



European Stevenson

Edited by

Richard Ambrosini and Richard Dury

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CHAPTER TWELVE

STEVENSON, CALVINO AND ALL THE DEVILS IN ITALY

MICHELA VANON ALLIATA

In 1983, at the height of a career that spanned nearly four decades as novelist, short-story writer, journalist and critic, Italo Calvino, the most Anglophile of all Italian authors—half of his ten most admired novelists wrote in English¹—stated:

On the subject of Stevenson's real worth, not all critics agree. There are those who consider him a minor author, and others to whom he is a true great. This latter is also my opinion, by virtue of the limpid, nimble clarity of the style, and also of the moral substance in all his narration. (Calvino 1983b 2: 137)

Almost thirty years earlier, in his essay on Conrad, in whom, he found, the love for adventure coexists with "the analytical, psychological" frame "of the Jameses and Prousts" who "tirelessly recover every crumb of sensation we have experienced", he wrote: "on one bookshelf of my ideal library Conrad's place is next to the airy Stevenson" (Calvino 1954: 174).

A sophisticated literary critic and well read in English letters, Calvino was a genuine cosmopolitan—born near Havana, in Cuba, he travelled extensively and lived in Paris for sixteen years, only going back to Rome for the last five years of his life—and anything but provincial in his literary tastes. Even if he had not become an internationally renowned fiction writer celebrated for his keen sense of storytelling, protean versatility—he moved from the neorealist tradition to the experimentation of his late postmodernist works—and for his lexical precision which coexists with an equally rich vein of fantasy, he would have been one of the most perceptive critics of the twentieth century, as well as one of the most respected writers in Europe (Carter 1987: 5).

Calvino's appreciation of Stevenson surfaces again and again: in an essay on *Treasure Island*, his favourite book alongside Hemingway's short stories, in a review essay of a volume of selected works, and in one on Carlo Fruttero and Franco Lucentini's translation of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Calvino 1955; 1982, 1983a); but perhaps his most significant contribution was his 1973 preface to "The Pavilion on the Links", which he considered one of Stevenson's "finest" tales.

Completed at Monterey in 1878-9 and later collected in *New Arabian Nights*, Stevenson's tale, his longest experiment with fiction at that point in his career as a writer, is a fast-moving narrative of mystery and adventure. In 1890 Conan Doyle saluted it as "the starting point for the history of the English short story" (qu. Menikoff 1990: 342).

Calvino's preface was republished in the posthumous anthology *Why Read the Classics* which collects essays written as introductions to the Einaudi Centopagine series of novellas by authors such as Twain, Tolstoy, and Balzac, together with his newspaper articles on other authors, including Jorge Luis Borges. Indeed, among the authors with whom he felt the greatest affinities was Borges who, with Queneau, was inspired by "an idea of literature as a world constructed and governed by the intellect" (Calvino 1973: 238), and it is perhaps no coincidence that Borges too was famous as a great admirer of Stevenson.

Like Stevenson, who was aware that "his greatest strength lay in the single memorable effect rather than in panoramic novels in the vein of Scott or Dickens" (Hammond 1984: 14), Calvino claimed that "by temperament" he felt "more at ease in short pieces: much of my works consists of short stories", be they the *Cosmicomics* or "even shorter compositions" such as "my book *Invisible Cities* and more recently my descriptions in *Palomar*". An apologist for and a master of the short story, in his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*—the meditations on the art of writing written for the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard which he never delivered as he died before leaving Italy—he makes a case for "the richness of short literary forms, with all they imply in terms of style and concentration of content" (Calvino 1988: 49-50).

In his Preface, after discussing the textual variants of the two editions of "The Pavilion", Calvino isolates some of the story's themes and stylistic devices which he then retraces as they returned and were endlessly elaborated throughout Stevenson's corpus.

He starts with Stevenson's preference for romance and adventure over the realistic novel² and links it to "play", defining "The Pavilion" as essentially "a huge game of hide-and-seek played by adults" (169). This

interpretation seems connected with Stevenson's central notion of enjoyment in reading, grounded on a carefully developed theory of fiction, as set forth in two essays, "A Gossip on Romance" and "A Humble Remonstrance".

Another praised aspect of Stevenson's tale is the "dry, direct and objective thrust" of his style which turns out to be "perfectly suited to an adventure story" (172).

He then remarks on the setting—the desolate, windswept dunes of the East Lothian coast which testifies to Stevenson's rootedness and powerful emotional response to Scotland, a response which coloured all his work from start to finish and gave it imaginative breadth and continuity—which is of great importance in the case of "Pavilion", a story that for Calvino "emerges from a landscape" (170).

As Carol Anderson notes, Calvino too felt himself rooted in a specific locality (Anderson 1990: 16). In his introduction to *Our Ancestors*,³ which in Italy is still his most popular work, he writes: "Much of Italian literature has regional roots. I have always tried to avoid what seems to me a regressive local feeling, but my own history starts from a very particular place. My home was in San Remo" (Calvino 1960: 169).

Another point he makes is the marginality of the love theme and it could not be otherwise, this novella being "above all a story of misanthropy: youthful misanthropy born of self-satisfaction and savagery, misanthropy which in a young man actually means misogyny, and which spurs the protagonist to travel alone over the Scottish moors, sleeping in a tent and living on porridge" (169).

In *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, the exclusion of women characters and consequently of "the complication of families and sexual relationships" helps highlight "the simple structure of an allegory or a fable" (Dury 2005: 53). In "The Pavilion" it is instrumental in bringing forward what in Calvino's view is the story's "most powerful mechanism", the one that "guarantees its hold over the reader", namely, "the psychological tale about the relationship between the two friends/enemies": Northmour, "a Byronic free thinker, and Cassilis, the champion of Victorian virtues". An "ideological divide" and "a first draft for the enemy brothers in *Master of Ballantrae*" which heralds Stevenson's fascination with moral ambiguity and the duality of man's nature, his tendency "to contrast two characters who are the two symmetrical halves of a single personality" (Calvino 1973: 170).

Calvino praises Stevenson's masterful ability in creating suspense, an ability intimately connected with the introduction of "an extraneous, incongruous element" to the story, namely the Carbonari, "that murky,

Italian secret society [...] with their black conical hats" (170), the devils of my title. The Carbonari's aim was political: they sought to bring about a constitutional monarchy and to defend the rights of the people, even by assassination and armed revolt, against all forms of absolutism, including the dominion of the Papacy.

The typically novelistic theme of the elusive conspiracy is transformed by Stevenson into an outstanding narrative thanks to a variety of factors: "firstly because Stevenson's hand with just a few strokes suggests the menacing presence of the Carbonari—from the finger squeaking down the rain soaked window, to the black hat skimming over the quicksands". It is the same hand that, "more or less at the same time, was recounting the approach of the pirates to the Admiral Benbow inn in *Treasure Island*" (170). Second, because the Carbonari, "however frightening they may be, enjoy both the author's sympathy, in line with British romantic traditions, and that of the two friendly rivals who, bound together by honour to defend Huddlestone, in their conscience are on the side of the enemy". Finally, this internal contrast, with sieges, sallies and attacks by rival gangs immerses the reader into "the spirit of childhood games":

The great resource that children have is that they know how to derive from the space they have available for their games all the magic and emotion they need, Stevenson has retained this gift: he starts with the mystique of that elegant pavilion rising up in the middle of a natural wilderness (a pavilion "Italian in design": perhaps this qualification already hints at the imminent intrusion of an exotic, unfamiliar element?); then there is the secret entry into the empty house, the discovery of the table already set, the fire ready for lighting, the beds prepared, though there is not a soul to be seen [...] a fairy tale-motif transplanted into an adventure story. (171)

The sentence, "a fairy tale-motif transplanted into an adventure story", reveals how, for Calvino, Stevenson's love of stylistic economy was connected with traditional popular culture. When in 1956 he himself edited a volume of Italian fairytales, he made clear that his motive

was not the result of loyalty to an ethnic tradition (my roots are planted in an entirely modern and cosmopolitan Italy), nor the result of nostalgia for things I read as a child—in my family, a child could read only educational books, particularly those with some scientific basis. It was rather because of my interest in style and structure, in the economy, rhythm, and hard logic with which they are told. (Calvino 1988: 35)

Fifteen years earlier, in a lecture in which he provided a sort of "recapitulation of his literary formation", Calvino said that of "the five

souls" present in Stevenson "(man of letters, Puritan, cockney, pirate and boy) he chose this latter to contain them all [...] and to give us his stories of far-away pirates and Scottish rebels", his "Manichaean confrontations of virtue and cruelty with a surprising levity and transparency which is almost a reversed image of the world". Finally, he claimed that Stevenson's "refusal of the world as it is, is never escapism, but rather the profession of a faith in which moral and poetic values coincide" (Calvino 1958: 42).

In the same year, 1958, in a letter to Luigi Santucci who had sent him a copy of his *La letteratura infantile*, he insisted on this very concept confessing that "he felt hurt in one of his fundamental affections" since in his book Santucci had not mentioned "the greatest of all, Stevenson, although in *Treasure Island* and in *Kidnapped* poetry is really great and it goes hand in hand with his pedagogic spirit" (Calvino 1991: 271).

Calvino highly praised "The Pavilion" because it revealed Stevenson's eye for visual detail, and the strength of its central image. It is worth remembering that on the brink of his novelistic career, Stevenson's aim was to capture a scene with a painter's eye (Ambrosini 2003: 25). We can see this project as deriving in part from his periods in close contact with communities of painters, from reports (one may suppose) from his cousin on the first Impressionist exhibition in Paris and especially from his friendship with Sidney Colvin, professor of Fine Art at Cambridge, and a family friend of Ruskin, Burne-Jones and Rossetti (Gray 2004: 7). In his essay, "A Gossip on Romance" he wrote:

The threads of a story come from time to time together and make a picture in the web; the characters fall from time to time into some attitude to each other or to nature, which stamps the story home like an illustration. Crusoe recoiling from the footprint, Achilles shouting over against the Trojans, Ulysses bending the great bow, Christian running with his fingers in his ears, these are each culminating moments in the legend, and each has been printed on the mind's eye for ever. [...] This, then, is the plastic part of literature: to embody character, thought, or emotion in some act or attitude that shall be remarkably striking to the mind's eye. (Stevenson 1882: 192-93)

This emphasis on the visual quality was also crucial to Calvino's own experience:

When I began to write fantastic stories, I did not yet consider theoretical questions; the only thing I knew was that there was a visual image at the source of all my stories. One of these images was a man cut into two

halves, each of which went on living independently. Another example was a boy who climbs a tree and then makes his way from tree to tree without ever coming down to earth. (Calvino 1988: 88-89)

In the very same lecture Calvino maintains that visual imagination is the quality that informs the authors he acknowledges as his models:

In an anthology that I compiled of nineteenth-century fantastic tales, I followed the visionary and spectacular vein that pulses in the stories of Hoffmann, Chamisso, Arnim, Eichendorff, Potocki, Gogol, Nerval, Gautier, Hawthorne, Poe, Dickens, Turgenev, Leskov, and continues down to Stevenson, Kipling and Wells. (95)

Included in that anthology among tales he defined as “the everyday fantastic”, along with Dickens’s “The Signal Man”, Vernon Lee’s “Amour Dure”, and “The Friends of the Friends” by Stevenson’s dear friend and correspondent Henry James, is Stevenson’s “The Bottle Imp”, which Calvino declares “a masterpiece of the art of narrative”. In this tale where Stevenson “had simply transported an old Scottish legend into a generic South Seas setting”,

The plot unfolds with mathematical, abstract precision. Here, too, the supernatural is reduced to a minimum: the anguish lies entirely in the conscience, and materialises in a simple bottle, wherein a glimpse of a whitish form is only just visible. [...] Here, it is the moral of human limitation that receives a rich, modulated fantasy portrayal. (Stevenson 1983b 2: 137)

Far from being a mere flight of fancy or simple amusement, the fantastic for Calvino, as for Stevenson, was not seen as a mode based on the creation of a strictly visionary and supernatural world, it was not simply escapist literature. On the contrary, while firmly rooted in a highly recognizable world, it retained a strong moral component, never ceasing to be a heuristic device, an instrument for the investigation of profound epistemological issues such as individual affirmation, self-fulfilment, and man’s alienation from society and from himself.

This moral, ethical tension runs throughout Calvino’s work which succeeded in merging didacticism and entertainment. Indeed, some of his most successful and finest books such as *The Baron in the Trees* (1957)—a romance parody with elements of political allegory which recounts the life of Cosimo from the age of twelve when he rebels against parental authority, climbs a tree and never sets foot on solid ground for the rest of his life—and *Marcopaldo* (1963)—a collection of stories relating the

misadventures of a poor unskilled worker and hopeless dreamer—have become ideal reading material in early secondary education. This combination is to be found also in his earliest book, *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* (1947), which was inspired by Calvino’s participation in the Italian Resistance:⁴

Reading and experience of life are not two universes, but one. Every experience of life, in order to be interpreted, calls on certain readings and is fused with them. The fact that books are always born from other books is a truth; only apparently in contradiction with that other truth; that books are born from practical life and from relationships with other beings. [...] So, in setting myself to write something like Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, I also wanted to write something like Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*. (Calvino 1964: xvi-xvii)

It is here, at the beginning of his literary career that Calvino reveals his debt to Stevenson in his sympathetic portrayal of the protagonist, Pin, an orphan boy who lives in the slums of a Ligurian town with his sister, a prostitute, and through whose outraged eyes the resistance movement is seen. Set in the upheaval of war-torn Italy, in a world upset by poverty and uncertainty, the novel is not a strictly canonical text of neo-realism, since Calvino eschews the Manichean portrayal of the Antifascist struggle as a battle between good and evil (McLaughlin 1998: 19). *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* is chiefly a portrait of this skinny, audacious and semi-literate street-urchin, the cobbler’s apprentice, who joins the Partisans to find the friend he has always longed to have. Like Jim, he must keep his wits sharp in order to stay alive; he is an adolescent as helpless in the midst of tragic events as the adults themselves.

Fantasy, here, as in the 1949 collection of short stories *Ultimo viene il corvo*, is not the cheery fantasy of children’s literature in which the prince and the princess live happily ever after; rather, it deals with the serious business of being human: maturation to adulthood, confrontation with betrayal and cruelty, moral choices, war and death. Told in a Neorealist manner but with fable-like twists which stem mainly from the deployment of a naive vision, Pin’s adventures are narrated totally without sentimentality.

In his essay on *Treasure Island*, Calvino writes that for Stevenson representing adventure through the naive vision of a boy’s eyes was the only way to avoid making it into a parody, as had been the case with Ariosto and Cervantes, two modern and sophisticated writers who chose to confront the by then exhausted tradition of chivalric romance. Calvino’s own fondness for young narrators and protagonists is also evident in the

tale of *The Baron in the Trees*, where twelve-year-old Cosimo, in his mixture of naiveté and boldness, is reminiscent of Stevenson's youthful and rebellious heroes, from Jim Hawkins to David Balfour.

Pin's loneliness might seem to be over once he meets Cousin, the protective father-figure partisan who accompanies him along the path to the spiders' nests; but there are ambiguous implications in this twist of the plot, in that Cousin is his sister's executioner (Nocentini 2000: 20). The typically Stevensonian theme of filial isolation, rather than illuminating a psychological conflict with paternal authority seems, as in Melville and Twain, to obey the very logic of the genre—"boyish adventures, especially games involving danger, are possible only when the limiting authority symbolised by the male parent is absent" (Kiely 1965: 72). The partisan, just like Long John Silver, is capable of being generous, kind, but also of uncomplicated cruelty. Yet, in both moods he holds a kind of parental sway over Pin.

The Cloven Viscount, the first in the trilogy later called *Our Ancestors*, written "to make up for the punishment inflicted on fantasy", has a political dimension, reflecting "the divided atmosphere of the Cold War in which it was written",⁵ and it shows Calvino's interest for the figure of the supernatural double and for the split personality which was central to Stevenson's apprehension of reality, a major concern in Calvino's entire output, from *The Baron in the Trees* down to *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. This hypertext and summa of contemporary fiction (McLaughlin 2002: 63) reveals what is perhaps the dominant characteristic of Calvino's entire output: "his metamorphic genius for never doing the same thing twice" (Rushdie 1981: 16). An ability, one might add, that was also shared by Stevenson.

The terms in which in which Calvino presents the major theme of *The Master of Ballantrae*, which he considered Stevenson's masterpiece—"the good brother who gradually turns out to be selfish and deceitful while the reader's sympathy is conquered by the bad brother" (Calvino 1982: 978-79)—reveal that this novel was the *Cloven Viscount's* prototype. Calvino's true concern was not the "problem of good and evil", but that of "the split personality".

The *Cloven Viscount's* narrator is again an orphan boy. The title gives the theme: during a war between Austria and Turkey (1716), viscount Medardo di Terralba is literally and horribly cut in half by a cannonball; a division which is not only physical but, it seems, moral and psychological (Carter 1987: 25). Saved by doctors on the battlefield, the half viscount, once home, takes sadistic pleasure in murder, fire, and torture. He burns down part of his own castle hoping to kill his old nurse Sebastiana, packs

her off to a leper colony, tries to poison his nephew and never stops bisecting everything he encounters in his path. The Stevensonian roots of *Cloven Viscount's* are pervasive: Calvino's portrayal of the hedonistic colony of lepers which is contrasted with the work ethic of the community of Huguenots recalls the leper settlement on Molokai as described in *The South Seas* (McLaughlin 1998: 37), while the eccentric doctor Trelawney is borrowed from his namesake in *Treasure Island*.

Medardo's other half, who miraculously appears on the scene towards the end of the novel, is decidedly good. When the two halves are finally united, the classic reconciliation and reintegration of the fairy-tale marriage pattern do not entirely dispel the psychological and moral ambiguities of an allegorical tale in which Calvino sought to describe "a mutilated and alienated man and his aspiration toward wholeness". Indeed, all characters suffer from forms of divisions and alienation, including Pietro Chiodo, who is "riven by his love of engineering and his knowledge that he creates instruments of torture" (Hume 1992: 96). As Medardo says to the narrator:

If only I could halve every whole thing like this [...] so that everyone could escape from this obtuse and ignorant wholeness. I was whole and whole things were natural and confused to me, stupid as the air; I thought I was seeing all and it was only the outside rind. If you ever become a half of yourself [...] my boy you will understand things beyond the common intelligence of brains that are whole. You'll have lost half of yourself and of the world, but the remaining half will be a thousand times deeper and more precious. (Calvino 1952: 191)

This apology of halfness, with its ensuing metaphors centring around the heightening of feelings, is reminiscent of Jekyll's first transformation into Hyde. That Stevenson's work is an important intertext here is revealed in an interview in which Calvino said: "When I started doing more personal things as with *The Viscount*, Stevenson was there on every page, even if I did not realise it at that time" (Calvino - Pericoli 1980: 1804).

However, in addition to the motif of duality and Calvino's fondness for modest rather than ironic or self-aggrandising young narrators such as the Baron's younger brother, Stevenson's legacy is shown in the playful tone, in the portrayal of the faithful nurse Sebastiana (a pirate's daughter—it is she who first recognises that the half of Medardo that has returned is the bad half and she is the only person who will stand up to him), and especially in the felicitous and overtly comic character of doctor Trelawny, the young narrator's friend, who instead of taking care of the sick, is engrossed in his passion for wills-of-the-wisps:

He had reached our coasts after shipwreck, astride a ship's barrel. All his life he had been a ship's doctor and made long and perilous journeys [...] with the famous Captain Cook, though he had seen nothing of the world since he was always under hatches playing cards. (Calvino 1952: 45)

In the introduction to the trilogy, Calvino wrote:

Among the writers I have always read, and willy-nilly have taken as a model is R. L. Stevenson. This is because Stevenson himself wrote the books he would have liked to read, because he, who was so delicate an artist, imitated old adventures stories and then relived them himself. To him writing meant translating an invisible text containing the quintessential fascination of all adventures, all mysteries, all conflicts of will and passion scattered throughout the books of hundred of writers; it meant translating them into his own precise and almost impalpable prose, into his own rhythm which was like that of dance-steps at once impetuous and controlled. (Calvino 1960: vii)

As is often the case, the distinctive qualities which are singled out as the trademark of Stevenson's style and poetics also characterise Calvino's own works: moral substance, clarity of style, exactitude, attention to the visible, "supreme economy with maximum effect" (Calvino 1973: 151-52), and a love of precise statement which reveal his grounding in European, particularly French literature—together with his legendary devotion to the art of writing and constant willingness to challenge himself. He is an Italian Calvin, as Gore Vidal put it, a highly self-conscious writer, a Stevensonian "sedulous ape", an assiduous explorer of linguistic, narrative and combinatory experiments, an ambitious ever-growing craftsman always in pursuit of narrative lightness:

my working method has more often than not involved the subtraction of weight. I have tried to remove weight, sometimes from people, sometimes from heavenly bodies, sometimes from cities; above all I have tried to remove weight from the structure of stories and from language. (Calvino 1988: 3)

The dance metaphor, with its emphasis on rhythm, quickness, impetuosity and control, highlights the quality Calvino valued most in writing: "the search for lightness as a reaction to the weight of living". This quality, which was at the heart of Calvino's own poetics and endeavour, goes with "precision and determination, not with vagueness and the haphazard. Paul Valéry said: 'Il faut être léger comme l'oiseau, et non comme la plume'". One should be light like a bird, and not like a feather (16).

In that sort of philosophical prose poem which is *Invisible Cities*, a fantastic recreation of Marco Polo's voyage into the Mongol empire, the aged and melancholic Great Khan, ruling over an empire which he sees as "crushed by its own weight", dreams of "cities light as kites [...] pierced cities like laces, cities transparent as mosquito netting" (Calvino 1972: 73).

Lightness then was what Calvino most appreciated in his "beloved" Stevenson, "the unequalled levity of his classic and impersonal language", his "painstakingly exact and miraculously simple and clean style" (Calvino 1955: 968) which echoed the unparalleled "swiftness, the memorable concision and varied rhythm of the spoken language of Ariosto" (Calvino 1974: 63).

This indeed was what Calvino wished: that the "airy" Stevenson and his dancing gait would come along with him across the threshold of the millennium in the company of Ovid, Stendhal, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Defoe and James who formed his literary genealogy and ideal library of classics, namely those books "which constitute a treasured experience for those who have read and loved them" and whose "rereading offers as much of a sense of discovery as the first reading" (Calvino 1981: 4-5).

Notes

¹ These are: Hemingway, Poe, Stevenson, James, Joyce and Conrad. However, "none of these writers is strictly English. Hemingway, Poe and James are all American, while Stevenson and Joyce come from peripheral Celtic countries. Conrad was a Polish-born English novelist. The only English born authors on whom Calvino wrote an essay are Defoe and Dickens" (McLaughlin 2002: 42). Translations otherwise unacknowledged are mine.

² Concerning the preference for romance, elsewhere he sees an affinity with Conrad (on whom he wrote his graduation thesis): for both, "adventure stories" were "only a pretext for saying something original about man, while the exotic events and countries serve to underline more clearly man's relationship with the world" (Calvino 1954: 174).

³ *I nostri antenati* (*Our Ancestors*) is the title given to the collected volume, published in 1960, of Calvino's three allegorical fantasy novellas: *Il visconte dimezzato* (*The Cloven Viscount*) (1952), *Il barone rampante* (*The Baron in the Trees*) (1957), *Il cavaliere inesistente* (*The Nonexistent Knight*) (1959).

⁴ "This was my first novel. [...] I read it not so much as something of mine but rather as a book born anonymously from the general atmosphere of the period, from a moral tension, a literary taste in which our generation recognised itself, at the end of World War II" (Calvino 1964: v).

⁵ "The motif of returning from war to find one's home country divided in two clearly alludes to the condition in which Calvino and many other ex-partisans

found themselves in the first five years after the Liberation" (McLaughlin 1998: 37).

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