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The Poetics of Childhood or the Construction of Lost Innocence:

R.L.Stevenson's Verses for Children

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Abstract: In the the spring of 1885 A Child's Garden of Verses was edited out, comprising sixty four verses, through which Stevenson's main intention was to expose and to transform children's memories, his memories, into poetic substance. By employing themes that "embrace" the child, having become aware of the child's singularity and needs, he tries to introduce the child to the contrasts of the world, by giving him/her the chance to use his/her own tools and his/her own point of view. Assistants to this attempt the poet reveals both amusement and speculation. This paper, exploring Stevenson's poetics in regard to his verses for children, suggests that A Child's Garden of Verses, full of narrative "naiveté" and lyricism, serve to help the reader enjoy the moments of day-to-day happiness, to reform a kind of illusion that often seems to be preferable to the rational confrontation of life during the Victorian era, and, finally, to call attention to the texture of childhood itself as well as to the images arising from it.

Keywords: R.L.Stevenson, Children's Poetry, Childhood

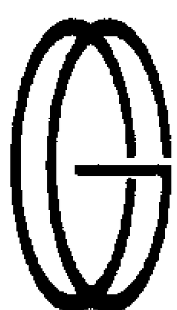
WHEN R.L.STEVENSON READ Kate Greenaway's Birthday Book for Children (1880), he was inspired by Mrs Sale Baker's verses and thought that he could write equal or better ones; and he did. But before that happens, as D. Butts (47) states: "...there also existed a tradition of children's poetry that ran back as far as traditional nursery rhymes", and Harvey Darton remarks: "Ninety per cent of all verse written for children...was poetry-substitute manufactured in good faith, but in a deliberate, purposeful way" (314).[1] That could explain why Stevenson's *Verses* have been regarded as a sudden "jump", in comparison with all those older and analogous attempts, in poetry for children, or to justify that Stevenson, according to Paul Maixner, is placed "in the front rank" of british school of stylists, while he is regarded as "modern of moderns" (160).

Even though these poems by Stevenson did not arouse enthusiasm among his contemporary critics, they did cause happiness. An anonymous critic finds in Stevenson's verses, "simplicity of diction ..., the force of statement ..., a quick and vivid fancy ..., much power of picturesque description...".[2] H.W. Garrod, in evaluating Stevenson's poetry, asserts that his verses "could have been written only by someone who had first learned to be a child late in life" (184), to conclude that in *A Child's Garden of Verses* Stevenson recaptures childhood (185). William Archer recognizes that Stevenson's verses pretend to have more autobiographical elements than dramatic, and approves of his attitude towards the child through his "Songs of Innocence"(Maixner 155-57). And H.C. Bunner stresses the power of Stevenson's art to insert in child's soul, and calls him "genius" as well as "magician", whose art "has a stronger hold on nature" (Maixner 158-60). Generally, Stevenson's contemporary critics accepted his poems "sympathetically, if not enthusiastically" (146).

Nevertheless, the elements he employs to form the literary repertoire of his poetry include whatever may be regarded as child-like, or might interest a child-reader: from attached persons such as "Alison Cunningham" to silent and indifferent ones as "The Gardener", from playmates such as "Willie and Henrietta" to plays such as "Pirate Story" and "The Dumb Soldier", and from "The Sun's Travel" to "The Moon". Whether one would like to ignore their real background, which is not something different from their writer's background and that of his age, one would not have been far wrong in regarding them as masterpieces. Through them, Garrod asserts, Stevenson "is trying to recapture a nature from which circumstances had excluded him" (184). And it is impressive to realise that an invalid man, who had been an ailing child, looks back on his childhood and speaks like a healthy child. Stevenson himself char-

[1] Just to name some: The *Divine (and Moral) Songs* (1715), by Isaac Watts; W. Blake's *Songs of Inn o cence* (1789); The *Poems for Infant Minds* (1804-1805), by Ann and Jane Taylor (et al.); Sara Coleridge' *Poetry Lessons in Verse, for Good Children* (1834); *Goblin Market* (1862), by Christina Rosseti, etc.

[2] Taken from an unsigned review: "Reviews: A Child's Garden of Verses". *Saturday Review*, Vol.59, No. 153, (21 March 1885): 394. (Warwick University Microfilms International, No. 2951).



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acterizes his verses "little ragged regiments", while he confesses that they seem "to smile, to have a kind of childish treble note that sounds... freshly not song ..., but a child's voice" (1911, 270-71). No matter how successfully he transforms this pure "child's voice" throughout his poetry, his obvious intention is to share with his child-reader the amusement he seems to feel writing these verses. This amusement may, therefore, be considered to be the main character of his poetics,[3] the poetics of childhood. D. Butts comes at this view, claiming that throughout the verses: "Stevenson's genius lies in his ability to interpret, in simple terms, the moods of childhood - and many are autobiographical." He also recognizes as the background to many of Stevenson's verses the "Colinton Manse" (Stevenson's grandfather's country-house) and Edinburgh, while he proclaims that Stevenson manages "to evoke the sights and sounds of his childhood" associated with these places (48). In fact, the freshness as well as the vividness detected in Stevenson's verses may lend a sort of an autobiographical overtone to them, while childhood seems to be for him "something in which we continue to be implicated and which is never simply left behind" (Rose 12).

According to the first edition, *A Child's Garden of Verses* contains sixty-four poems[4] divided into four parts: "A Child's Garden of Verses", "The Child Alone", "Garden Days", and the "Envoys", which may be taken with the poem "To Alison Cunningham, from her Boy" as a particular category including all the dedications that Stevenson directs to people he loved.

Stevenson dedicates the whole book to Alison, who is an adult, and not to a child or to children. Although she was a "pious" Calvinist woman, Alison Cunningham was the ideal Nanny. She was always at his bedside comforting the "sick child" and driving away his nightmares by singing country ballads and Scottish rhymes, by reading verses, stories and the Bible to him (Steuart 40-52). Stevenson expresses his gratitude to her, notes his luck to have such a nurse, and stresses their devoted relationship, considering her to be:

My Second Mother, my First Wife, the Angel of my Infant Life (v) [5]

However, he does not seem to regret the lost age of childhood, a tendency usually detected in romantic poets (Moss 231), but he intends to reconstruct it and to rejoice in it. In the last three lines of this poem Stevenson prepares everyone who would read these rhymes, about what is following:

- In the bright fireside, nursery clime
- May hear it in as kind a voice
- As made my childish days rejoice! (v)

The "Envoys", constituted by six poems, is the last part of the book. Five of them address particular persons by their names: "To Willie and Henrietta", "To Minnie", "To My Name Child", one "To My Mother", one "To Auntie", and the last one "To Any Reader". Willie, Henrietta, Minnie, the Name Child (Louis Sanchez) are all parts of a childhood bristling with playful days at his grandfather's home at Colinton Manse, and in Edinburgh. Stevenson, corresponding to the need of his age for writings analogous to "a small child's experience" (Avery 148), attempts to transform experiences which, in most cases, any child-reader could have. Thus recalling his "childish days", he invites the potential reader to share them with him, as it happens in the ending poem "To Any Reader". Here are the first six lines:

As from the house your mother sees
You playing round the garden trees,
So you may see, if you will look
Through the windows of this book,
Another child, far, far away,
An in another garden, play.
(120)

Even in this, relatively, impersonal poem Stevenson seems to speak to a familiar person, a "fellow" one, since he lends him/her a human face by laying an "emphasis upon the life experience of the individual", according to Rosenblatt's notion of the reader (14-15). Following the verbal sequence, "Through the windows of this book", this reader is also required to "shape", even to revise, his/her own responses to the poems he/she may have read; in other words, by drawing on his/her own fund of experience, the reader will be able to complete the "process of communication" with the poet, through the poetical text (76). Moreover, the pronoun "you", impersonal as it seems to be in addressing any reader, in fact serves this communication as a direct invitation to a transaction in which the poet becomes "you" - identified with his reader.

One has the sense that all these poems should be at the beginning of the book to introduce the "protagonists" of the scenes, which take place inside the

[3] For the term "poetics", used in the title of this article, see Gaston Bachelard's: *La Poétique de l'Espace*. Paris: P.U.F., 1957, and Roni Natov's: *The Poetics of Childhood*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
[4] Or sixty-seven, if we count the dedication "To Alison..." and regard the "Nort-West Passage" as three separate poems.
[5] **R.L. Stevenson's verses quoted here are taken from:** *A Child's Garden of Verses* **1885. Reprint. Lo n don : Puffin Books, 1952. (All subsequent page re f erences are to this edition and will be included in the text. When a poem is quoted in part only, this is indicated by ellipsis dots).**

poems, to the reader. But, possibly, their position at the end of the book is Stevenson's choice, because he wanted them to serve as a postscript ("envoy", or "envoi") and dedications at the same time. In fact, he seems to use the word "envoys" as an "interpretant", in Riffaterre's terms, namely a sign which serves as a key-word, by placing it between his reader and the poems following. Although these poems are not "generated by expansion" from this title (Riffaterre 104), that is they are not directly connected with this title, Stevenson does not isolate them in the different parts of his verses, but instead lends them a sort of a thematic coherence and makes them function as similar utterances, thus serving his reader's involvement.

All these poems have a directness which lend liveliness to the speech, and stress the assumption that all are autobiographical. Especially the poem "To Minnie", with its picturesque description and "pathos", associated with the phrase "my first wife" (v) from the dedication "To Alison ...", both are concrete indications of a child-like sexuality and of an obvious childish way of transforming and living the real experience. I quote below the six first lines from the poem "To Minnie":

> The red room with the giant bed
> Where none but elders laid their head;
> The little room where you and I
> Did for a while together lie
> And, simple suitor, I your hand
> In decent marriage did demand;
> (114)

The friends he mentions, along with Mother and Auntie as well, whom every child is likely to have associated with his/her own childhood, belong to a magic world in those Victorian days. At this point, it is evident that the conceptualization of the reader in Stevenson's poetry should also be examined in regard to the ways in which the concept of childhood, in general, was perceived in the nineteenth century and especially in the late Victorian period. For a man of letters as Stevenson was, placed in such a distinctive period as the (late) Victorian era, it would be impossible to be unaware of what was going on at that time, and be untouched by its impacts. Speaking on the Victorian period, E. Goudge remarks: "Childhood ... was a world itself. The door which shut off the nursery wing from the rest of the house made a very dividing line between the life of the child and the adult" (22). This view forms an image of an upper-middle-class Victorian childhood where, as G. Avery states: "Innocence and a loving, trustful manner are the key attributes of the late Victorian and the Edwardian ideal child" (152).

However, this childhood is not always placed in a "happy family" framework. There were many children at that time, especially in the early and mid-Victorian period, who were regarded as "financial entities" by their families, as they "must work in order to pay their parents back for all the kept years of childhood" (Steedman 125), and adults used to break into the children's world for several purposes, such as moral, social, emotional or even sexual imperatives (139-40). Although England at that time seemed to be an "infinite romance", the financial wealth coexisted with a religious unrest, and the political freedom with "mixed feelings of satisfaction and anxiety" (Abrams et al., 1993, p.892). This situation is detected even in the late-Victorian period, despite the fact that the rapid technological improvement along with the labour market demands generated by "industrialization" and the adults' need in controlling children had started to decline (114-15, 120-25). Consequently, not all Victorian children were allowed to enjoy their childhood; nor were they all able to build their own "kingdom". It could be argued, therefore, that the concept of childhood, of the child, depicted in Stevenson's poetry is not absolutely analogous to the real image of children in general at that age, though by setting no class barriers he directs his verses "To Any Reader", but rather a "literary figure" established since the mid-nineteenth century, according to C.Steedman (62). In fact, Stevenson idealizes the concept of childhood in his poetry and sets it serving his main purpose: the amusement of his readers. However, such a conceptualization of the childhood, evokes a romantic attitude towards the child and according to this attitude "children may realize themselves most fully when free from adult intrusions" (Moss 226). Childhood, therefore, is regarded as a "community" itself, while children do not have "to redeem and to reconcile a community of adults", but to celebrate "childhood as a time of special, Pan-like vitality and pleasure" (226). As J.M. Barrie's Peter Pan (1904) in its time, Stevenson's verses may be taken "as a response to some of the most divisive and contradictory aspects of one particular moment whose difficulties it has been used to disavow" (Rose 143). And in Iser's terms, Stevenson's literary repertoire is "drawn from literary reaction to historical problems" (82).

The first part of "A Child's Garden of Verses", next to the dedication "To Alison ...", includes forty-one poems.[6] For most of them the background seems to be the same as in the "Envoys": Edinburgh's summer and winter days, and the countryside at Colinton. Again, happiness and a happy-go-lucky attitude are derived from these poems and all of them range over the common theme of children's life.

[6] Or forty-three, if we regard the last one as three separate poems.

A good many of these *Verses*, which may constitute a separate category, which one may call "Childhood's experiences", seem to rely on such a recounting of the poet's own experiences that Stevenson as an adult always aspires to. Poems such as "Bed in Summer", "At the Seaside", "Rain", "The Sun's Travel", "The Cow", "The Wind", "Looking-glass River", "Winder-time", "Nort-West Passage", and other, present scenes of a child's life, through which the child realises his/her own existence, and uses his/her imagination to make himself/herself more familiar with the world surrounding him/her. "The Wind" which embraces "The Sun's Travel" and "The Moon", to dip both of them into the "Looking-Glass River" near to "Keepsake Mill", evokes a romantic feeling, while the "Foreign Lands" and "Travel" remind one that "abroad" and "adventure" – both outdoor and indoor – were romantic for Victorians. Nevertheless R.L.Stevenson has no intention of falsifying reality in a romantic way. Although he believes that "No one is more romantic" than a child (Stevenson, 1899, 233), his honest attempt is to indicate and to renew the deep relation between children and their day-to-day experiences, while he moves them out of the complexity of urban life, or the adults' world, to the "pastoral simplicity of childhood" (Marinelli 3-4), to nature, creating a sense of exploration in time as well as in space, a sense indicating to some extent a nostalgia for the past akin to that betrayed in many romantic works (Moss 226).

But there is not only the experience and the childish reality. In poems such as "The Hayloft", "My Shadow", "From a Railway Carriage", "Happy Thought", "Where Go the Boats?", another thematic category may be detected, the "Thoughts", that this reality causes. Especially in the last two poems, the thoughts are relatively philosophical, and rather metaphysical. Actually, such thoughts not only challenge the reality and the fund of children's experiences, but also recall and reform them. As an illustration of such an attitude, I quote below the two first stanzas from the poem "Where Go The Boats?":

Dark brow is the river
Green leaves a-floating
Golden is the sand.
Castles of the foam
It flows along forever,
Boats of mine a-boating
With trees on either hand.
Where will all come home?
(32) and the poem "Happy Thought" complete:
The world is so full of a number of things,
I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings.
(42)

Such thoughts not only demand that the child-reader's imagination be creative, but also expect he/she to verify his/her presence in the poem. There are "signs" in the poetical texts which do not just evoke the reader's participation in the production of the meaning, but, functioning as semantic constraints, they designate his/her thinking procedure. Signs such as "It flows along for ever" or "where will all come home?" (in the first poem) and "I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings" (in the second) form verbal structures rather unusual in a child's way of expression, though the feelings they embody can be regarded as a child's feelings. Moreover, it is rather improbable that a child reader could manage to transform such structures into "mental images", meaning to ideate these images with his/her own mind, since they are not referring to his/her well-known world, to his/her "stock of experience" (Iser 38). For this reason it is probable that the "I" (in the second poem), though it transfers a warm tone, stands as the poet's "persona", or the poet's point of view, and not as an indication of identification, while the child reader here is what Aidan Chambers calls "unyielding reader" (93).

Stevenson employs many other means in order to ensure this "living-through experience" as, for example, in many short poems constituted by a single stanza such as the "Rain", "A Thought", or the poem "Auntie's Skirts". I quote the last one in its entirety:

Whenever Auntie moves around,
Her dresses make a curious sound;
They trail behind her up the floor,
And trundle after through the door. (33)

Obviously, this poem, as well as the others of this sort, may be set to an appropriate ballad rhythm and sung as a song, reminding us of the nursery rhymes which adults are fond of singing to children.

But children cannot only enjoy their life; they also have to obey some rules which the adults establish, and there are times when the "Children's Garden" is not exactly a paradise. Poems such as the "Whole Duty of Children", "System", "A Good Boy", "Good and Bad Children", constitute another thematic category which could be entitled "Codes of behaviour", and the "System" may be taken as the most representative of them. Here is the first stanza of it:

Every night my prayers I say,
And get my dinner every day;
And every day that I've been good,
I get an orange after food. (34)

The explicit association in the "System", with the code of behaviour that a child must follow, could be connected intertextually with the thought system, the "dominant thought" system, in Iser's terms, of Stevenson's epoch regarding the position of the children. Moreover, the humour generated by the

last line of this poem should also be regarded as an intertextual indication, or as a "literary allusion", according to W.Iser, since it signifies a literary, though child-like, reaction to a reality which may be defined historically (88), since there are some implications of irony referring to the ethical codes of the Victorian period.

In the poems of this group it is obvious that a code, religious and social, dictates the children's behaviour. And when the circumstances get worse, as in the "Whole Duty of Children" where a child "should .." a lot of things, then he behaves "mannerly", At least as far as he is able. (9)

Stevenson manages to liberate his child-reader, more than other contemporary writers, from Victorian constraints, from the codes of behaviour set by a society, which was both conservative and inconsistent. The idea of "liberty was gradually being regarded as an habitual and very elastic right, instead of a severely observed duty" (Darton 299), during the late-Victorian period. In consequence of that, the writings, especially those for children, were "more spacious and unrestricted" (299), and Stevenson tries to help his reader to evade constraints and conventions, unlike other Victorian writers (Moss 228).

In accordance with his contemporaries Stevenson seems to be aware of a child's singularity, respects its special needs (Steedman 86-88), and wants the child to feel happy and safe in a playful nursery world (Avery 150). In this part there are many poems that may constitute a separate thematic category called "Play", according to D. Butts (50), in which Stevenson depicts a childhood bristling with playful days, happiness and a carefree attitude, and where the child's play is the main direction. As an illustration of this the first stanza from the "Pirate Story" is quoted below:

Three of us afloat in the meadow by the swing,
Three of us aboard in the basket on the lea.
Winds are in the air, they are blowing in the spring,
And waves are on the meadows like the waves there are at sea.
(23)

In the poems of this category Stevenson stresses the power of the vivid imagination of children and supports children's "rights on playing" (Stevenson, 1899, 222-44). "Young Night Thought", "Pirate Story", "The Land of Nod", "My Bed is a Boat", are only some other poems of this group. Children are able to transform, in their own way, everything that surrounds them, while they can derive great pleasure from almost everything.

The nine poems of the next part, called "The Child Alone", belong also to the thematic category of "Play". The most representative ones are: "My Kingdom", "The Unseen Playmate", "Picture-books in Winter", "Block City", "The Little Land". In some poems, as in "The Little Land", a pure, child-like imaginary perception of the world is apparent. In another poem, "The Land of Story Books", there is a reference to a child's parents who, unfortunately, "do not play at anything", and the child had better go "away behind the sofa back" (102). Also in the "Block City" (the first stanza is quoted):

What are you able to build with your blocks?
Castle and palaces, temples and clocks.
Rain may keep raining, and others go roam,
But I can be happy and building at home.
(81)

Stevenson encourages his reader to build the metaphors, following in the next stanzas, upon the signs, namely the words he exposes in the first stanza (quoted above) as answers to the question he puts. In other words, by underscoring the shifting from the mimetic level of poetic language "Castle", "palaces", "temples", "docks" in the first stanza to the semiotic transformation in the next stanzas –"sofa" becomes "mountain", "carpet" becomes "sea" (second stanza) – he captures his reader's attention, but makes his/her participation active.

The part "Garden Days" contains eight poems, which refer to whatever takes place in the garden: from "Nest Eggs" and "The Flowers" to "The Dumb Soldier", from "Night and Day" to "Summer Sun" and "Autumn Fires". A good many of them are a child's experiences combined with philosophical considerations and thoughts. For instance, in the "Nest Eggs" the image of bird's nest with eggs which "mother keeps heated" (119), is being elongated as far as reaching freedom in the "blue air" (120).

In many poems of this category, referring to children's play, the reader does not have to assimilate the experiences embodied in the text, as they happen to be his/her own experiences, but only to project them as a textual experience. In "The Dumb Soldier", a pure childlike play, the discovery of a buried soldier lends to the concept of existence a metaphysical undertone. I quote below the first two stanzas of it:

When the grass was closely noun,
Walking on the lawn alone,
In the turf a hold I found
And hid a soldier underground.
Spring and daisies came apace;
Grasses hide my hiding-place;
Grasses run like a green sea
O'er the lawn up to my knee.
(101)

Here the poetic discourse not only depicts pure childish moments, but also expresses the feelings

that a play might entail, and widens the experience transformed in the poem. Although the poetic text may be regarded as a "stimulus" for the reader to activate his/her own experiences, the guidelines offered by the poem would demand from the reader an extension of his/her own expectations along with the expansion of the thematic material. In Riffaterre's words, the reader has to surpass the mimetic level of the poetic discourse in order to reach the "semiosis" of textual signs (88-89), such as "Grasses run like a green sea". Consequently, the reader is asked to explore with the poet the connotative possibilities of the poetic language, and, therefore, to challenge his/her imaginative as well as linguistic limits.

Except for the "dedications" mentioned in the beginning, all the rest of Stevenson's verses, undoubtedly, refer to the pure world of children: experiences, thoughts, plays and codes of behaviour. Stevenson's feelings in all these poems are, certainly, honest and true. There is no indication or hint that he is artificial, but he rejoices being in this children's "Garden", while he seems to live and feel again – and, probably, more strongly than when he was a child – everything he inserts in this poetic composition. However, neither exaggerations nor any non-original experiences may be noticed in this poetry, while the picturesque and vivid diction Stevenson employs makes the child familiar with the natural and the social environment, not by forcing him/her to follow his process, but by calling on him/her to realize it. There is nothing purer than the scene in which a child is playiung with his shadow or with the pillows in his bed, or having climbed on a cherry-tree is looking around for foreign lands.

In conclusion, Stevenson seems to attempt to establish a symmetry, or an equivalence, between his poetic discourse and his potential reader, while the poetic experience seems to be first of all a process of his own consciousness of what he had experienced as a child. And while one believes that these poems direct the reader to the pragmatic experiences, at the same time, they "exalt" on the skies of imagination with their vivid 'flights'. *A Child's Garden of Verses* comes to freshen-up the child's nerveless sense of happiness and gaiety, while reminding one of little daily things whose existence human beings tend, sometimes, to ignore. Stevenson's poems for children full of narrative "naiveté" and lyricism serve to help the reader enjoy the moments of day-to-day happiness, to reform a kind of illusion that often seems to be preferable to the rational confrontation of life, and, finally, to call attention to the texture of childhood itself.

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