science which wrenched the national mind and habits of the English people from their traditional beliefs and relationships, and showed how those forces reflected in Victorian poetry and prose, establishing in them those moods and conventions which sapped the vitality and dulled the freshness of English literature of the 1830s; secondly, we stated that it was a note of naturalism in the poetry of Robert Louis Stevenson that broke from the traditions of Victorian poetry, giving a refreshing stimulus to the pulse of English poetry, and we gave an explanation of what was meant by Naturalism; and thirdly, we offered proof of this quality of naturalism in Stevenson's poetry by exposition and quotations from A Child's Garden of Verses, Underwoods and Songs of Travel. In conclusion we offer a brief summary of the essential differences between the spirit of Victorian verse and that of Stevenson's to enforce the argument of the latter's break from the traditions of the former.

The differences exist in the temper of the poetic spirit, and how that temper affected the imagination and the emotions, and the character of verbal craftsmanship which gave expression to the poetic faculties. The temper of the Victorians was to speculate upon the problems which mystified and disturbed the national mind, and their poems became poetic
debates on one side or the other of questions about democracy, science, religion, with their hopes and fears. With these preoccupations the Victorians were restrained from giving freedom to the imagination and emotions which would express the individual mind and soul in their reactions to nature and experience.

Stevenson gave the utmost freedom to both his imagination and emotions. He did not attempt to transcribe the ineligible script of nature as a message from God or as a symbol of immortality; nor did he strive to translate man's origin and experiences in the terms of either science or theology. To have done these things in his poetry would have meant the tyranny of the intellect over the imagination and the emotions, and would have created either a furtive or challenging spiritual temper in his art. The furtive temper which was present in the works of Tennyson and Arnold sought a refuge in the illusory with the hope of perceiving revelations to confirm their hopes and aspirations, and the challenging temper in Rossetti, Swinburne and Morris, defied the realities to yield a mysticism which would endow them with a comprehension of the secrets of truth and beauty. In all this the poetic nature as well as the poetic methods became strained and precise, the gladness and spontaneity, the freshness and simplicity which glorifies a renaissance of poetry had vanished. Victorian poetry had become unnatural in the expression of an untroubled imagination and the chilled manifestation of disciplined emotions.

Robert Louis Stevenson felt more than any poet in the late Victorian age the need of escaping from the conventions and traditions of the Victorian poets. At a time when men had apparently forgotten how to
play, how happy and carefree life could be, confessed in his verse a childish indifference to problems. He infused, therefore, his verse with the spirit of naturalism, as it has been the purpose of this thesis to show, and in so doing broke definitely from the traditions of the Victorian poets.
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