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The strange case of *Weir of Hermiston* and *St. Ives*: R. L. Stevenson's last adventures in narration

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Notwithstanding their differences, *Weir of Hermiston* and *St. Ives* mirror, in fictional form, the very issues that were at stake for Robert Louis Stevenson in his essays and ideas on literature, in his view of Scotland as a divided and dissociated nation, and in his creative approach to Scottish history and geography. But, above all, these novels exemplify Stevenson's view of fiction as an adventurous voyage not only in space and time, but also in words and sentences, a textual challenge on the possibilities and limits of writing. Both novels were conceived and written in Vailima, where the cultural, geographic and climatic distance from his contested and missed homeland offered him the occasion to review, and sometimes to revise, his biographic and literary past. Unfortunately, contemporary critical studies on Stevenson have focused mainly on *Weir of Hermiston*, almost universally acclaimed as his uncompleted masterpiece, while deliberately neglecting the other novel he was writing in those same years.

In fact there has been a widespread downplaying of *St. Ives*, whose completion (following Conan Doyle's refusal) was entrusted by Sidney Colvin and by the members of Stevenson's family to Arthur Quiller-Couch, who had written in 1887 a novel inspired by the style *Treasure Island*, entitled *Dead Man's Rock*. Many perplexities derive not just from the presumably modest literary quality of Stevenson's last romance, but in particular from the writer's own dissatisfied comments (partially motivated by the difficulties he faced during its intermittent and problematic gestation), and from the critical attacks *St. Ives* had to undergo soon after it was in print. An example is given by a review published in the *Athenaeum* on 16 October 1897, signed by Joseph

Jacobs, who blames it as the product of 'a fagged mind', after having praised the style of Quiller-Couch's spurious continuation as the only positive quality of Stevenson's last novel. In Jacob's opinion, *St. Ives* is 'a rattling, touch-and-go tale of adventure of a somewhat ordinary type', whose most 'remarkable (and significant) thing [. . .] is the skill with which Mr. Quiller Couch has supplied the last six chapters'.[1] Nevertheless *Weir of Hermiston* and *St. Ives* share many more common elements than is at first apparent: both novels begin in Scotland in 1813[2], they introduce the issue of Scottishness, they both treat the question of evil (identified with devil-like figures such as Frank Innes and Alain St. Ives), they offer similar representations of women as expressions of natural forces (the two Kirsties and Flora Gilchrist), they include the figure of Walter Scott as a literary model and a fictional character, and finally they point to the necessity of heroism in an antiheroic age. Although they do not speak the same narrative language and do not share the same style, they spring from the same Scottish source and try to answer the same questions, embodying Stevenson's dualistic nature as an engaged and popular writer, as a serious intellectual and a nostalgic narrator of adventures.

Weir of Hermiston (1896) is a story based upon multiple forms of dissociation, experienced by the main character Archie Weir in the course of his personal and cultural evolution. Stevenson's unfinished novel resembles a *bildungsroman* set in a half-invented and half-remembered Lowland Scotland, whose protagonist undergoes a series of rites of passage: from the contrast with the father figure (the authoritarian judge Adam Weir) to the loss of the mother (the fragile and religious Lady Rutherford), from the exile from Edinburgh to Hermiston to the contact with the mythical tales of the Elliotts, from the realisation that friendship is ephemeral (as in the case of Frank Innes) to the process of sexual and emotional initiation after his meeting Young Kirstie. All of these elements are woven around a tale based on

unresolved antitheses that reflect the dual nature of Scottish history and culture. Finally, in this novel Stevenson tries to find a common ground between his interest in realistic psychological characterisation, whose literary outcome is represented by South-Sea fictions such as 'The Beach of Falesá' (1892) and *The Ebb-Tide* (1894), and his Scottish cultural background. The oral quality of *Weir of Hermiston* bears in fact a strong resemblance to the narrative technique used in *The Ebb-Tide* (Stevenson's last completed novel), sharing its ironic treatment of the notion of truth. Focusing more on characterisation than on adventures (at least in the fragment he left his readers), Stevenson fills *Weir of Hermiston* with the biographical and literary experiences of his maturity, along with an increasing interest in realism, seen by him not as a negation of romance but as an alternative narrative perspective on events. Thus Attwater, for example, the realistically portrayed protagonist of *The Ebb-Tide*, can be seen as an authoritarian father figure who may be compared to Judge Weir, as if Stevenson in *Weir of Hermiston* was looking back to his historical, biographical and cultural past through the lens of the present.[3]

The 'Introductory' to *Weir of Hermiston* is the section in which all of these textual, narrative and ideological premises are best translated into a fictional form. From a topographic point of view, the Weaver's Stone is the setting where the most relevant scenes of the novel take place: Archie's memories of Covenanting tales of persecution read by his mother Jean, his meetings with Young Kirstie, and – according to the author's planning – Frank Innes's murder by the hand of Archie. In Bakhtinian terms, this place represents the novel's *chronotope*, which fuses chronological and geographical references in one single unity.[4] The omniscient narrator, deliberately distanced from the biographical author, does not always introduce specific historical and literary references to give chronological and topographic credibility to its tale. In the ballad-like style of the 'Introductory' history and geography

are employed like fluid documents that serve the sole purpose of creating a pre-text for the narration:

> In the wild end of a moorland parish, far out of the sight of any house, there stands a cairn among the heather, and a little by east of it, in the going down of the brae-side, a monument with some verses half defaced. It was here that Claverhouse shot with his own hand the Praying Weaver of Balweary, and the chisel of Old Mortality has clinked on that lonely gravestone.[5]

Stevenson's decision to adopt an oracular narrator (emotionally involved in the events, but whose identity cannot deduced from the fragment Stevenson left his readers), has significant textual, narrative and ideological resonances. The allusions to John Graham of Claverhouse, Viscount Dundee (who persecuted Covenanters in the South-West of Scotland from 1678, and whose contradictory nature is evoked in Scottish historical memory through epithets such as 'Bloody Clavers' and 'Bonnie Dundee') and to Robert Patterson (the stonemason whose house was ransacked in 1745 by retreating Highlanders during the Jacobite rebellion, and to whom Walter Scott dedicated *Old Mortality*) are used to enhance the notion that fiction and history are not mutually irreconcilable. Indeed, historical documentation and artistic creation may find a common ground in the figure of the 'Praying Weaver', a fictional Covenanter associated to the village of Balweary who metaphorically represents the figure of the narrator 'weaving' a tale.

In the second paragraph of *Weir of Hermiston*, the late-nineteenth-century narrator, who recounts the events from a chronological vantage point, relates this Scottish public context to the private events of the main characters (Archie, Adam, Frank, the two Kirsties and the Four Black Brothers), making their fictional 'story' part of Scots historical memory, and turning a ballad-like narration into a nineteenth-century novel:

> To this day, of winter nights, when the sleet is on the window and the cattle are quiet in the byre, there will be told again, amid the silence of the young and the additions and corrections of the old, the tale of the Justice-Clerk and of his son, young Hermiston, that vanished from men's knowledge; of the two Kirsties and the Four Black Brothers of the Cauldstaneslap; and of Frank Innes, 'the young fool advocate,' that came into these moorland parts to find his destiny (p. 85).

Hermiston represents the place in which history and myth, fact and fiction, reality and imagination coexist. This literary heterocosm allows Stevenson to introduce famous literary figures within an invented narrative frame. More than any other writer mentioned in the novel (including James Hogg and Robert Burns), Walter Scott figures as a recurring presence and as the incarnation of that Scottish cultural heritage to which *Weir of Hermiston* pays its tribute. Apart from the implicit reference to *Old Mortality* included in the 'Introductory', Scott is mentioned with reference to the management of Adam Weir's country house at Hermiston. The narrator tells that '[my] lord had been led by the influence of Mr Sheriff Scott into a considerable design of planting; many acres were accordingly set out with fir, and the little feathery besoms gave a false scale and lent a strange air of a toy-shop to the moors' (p. 126). Some pages later, in the course of Kirstie's (mediated) narration of the heroic vicissitudes of the Four Black Brothers, Scott's spirit is invoked again:

> Some century earlier the last of the minstrels might have fashioned the last of the ballads out of that Homeric fight and chase; but the spirit was dead, or had been reincarnated already in Mr Sheriff Scott, and the degenerate moorsmen must be content to tell the tale in prose, and to make of the 'Four Black Brothers' a unit after the fashion of the 'Twelve Apostles' of the 'Three Musketeers' (p. 136).

Another allusion to Scott, which in a way anticipates the post-modern trend to incorporate 'real' historical or literary figures into a literary text, is related to the narration of the lives of the Four Black Brothers, and of the poet/shepherd Dand in particular. According to the narrator, 'Walter Scott owned to Dandie the text of the "Raid of Wearie" in the *Ministrelsy*, and made him welcome at his house, and appreciated his talents, such as they were, with all his usual generosity' (p. 140). In this, as well as in other cases, Stevenson makes Walter Scott, the persecuted Covenanters, Archie Weir, the Justice-Clerk, Frank Innes, the Elliott brothers, and the two Kirsties part of the same literary world and of the same events which take place in the half-fictional, half-biographical landscape of Hermiston, mixing Scottish memory and personal desire

The 'dualistic' quality of narration in *Weir of Hermiston* finds a thematic exemplification in the antithesis between Archie and Adam Weir, two embodiments of Scotland as an internally divided nation. As far as Archie's character is concerned, *Weir of Hermiston* is suspended between autobiographical reminiscences – his precarious health and 'the childish maladies with which the boy was troubled' (p. 97), his partaking in the Edinburgh Speculative Society, his interest in 'Byronism' – and an adventurous impulse spurred by his passionate love story with Kirstie which, along with his rebellion against his father, initiates him into maturity. As for Stevenson's characterisation of Archie's sentimental enemy Frank Innes, it is far less complex than his portrait of Judge Weir, and has been cited by critics as one of the novel's weak points. Indeed, the 'young advocate' is just a 'devilish' flat character, as the title of chapter 7 suggests. ('Enter Mephistopheles' is a quotation from Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*). His sole and exclusive role is to be the antagonist of Archie's pure feelings and to be Kirstie's seducer, at least according to Stevenson's plans. Frank Innes is partially inspired by the lawyer George William Thomson Omond (1846-1929),

one of the founders of the *Edinburgh University Magazine* and a member of the Speculative Society. Omond was disliked by Stevenson, who described his speeches as 'inarticulate and foolish' in a letter to James Walter Ferrier dated 23 November 1872. Frank Innes is the typical figure of the villain derived from the tradition of the romance, and will have his counterpart in the character of Alain in *St. Ives* (who is also identified with the devil on more than one occasion), although the latter character also shares Archie's ante-litteram 'Byronism'.

While the transition from sentimental immaturity to sexual initiation is represented in *Weir of Hermiston* by Archie's tormented relationship with Young Kirstie (which would lead to Frank Innes's murder), his first rite of passage from acquiescent boy to rebellious man occurs after he has witnessed Duncan Jopp's cruel trial and death sentence in 1813. In turn, the character of Adam Weir in *Weir of Hermiston* is a complex portrait of paternal and institutional power. Although the Justice-Clerk living in George Street bears some resemblances to Stevenson's father Thomas and is partially based upon his personal memories, Stevenson integrates these biographical elements with the historical reference to Lord Braxfield (1722-1799), who was first introduced in the essay 'Some Portraits by Raeburn', included in *Virginibus Puerisque and Other Papers* (1881). Despite the Judge's notorious harshness, Henry Raeburn's portrait on display at the Scottish Academy (which is the main object of Stevenson's essay) shows a rather convivial figure. In the case of *Weir of Hermiston*, Stevenson does not choose to describe Adam Weir's physical traits, but uses the Judge's short sentences and his Scottish dialect to convey his special mixture of cruelty and irony. Adam's characterisation thus complicates the antithesis between youth and old age, rebellion and authority, innovation and tradition, demonstrating (in line with Stevenson's poetical and ideological principles) that in Scottish culture and history these oppositions cannot be easily solved. From a linguistic point

of view, the dualistic nature of Scotland is dramatised in the clash between Archie's predilection for English and Adam's use of Scots.[6] Far from being a mere stylistic device to convey the contrast between Scottish dialect and cultivated English, the languages adopted by Archie and Adam represent their opposite *ideologemes* (in Mikhail Bakhtin's definition) and their perspectives on the question of justice and punishment, as well as their notions of good and evil. Although Archie will later find in Scots a common linguistic ground to create an intimacy with Young Kirstie (as the embodiment of primeval Scottish values and uncontrollable natural forces), his dissociation from his paternal cultural heritage is exposed at first in his challenging choice to use English:

> 'And now, if you please, we shall approach this business with a little more parteecularity. I hear that at the hanging of Duncan Jopp – and, man! ye had a fine client there – in the middle of all the riff-raff of the ceety, ye thought fit to cry out, "This is a damned murder and my gorge rises at the man that haangit him"'.
> 'No, sir, these were not my words,' cried Archie.
> 'What were yer words, then?' asked the Judge.
> 'I believe I said, "I denounce it as a murder!"' said the son.
> 'I beg your pardon – a God-defying murder. I have no wish to conceal the truth,' he added, and looked his father for a moment in the face (p. 112).

The novel's abrupt ending, describing Kirstie's passionately violent reply to Archie's words, includes an emblematic example of Stevenson's depiction of women as untameable natural forces. Here the young man is confronted with the primal elements of femininity, which make Kirstie an expression of the most uncanny side of Scottish rural landscape, of its chaotic mixture of irreconcilable elements and unsolvable interrogatives:

> There arose from before him the curtains of boyhood, and he saw for the first time the ambiguous face of woman as she is. In vain he looked back over her interview; he saw not where he had offended. It seemed unprovoked, a wilful convulsion of brute nature... (p. 194).

Because of its light tone, of its unpretentious structure and of its partially predictable plot, *St. Ives* may seem inferior to the 'serious' *Weir of Hermiston*. When Stevenson began working on it, in fact, *St. Ives* seemed to him only a *divertissement* with no literary ambitions that would probably cost him less toil than the wide-ranging and more complex *Weir of Hermiston*. However, as months passed by, the balance of the two novels changed and their roles reversed, turning *St. Ives* into a sort of narrative nightmare. Apart from his constant requests for informative books dealing with topics ranging from balloon ascensions to American privateers (craft with 18 guns and a crew of 180 people operating in British waters in the years 1812-14), the first part of *St. Ives* had to be rewritten because Stevenson realised that he had made a great mistake in his portrayal of its hero Viscount Anne Champdivers St. Ives, a French soldier fighting during the Napoleonic Wars and imprisoned in Edinburgh Castle. Stevenson realised his errors when he received a copy of the *Mémoires d'un conscrit de 1808* by L. F. Gille:

> I had miserable luck with *St. Ives*; being already half-way through it, a book I had ordered six months ago arrives at last, and I have to change the first half of it from top to bottom! How could I have dreamed the French prisoners were watched over like a female charity school, kept in a grotesque livery, and shaved twice a week? And I had made my points on the idea that they were unshaved and clothed anyhow.[7]

Notwithstanding its stylistic differences from *Weir of Hermiston, St. Ives* represents another attempt to reflect on

Scottish culture and history. The novel is Stevenson's farewell to romance, the literary form that gave him success, which he defended against accusations of literary immaturity in many essays, and which he considered as an expression of pure narration.[8] In *St. Ives* Stevenson not only sums up his ideas on romance (through the mediation of literary models such as Alexander Dumas, Victor Hugo and Stanley John Weyman), but goes back to his previous adventure novels. Most notably, for example, this text features a character narrating in the first person his past experiences (like *Treasure Island*) and it is basically a series of vicissitudes originated by the hero's picaresque wanderings in Scotland (like *Kidnapped*).

Opening on May 1813 (the same year in which Duncan Jopp is hanged and when the actual narration of *Weir of Hermiston* begins), *St. Ives* centres on the character of Anne St. Ives, a refined French Viscount whose parents were killed during the French Revolution. After having fought with Napoleon, he is captured by English soldiers and imprisoned in Edinburgh Castle, where his adventures begin. Stevenson's choice of a foreigner suggests that he wanted to offer another picture of southern Scotland from an 'alien' perspective. Like the 'recluse of Hermiston' Archie Weir, the prisoner Anne St. Ives begins to discover Scotland from the outside, only to be successively involved in Scottish culture via a sentimental relationship (in his case with a girl named Flora Gilchrist). Anne's employment as an interpreter for his fellow-prisoners and the fact that he carves a wooden rampant Lion (the symbol of Scotland) to offer it as a gift for Flora enhance his role as a mediating subject, who tries to connect opposites through his linguistic and creative ability, just as Stevenson did in all of his literary works. Such elements complicate the nature of *St. Ives* as a novel (dismissed as a mere 'swashbuckler' by contemporary critics), and foreground its status as a problematic achievement in Stevenson's macrotext. Indeed, if *St. Ives* includes the typical formulae of the romance form (the gallant knight, the devoted

lover, the female heroine in need of help, the devilish enemy, the final confrontation etc.), it is rather less typical in its representation of Anne's traits as a foreigner abroad with his own opinions as a curious observer of Scottish history and culture. Narrated through the unmediated voice of its protagonist, *St. Ives* is basically a 'novel of character', as defined by Stevenson in 'A Humble Remonstrance' as a class of fiction characterised by its lack of a coherent plot and by a series of unrelated adventures revolving around the hero.

The fact that the 'older self' of the narrator remembers his 'younger self', and recounts his past adventures, gives the story an implicitly ironic tone. Moreover, the use of the first person in *St. Ives* suits the laws of romance as a genre, since this strategy is more emotionally involving and helps the reader to identify with the hero/narrator. Finally, the decision to use the figure of the 'protagonist-as-narrator' who reports facts is connected to (and justified by) the biographical events surrounding the composition of *St. Ives*. Due to his precarious health in the years 1893-1894, Stevenson was forced to dictate most of the novel to his step-daughter and amanuensis Belle Strong, and sometimes when he could not even speak, he used the deaf and dumb alphabet to communicate. The use of first person narration is linked thus to narrative desire, as if Stevenson had to dictate to Belle the 'ideal' and 'perfect' adventure that he himself wished to listen to.

Conceived as an ideal farewell, both to his first boyish daydreams as reader of romances and to his literary forefathers, *St. Ives* is a tribute to Stevenson's most beloved French novelist Alexander Dumas, and in particular to what he considered as Dumas's masterpiece: the *Vicomte de Bragelonne*. In his last romance Stevenson tries to evoke the atmosphere and the heroic impulses that animate the French literary tradition, which influenced him, to the point that he even imitates the linguistic register of a French character speaking a refined English.[9] This occurs most notably in the sections describing Anne's feelings for

Flora Gilchrist. Like Young Kirstie in *Weir of Hermiston*, Flora is the embodiment of the impulsive Scottish character. Although Flora is light, while Kirstie was dark, both women are associated to natural forces (Flora is repeatedly called 'daughter of the winds'). Furthermore, Kirstie and Flora represent the main reason behind Archie and Anne's heroic actions, which lead them to leave their state of (metaphorical and physical) seclusion:

> There was one young lady in particular, about eighteen or nineteen, tall, of a gallant carriage, and with a profusion of hair in which the sun found threads of gold. As soon as she came in the courtyard (and she was a rather frequent visitor) it seemed I was aware of it. She had an air of angelic candour, yet of a high spirit; she stepped like a Diana, every movement was noble and free [. . .] I could have clapped my hands in applause, and was ready to acclaim her a genuine daughter of the winds (pp. 5-6).

The French school of Dumas, however, is not the only source for the creation of *St. Ives*. In the last years of his life Stevenson was increasingly fascinated by Stanley John Weyman's 'sword and cloak' historical romances *A Gentleman of France* (1894) and *Under the Red Robe* (1894), which represented for him the proofs that the romance genre was still alive and kicking on English soil. In a letter to Weyman sent from Vailima on 5 April 1893, Stevenson congratulates him on the first chapter of *A Gentleman of France*, which had just started serialisation in *Longman's Magazine*. In Stevenson's words, 'I never read a better first chapter, and I never want to read a better. The interest is so completely and so immediately settled on the hero that one might almost say it did not matter what was to follow'.[10] In another letter dated 18 May 1894, written to Weyman after having finished reading his book, Stevenson not only re-asserts his critical opinions on the potentialities and limits of romance, proving that he was evidently self-aware of its narrative strategies, but suggests an inherent connection between the novel he was writing at the time (namely, *St. Ives*) and *A Gentleman of France*:

> It is true the book is a little shapeless, but that is inherent in the *genre*. You cannot both eat your cake and have it. A story must either be a huge breaker – or it must be the surf along the beach, one climax after another climax and none measurably greater than the other. Yours is the second method; admirably you have done it; and long may you continue to do so.
>
> I dare say you will have shortly a fine occasion to copy out this criticism and send it back for my own use. I have been already more than a year over a book of mere adventure like your own, and strangely enough, it might very well have borne your title, *A Gentleman of France*. But I fear in competition he will come in a bad second.[11]

In *St. Ives* Stevenson integrates the deployment of such romance codes to a specific geographic location that was part of his literary and cultural project. Indeed, the Scottish setting represents one of the undisputed protagonists of *St. Ives*, evoked by Stevenson with a mixture of irony and nostalgia. As with *Weir of Hermiston* the lines separating the fictional and the real geography of Scotland are indistinguishable. Edinburgh, where Stevenson lived during his youth and where he attended the meetings of the Speculative Society (called in *St. Ives* the 'University of Cramond') is perceived, so to say, under the French eyes of Anne St. Ives. In one of the most affectionate sections of the novel, the prisoner Anne looks down on Edinburgh from an elevated view. It can be easy to imagine that, in those same moments, Archie Weir, Adam Weir and Frank Innes were walking down its streets in Stevenson's fictional heterocosm:

> [Whenever] I desired to be solitary, I was suffered to sit here behind my piece of cannon unmolested. The cliff

> went down before me almost sheer, but mantled with a thicket of climbing trees; from farther down, an outwork raised its turret; and across the valley I had a view of that long terrace of Princes Street which serves as a promenade to the fashionable inhabitants of Edinburgh. A singularity in a military prison, that it should command a view on the chief thoroughfare! (p. 39).

The plot of *St. Ives* is a variation of the traditional return home of the hero (the *nostos*), which has Homer's *Odyssey* among its genotexts. After Anne has killed in a duel the brutal Goguelat (and will be accordingly accused of murder), and has escaped Edinburgh Castle to reach Amersham Place in Bedfordshire in order to meet his rich uncle the Count (and his 'double' in the figure of his cousin Alain), the whole action revolves around his vexed return to Swanston Cottage to join the beloved Flora. It is in the course of his travels between Scotland and England that the main adventures take place. In the course his long journey, Anne St. Ives is accompanied by a young Scottish factotum and training valet named Rawley, who represents a mature recapitulation of the character of David Balfour in *Kidnapped* and, to some extent, of Jim Hawkins in *Treasure Island*. In line with Stevenson's interest in dualities, Rowley and Anne embody the contrast between innocence and experience, Scots 'naturalness' and French 'refinement'. Anne's nostalgia for his youth (inspired by his encounter with Rowley) seems to reflect Stevenson's own longing for the days that are no more and that period of childhood in which readers identify with the characters of the novels they are reading. The more mature Stevenson, however, must recognise the impossibility of heroism in what the narrator of *Weir of Hermiston* calls 'an age of incredulity'.

Viscount Alain, Anne's cousin, is the quintessential villain of romances and Anne's principal enemy. His most remarkable feature is that, apart from being a spy, a sort of ante-litteram

Byronic dandy like Archie Weir, and a spendthrift (which causes him the loss of his rich uncle's inheritance), he is portrayed as Anne's dark double. This character is introduced for the first time in the course of a dialogue between Anne and Daniel Romaine, the Count's London solicitor:

> 'To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit? how did you recognise me? and how did you know I was here?' [. . .]
> 'It is rather an odd story,' says [Daniel Romanine], 'and, with your leave, I'll answer the second question first. It was from *a certain resemblance you bear to your cousin*, M. le Vicomte.'
> 'I trust, sir, that I resemble him advantageously?' said I.
> 'I hasten to reassure you,' was the reply: 'you do. To my eyes, M. Alain de St.-Yves has scarce a pleasing exterior. And yet, when I knew you were here, and was actually looking for you – why, *the likeness helped*. As for how I came to know your whereabouts, by an odd enough chance, it is again M. Alain we have to thank' (p. 33, my italics).

The second part of *St. Ives* deals with Alain's attempt to regain the stolen 'treasure' (as it is defined in the novel) the Count has given to Anne St. Ives, whose attitude towards his double is a combination of attraction and repulsion. Like Frank Innes in *Weir of Hermiston*, Alain is constructed as a merely functional character who acts as Anne's antagonist, and is usually associated to the devil. For instance, Chapter XIX (from which the last excerpt was taken) is entitled 'The Devil and All at Amersham Place'; it is to be noticed that in *Weir of Hermiston* the chapter describing Frank Innes's arrival at Hermiston was entitled 'Enter Mephistopheles'. In this way, Stevenson's *St. Ives* replicates the laws of the genre, as defined by critics such as Northrop Frye: '[the] central form of the romance is dialectical: everything is focussed on a conflict between the hero and its enemy [. . .]

Hence the hero of romance is homologous to the mythic Messiah or deliverer who comes from an upper world, and his enemy is analogous to the demonic powers of the lower world'.[12]

While in *Weir of Hermiston* Walter Scott was simply mentioned by the narrator and by some characters, in *St. Ives* he makes his appearance in the story as a 'real' human being. The casual encounter with Anne, accompanied by a Scots drover named Sim (who is Flora's uncle), takes place on the Borders, as if Stevenson/Anne wanted not only to make one of his dreams come true through the creative power of language, but also wished to bid an affectionate farewell to a writer who embodied the Scottish literary and cultural heritage:

> Our encounter was of a tall, stoutish, elderly gentleman, a little grizzled, and of a rugged but cheerful and engaging countenance. He sat on a hill pony, wrapped in a plaid over his green coat, and was accompanied by a horsewoman, his daughter, a young lady of the most charming appearance [. . .] Presently I was aware that the stranger's eye was directed on myself; and there ensued a conversation, some of which I could not help overhearing at the time, and the rest have pieced together more or less plausibly from the report of Sim. [. . .]
>
> Years after it chanced that I was one day diverting myself with a Waverley Novel, when what should I come upon but the identical narrative of my green-coated gentleman upon the moors! In a moment the scene, the tones of his voice, his northern accent, and the very aspect of the earth and sky and temperature of the weather, flashed back into my mind with the reality of dreams. The unknown in the green-coat had been the Great Unknown! I had met Scott; I had heard a story from his lips; I should have been able to write, to claim acquaintance, to tell him that his legend still tingled in my ears (pp. 85-6).

Stevenson's awareness of the incongruities and paradoxes of fictional narrations has important repercussions not only on the way he created his novels, but also on the way he (un)finished them. By leaving *Weir of Hermiston* and *St. Ives* partially 'open', like typical postmodern fictions, Stevenson accidentally created two stories which readers experience as perpetually unending narrations. In the case of *St. Ives*, for instance, neither Arthur Quiller-Couch's linguistically respectful completion (he comes to the point of imitating Stevenson's style) nor Jenni Calder's philologically more accurate ending (in her edition of the novel, dated 1990) can claim to put a full stop to Anne's adventures.[13] On the contrary, they seem to demonstrate the impossibility of a conclusion. As far as *Weir of Hermiston* is concerned, readers cannot even be sure that the famous last words written by Stevenson ('a wilful convulsion of brute nature...') are the ultimate traces we have of Archie and Kirstie's story. As a matter of fact, the 1892 manuscript (at Pierpont Morgan Library, New York) includes two more pages of dialogue.[14]

Contrary to what Stevenson asserted in 'A Humble Remonstrance' (1884), in these last incomplete fictions art comes to the point of resembling life, because it seems to be 'monstrous, infinite, illogical, abrupt and poignant'. The very fact that the accounts of Stevenson's last minute diverge proves that it is almost impossible to look for certainties even in the most ineluctable of all human events. Like his novels, Stevenson's physical 'ending' turned into a narration based upon the surprises and incongruities of storytelling. For instance, according to Belle Strong, Stevenson (who was dropping the oil in the salad Fanny was preparing) suddenly said 'What's that?' or 'What a pain' and, putting both hands to his head, uttered the ominous 'Do I look strange?' On the contrary, in Fanny's account given to Charles Baxter, her portrait of Stevenson is less domestic and hagiographic. Fanny confesses that Stevenson mixed himself a whisky and soda so strong that, in his momentary absence, she

had to drink a portion of it. Then, when Stevenson had returned and drunk it up, he flushed and said 'Do I look queer, Fanny?'[15] These biographic accounts are the product of re-created personal history, and as such they are subject to all the alterations and imperfections of memory. In this sense, it does not seem irrelevant that in his dedication of *Weir of Hermiston* to Fanny (added posthumously), Stevenson describes the empty space upon which he wanted to write his last, and unfinished, work of fiction as an 'imperfect page':

> If any deed be done, if any fire
> Burn in the imperfect page, the praise be thine.

NOTES

1 Joseph Jacobs, from an unsigned review, *Athenaeum*, 16 October 1897, p. 3651, quoted in *Robert Louis Stevenson. The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Paul Maixner (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 485.

2 In truth, *Weir of Hermiston* and *St. Ives* are set in 1814, a year which had for Stevenson a literary and historical value. The year 1814 was not just 'the year of Napoleon's defeat and exile to Elba, but [also] the year of Scott's first Scottish historical novel *Waverley*. Scott himself appears in and around the edges of these last tales [. . .] Adam Weir keeps a town house in George Square, like Scott's father, while his wife's family, like Scott's mother's, is named Rutherford'. Ian Duncan, 'Stevenson and Fiction', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. by Penny Fielding (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 21.

3 'Like Attwater, Hermiston is a brutal lawgiver and unforgiving father, his justice founded in Old Testament notions of retribution'. Julia Reid, *Robert Louis Stevenson, Science, and the 'Fin de Siècle'* (London: Palgrave, 2006), p. 51.

4 See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981).

5 Robert Louis Stevenson, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and Weir of Hermiston*, ed. by Emma Letley (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 83. All further references will be to this edition, with pages parenthetically indicated.

6 David Daiches argues that '[in] the confrontation between Archie and his father in *Weir of Hermiston*, the father's mocking Scots and the son's clipped and defensive English illuminate splendidly the situation that is being presented'. David Daiches, 'Stevenson and Scotland', in *Stevenson and Victorian Scotland*, ed. by Jenni Calder (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981), p. 28.

7 Letter to Sidney Colvin dated 24 or 25 April 1894, *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. by Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Mehew (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1994-1995), vol 8, pp. 279-80.

8 In Glenda Norquay's words, romance for Stevenson 'becomes associated not only with models of imaginative engagement in early childhood but also with the period of boyhood in which total immersion in a text is possible'. Glenda Norquay, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Theories of Reading. The Reader as Vagabond* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 74-5.

9 In 'Books Which Have Influenced Me' (1887), Stevenson confesses that '[perhaps] my dearest and best friend outside of Shakespeare is d'Artagnan – the elderly d'Artagnan of the *Vicomte de Bragelonne*'. In 'A Gossip on a Novel of Dumas's' (1887), he adds that, along with Scott, Shakespeare, Moliere, Montaigne and Meredith's *The Egoist*, the *Vicomte de Bragelonne* is part of 'the inner circle of my intimates'. *R. L. Stevenson on Fiction. An Anthology of Literary and Critical Essays*, ed. by Glenda Norquay (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 111; p. 118.

10 *Letters*, vol 8, p. 49.

11 *Letters*, vol 8, p. 285. I would like to thank Glenda Norquay for having introduced me to S. J. Weyman and to his influence on Stevenson in her paper entitled 'Romance and Revivification' ('Locating Stevenson', 6th Biennial Robert Louis Stevenson Conference, University of Stirling, 8-10 July 2010).

12 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism. Four Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p. 187.

13 Stevenson's novel was interrupted at chapter XXX. Although Quiller-Couch corresponded with Sidney Colvin and was advised by Belle Strong to include a reference to the American privateer 'The True

Blooded Yankee', he preferred to introduce new characters such as Captain Colenso, and to allude only briefly to privateers. In her edition Jenni Calder (through the help of the researches made by R. J. Storey) gives more prominence to 'The True Blooded Yankee'. Quiller-Couch and Calder describe an adventurous balloon ascension involving Anne, which was part of Stevenson's original plan for his novel.

14 Robert Louis Stevenson, *Weir of Hermiston*, ed. by Catherine Kerrigan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), pp. 115-7.

15 *Selected Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. by Ernest Mehew (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 609-10; *Letters*, vol 8, p. 404n.