The Art of Description in Robert Louis Stevenson

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THE ART OF DESCRIPTION IN
ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

BY
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INTRODUCTION

Since his death in 1894 Robert Louis Stevenson has enjoyed almost continuous great popularity. In our own country, he doubtless vies with Mark Twain for high place in the esteem of the everyday citizen. He is admired by the expert for his excellent style and by the unliterary for his 'rip-roaring yarns,' of which Treasure Island and Kidnapped are the best loved. Nevertheless, there remains considerable speculation as to the place he will ultimately assume among English writers, and not a little unanimity among the critics in the belief that his place will not be in the upper brackets of the great.

The most various and contradictory things have been said and written about this interesting and beloved writer.

His style had the thread of gold, and he was the perfect type of the man of letters... His was the magical touch that no man can explain or acquire; it belongs to those only who have drunk at the Pierian spring. There is a place at the marriage feast for every honest writer, but we judge that our master will go to the high table and sit down with Virgil and Shakespeare and Goethe and Scott.1

"For grace and tact of reminiscence, where shall we look for his equal? What invaluable characters has he not touched off in a few happy strokes!"  

Stevenson's creations wear the habit of life, yet with more than life's grace of carriage; they are seen picturesquely without, but also psychologically within. In a marvelous portrayal like that of John Silver in Treasure Island the result is a composite of what we see and what we shudderingly guess; eye and mind are satisfied alike.  

"Stevenson had never a very subtle interest in character. He probably knew very little about it... Pure character, to him, was a grey void."  

"His genius is in nearly all cases pulled up or spoiled by his all too conscious cleverness... He therefore remains but a second-rate creator."  

These and a thousand other varied opinions have clouded the picture of Stevenson. He has been praised, even idolized, to the point that his intimate friend, Mr. W.E. Henley, felt that nothing remained but a 'Seraph in Chocolate,' 'a barley-sugar effigy of a real man.' On the other hand, he has been said to be deficient in the power to achieve closely knit plot...
throughout a long story; he has been considered by some to be shallowly optimistic in his moralising; he has been accused of being a "literary faker" and a mere "sedulous ape."

The question which naturally rises out of this welter of varied and conflicting opinions is this: What elements in Stevenson's writing account for his popularity and are of permanent value? Many answers to this question have been brought forward by his adherents. They have pointed to the great personal courage of the man himself, which shines through his writings, to his optimism and confidence in the essential goodness of man. They have mentioned his undoubted and unusual ability as an interesting story-teller, his deft handling of certain literary devices (e.g., paradox, antithesis, allusion, etc.), and his fine powers of description.

The present thesis purposes to investigate the technique of Stevenson's description, in order to determine its importance in promoting the successful effect which his writings achieve. The scope of the paper will not permit of an exhaustive study of descriptive passages in all of his books. A selection has been made as follows. The principal primary sources will be travel books, such as Travels with a Donkey and An Inland Voyage; reference will also be made to selected passages from the more popular romances, chiefly Treasure Island and
Kidnapped; and occasional exemplary descriptions will be drawn from the other works. The material for this thesis will be found primarily in the works of Robert Louis Stevenson and the writings of critics who have discussed his literary style. Other sources will be volumes dealing with composition and rhetoric; these are to be utilized in determining the nature of description.

The first portion of the paper will be devoted to the derivation of a notion of what description is. It is then proposed to discuss certain aspects of Stevenson's ancestry, his life, and his temperament which would seem to be contributing factors to a facility for description. Thirdly, the general use of description in the writings of Stevenson will be considered. This is to be followed by detailed analysis of selected passages from the works mentioned above. In the course of the thesis the opinions of some of the reputable critics will be given, insofar as they touch upon those phases of Stevenson's art which would involve the descriptive technique which is the concern of this paper. A summary and an evaluation of the place of the technique of description in Stevenson's works will close the thesis.
CHAPTER I

THE NATURE OF DESCRIPTION

The Oxford English Dictionary defines description as the "action of setting forth by mentioning recognizable features or characteristic marks; verbal representation or portraiture." According to Webster, description is "discourse or an example of it, designed to represent to the imagination a unit of subjective or objective experience, as a scene, person, sensation, emotion." Funk & Wagnall's New Standard Dictionary mentions three species of description, according as the process exhibits parts in their relations, the aggregate of attributes, or the substance itself.

Evelyn M. Albright, in a book called Descriptive Writing, notes that description "aims to stimulate the imagination to form mental pictures," and "has even been called "word-painting"." According to another version, description is "a form of discourse which is intended to produce in the mind of the reader or listener the same impression of an object

4 The Macmillan Co., N.Y., 1924, 2.
5 Ibid., 8.
which he would form from the object itself."  

A fuller elaboration of this idea is that description aims to stimulate the reader's imagination by "reawakening in him sense impressions from his past experience."  

Many more definitions might be recorded, but they would only exhibit the similarity which is apparent in the preceding. One more may be added, however, taken from *The Working Principles of Rhetoric*, by John Franklin Genung, which volume is to be used as the basis for our analysis of the nature of description: "Description is the portrayal of concrete objects, material or spiritual, by means of language."  

The foregoing definitions are remarkably alike. Description is seen to be a form of discourse which employs words in order to furnish the reader or hearer "with the same picture and the same impression that we ourselves derived from the place, object, or person described."  

It will be noted that every definition listed above contains some direct or indirect allusion to the analogy between description and painting.

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6 Thomas, Howe, O'Hair, *Composition and Rhetoric*, Longmans, Green & Co., Boston, 1908, 272.
8 Ginn & Co., Boston, 1900, 477. Cf. Appendix I regarding the use of this text.
or portraiture. This idea is unanimously accepted by all, though one rhetoric terms the analogy misleading on the grounds that while a painting appeals directly to the sense of sight and is immediately intelligible to the beholder, "words can in themselves portray nothing; they can only suggest sensations." 10

Definition of description, therefore, necessarily centers in portrayal, which is a painter's term; this implies, not the mere bare enumeration of parts and qualities, for this would be a prosy catalogue, but a kind of word-picture, "wherein is something answering to the draughtsmanship, the coloring, the light and shade, the perspective, that give artistry to the actual picture." 11 When Genung remarks that description deals with concrete objects, he means that they are perceived, not as members of a class, but as unique objects and by individual characteristics. Description seeks to give the traits wherein the object is individually impressive. The range of objects amenable to description includes not only sensible things adapted to portrayal, but also "spiritual objects, as, for instance, character, states of mind, and the like, which contain little or no pictorial suggestiveness." 12

10 Thomas, Manchester, and Scott, Composition for College Students, the Macmillan Co., N.Y., 1924, 284.
11 Genung, 477.
12 Ibid., 478.
13 Ibid., 479.
In description one attempts to make something beautiful out of unplastic material and with an unwieldy working-tool. "The working-tool is language, employed to do what more naturally belongs to the brush or the chisel."13 The material is the multitude of parts and details contemplated in any object. The two most difficult problems to be faced are the selection of details and the production of a total effect.

In selecting those details to be included in any verbal description, one must naturally bear in mind the purpose of the description. All authors consulted distinguish between what may be called expository or scientific description and literary or artistic description.

If the purpose of the description is to arouse a feeling of pleasure or any emotion which a picture or a piece of statuary might arouse, we call it artistic or literary description. If the purpose is to give accurate, useful information of an object, we call it practical or scientific description.14

A literary description of a criminal might be intended to arouse an emotion of pity and a strong interest in the character of the man. A practical description of the same criminal would be intended only to convey information which would help to identify the man described. Our interest is in artistic, not scientific description, since the latter calls for the exercise of no

13 Ibid., 478.
14 C.S. Thomas, Composition and Rhetoric, Longmans, Green, & Co., N.Y., 1942, 104.
faculty or distinctive technique not employed in exposition.

In artistic description, vividness is the quality most to be desired; nearly all rhetoricians are agreed on this point. "The test of a good description is its vividness," 15 says one, and adds that "great masters of description, like Robert Louis Stevenson and Rudyard Kipling, are distinguished by (1) keenness of observation, (2) the vividness of their own mental image, and (3) their command of fitting words." 16 It is apparent that the end-result of the exercise of these three qualities would be to produce a vivid description, suitable for conveying a strong picture to the reader.

In selecting details to be depicted from the great number observable in the object, the criterion will be, then, the vivid picture which is the desired product of the description. Selection is a fundamental principle of any art and, here again, a lesson may be learned from the painter, who "more or less consciously selects the details that are for him the dominant impression and omits those that do not serve his purpose." 17 Genung mentions several general rules of conduct in this regard. Since the enumeration of more than a small number of the details belonging to an object crowds and confuses the

16 Ibid., 437.
17 Genung, 284.
portrayal, it is desirable to choose the smallest number of details that will adequately present the desired design. These details should make up in importance and character-giving quality for what they sacrifice in number, and hence should be selected for their power to excite the imagination. "If you cannot tell the whole, tell that most outstanding and distinctive thing which will make the reader think the whole." 18

The second problem, that of total effect, arises from the disadvantage of language as a picturing medium. The description must take time, and the details must be presented separately and successively. But the object itself is at rest, and must produce its impression all at once. The description goes on continually to new things, but the things it has left must, for the integrity of the picture, remain vivid. Hence, they must include a core or framework of description, about which a body of details is built, and to which the reader's memory constantly refers.

These difficulties of selection and total effect result in narrowing down the chosen details to a surprisingly small number. A report on the average number of details found in several hundred Stevenson descriptions will be given in

18 Genung, 430.
Chapter III. In the light of such difficulties it is easier to comprehend the zest with which Stevenson and other great writers have approached the task of composition:

It is the work and it is a great part of the delight of any artist to contend with these unruly tools, and now by brute energy, now by witty expedient, to drive and coax them to affect his will. 19

The actual mechanism of description begins with the choice of a point of view from which to observe the object under consideration. When Scott wishes the reader to see the attack made by the Saxons upon the Norman castle, he places Rebecca in a niche high up on the castle wall. This is a physical point of view, and nothing is more important than careful adherence to this definite viewpoint. The mental point of view is similar. A landscape produces different reactions depending upon the cast of mind of the beholder; he may be, for instance, a painter, a farmer, an engineer, an architect. This point of view with respect to the non-physical side of an object, may be referred to as an attitude. It is not necessary that either the physical or mental point of view be explicitly mentioned. But it is important that the details be so graduated to one point of view that the reader may instinctively feel his position with reference to the object. 20

Having determined the point of view, the writer next gives in brief outline that most comprehensive and characteristic trait which he selects as the core or nucleus of his description, and around which the reader is to group the various details that follow. Here again must be mentioned the fact that an extensive catalogue of the manifold details confronting the observer only numbs the reader and induces that impatience with descriptive passages that is so common. It is desirable that the beginning and the end of the description should be particularly emphatic, and that such details as distract from the desired atmosphere be deliberately eliminated. All rhetoricians seem to agree that the best descriptions are brief, the details few.

Details are usually arranged in space order, that is, the point of view is north, south, up, down, here, there, etc. Shape and color are the two basic considerations, though appeals to senses other than sight should be made wherever possible. Descriptions that do not rely upon appeal to the senses for vividness are not likely to be vivid at all.

An object may be described by impression rather than by following its natural visible lines. In description by impression the details are selected because of some character-
izing quality common to them all; "strictly speaking this describes not the object but qualities of the object." A word may be added here regarding indirect description, in which the imagination is aroused by giving the effect of what one is describing, upon oneself or upon someone else. Emphasis upon the blanched cheek, the trembling hand, may often be more effective than description of the object which produces these symptoms of terror. As we shall see, some of Stevenson's most effective descriptions are of this indirect type.

Because of the strong appeal description makes to the imagination, it is natural that its language should very frequently be figurative. Stevenson's skillful use of certain figurative devices will be discussed in its proper place. We may say a few words at this time, however, regarding epithet, since Stevenson's passion for finding the one, perfect word to suit his purposes, made him especially apt at employing this figure. An epithet may be defined as a descriptive adjective that crowds an entire "picture into a single word." The value of epithet in description lies in its concentration. "Carried too far, it is, like extreme impressionism of any sort, likely to degenerate into caricature;" but where epithets are fresh and few, they may be better than "pages of inventory

22 Ibid., 489.
23 Ibid., 147.
24 Albright, 67.
description in cases where vividness of conception is need-
ed." 25 From the time when Homer first spoke of the "winged-
words" of Nestor and the other heroes, of the "rosy-fingered
dawn," the "far-darter," and the "wine-dark sea," men's
imagination have been fired by the skillful use of this
vigorous figure, so poetic in character. Few writers of prose
have employed it with greater artistry than Robert Louis
Stevenson, as we shall see.
CHAPTER II
CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO STEVENSON'S
FACILITY FOR DESCRIPTION

It now seems advisable to discuss certain aspects of Stevenson's life and temperament which probably accounted largely for such facility for description as he possessed. It is immediately obvious that a study of this nature involves a certain amount of conjecture; it is not possible in most cases to trace a direct connection between such general factors in a man's life and his ability with respect to a particular element of literary style. However, since the appeal of description is so entirely directed to the imagination, and since the ability of the writer to make vivid in the minds of his readers the people and objects he describes is so important a criterion of his success, it is evident that certain temperaments and certain experiences would be greatly conducive to eminence in descriptive powers. Our consideration of this matter will be fourfold: 1) Stevenson's ancestry, and more especially, his own interest in it; 2) his temperament; 3) places in which his life was spent; 4) certain boyhood influences and particularly his early interest in plays, drawing, writing, etc.

The real romance of Scotland lives in her songs and stories. "Border ballads, Highland lays, tales of Homeric prowess,
passion of more than Latin vehemence and wildness—these enshrine the deeds and histories of the past, as they appeal to the popular imagination."¹ A memorial in the old quadrangle of Edinburgh University to a band of young heroes of World War I bears the inscription: "All Earth is witness that they answered as befitted their ancestry." These words of Kipling suggest Simonides—Scottish boys going to death because their fathers would have had it so. It is typical of the Scot's absorbing interest in his ancestry, of the Celtic imagination enthralled and fired by stories of Highland courage and Highland fidelity. It is doubtful whether Stevenson was of genuine Celtic lineage, but it is certain that he was all his life interested in proving that he was. He disliked the English; he disliked his fellow citizens of Edinburgh—"there was but one alternative; he was Celtic. In proof he set himself arduously to discover or create a fit genealogy."²

With this preconceived idea and with unwearied gusto he explored certain vapory traditions which appeared to give him a Celtic lineage, to give him a Norse name, even the redoubtable one of the Clan MacGregor, family of the formidable Rob Roy.

² Ibid., I 21.
Almost the last letter he wrote was a request for aid in his search. "It may be said he died trying to establish for his progenitors a foothold in history, a niche in the domestic annals of their country."³

But, regardless of the actual facts, Stevenson, his father, and his grandfather all "exhibited many moods and tendencies of mind attributed to the Celtic race."⁴ Louis' father was noted for the extreme care with which he chose words, sometimes leaving an expression unfinished after several unsuccessful efforts at selecting a word. He also exhibited the common Celtic trait in which "affections and emotions, passionate ups and downs, found best expression in words and gestures."⁵

From his Highland ancestors Louis drew the strain of Celtic melancholy, with all its perils and possibilities, and its kinship to the mood of day-dreaming, which has flung over so many of his pages now the vivid light wherein figures imagined grow real as flesh and blood, and yet again the ghostly, strange lonesome, and stinging mist, under whose spell we see the world bewitched, and every object quickens with a throb of infectious terror.⁶

And one who reads the stories and the letters of Robert Louis Stevenson will little doubt the truth of these words, both as they pertain to the man and to his writing. He was always a

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³ Ibid., I, 6.
⁵ Ibid., 22.
⁶ Hammerton, 7.
18

scot. "This Bohemian, this gypsy, this cosmopolite, had, after all his travels,...a slight burr remaining in his speech, and he had a much stronger Doric accent of the mind."

The sights and thoughts of my youth pursue me; and I see like a vision the youth of my father, and of his father, and the whole stream of lives flowing down there far in the north, with the sound of laughter and tears, to cast me cut in the end, as by a sudden freshet, on these ultimate islands. And I admire and bow my head before the romance of destiny.

To be sure, he has succeeded well in describing this will-o'-the-wisp Celtic spirit of Tam-o'-Shanter, and in doing so, has given us, in "Thrawn Janet," "The Pavillion on the Links," and "Markheim," some of the best "mood-stories" in English.

Stevenson's temperament was essentially bound up in what he wrote. "It is impossible to separate Stevenson from his work, because of the imperious personal element in it." Henley, who knew him well, said that he was what the French call personnel—incessantly and passionately interested in Stevenson. This element was helpful when it appeared in his essays, a weakness when it occurred in the novels.

Stevenson's constant habit of putting himself in the place of another, and asking himself how would I have borne myself here or there, thus, limited his field of dramatic interest, where the

8 Stevenson, David Balfour, dedication, VI, vii.
9 Japp, 105.
subject should have been made pre-eminently in aid of this effect. Even in Long John Silver we see it, as in various others of his characters.10

Dr. Japp goes on to say that as he grew older, Stevenson became less of an egotist and, by the time he got to Weir of Hermiston, more of a realist.

All his biographers agree that Stevenson had very great personal courage. He exhibited this chiefly in his life-long battle against the sickness and hardship that dogged him. The tremendous driving force that kept him hard at work in dirty, drab, cheap rooms in San Francisco during his first visit to America is inspiring. Always he was sick. "Nobody," says Chesterton, in typical style, "knew better than he did that nothing is more terrible than a bed; since it is always waiting to be a deathbed."11 Stevenson once termed himself "a mere complication of coughs and bones." And he frequently was sick in mind as well as in body.

They understand little of Robert Louis Stevenson who picture him as a creature all fire and air, revelling Puck-like in perpetual levity and light-heartedness. No man of his gifts and craft ever did or ever can so revel; for unbroken, unruffled gaiety would be an impossible contradiction of the creative spirit. Every imaginative artist...has his moments of crushing gloom...Stevenson, like

10 Ibid., 188.
other gifted men, had the defects of his qualities. If his mercurial temperament leaped up in the sun, it plunged as quickly to zero in the shade.  

"Lightness, audacity, fiery impetuosity of heart and soul, and eager, ever-ready enthusiasm rather than depth or power, characterized the whole man." 13 At no period of his life did he repose in quiet strength—"he was, says Steuart, "forever effervescent." Stevenson was not lavishly endowed with nature's gifts and it was with no sham humility he insisted that he owed everything to his "dire industry:" and that, if he had genius at all, it was simply a genius for hard work. And certain it is that he exercised this genius in the face of suffering and trouble that would have quenched the fires of a dozen men of smaller spirit.

We now come to the adventurous wandering that characterized Stevenson's life. What Stephen Chalmers calls the "fearful fascination" of the sea for the Scot was surely typified in the author of *The Merry Men*, *The Ebb Tide*, and *Treasure Island*. "There was evidence of the Viking strain in Stevenson and his seagoing forefathers." 14 In order to describe persons and places, one must have seen them. While it is probably true that

12 Steuart, I, 239, 240.
13 Ibid., II, 304.
Stevenson's knowledge of people was limited, which doubtless explains the defects noted in his characterizations, it is equally true that he did know places, which doubtless explains the great excellence of many of his nature descriptions. It can almost be said that he was constantly on the move from the time of his birth in Edinburgh to the time of his death in far-off Samoa.

While still a young boy he visited London, the Isle of Wight, Stonehenge, Homburg, Mentone, Genoa, Venice, Rome, Naples, and the Rhine. And he seemed never to forget. Imagination was active "gathering impressions, devising, projecting, building airy castles,"15 some of which were to materialise, to his own profit and to the delight of mankind. Swanston, a family summer home, appears and reappears in his essays. Many years after leaving it, he spoke of the lawn as a "perfect goblet of sunshine," of the Manse as a "nest of small rooms." "That was my golden age; et ego in arcadia vixi."16 Swanston is conspicuous in almost the last thing he wrote, the unfinished St. Ives. There are other instances of the abiding effects of his visits to many lands. "The Rhone and the Bremmer Pass remained as vivid memories, the scenery of the latter being partly reproduced in the story "Will o' the

15 Steuart, I, 70.
16 Ibid., I, 56.
The author of The Penny Piper of Saranac notes that The Master of Ballantrae ends "in story where it was begun in fact—in the frozen forest under the shadow of Mount Baker." The travel books, several in number, are, of course, directly traceable to the zestful wanderings of their author.

"The blithe spirit of adventure which was as the breath of life in his nostrils impelled him forward like an informing, animating genius, as in fact it was." Chesterton adds that Stevenson's life was really what "we call picturesque; partly because he saw everything in pictures; and partly because a series of accidents did really attach him to very picturesque places." Finally, a word regarding the charge, brought forward by Mr. Frank Swinnerton and others, that Stevenson wrote romance because he lacked the courage to deal with real life in fiction—after the fashion of Thomas Hardy. His interest in form is explained on the same grounds. What can a perpetual invalid possibly know about real life? In answer, E.C. Wagenkecht quotes from Critical Woodcuts by Stuart P. Sherman:

What lions have these critical fellows shot with a bow and arrow, that they turn up

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17 Ibid., I, 70.
18 Chalmers, 10.
19 Steuart, I, xiv.
20 Chesterton, 6.
superior noses at Stevenson, who merely consorted with the thieves and harlots of the slums of Edinburgh and London, ran through the professions of engineering and law before he was twenty-five, explored the Scotch coast in a sailboat, canoed the Sambre and Oise, slept in a lonely bivouac à la belle étoile in the Cévennes, fled to San Francisco by emigrant train, chartered his own schooner, sailed the South Seas for three years, feasted with cannibal chiefs, refused to sleep with their wives, conspired with Kanaka kings, was threatened with deportation, planted a wilderness, governed a small tribe of savages and died in his boots.  

Stevenson once said of himself, "I am one of the few people in the world who do not forget their own lives." It is a truth to which all of his critics have borne testimony. Andrew Lang, after comparing Stevenson to George Sand in this regard, adds:

The peculiarity of Mr. Stevenson is not only to have been a fantastic child, and to retain, in maturity, that fantasy ripened into imagination; he also kept up the habit of dramatising everything, of playing, half consciously, many parts, of making the world "an unsubstantial place." This turn of mind it is that causes his work occasionally to seem somewhat freakish. Thus, in the fogs and horrors of London, he plays at being an Arabian tale-teller, and his "New Arabian Nights" are a new kind of romanticism—Oriental, freakish, like the work of a changeling.

22 Letters, iii, 107, quoted by Balfour, 27.
Another critic says he would give much to possess the extraordinary vividness of recollection by which Stevenson could recall not only "the doings, but the very thoughts and emotions of his youth." 24 Mr. Swinnerton remarks that one note which is "struck and re-struck in Stevenson's essays is the memory of childhood." 25

This extraordinary faculty of the grown writer was an important influence in his writings. And the thing to be remembered is not that he experienced the things he did, for many of them would not be uncommon in the lives of imaginative children, but his astonishing ability to re-create his experiences after the passing of years. When a grown man, for instance, he recalled the night noises of childhood, the sound of a horseman riding furiously past the bottom of the street and away up the hill into town. "I think even now that I hear the terrible howl of his passage, and the clinking that I used to attribute to his bit and stirrup." 26

Always sick, his body imprisoned for long, dreary days, always within walls, his imagination roamed wide. Now he was a hunter, now a pirate, and he saw apparitions in the dusk under the trees at Colinton Manse. Steuart conjures up a picture of

24 Quoted from Mr. Baildon by Dr. Japp, 109.
25 Swinnerton, 67.
26 Quoted by Balfour, 29.
the ailing child, swathed in a blanket, gazing from an upper window. One can imagine him there waiting impatiently for the lamplighter, whose nightly passing was to give us one of the loveliest and most poignant poems in *The Child's Garden of Verses*.

"But I, when I am stronger and can choose what I'm to do, O Learie, I'll go round at night and light the lamps with you.

And O, before you hurry by with ladder and with light, O Learie, see a little child and nod to him tonight."

The yearning of imaginative, imprisoned childhood has never been more truly or exquisitely expressed.

And his nurse, Alison Cunningham, fondly known as Cummy, filled up the lonely hours and fired the child's imagination with reading and the telling of stories. Dr. Japp says bluntly that Cummy was "perhaps the most influential teacher Stevenson had."27 Her dramatic powers seem to have been remarkable.

Stevenson himself attributed his passion for the drama to her grand, dramatic way of reciting. Nearly all the critics comment on her imagination-stirring reading of the stories of Joseph, of Saul and David and Jonathan, of Moses and Miriam, "of numberless kings, warriors and battles."28 She is believed to have read almost the entire Bible to him three times before he himself was able to read. Close upon the Bible came the

27 Japp, 34.
28 Steuart, I, 44.
Shorter Catechism; then followed such works as "The Pilgrim's Progress," "A Cloud of Witnesses," "The Saint's Everlasting Rest," "Foxe's Martyrs," and "The Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne." Her "bogle-stories" bore permanent fruit. She believed while she recited, and Stevenson later believed while he wrote. "Thrawn Janet," that little masterpiece of Scot's superstition, is "exactly in Cummy's most authentic manner." 29

The influence of his constant illness on his imagination, and hence on his later descriptive powers, cannot be over-estimated.

Stevenson's childhood is a story of a rather unsuccessful struggle against ill health with a resulting growth of imaginative sensitiveness as the boy, deprived of physical activity, turned his energy inward; for nervous energy Stevenson perhaps had to a remarkable degree... For this reason his war games were more elaborate, more logically continued. His ship on the stairs, the horseman galloping by on windy nights who haunted his imagination, the "shadow march," his hunter's camp behind the sofa, about all of which you may read in A Child's Garden of Verses, were matter of more vivid importance to him than they could have been to most children who had constant outdoor activities to fill their days with reality and their nights with sleep. 30

Stevenson later wrote of himself and his cousin, Robert Alan Mowbray, "we lived together in a purely visionary state, and were never tired of dressing up." 31

29 Ibid., I, 45.
31 Quoted from a Stevenson letter by Balfour, 30.
At the age of six he entered into the realms of Skeltdom and the toy theatres, exquisitely pictured in the essay "A Penny Plain and Twopence Coloured," written when he was thirty-four. Chesterton felt that the boy Stevenson lived, not only inside his own home, and often inside his own bedroom, but inside his toy theatres.

"Where does the story of Stevenson really start; where does his special style or spirit begin and where do they come from; how did he get or begin to get, the thing that made him different from the man next-door?" I have no doubt about the answer. He got them from the mysterious Mr. Skelt of the Juvenile Drams, otherwise the toy theatre, which of all toys has most of the effect of magic on the mind. Rather, of course, he got it from the way in which his own individual temper and talent grasped the nature of the game. He has written it all in an excellent essay and at least in one very real sentence of autobiography. "What is the world, what is man and life but what my Skelt has made them?"

The main point to be seized here is that they were coloured pictures of a particular kind. The colour faded, but in a certain sense the forms remained fixed; that is, that though they were slowly discoloured by the light of common day, yet when the lantern was again lit from within, the same magic-lantern slides glowed upon the blank screen. They were still pictures of pirates and red gold and bright blue sea, as they were of his childhood. And this fact is very important in the story of his mind.

Stevenson's favorite Skelt dramas were The Red Rover, The Blind Boy, The Miller and His Men, and Three-fingered Jack, the Terror.

32 Chesterton, 35,36.
of Jamaica. It is not difficult to place some of the progenitors of Pew and Long John Silver.

Another pastime was to lie on the floor, face down with large sheets of paper and draw staggering pictures from imagination. Once, looking up from such an exercise, he remarked gravely, "Mamma, I have drawed a man. Shall I draw his soul too?" 33

But very soon began his interest in what was to be the unremitting toil and love of a lifetime--learning how to write.

As soon as I was able to write, I became a good friend to the paper-makers. Reams upon reams must have gone to the making of Rathillet, The Pentland Rising, The King's Pardon (otherwise Park Whitehead), Edward Daven, A Country Dance, and A Vendetta In the West. Rathillet was attempted before fifteen, The Vendetta at twenty-nine, and the succession of defeats lasted unbroken till I was thirty-one. 34

A long list of these early efforts is available, beginning with "A History of Moses," with illustrations by the author (aged six) showing the Israelites swaggering in top hats and enjoying immense cigars. Balfour records that "magazines had risen and fallen wherever the boy had gone." 35 In 1867, the family summered in Swanston Cottage, near Edinburgh, and the good folk of Swanston later remembered the seventeen-year old

33 Steuart, I, 51.
34 Quoted by Japp, 17.
35 Balfour, 88.
Stevenson as a "lank, idle, daft-like" youth with a passion for "speirin' questions" and writing in "wee note-books." 36

The story of his unremitting and brutal labors to learn to write by imitation is too well known to bear repetition here. His own account of it is reprinted in Appendix III. He always had his two books, one to read, one to write in. And what he wrote was written consciously for practice. Stevenson never got a great deal from formal instruction, and more important in his development than either school or travel was his own dire industry. He labored away always, making a thousand little efforts, "learning to write patiently, persistently, without brilliance or any apparent prospect of success." 37 Hazlitt, Lamb, Wordsworth, Sir Thomas Browne, Hawthorne, Montaigne, Beaudelaire, Oberman, Lowell, Ruskin, Browning, Morris, Keats, Swinburne, Chaucer, Webster, Congreve, Thackeray—he played the sedulous ape to them all. It was a complexing mosaic, but he saw something in each that he wanted for his own. It was an "assiduity and determination surely unequalled in literary apprenticeships." 38 Stevenson himself spoke of his "dire industry" and declared that he had "slogged at it day in, day out," and believed that he had done "more

36 Steuart, I, 107.
37 Balfour, 56.
38 Steuart, I, 96.
with smaller gifts than almost any other man of letters in the world." 39

Too much has already been written in praise and blame of his system. He himself later came to see some of its defects. Suffice to say that it is what made Stevenson a writer; it gave him his clearness and lucidity; it developed in him that passion for accurate choice of words that is largely the secret of his successfully vivid descriptive passages. Few would agree with Chapman, whose opinion will seem too harsh, that "there was an undertone of insincerity in almost everything which he has written." 40

Newman, Tolstoy, and innumerable other first-rank writers have followed the same path, though not so elaborately as Stevenson, who toiled after his models with the expressed hope of attaining their propriety, force, and distinctness of expression. It is obvious that these qualities are imitable without "danger to individuality. A clerk can imitate the legibility of another man's handwriting;" a speaker can imitate the "clearness of another's utterance," without imitating his voice; "the grubby boy can imitate the clearness of the model

39 Quoted by Steuart, I, 97.
40 J.J. Chalmers, Emerson and Other Essays, Chas. Scribner's Sons, N.Y. 1898, 245.
boy's face without imitating his features." In a passage from Chesterton which will be considered in the next chapter, there is mention of the oddness of the fact that Stevenson should be accused of being imitative with the phrase "sedulous ape," a highly individualistic combination of words. "That sort of trick, the rather curious combination of two such words, is what I mean by the style of Stevenson." It would certainly seem to be a truthful observation. The expression "sedulous ape" is typical of the many highly illuminating and vividly suggestive phrases which everywhere dot the writings of Robert Louis Stevenson.

In conclusion, it may be said that there can be no doubt that the pale, sickly, wandering, ever-writing child who was enthralled by Cummy's treasury of ghost, goblin, witch, warlock, spunky, and fairy stories was very much the father of the man who gave the world Treasure Island, Kidnapped, A Child's Garden of Verses, "An Apology for Idlers," and Travels with a Donkey.

42 Chesterton, 113
CHAPTER III

GENERAL USE OF DESCRIPTION

IN R.L. STEVENSON

We now arrive at the actual discussion of Stevenson's technique of description. It may be well at this point to summarize briefly what was said in Chapter I regarding the nature of description. Description is the portrayal of concrete objects by means of words, in an effort to furnish the reader with the same picture and impression that the writer derived from the place, object, or person described. It is analogous to portraiture, but does not imitate the full reproduction of detail characteristic of photography. The principal problems to be met in description are the selection of details to be portrayed and the achieving of a unified total effect. In artistic description vividness is the quality most to be desired; this quality is ordinarily achieved by choosing and portraying the smallest number of characteristic details that will adequately present the desired design. In the actual mechanism of description the writer first chooses a point of view, physical or mental, from which to view the object under consideration. He then ordinarily enumerates one or two general characteristic details, which comprise the framework about which a body of more particular details is built. Description appeals to the imagination, and hence
frequently employs figurative language and indirect methods, as for instance, in cases where the effect of the object upon the beholder is described instead of the object itself.

Our immediate concern is to discuss some of the general methods employed by Stevenson in description. At the outset it may be said that the literary criticism of Stevenson's style must frequently be interpreted in this regard. The subject is only rarely discussed directly and as such. This does not mean that the critics' comments need to be twisted or vitiated in any way. It is plain that what is treatment of the processes, elements, or effects of description (e.g., clearness, vividness, appeal to the imagination, character portrayal, etc.) is rightly applied to the subject under consideration in the present thesis, even in cases where the term "description" is not used by the writers.

Let us first hear what Stevenson has to say. "There are two distinct duties uncumbent on any man who enters on the business of writing: truth to the fact and a good spirit in the treatment."¹ Again he states that the hardest thing to do in words is to embody "character, thought, or emotion in some act or attitude that shall be remarkable, striking to the

¹ Steuart, I, quoted from the frontispiece.
mind's eye. Both of these utterances demonstrate Stevenson's preoccupation with description, and both purport to state fundamental truths about the art of writing. "Truth to the fact" will help bring about a picture that is "remarkable, striking to the mind's eye." And he himself tells us that when he vowed to attain proficiency in the art of writing, description was the form his efforts mainly assumed. "To any one with senses, there is always something worth describing, and town and country are but the continuous subject." When he came to the realization that he had acquired some skill in the art, he referred to himself, half humorously, "as a fellow whose forte lay in transcribing what was before him, to be seen and felt, tasted and heard."

The first characteristic element of his descriptive passages is his realism. Realism is defined by Swinnerton as "the critical interpretation of actual things." He adds that this does not mean an accumulation of detail or "a preference for unpleasant subjects." A descriptive passage would be realistic if it translated to the imagination of the reader a vivid and accurate picture of the object of the

3 Ibid., xxxiv.
4 Burton, 308.
5 Swinnerton, 34.
description. As already seen in Chapter I, this is usually accomplished by portraying a complete impression by means of a comparatively small number of details. Romance, on the other hand, is considered to be "primarily a flight of fancy." But the obvious and interesting thing about Stevenson is that his romance is the secret of his realism. "Autant vaudrait écrire que le réalisme de Stevenson est parfaitement irréel... Stevenson n'a jamais regardé les choses qu'avec les yeux de son imagination." And this is a fact upon which many a critic has commented. Stevenson seemed to see everything with the eyes of the imagination.

He wrote of himself that he could not describe a thing that was before him at the moment, or that had been before him only a little while before. "I must allow my recollections to get thoroughly strained free from all chaff till nothing be except the pure gold." According to Rice, romance takes on its local color from "being spun out of the author's pure imagination. The author of romance must be true primarily to himself, to the inner actuality of his mind." This same critic says, in another place, that romance

6 Rice, 157.
7 M. Marcel Schwob, New Review, Feb., 1895, quoted by Hammerton, 178.
8 Swinnerton, 45.
9 Rice, 157.
depends for its power, not on fidelity to externals, but "on the tone and on the rhythm of fancy."\(^{10}\) In proof, he adduces the fact that later in his life, when Stevenson knew infinitely more about the sea and ships and islands, he could write no better romance than his first, *Treasure Island*, though his descriptive ability increased greatly with experience.

But again, let us recall that it is Stevenson's power to describe realistically that we are now discussing. Stevenson was fond of using his imagination about all matters; he was fond of "supposing," as he used to say. One of the foremost Stevenson critics, in this regard, says that to a realist a London suburb is a drab affair, the houses are alike, like bandboxes; he inquires about milk bills, the servants' wages, and the like.

Yet, Stevenson, it seems, could not pass along such a line of brick bandboxes without having his pulses set a-throbbing by the imaginative possibilities of the place. Of his own Lieutenant Brackenbury Rich he says: 'The succession of faces in the lamplight stirred the lieutenant's imagination; and it seemed to him as if he could walk forever in that stimulating city atmosphere and surrounded by the mystery of four million private lives. He glanced at the houses and marvelled at what was passing behind those warmly lighted windows; he looked into face after face, and saw them each intent upon some unknown interest, criminal or kindly'...A monotony of bad building is no doubt a bad thing, but it cannot paralyse the activities

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 177.
or frustrate the agonies of the mind of man.

To a man with Stevenson's live and searching imagination, every work of human hands became vocal with possible associations... How should the world ever seem dull or sordid to one whom a railway-station would take into its confidence, to whom the very flagstones of the pavement told their story?

But the interesting fact was that, after Stevenson finished straining the chaff from the pure gold, he frequently succeeded in transcribing an extremely realistic, if not photographically accurate picture to the reader's imagination. Let us look at a few examples, selected by Marcel Schwob, to whom reference was made above. No man has a face like a ham or eyes like crumbs of glass; but Stevenson gives them to Long John Silver. The shining of Alan Breck's silver buttons when he leaped on the vessel is highly improbable. The rigidity of the flame and the column of smoke in the famous duel scene of The Master of Ballantrae could hardly obtain in a real room. No one could see the moonlight shining in a man's eyes, "though he was a good many yards distant," as Cas siliis does in "The Pavilion on the Links."

Of such things as these, M. Schwob says:

Mais ce ne sont pas là, en vérité, des erreurs: ce sont des images plus fortes que les images réelles... Ce sont des images

Then Schwob formulates his argument still further, and relates, by way of example, how unreal a real sheep's heart looked when introduced on the end of Giovanni's dagger in a French performance of John Ford's "Annabella and Giovanni," and how at the next performance the audience was duly thrilled when Annabella's bleeding heart, made of a bit of red flannel, was borne upon the stage. He observes:

Il me semble que les personnages de Stevenson ont justement cette espèce de réalisme irréel. La large figure luisante de Long John, la couleur blême de crâne de Thevenin Penete s'attachent à la mémoire de nos yeux en vertu de leur irréalité même. Ce sont des fantômes de la vérité, hallucinants comme de vrais fantômes. "N'oubliez pas que les traits de John Silver hallucinent Jim Hawkins, et que François Villon est hanté par l'aspect de Thevenin Penete." 13

Rice's comment on Stevenson's pictures is almost identical. "There is a marvelous unreality about them that is in no respect a falseness and which one accepts in place of reality without looking back." 14 It is all very like Stevenson himself--the child who told wonder-tales all day long, who

12 Schwob, quoted by H. Ammerton, 178.
13 Ibid., 179.
14 Rice, 157.
played endless games of "supposing" alone in his father's house, and who kept on playing all his life.

The next factor of Stevenson's descriptions to be considered is a certain cameo-like quality which was largely the result of his intense love of technique, of re-writing and polishing. "Think of technique when you rise and when you go to bed," he said, and "I have lived with words." He loved the practice of his art and began, as we have seen, at a very early age to take infinite pains with his writing. Constant, determined labor was his literary gospel.

Walter Pater quotes Schiller as saying that the artist "may be known rather by what he omits." Pater adds:

For in truth all art does but consist in the removal of surplusage, from the last finish of the gem-engraver blowing away the last particle of invisible dust, back to the earliest divination of the finished work to be, lying somewhere, according to Michaelangelo's fancy, in the rough-hewn block of stone.

Stevenson himself says that if anything is written in two sentences that could be well said in one, it is written by an amateur. "I am always cutting the flesh off their bones."

15 Quoted by Steuart, II, 12.
17 Ibid., 19.
18 Quoted by Balfour, 346.
he said of some of the characters in his short stories. His was not the pen that covers page after page without an effort, unblotted and uncondensed; he exclaims with regard to Scott's feat of having turned out Guy Mannering in three weeks, "What a pull of work! Heavens, what thews and sinews! And here am I, my head spinning with having re-written seven not very difficult pages, and not very good when done." 19 One who knew him very well calls this re-writing and polishing a very soothing pasttime for Stevenson, and compares it to the knitting and bead-stringing "that doctors now prescribe for their patients;" it is a fact that much of Stevenson's work was done in bed. "It was this re-writing and polishing that kept him alive." 20

The net result of this passion for technique and for "cutting the flesh off the bones" was a descriptive style that has been commented upon by almost every Stevenson critic. Wagenkecht refers to his "chiseled elegance," and contrasts it to the "slovenly, surging power of a Scott." 21 Steuart remarks that "he succeeded in fashioning for himself an

21 Wagenkecht, 381.
instrument of rare and exquisite delicacy,"$^{22}$ and elsewhere refers to Stevenson as "essentially a cameo-worker, a latter-day Alexandriam."$^{23}$ Burton says that he had in description "a wonderfully supple instrument of expression."$^{24}$ He had learned to make words do his bidding; he writes as one whom the parts of speech must obey. He must have the one, perfect word for his purpose, and to that end he labored incessantly, a man, who, in Mr. Kipling's phrase, "makes most delicate inlay in black and white, and files out to the fraction of a hair."$^{25}$

It is our intention to postpone analysis of individual passages for the most part to the following chapter; but it may be well at this point to exemplify this much-discussed quality by which Stevenson, often in a brief phrase, could present vivid and memorable pictures to the imagination. We have already noted Chesterton's comment on the highly individualistic phrase "sedulous ape" which has become so closely associated with the name Stevenson. Chesterton, in the same place, goes on to say that this rather curious combination of two words is the thing he means by the style of Stevenson. He adds that, in his opinion, Stevenson used

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$^{22}$ Steuwart, II, 315.
$^{23}$ Ibid., I, 370.
$^{24}$ Burton, 304.
$^{25}$ Quoted by Balfour, 346.
the right word in the right place; nobody else used it because nobody else thought of it. Steuart happily records several versions of three passages from *A Child's Garden of Verses* which may be used to exemplify the extremely felicitous results of Stevenson's efforts to put things in just the right way. The following excerpts are taken from an essay called "His Workshop," by H.H. Harper.

A. 1) Till I at last should catch a glance Of vessels sailing off to France.

2) To where the grown-up river slips Into the sea among the ships.

3) To where the grown-up river slips Along between the anchored ships And lastly between harbour walls Into the bright Atlantic falls.

B. 1) I saw the river dimple by Holding its face up to the sky.

2) I saw the dimpling river pass And be the sky's blue looking glass.

C. 1) The world is so great and I am so small I do not like it, at all, at all.

2) The world is so full of a number of things I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings.26

There is no need to dilate upon the evident beauty and attractiveness of the ultimate form of these verses. All three are lovely poetic expressions and, as students of

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26 Steuart, II, 8.
child-nature will agree, very close to the facts. One of them has attained a place among the most generally loved and often quoted verses in English. What is to be noted is the vast improvement of the final versions over the earlier ones and the vivid pictures ultimately obtained in so concise manner. The first version of Example C would never have obtained the popularity of the finished poem. The first recorded stage of Example A is clumsy and highly inept; the final form is simple and very beautiful. In Example B the phrases "dimpling river" and "sky's blue looking glass" are typical Stevenson figures, vivid, apt, and fresh, without being bold or forced.

It is true that there is sometimes more than a hint of preciousness. Stevenson strove incessantly to escape from the hackneyed form of words and from cut-and-dried commonplaces of speech. This effort is evident sometimes, although the instances are not too frequent, and are found generally in his earlier writings. If it is true that Stevenson cared for his phrases, he cared more for life, and for accurate, lively pictures of it. Individual phrases will be discussed in the following chapter.

So far in this chapter we have discussed three things: 1) some of Stevenson's own general ideas on description; 2) his use of some of the imaginative elements of romance
to produce vivid, fluent, and life-like pictures; and 3) his policy of refining language to the point where he acquired sharply etched and striking descriptive phrases. A further question now arises. Was it merely as a result of his intense pre-occupation with technique and with words that Stevenson was able to write vivid and beautiful descriptions, or did he develop a more or less definite technique in solving the problems of selection and total effect?

It was enunciated as a premise in Chapter I that the best descriptions are brief and vivid, containing few details. Let us see if Stevenson's descriptions conform to this principle. In 1900, a student of Professor Ansley of the University of Nebraska conducted a survey of this matter. He studied a large number of pictorial descriptions of outdoor scenes taken from twenty-three of Stevenson's works. In each description, that which seemed a separate feature of the picture was held to constitute a separate detail. Sometimes it was a quality of the background, sometimes it was an object in the picture. In 525 passages so classified the number of details employed varied from three to eleven. A group of three was found to be preferred by Stevenson to one of four, as was a group of six; four, seven, and eight details were found in approximately the same number of cases (seventeen or eighteen for each). But there was discovered to be a figure under which five-sevenths of the descriptions grouped themselves. 363 of the
525 passages observed were found to contain five details. 27

One illustration will suffice for our purposes here. An oblique line separates details.

Before us was a great excavation, not very recent, for the sides had fallen in and grass had sprouted on the bottom. In this were the shaft of a pick broken in two and the boards of several packing cases strewn around. On one of these boards I saw, branded with a hot iron, the name "Walrus"—the name of Flint's ship. 28

The picture presented is vivid and clear, the passage is brief and concise, the number of details totals five. This is a singularly small number of details to be thought ample to produce anything like a full representation. Even the largest number observed, eleven (found in only two passages of the five hundred), seems a skimpy selection from the vastly larger number which a photograph would record. But we have seen that the nature of language, inferior as a picturing tool, demands this brevity. Skillful choice of details and words, plus the creative activity of the reader's imagination, must supply the deficiencies.

27 E. F. Piper, "An Inquiry into Some Phases of the Art of Description in the Writings of Robert Louis Stevenson," University of Nebraska, 1900, 10. This interesting essay (twenty-one pages) was accepted as a Master's thesis at the University of Nebraska. It contains no bibliographical references, even to the nineteen passages of Stevenson which are listed as examples of the tabulations quoted above. The findings of the survey are quite accurate.
28 Stevenson, Works, II, 192.
It is concluded, then, that Stevenson always employed a comparatively small number of details in description and, in a preponderance of cases, used only five. What are the causes which favor such a number, and of what sort are the details chosen?

The aim of the description is, as will be recalled, to furnish the reader with a vivid and complete picture; but the beholder of the object or scene sees everything in an instant, while the reader must receive the component parts of the picture piecemeal and as they are given to him. The problem of the describer is to select and arrange the number and type of details that will best accomplish this object. It may be said that in beholding a scene or an object, one perceives certain features as standing out from a background. Even in the case of living creatures, men or animals, this is true. It is this fact that makes possible the art of the caricaturist and the recognition of it by others. We would not laugh at the vastly enlarged chin or eyebrows on a certain public figure, if we were not aware, as was the artist, of the prominence of these certain features in the facial make-up of the individual being satirised. We may, then consider the details of a description as being in two classes, general and specific.

General details have only general meaning and do not furnish a particular scene; they comprise the general impression
of the object to be described, and assist the reader to retain
the composite picture in mind. They may be said to make up
the core or framework of description, spoken of in Chapter I,
about which the particular details are grouped to complete the
picture. They form a more or less vague background, upon
which the more specific details adjust themselves. As we have
seen, the mind retains impressions only briefly and tends to
pass on to new details as they are presented. For this reason
the general details ordinarily come first; then follow the more
specific details, in order of vividness, those which are to
be most prominent in the picture coming last. This is the
order almost invariably used by Stevenson. To employ the re-
verse order, as is sometimes done, and to present specific de-
tails first would mean that the background would be required to
adjust itself to the particular and prominent details. The mind
would tend to retain the particular objects, because of their
greater vividness, to the detriment of the less specific, and
would also normally furnish its own background for them, a
background often different from that of the writer. This
would make the later mention of general details either
useless or confusing.

The descriptive passage includes, therefore, a comparative-
ly small number of details, usually arranged so that the more
prominent, specific, and vivid follow the more general, which
fulfil somewhat the same function as the background in a paint-
ing. Stevenson's-paractice of selecting five details may be
simply explained thus. Less than five seemed too few; more
than five too many for imagination and memory. Ordinarily he
used two general details, rarely more, and three specific
details. Two details were usually chosen to establish the
background. The addition of a single specific detail would
make the picture too monotonous and simple; three specific
details were felt, in most cases, to be needed, to furnish
a sufficiently complete picture and desirable variety. In a
briefer or more elaborate picture, the same order and pro-
portion of general and specific details is generally employed,
though the number of details may be smaller or greater, depend-
ing upon the exigencies of the case. In longer descriptions
the particular details sometimes increase in vividness to the
point where the final detail has divisions of its own, each
pointing out a special feature of the object.

Let us now, by way of illustration, analyze a few
Stevenson pictures. The passage from Treasure Island quoted
on page 45 contains, as noted, five details: A. general
details—(1) the excavation; (2) its sides and bottom.
B. specific details—(1) the broken pick shaft; (2) the
boards strewn around; (3) the branded board. The following
passage contains seven details, two general and five specific:
As I came out on the verandah the mission boat was shooting for the mouth of the river. She was a long whale-boat painted white; a bit of an awning astern; a native pastor crouched on the wedge of the poop, steering; some four and twenty paddle a flashing and dping, true to the boat song; and the missionary under the awning in his white clothes, reading a book. 29

The two general details give the reader a picture of (1) the boat (2) heading for the river-mouth. Then, specifically, he is led to see (1) the color of the boat, (2) the stern awning, (3) the native pastor steering, (4) the paddles, and (5) the reading missionary. Detail number four, incidentally, brings to the ear of the reader the sound of the boat song. Again the picture is brief and concise, but, with the help of the imagination, vivid and adequate.

One further example may be recorded, in which the usual procedure is reversed, the specific details coming first, the general details last.

The lamp was shaded, the fire trimmed to a nicety, the table covered with deep orderly documents, the backs of the books made a frame upon all sides that was broken only by the windows and the doors. 30

Here we have the usual five details, the three specific details opening the picture—(1) the lamp, (2) the fire, and (3) the document-covered table. Then come the general details, (1) the book-lined walls and (2) the doors and

29 Stevenson, Works, IV, 284.
30 Ibid., II, 39.
windows. It will be noted that in this case in which the background is not presented first, Stevenson formally notifies the reader that the walls and their openings "made a frame" for the picture.

Stevenson nearly always gives a general name to the scene, as sea, or forest, or library, before he presents general details. Moreover, except in cases where the preceding narrative gives the reader the necessary vantage point, he always fixes the point of view early in the description. In order to receive a coherent picture the reader must remain in that spot, or frame of mind in mental points of view. Warning is also given of any intent to change the point of view, as in panoramic descriptions. In the passage quoted above from *The Island Night's Entertainment*, the narrator begins, "As I came out on the verandah," thereby indicating the spot from which the passage of the mission boat is to be viewed. Here is another instance: "From a rising hill they looked below them on the dell of Holywood;" 31 then, this point of view having been established, the description of the forest abbey of *The Black Arrow* is begun. The following is taken from *Kidnapped*: "On the forenoon of the second day, coming to the top of a hill, I saw all the country

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31 Ibid., VIII, 302.
fall away before me down to the sea.32 Then the picture seen from the top of the hill is presented.

In general, we see, Stevenson fixes the point of view, then gives the general details, and finally the specific details. The details increase in definiteness and vividness, and all take definite positions with regard to the beholder, the background and each other. While the total number of details and the number of general and specific details vary according to the situation, Stevenson has an established practice for presenting a scene, a practice from which he does not depart without good reason. This general method employs five details, two general and three specific.33

It is generally conceded that Stevenson's nature descriptions and his 'place' pictures represent the acme of his descriptive art. Much of what has been said above is better applied to this type of description than to that which has for its object a person. A word may be added at this point regarding his description of characters. We will not concern ourselves deeply in any part of this thesis with the controversy regarding Stevenson's understanding of character. We shall confine ourselves rather to his pictures of people.

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32 Ibid., V, 12.
33 The division into "general details" and "specific details" is taken from the essay by E.F. Piper which is referred to in footnote number twenty-six above.
to what may be called external description of persons. Some of the most severe criticism leveled against Stevenson is that which maintains that his characters are poorly, shallowly, or at least unevenly portrayed. Doubtless there is much truth in such criticism, especially as regards women, whom Stevenson understood poorly enough. It is also probably true that he lacked what Rice calls "endurance and evenness of mood." 34 and hence found the rounding out of full-length characters in a long story too much of a struggle. On the other hand, certain critics have praised his characters ecstatically. Probably the truth lies somewhere in the middle. Stevenson was not a great portrayer of character, but he did create some fine ones, and there is something about many of his characters that makes them "stick in the memory."

What is the characteristic note of Stevenson's descriptions of people? It seems to be a reliance upon a very small number of salient and characteristic qualities of the person being described. It will be recalled that in Chapter I we spoke of description by impression, in which the details are selected because of some characteristic quality common to them a. . One is reminded immediately of Dickens, whose Peggotty is remembered by many as a sort of benevolent gown from the back of which

34 Rice, 139.
the buttons fly in all directions, and Miss Murdstone, who is on various widely separated pages of David Copperfield pictured as a very metallic lady, embellished with little rivets and fetters and carrying a hard steel purse which she kept in "a very jail of a bag which hung upon her arm by a heavy chain, and shut up like a bite." 35 Like David, few of us have ever seen such "a metallic lady altogether as Miss Murdstone was." Then there is Mrs. Fezziwig of A Christmas Carol, who came into the room, "one vast, substantial smile," 36 a sort of mammoth Cheshire cat, and her amiable husband, whose luminous calves cut the air so deftly "that he appeared to wink with his legs." These are no photographs, but we do remember Peggotty and Miss Murdstone and the Fezziwigs. Stevenson frequently follows the same practice.

Let us compose a picture of Long John Silver; the process will be very simple. Stevenson is quoted as giving the following definition of a pirate--an epitome of impressionism in itself: "a beard, a pair of wide trousers, and a liberal complement of pistols." 37 Add to this a face like a ham, eyes like crumbs of glass, a wooden leg, place the bright-hued Cap'n Flint upon his shoulder, and you have Long John, the

35 Charles Dickens, David Copperfield, Trade Publishing Co., N.Y., 1923, 47.
37 Harvey, lvii.
master pirate, the man who was the terror of Flint and
the worst of his desperadoes, the man who brutally murdered
his fellow sailor before Jim Hawkins' eyes, and the man for
whom Stevenson has inspired so much of a stealthy sympathy
that we are all secretly relieved when he finally escapes
the hanging he so richly deserves, bearing off with him a
moderate share of the treasure. Chesterton says that Steven-
son's figures are all black and white, standing out in abrupt and
sharp outline "as if they were cut out with cutlasses, as was
that unforgettable chip or wedge that was hacked by the blade
of Billy Bones out of the wooden sign of the Admiral Benbow."38

The dear old Sheriff of Dumbarton, the gardener who blamed
Providence for his failures, John Todd, the dying grave-digger,
these are only a few of the types he has etched in a few
sharp strokes. Even of four-footed animals he has quite a
little gallery, from the immortal Modestine, down to the
intelligent and gentlemanly 'Wiggs'.

The picture of Pew, the blind beggar of Treasure Island,
is often quoted as an example of description; yet it is a
mere sketch. "With the tap-tapping of his stick to announce his
coming, we get a remarkable example of the effect secured by
an economy of details; that tap-tapping gets on your nerves,

38 Chesterton, 29.
and you never forget it.\textsuperscript{39} Stevenson was extremely sensitive to the appearances of people, and more so of places, but he seldom forgot his purpose as a writer. "He always tended to represent his object impressionistically; instead of trying to describe everything, he concentrated upon some salient feature,"\textsuperscript{40} thus stimulating the reader's imagination to fill out the picture for itself.

We may conclude from the foregoing, not only that there are certain definite and recognizable characteristics of Stevenson's descriptions, but also that he followed certain set theories and technical practices. In the following chapter we shall analyze some of the more specific characteristics of individual descriptive passages.

\textsuperscript{39} Burton, 305.
\textsuperscript{40} Wagenknecht, 38.
CHAPTER IV
SPECIFIC USE OF DESCRIPTION
IN R.L. STEVENSON

It is not easy to know how to solve the problem of discussing specific Stevenson, descriptive passages, since the number available is so great. It is not possible, within the limits of this paper, to treat them exhaustively; hence, it becomes necessary to make some selection. The following four-fold division has been decided upon. First we shall exemplify Stevenson's use of certain common figures of speech, namely simile, metaphor, and personification. The second part of this chapter will treat of the appeal made to other senses besides sight in Stevenson descriptions. This will be followed by examples of his "cameo-like" pictures, felicitous choice of words, and certain characteristic elements in his descriptive passages. Finally, we shall select and discuss a number of general pictures; these will be classed as (1) descriptions of moods or impressions, (2) unusually brief and concise pictures, (3) descriptions of man-made objects, (4) descriptions of men and women, and finally (5) nature descriptions.

As was stated in Chapter I, description is the art of verbal picture-making and its appeal is directed to the imagination. A natural result of this fact is the prevalence...
of figurative language in descriptive writing, since, by its nature, a figure of speech is intended to aid the imagination in the formation of vivid pictures and clear ideas. Stevenson well exemplifies this characteristic of description. He makes liberal use of figurative language; irony, hyperbole, antithesis, and most of the other conventional figures of speech dot the pages of his books. For our purposes we have chosen to discuss three of the more common figures, simile, metaphor, and personification.

Simile and metaphor are figures of comparison. When the thing to be illustrated and the associated object are named together, "with a particle or phrase of comparison (like, similar to, resembling, comparable to, etc.) expressed or implied, and when these compared objects are of different classes, the figure thus arising is called Simile."¹ A simile is an expressed likeness. Ordinarily the associated object is more familiar than the thing illustrated and has the effect of reducing the latter to simpler terms. For example, the sound of a voice raised in stern command might be said to be "like the crack of a whip," introducing a familiar and comparison sound, and also a suggestion of the harshness involved in the tone of voice being described. A peculiar imaginative effect, not easily defined, is produced when the associated object is

¹ Genung, 77.
less palpable or concrete than the thing illustrated. Such a comparison is that between a winding road "crawling furtively through the grass" and "a timid thought or a dawning talent." 2

Stevenson's similes are numerous, widely varied, and used with an artistry which renders them most effective. While on his Travels with a Donkey, the wind in the trees along the mountain-tops of Vivaraïs reminded him of "the hissing of an enormous tea-urn." 3 This is a concrete and appealing figure, which quickly strikes a response in the imagination of anyone familiar with the many-toned songs of the wind. The comparison evidently found favor with Stevenson, for, following a characteristic practice of repeating phrases and words which attracted him, he describes the sound which followed the explosion Edward Challoner heard in The Dynamiter as "a monstrous hissing and simmering, as from a kettle of the bigness of St. Paul's." 4 Another comparison which Stevenson liked well enough to repeat is an extremely apt one. Of a storm he says, "The great trees thrash about like whips; the air is filled with leaves and branches flying about like birds." 5 The crack of a whip in motion and sound is well likened to the thrashing about of great trees in the teeth of the wind. The picture pre-

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3 Stevenson's works, XII, 228.
5 Ibid., XXII, 503.
sented is vivid and easily formed from the comparison. This figure is used again in The Memoir of Fleeming Jenkin, where young cocoa trees are described as not having begun to "shoot skyward with that whip-like shaft of the nature of the palm." 6 A further comparison that Stevenson used on several occasions is that between some pleasant natural phenomenon and the cool, restful properties of a bath. The South Sea air is, he says, "like a bath of milk." 7 In another place he speaks of leaving the "long alignment of glittering streets" of Paris and fleeing to the welcome atmosphere of the woods, which is like a "bath to the senses." 8

Sometimes he combines several successive similes into a description; so, when the murderer Markheim stands amid the dusty shelves of the dealer's shop:

> The candle stood on the counter, its flame solemnly wagging in a draught, and by that inconsiderable movement, the whole room was filled with noiseless bustle and kept heaving like a sea, the tall shadows nodding, the gross blots of darkness swelling and dwindling as with respiration, the faces of the portraits and the china gods changing and wavering like images in water.

The heart of this striking picture, which perfectly conveys

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6 Ibid., XIX, 109.
7 Ibid., XIX, 326.
8 Ibid., XV, 176.
9 Ibid., VII, 108.
the atmosphere of the place and of the story, is contained in
the choice of verbs, and in the three similes. The first one,
which portrays the whole room as heaving like a sea in the
flickering candle light, is singularly expressive; but the
third, in which the faces of the images in the shop are made
to waver like images in water, is a superb comparison, largely
because of the striking and unique appearance of things under
water, and the close parallel between the movement of water
and that of candle light. Another interesting combination of
similes is found in a passage from The Master of Ballantrae, in
which Stevenson describes a man as having "legs like walking
canes and fingers like the stalk of a tobacco pipe." These
similes are notable because of the extreme simplicity and
commonness of the associated objects. This combination of
several similes is not uncommon in Stevenson.

Some of his similes are so apt as to be as nearly perfect
imaginative aids as possible. David Balfour refers to another
as being false "as a cracked bell." In The Black Arrow a man
is caught up on high so that he "span round in mid-air like
a criminal upon a gibbet," surely a figure to stir the
imagination and a remarkable evidence of Stevenson's ability to

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10 Ibid., IX, 169.
11 Ibid., VI, 206.
12 Ibid., VIII, 127.
perceive likeness of forms in different objects and circumstances. In *The Merry Men*, which contains some of the best of Stevenson's description, the uneasy sea gives off a sound "like a long sigh," and in a storm "all heaven seemed to thunder overhead like one huge sail," a figure which rapidly and vividly calls to mind the cracking and rustling of wind-tossed canvas. A pleasant and apt simile is contained in *Weir of Hermiston*. The eyes of Kirstie's lover follow her tenaciously about the room like "a battery of cannon constantly aimed." In *The Black Arrow* Appleyard is picturesquely represented as having a face "like a walnut-shell, both for colour and wrinkles." On his first trip to America, Stevenson met an Irish-American who "twinkled all over with impudence like a piece of sham jewelry." It will be noted that the foregoing similes, besides being very well-suited to the author's purposes, demonstrate his own wide range of imagination and observation. One further example, a nearly perfect simile, exhibits a singular felicity of expression and perspicuity of intellect. After an illness, Stevenson said of himself that he had a voice "like the whisper of a shadow."

Occasionally we discover similes in which the comparisons

are strong or unusual; sometimes a little forced. Treasure Island is pictured on the map "like a fat dragon standing up." Dragons, mythical or not, are very concrete in the imagination; one quickly pictures the island. In the South Seas Stevenson saw "disproportioned trees like bristles on a broom." The figure is homely, but the similarity of form between the objects compared enables the reader to see the trees at once. The Island of Muka-hiva, says Stevenson, "heaved up in peaks and rising vales, impending like a pair of warts above the breakers;" here the comparison between a pair of warts above the breakers and two island peaks is not so evident; the figure is peculiar, perhaps not too good. When he describes a ship as "rotten as cheese," it is definitely difficult to perceive the analogy. A strong comparison which is also very apt is that of moving windmill sails to "a donkey's ears." The following passage, taken from "Ollolla," contains a very strange simile, which is difficult to comprehend, but very forceful: "The sunshine struck upon the hills, strong as a hammer on the anvil, and the hills shook; the earth, under the vigorous insolation, yielded up heady scents; the woods smouldered in the blaze."
In the definition of simile given above, it will be observed that the comparison is between objects of different classes. Thus one might say that a cloud in the sky looked "like a man's head." Some of Stevenson's most attractive similes almost reverse this process; they seem to come very near to being comparisons between objects of the same class. Two examples will suffice. The first, from Treasure Island, is a comparison between two plants. "Then I came to a long thicket of these oak-like trees... which grew along the sand like brambles, the boughs curiously twisted, the foliage compact, like thatch." The comparison of the trees to the brambles is unusual; the more ordinary simile would involve a comparison between the trees and some object not of plant nature. The second instance is from a letter to Mrs. Sitwell. "The castle stood up against the sky as thin and sharp as a castle cut out of paper." In this comparison of a castle to a castle, Stevenson has cleverly perceived that the similarity of the two objects in form is off-set by a difference in the pictures and associations which they each have in the mind and imagination of the reader. Such a figure as this, in the hands of a writer as skillful as Stevenson, easily serves his purpose.

23 Ibid., II, 76.
24 Ibid., XXIII, 64.
The chief purpose of simile is to picture and illustrate; hence it is "more promotive of clearness and definiteness than of passion and strength." When men are strongly moved, rather than indulge in comparisons, they "strike at once for the more trenchant metaphor," a close association of two objects in which, instead of comparing one thing with another, the two are identified, by taking the name or assuming the attributes of one for the other. A few examples of Stevenson metaphors are given here.

Ordinary metaphors are common on his pages. In An Inland Voyage he speaks of "a rag of blue sky." At the Monastery of Our Lady of the Snows he saw "black bricks of fir... plastered here and there upon both sides." In Prince Otto he pictures a road which ran "like a fillet across the very forehead of the hills." A letter mentions a meadow by the sea which is "one sheet of jonquils," and in The Master of Ballantrae he describes a ship as "a floating bedlam." There is nothing striking or extraordinary about the foregoing figures. They are work-a-day metaphors, doing the writer's will in their proper settings.

25 Genung, 79.
26 Stevenson, Works, XII, 53.
27 Ibid., XII, 191.
28 Ibid., IV, 3.
29 Ibid., XXIII, 369.
30 Ibid., IX, 41.
But Stevenson was not the man to rest with work-a-day results. Some of his metaphors are both striking and unusual. We have seen in Chapter III the lovely verse which pictures the "dimpling river" as "the sky's blue looking glass." We know Stevenson worked hard to achieve this figure; but once he had it, he used it often. In *An Inland Voyage* he tells how he came upon a river which "doubled among the hillocks, a shining strip of mirror glass." In a letter to a friend, Miss Boodle, he tells of Samoan streams which "come running down out of the mountains, and which are all as clear and bright as mirror glass." Other striking examples of metaphors are not difficult to find. In one place he writes, "suddenly, at a single swoop, night fell," and the reader, picturing to himself the lightning-like swoop of the bird, quickly pictures the scene. On his *Travels with a Donkey* he saw "peaks alternately naked and hairy with pines," a bold figure, but involving a vivid pictorial image in the association of the ideas expressed in the figure. Another beautiful metaphor is found in *The Black Arrow*, where we read of the reflection of the sky, which was scattered over all the surface of the River Till "in crumbs of smiling blue." He refers to the cocoa palm

31 Ibid., XII, 26.
32 Ibid., XXV, 288.
33 Ibid., XII, 186.
34 Ibid., VIII, 41.
as "that giraffe of vegetables." More poetic figures are also to be found. In one place he writes: "The last footsteps melted on the wind." One sees the silent, imperceptible disappearance of melting snow, and immediately derives a vivid picture from this apt figure. He once wrote home from Vailima that he had seen a thicket "full of moths of shadow and butterflies of sun;" the association between the known vagaries in the flight of these insects and the uncertain movements of light and shadow among leaves is a true and close one.

Closely allied to metaphor, in fact a kind of personal metaphor, is personification, which "endows inanimate things or abstract ideas, with attributes of life and personality." The use of personification inheres in the fact that we can follow the traits and acts of a person better than the attributes of a thing. Stevenson recognized this truth and made liberal use of this figure of speech. While the treasure hunters were in the blockhouse, they experienced a sharp chill in the air. When it was past and the sun had climbed above "our girdle of trees, it fell with all its force upon the clearing, and drank up the vapours at a draught." In "Virginitis Puerisque" Stevenson says of a ship, one of his

35 Ibid., XIX, 5.
36 Ibid., VIII, 60.
37 Ibid., XVII, 178.
38 Genung, 84.
39 Stevenson, Works, II, 117.
favorite subjects for personification, "How strong, supple, and living the ship seems upon the billows! With what a dip and rake she shears the flying sea!" He adds that the man who perceives this effect with force and spirit is by no means commonplace, an observation well applied to himself.

A more poetic personification is the following: "Poor Spring, scattering flowers with red hands and preparing for Summer's triumphs all in a shudder herself." Another personification of an abstract idea is contained in a letter in which Stevenson sees "the world fleet about me; and the days chase each other like sun-patches and the nights like cloud-shadows on a windy day." In this passage is displayed both personification and simile.

As we shall see, Stevenson loved to describe wind, water, woods, and the like. Following are gathered together some personifications of these objects. Of the wind he says: "The fierce wind hunted the clouds through heaven, and cast ungainly splashes of shadow and sunlight over the scene." Again he writes, "The wind drove a white cloud very swiftly over the hill-top; and looking up, I was surprised to see the cloud dyed with gold." "The wind takes a run and scatters

40 Ibid., XIII, 10.  
41 Ibid., XXV, 69.  
42 Ibid., 109.  
43 Ibid., XII, 184.  
44 Ibid., 258.
the smoke." 45 The next is a quiet personification of the forest of Mormal. "It looked solemn along the river-side, drooping its boughs into the water, and piling them up aloft into a wall of leaves." 46 Of the same trees he writes that their green tops were "billowing in the wind, their stalwart younglings pushing up about their knees." In a more colorful and vigorous figure, spoken of trees in a Samoan jungle, he writes, "The lianas noosed and sought to hang me; the saplings struggled, and came up in that sob of death one gets to know so well." 47

Water is frequently personified by Stevenson. "The river was in such a hurry for the sea! Every drop of water ran in a panic, like so many people in a frightened crowd." 48 "The river hurried on meanwhile, and seemed to chide at our delay." 49 Following are two beautiful personifications of the sea. Stevenson writes to a friend that the houses of Honolulu stand at the edge of the beach, "where an angry little spitfire sea continually spirits and thrashes with impotent irascibility." 50 The use of non-picture words such as impotent and irascibility will be noted; this feature of Stevenson's descriptions is

45 Ibid., XII, 337.
46 Ibid., 43.
47 Ibid., XVII, 10.
48 Ibid., XII, 61.
49 Ibid., 84.
50 Ibid., XXIV, 175.
not uncommon, and his effective employment of such words in picture-writing is indicative of his mastery over words. "The water," he says in David Balfour, "bickered and sang in our midst."51 A letter to Cosmo Monkhouse, written from Hyères in 1885, contains the following interesting description of Stevenson's house there: It "is like a London house, high and very narrow; upon the lungs I will not linger; the heart is large enough for a ballroom; the belly greedy and inefficient; the brain shocked with the most damnable explosives, like a dynamiter's den."52 Only the author of Treasure Island could, on so slight a provocation, conceive the simile "like a dynamiter's den."

So we see that Stevenson makes liberal use of imaginative and figurative language, often approaching, in word and imagery, the language of poetry. Simile, a most graphic figure of speech, is used to aid vividness and clearness. Metaphor and personification are valuable aids in suggesting action and human interest in objects or scenes otherwise more or less inert.

Description appeals primarily to the eye, since it is principally through the sense of sight that the imagination operates. Nevertheless, descriptive writing is improved by

51 Ibid., VI, 106.
52 Ibid., XXIII, 373.
broadening its appeal to include as many senses as possible, and Stevenson not infrequently introduces matter which portrays sensations of hearing, smell, taste, and, more rarely, touch. A brief passage from *Treasure Island* involves three senses, hearing, touch, and sight.

I could hear from far before me not only the continuous thunder of the surf, but a certain tossing of foliage and grinding of boughs which showed me the sea breeze had set in higher than usual. Soon cool draughts of air began to reach me; and a few steps farther I came into the open borders of the grove, and saw the sea lying blue and sunny to the horizon, and the surf tumbling and tossing its foam along the beach.53

Stevenson often describes such sounds as that of the wind, the surf, trees, bells, bird songs, and the like. In *The Dynamiter* we read of a bell which had "a thin, garrulous note."54 He wrote home from Samoa, describing a "huge silence broken only by the faraway murmer of the Pacific and the rich piping of a single bird."55 Bird songs appealed to him, even the early call of the rooster. Moving across the plains of America, he wrote that "at every town the cocks were tossing their clean notes into the golden air."56 As Blanche calls Dennis over to the window at dawn in "The Sire de Maletroit's Door," we read:

53 Ibid., II, 125.
54 Ibid., III, 71.
55 Ibid., XVII, 222.
56 Ibid., XV, 147.
The scene disengaged a surprising effect of stillness, which was hardly interrupted when the cocks began to crew somewhere among the steadings. Perhaps the same fellow who had made so horrid a clangour in the darkness not half an hour before, now sent up the merriest cheer to greet the coming day.  

It may be noted that most of the descriptive passages gathered here, even though removed from their contexts, have a definite poetic quality. They are plainly artistic, not utilitarian in any way, and are liberally studded with figurative language. It will also be noted that the prose is extremely rhythmical and has an exquisite cadence.

We may add a few additional pictures written to appeal to the sense of hearing. A realistic description of the unpleasantness incidental to trans-oceanic travel in Stevenson's day is found in The Amateur Emigrant.

Partitions were so thin that you could hear the passengers being sick, the rattle of tin dishes as they sit at meals, the varied accents in which they converse, or the clean flat smack of the parental hand in chastisement.  

In Travels with a Donkey we have a more pleasant picture of the quiet noises of night in the valley of the Tarn.

The shrill song of frogs, like the tremolo note of a whistle with a pea in it, rang up from the riverside before the sun was down. In the growing dusk, faint

57 Ibid., I, 342.
58 Ibid., XV, 1.
rustlings began to run to and from among the fallen leaves; from time to time a faint chirping or cheeping noise would fall upon my ear; and from time to time I thought I could see the movement of something swift and indistinct among the chestnuts. 59

Stevenson is not the only writer to have endeavored to describe these night noises that are largely inaudible amid the hustle and bustle of the day. Many writers, however, have been less successful in their efforts. The following is taken from "Olalla;" it is a fine attempt to portray the sound of falling water. "There rose upon all sides the voice of falling water, not condensed and formidable as in the gorge of the river, but scattered and sounding gaily and musically from glen to glen." 60 This is not only an excellent poetic passage, but also accurate in its delineation of the difference in sound between a heavy waterfall and the ordinary musical wandering of the falling river.

Sensations of smell and taste are notoriously indefinite; moreover they are ephemeral, unlike the image of sight which remains stable as long as the proper object is present to the eye. Stevenson did, however, occasionally write for these senses. Briefly, in Across the Plains, he writes of Monterey, "At the approach of the rainy season a deathly chill and a

59 Ibid., XII, 244.
60 Ibid., VII, 148.
graveyard smell began to hang about the lower floors."

Unpleasant smells are described by him more often than pleasant ones. Jim Hawkins has this to say of the anchorage on Treasure Island: "A peculiar stagnant smell hung over the anchorage—a smell of sodden leaves and rotting tree trunks. I observed the doctor sniffing and sniffing, like someone tasting a bad egg." As the Amateur Emigrant Stevenson went down into the steerage of the vessel to visit a sick man. This is his description of the odors of the place.

The stench was atrocious, each respiration tasted in the throat like some horrible kind of cheese; and the squalid aspect of the place was aggravated by so many people worming themselves into their clothes in the twilight of the bunks.

In more pleasant vein is the following, taken from The Memoirs of Fleeming Jenkin. "As we passed, there came a sudden breeze from land, hot and heavy scented; and now as I write its warm rich flavour contrasts strongly with the salt-air we have been breathing." As a final example of description which appeals to the sense of smell, we have chosen the comparison between the smells of the sea and those of the woods, a passage in An Inland Voyage. It is probably the most beautiful of its kind in Stevenson's writings.

61 Ibid., XV, 159.
62 Ibid., II, 73.
63 Ibid., XV, 48.
64 Ibid., XVIII, 91.
And, surely, of all smells in the world the smell of many trees is the sweetest and most fortifying. The sea has a rude pistolling sort of odour, that takes you in the nostrils like snuff, and carries with it a fine sentiment of open water and tall ships; but the smell of a forest, which comes nearest to this in tonic quality, surpasses it by many degrees in the quality of softness. Again the smell of the sea has little variety, but the smell of a forest is infinitely changeful; it varies with the hour of the day, not in strength merely, but in character; and the different sorts of trees, as you go from one zone of the wood to another, seem to live among different kinds of atmosphere. Usually the rosin of the fir predominates. But some woods are more coquettish in their habits; and the breath of the forest Normal, as it came aboard upon us that showery afternoon, was perfumed with nothing less delicate than sweetbrier.

We have already referred to Chesterton's statement that "a curious combination of two words" was what he meant by "the style of Stevenson." It is generally conceded that Stevenson was a supreme artist in the use of epithet, which is, as we saw in Chapter I, the crowding of an entire picture into a single adjective. A deep, comprehensive sense of the richness of words, both in meaning and sound, is one of the most conspicuous qualities in Stevenson's style. Pater once wrote that he feared to miss "the least promising composition of Wordsworth", lest "some precious word should be lying hidden within." So it is with Stevenson.

65 Ibid., XII, 44.
66 Pater, 41.
Even the dullest of his pages may contain the few perfect lines, the phrase, the single word, perhaps, that makes the entire reading worthwhile.

Let us come back again, by way of explanation, to the famous phrase "sedulous ape." The full-blown epithetical phrase comprises a noun plus its modifying adjective. Anyone could have referred to one who studied to learn by imitation as an *ape*; the use of the word in connection with mimicry is very common. But only Stevenson would crowd the whole picture of the herculean labors of his long literary apprenticeship into a single modifying adjective. The word *sedulous* removes the levity from the word *ape*, and adds a rich picture of serious, whole-hearted, and incessant labor. Dawson says of Stevenson that he "ceaselessly experimented in the art of word-weaving." He saw that words were more than the mere counters of speech;

they had roots and bloom, colour and fragrance; they were histories and biographies; they embalmed the thoughts of dead generations, and had associations which linked them with an immeasurable past; they had also the secret of music in them, and were capable of endless modulation and harmony under the touch of a deft hand, and by the regulation of a quick ear.67

He goes on to say that we may open Stevenson's books at random, and be sure that the musical results of this

67 Dawson, 244.
preoccupation with words will greet us. He then lists a "half-a-dozen phrases, taken at hazard as the book happens to fall open:

The high canorous note of the north-easter on days when the very houses seem to stiffen with cold.

The song of hurrying rivers.
The green-gold air of the east at evening.
The sad immunities of death.
The great conflagrant sun, tumultuary, roaring aloud, inimical to life.
The fountains of the Trade were empty. Where it had run but yesterday, and for weeks before, a roaring river, charioting clouds, silence now reigned, and the whole height of the atmosphere stood balanced.°

It is true that the mere sound of these phrases affords a satisfying depth of harmony that fills the ear. But it is also true that Stevenson seldom chose a word for its mere sound, but for its truth and fitness.

Stevenson could not abide the "stock phrases" with which most of us make shift to express our thoughts, instead of "using first-hand effects."° Rice records the efforts of Stevenson to describe "the little silverings" caused when flurries of wind caused the undersides of the leaves of olive trees to catch the light. He even discussed the problem in letters to his friends. Rice also singles out Stevenson's description of snow in Villon—"Flake after flake descended

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°8 Stevenson, Works, I, 245.
69 Burton, 308.
out of the black night air, silent, circuitous, interminable--and the whole city was sheeted up," and to a phrase in a Stevenson letter, "the flapping wind."70 The results of this striving to paint very concise and accurate pictures are everywhere in evidence. We read of flower pots which "garnished the sills of the different windows,"71 of an attack with "a skewerlike dagger,"72 and of the "dry, monotonous ticking of the clock."72 The word dry is the only word to complete the picture and, as in so many Stevenson pictures, we wonder with Chesterton why no one else had thought of it before. Black Dog in Treasure Island is described as a "pale, tallowy creature,"74 singularly expressive phrase. In "Virginibus Puerisque" he speaks of men "taking into their lives acidulous virgins."75

Some of his finest phrases, as always, refer to nature; "an amiable stripling of a river," "twisted ribbons of road," 
"a rattling highland river," "fringed with surf," "shaggy with fern and islanded with clumps of yew," "pencilling of palms;" these and a thousand others fill the pages of his books and letters, perfect, jewel-like phrases.

70 Rice, 95.
71 Stevenson, Works, I, 117.
72 Ibid., VII, 108.
73 Ibid., XXII, 6.
74 Ibid., II, 7.
75 Ibid., XIII, 6.
Lionel Johnson uses the following quotation to illustrate the fact that if a man writes well and puts the impress of his personality on what he writes, he will interest other men, even though what he says has been said many times before—in a different way.

Said Peacock's Mr. Gall, of landscape gardening: "I distinguish the picturesque and the beautiful, and I add to them, in the laying out of grounds, a third and distinct character, which I call unexpectedness." 76

This quality of unexpectedness is prominent in Stevenson's descriptive writing. He speaks of "a soiled meadow," for example, in An Inland Voyage; one simply doesn't expect a meadow to be soiled, and the impact of the phrase is considerably heightened. He writes of the forest where "the crooked viper slumbers," 77 and the reader is both startled at the unexpectedness of the phrase and enchanted by its obvious fitness. Combinations like "fat black mud," and "fine strong night" have similar appeal and are characteristic Stevenson phrases. In an interesting passage in Travels with a Donkey, he describes himself as "desperately tacking through the bog." 78 The word tacking is perfectly suitable; yet it is unusual and unexpected.

77 Stevenson, Works, XV, 175.
78 Ibid., XII, 173.
There is another definite quality in Stevenson's descriptive writing that exemplifies this character of unexpectedness. It is the unusual combination of what might be called plus and minus words, of a word having a good meaning and connotation and a word having a contrary meaning or connotation. Two exaggerated phrases may clarify what is meant. It is as if one were to say "he spoke with a loud, soft voice," or "Billy came into the room, resplendent in a shining white, dirty suit." A few examples from Stevenson will suffice. Of a morning at the inn in Chasserages he wrote, "the room was full of a transparent darkness." It was just at dawn, and the reader quickly pictures the very kind of darkness Stevenson is describing. The two words are definitely not contradictory, but they are sufficiently antagonistic in meaning and atmosphere to make a striking combination. Of Olalla's mother he says, "she was all sloth and contentment." Archie Weir, on a Sunday morning in church, is described as feeling as though his body were "ethereal and perishable like a strain of music." In another place we read of a man being robbed of the "courage of his cowardice." A curious phrase is employed in "The Rajah's

79 Ibid., XII, 216.
80 Ibid., VII, 181.
81 Ibid., XX, 87.
82 Ibid., III, 19.
Diamond" to describe the lawyer as he explains the terms of the will. "And the lawyer raised his eyebrows at him with solemn gusto." In a letter he refers to the book Morley Ernstain as a "good, honest, dull, interesting tale." Steuart quotes a Stevenson description of the La Solitude garden at Hyères as thrilling "all night long with the flutes of silence." The nature descriptions are constantly studded with phrases like the one describing the River Tarn as "making a wonderful hoarse uproar."

It was natural that in his life-and-death struggle to find "the one, perfect word" he sometimes found that there was no such word and constructed his own. He coined not a few words, sometimes merely using a peculiar form of an ordinary word as a part of speech for which the word was ordinarily not employed, sometimes building an entirely new word for his purposes. In a college paper on "The Philosophy of Umbrellas" he pictures certain men who, in spite of prodigious efforts, can never become genuine umbrellarians. In St. Ives he refers to old soldiers who have never known anything but military discipline and are hence boorish in their conduct among

83 Ibid., I, 159.
84 Ibid., XXIV, 111.
85 Steuart, II, 20.
86 Stevenson, Works, XII, 241.
87 Ibid., XXII, 50.
civilians as whiskerandoes. In a letter to W.E. Henley the merry singing indigenous to the barroom is referred to as tapsalteerie. 

In a letter written from Vailima he describes his wife as sometimes engaged in "some kind of abstruse Boswellising." Modestine, the companion of his travels, under the influence of "this plain wand, with an eighth of an inch of pin, ... broke into a gallant little trotlet that devoured the miles." Surely no other word than trotlet could adequately describe the gait of "a diminutive she-ass, not much bigger than a dog."

As Stevenson's mastery over his tools increased he became more at ease in his improvisations, and we frequently see nouns in adjective form, adjectives in adverb form, and the like. In several places he uses the word cliffy in pictures of mountainous views. In Across the Plains he writes that every "trouty stream along that mountain river" was dear to him. Again, he pictures a man as being "of sturdy intellect and broady build." Other instances of such word forms are tumultuary, crispation, sparsedly, wafts (as a noun). A Samoan dance was described as being "embraceatory beyond

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88 Ibid., XXI, 17.
89 Ibid., XXV, 131.
90 Ibid., XVII, 216.
91 Ibid., XII, 164.
92 Ibid., XV, 147.
93 Ibid., IV, 31.
A rather unsuccessful invention was used to express his joy at returning "home from unsightly deserts to the green and habitual corner of the earth." Even the conventional habitable might have been a more fortunate choice.

It is not surprising that in his search for aptness of expression Stevenson sometimes fell into the errors that beset such a path. And he has been severely criticised for his failing in this regard. Rice quotes Mr. Copeland's excellent essay to the effect that "no author who has written so many quotable passages has written so few great books." Swinnerton, sometimes a too severe critic, says that nothing remains of "Virginibus Puerisque" but "boudoir phrases" and calendar mottoes. He wonders what it is in the essay that gives so many readers pleasure. In another place he answers his own question. "It is all because of the insatiable desire of mediocrity for the picturesque." He calls In the South Seas the best of the travel books and the wisest, because Stevenson had put "picturesqueness behind him for what it is—the hallmark of the second-rate writer."

It is interesting to note that Steuart, a more objective critic

94 Ibid., XVII, 138.
95 Ibid., XV, 147.
96 Rice, 100.
97 Swinnerton, 72.
98 Ibid., 60.
than Swinnerton, notes the same advance over the early travel books in *The Silverado Squatters*. "The writer was shedding his affectations, with an immense gain in naturalness." 99 The fact remains, however, that *Travels with a Donkey* is probably read fifty times for every single reading of either *In the South Seas* or *The Silverado Squatters*, which Stevenson himself described as "poor stuff and pawed over."

It is certainly true, nevertheless, that Stevenson did, not infrequently in the beginning, fall into preciousness, affectation, and stilted writing. In *An Inland Voyage* he speaks of "the breath of rejoicing trees and grass," 100 and informs the reader that "the heavens wept upon our heads." In *Travels with a Donkey* he calls the stars "companions of the night." 101 Even in *The Master of Ballantrae*, a more mature work, Mcakellar carries the candle into the darkness and says, "My teeth smote each other in my mouth." It wouldn't do to say they chattered in fear. In describing the dead stillness of the same dark night, Stevenson writes that "a windless stricture of frost had bound the air." But such lapses are few and insignificant. Most critics agree that, generally speaking, "the thought constructs the tune"

99 Steuart, I, 334.
100 Stevenson, *Works*, XII, 94.
101 Ibid., 223.
successfully and for the most part harmoniously.

A further trait of Stevenson's use of individual words and phrases is his practice, noted earlier, of repeating words and expressions which appealed to him. For example, in *Travels with a Donkey* he uses the word *naked* at least four times in reference to outdoor scenes: "the naked, unhomely, stony country," "a few naked cottages," "peaks alternately naked and hairy with pines," and "a naked valley." 102 The word is often found elsewhere in his writings, as for instance in a reference in "*Virginibus Puerisque*" to "the naked Alps." 103 He also had a fondness for the word *tarnish*. "Autumn had put tints of gold and tarnish in the green." 104 "It was a rich house, in which Time had breathed his tarnish and dust had scattered disillusion." 105 "Tonight there was just a little lake of tarnished green." 106 Other favorite words which he used over and over again are *tumultuous, hoarse, fringed, shaggy,* and

Before concluding this portion of the present chapter which treats of detail characteristics of Stevenson's

102 Ibid., XII, 157, 171, 183, 186.
103 Ibid., XIII, 83.
104 Ibid., XII, 241.
105 Ibid., VII, 166.
106 Ibid., XXV, 93.
description, we may mention the prevalence of color-words in his out-of-door pictures. He had a fine eye for form and color and constantly strove to find words that would adequately portray the colors he perceived. The sky, of course, offered him the greatest opportunities in this regard. A selection of the terms he used to describe colors seen in the sky at various times and in various places has been made. If all these colors were contained in the sky at one time, Stevenson might describe them as follows: orange melting into gold; cloudy gold; luminous green; dusky purple; grey purple; pink and amber; pink and rust; "a ruddy powerful, nameless changing colour, like a serpent's back;" red like fire, blue like steel, green like the tracks of sunset; mottled grey; indigo; opal; grey, touched with blue and faint russets; stone-coloured; dark sapphire. These expressions, chosen at random from various books, serve to illustrate Stevenson's color-consciousness in description. A similar catalogue might be compiled of color-terms applied to trees, leaves, sunlight, and water. He saw peculiar colors in water—gold and green and snow-white; purple dove-color; "tarnished green deepening into blood-orange;" and, all at one time, blue, grey, purple, and green. The following rhapsody in color is from a diary Stevenson kept while in the South Seas.

107 Ibid., XV, 399.
The morning was all in blue; the sea blue, blue inshore upon the shallows, only the blue was nameless; the horizon clouds a blue like a fine pale porcelain, the sky behind them a pale lemon faintly warmed with orange. Much that one sees in the tropics is in water-colours, but this was in water-colours by a young lady.  

In the foregoing pages of this chapter we have explained and exemplified the various elements noted in Stevenson's descriptive passages. It is now our intention to give, more or less as the results of a survey, a sampling of longer descriptive pictures. For this purpose, the author has garnered nearly two hundred pages of Stevenson descriptions and grouped them under the following headings: (1) mood pictures; (2) catalogue-pictures; (3) descriptions of artifacts; (4) descriptions of men and women; (5) nature descriptions. It is obvious that not all can be included here; so a selection has been made; exemplary passages will be reproduced and, in some instances, commented upon.

Stevenson was extremely sensitive to setting, to moods and impressions, and he strove mightily to create them in his writings. In an earlier portion of the thesis we have referred to his practice of viewing everything with the eyes of the imagination. In "A Gossip on Romance" he

108 Quoted by Balfour, 281.
declares that "some places speak distinctly. Certain dank gardens cry aloud for a murder; certain old houses demand to be haunted; certain coasts are set apart for shipwreck." Of gaslight he has this to say:

A new sort of urban star now shines out nightly, horrible, unearthly, obnoxious to the human eye; a lamp for a nightmare! Such a light as this should shine only on murders and public crime, or along the corridors of lunatic asylums, a horror to heighten horror.

Stevenson, incidentally, must have had a special dislike for gaslight; in another place he describes it as "a knickering, flighty, fleering, and yet spectral cackle."

We have already given in full at the beginning of this chapter one of the best mood pictures in Stevenson, the description of candle light in the dealer's shop in "Markheim." From the same story is taken a vivid description of the terror in the mind of Markheim. "Meanwhile, and behind all this activity, brute terrors, like the scurrying of rats in a deserted attic, filled the more remote chambers of his brain with riot." Later he says of Markheim that "his nerves would jerk like a hooked fish." "A flash of ice, a flash of fire, a bursting gush of blood went over him, and

110 Ibid., 168.
111 Ibid., XXIII, 377.
112 Ibid., 118.
then he stood transfixed and thrilling."\textsuperscript{113} The end result of such descriptions is a very realistic sense of terror in the mind of the reader. Raleigh mentions several specific horrible happenings in Stevenson's stories that are "plainly generated by the scenery against which they are thrown; each is in some sort the genius of the place it inhabits."\textsuperscript{114} The foregoing are all descriptions of unpleasantness; but Stevenson could also depict pleasant moods, as in the following: "The Lady, meanwhile, lying back upon the cushions, passed on from trill to trill of the most heartfelt, high-pitched, clear, and fairy-sounding merriment."\textsuperscript{115}

The next group we refer to as catalogue pictures; they are descriptions that are concise, sometimes consisting only of a series of five or six descriptive adjectives. They are included as a separate class because they are in a way typical of Stevenson, arising from his practice of "cutting the flesh" off the bones. Swinnerton, who is not always kind to Stevenson, has this to say regarding his brief descriptions: (the quotations are from \textit{Treasure Island}.)

\begin{quote}
It is interesting to notice how vividly one catches a picture from such a brief passage as this: "As the water settled, I could see him lying huddled together on the clean,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., III, 118.
\textsuperscript{114} Raleigh, 58.
\textsuperscript{115} Stevenson, Works, III, 86.
bright sand in the shadow of the vessel's sides. A fish or two whipped past his body."

Or again, on the following page, when Jim Hawkins has thrown overboard another of the mutineers: "He went in with a sounding plunge; the red cap came off, and remained floating on the surface; and as soon as the splash subsided I could see him and Israel lying side by side, both wavering with the tremulous movement of the water." Such slight passages really indicate an unusual quality in the book. They convey a distinct impression of the scene which one may feel trembling within one's own vision and hearing. 116

The description of Monastier which opens Travels with a Donkey is priceless.

Monastier is notable for the making of lace, for drunkenness, for freedom of language, and for unparalleled political dissension...They all hate, loathe, decry, and calumniate each other. Except for business purposes, or to give each other the lie in a tavern brawl, they have laid aside even the vivility of speech. 117

Mr. Utterson, the lawyer of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, is described as being "a man of a rugged countenance, that was never lighted by a smile; cold, scanty, and embarrassed in discourse; backward in sentiment; lean, long, dusty, dreary, and yet somehow lovable." 118 Here is Stevenson's picture of an American railroad car, a vehicle he had good reason to despise: "That long, narrow wooden box, like a flat-roofed

116 Swinnerton, 150, 151.
117 Stevenson, Works, XII, 143.
118 Ibid., VII, 281.
Noah's Ark, with a stove and a convenience, one at either end.\(^\text{119}\) His out-of-door pictures are frequently longer and more elaborate; however, some are as concise as the following: "The sun was now up, shining with a frosty brightness out of a yellow halo, and right over against the luminary, Shoreby, a field of snowy roofs and ruddy gables, was rolling up its columns of morning smoke."\(^\text{120}\)

But many Stevenson pictures are still more brief than these. Following are several, selected at random. (1) "It was a fine, green, fat landscape, or rather a mere water-lane going on from village to village."\(^\text{121}\) (2) Of a wilderness: "its thickets, swamps, precipitous rocks, impetuous rivers, and amazing waterfalls."\(^\text{122}\) (3) "He was a lean, nervous, flibbertigibbet of a man, with something the look of an actor and something the look of a horse jockey."\(^\text{123}\) (4) Alan Breck to David Balfour: "Ye have a fine, hang-dog, rag-and-tatter, clappermaclaw kind of look to ye, as if ye had stolen the coat from a potato-bogle."\(^\text{124}\) (5) Of Rosie and May in The Merry Men, "bruised, drenched, beaten, and breathless."\(^\text{125}\)

\(^{119}\) Ibid., XV, 116.
\(^{120}\) Ibid., VII, 258.
\(^{121}\) Ibid., XII, 12.
\(^{122}\) Ibid., IX, 66.
\(^{123}\) Ibid., XII, 37.
\(^{124}\) Ibid., V, 216.
\(^{125}\) Ibid., VII, 47.
(6) Of the ship "Admiral": "It is a low, black, dirty, black-guard, ragged-piece! vomitable in many parts—simply vomitable."

(7) Of the city of Edinburgh: "the gusty, rainy, smoky, grim old city." Brief, sharply-etched pictures of this type are common in Stevenson's books; they are not common in view of the artistry with which they are composed. As Dawson says, Stevenson "found in language the medium of interpretation that the painter finds in line and color...It is not until we try to alter these phrases, to transpose or amend them, that we discover how perfect they are." 

We now come to Stevenson's descriptions of artifacts. By an artifact we mean anything made by the art of man, be it a ring, a castle, or a wall. Descriptions of this sort are not so plentiful as other types in Stevenson, nor are they generally so noteworthy. But there are splendid examples to be found. Our first choice is the description of the renowned "sack" of Travels with a Donkey:

This child of my invention was nearly six feet square, exclusive of two triangular flaps to serve as a pillow by night and as the top and bottom of the sack by day. I call it "the sack", but it was never a sack by more than courtesy: only a sort of long roll or sausage, green waterproof cart cloth without and blue

126 Ibid., XXV, 202. 
127 Quoted by Steuart, I, 401. 
128 Dawson, 46.
sheep's fur within. It was commodious as a valise, warm and dry for a bed. There was luxurious turning room for one; and at a pinch the thing might serve for two. I could bury myself in it up to the neck; for my head I trusted to a fur cap, with a hood to fold down over my ears and a band to pass under my nose like a respirator; and in case of heavy rain I proposed to make myself a little tent, or tentlet, with my waterproof coat, three stones, and a bent branch.129

This is rather a business-like exposition, but clear and of a pattern in spirit with the mock-seriousness with which he discusses his preparations for the trip. The next passage, a charming picture of windmills, is to be found in Memories and Portraits.

There are indeed, few merrier spectacles than that of many windmills bickering together in a fresh breeze over a woody country; their halting alacrity of movement, their pleasant gesticulations, their air, gigantically human as of a creature half alive, put a spirit of romance into the tamest landscape.130

This delightful "character-study" is composed of no more than the usual five details, each poetically and vividly presented, the first providing a back-drop of "woody country." The Rajah's Diamond contains a breath-taking description of a huge diamond.

For there lay before him in a cradle of green velvet, a diamond of prodigious magnitude and of the finest water. It was of the bigness

129 Stevenson, Works, XII, 144.
130 Ibid., XIII, 181.
of a duck's egg; beautifully shaped, and without a flaw; and as the sun shone upon it, it gave forth a lustre like that of electricity, and seemed to burn in his hand with a thousand individual fires.\textsuperscript{131}

A notable feature of Stevenson's best writing is the cool assurance with which he couples dignified matter and phraseology with apparently undignified terminology and figures. Only a master craftsman could have applied the simile "of the bigness of a duck's egg" to a prodigious diamond which "gave forth a lustre like that of electricity" without defiling the picture.

One further example must suffice; it is a description of a tavern on a lonely South Sea isle.

It was small, but neatly fitted, and at night sparkled with glass and glowed with coloured pictures like a theatre at Christmas. The pictures were advertisements, the glass coarse enough, the carpentry amateur; but the effect in that incongruous isle, was of unbridled luxury and inestimable expense.\textsuperscript{132}

Other noteworthy descriptions of artifacts are those of the Moat House in \textit{The Black Arrow}, the house of North Ronaldsay in \textit{Records of a Family of Engineers}, and the ship "Hispaniola" and Ben Gunn's boat in \textit{Treasure Island}. It may be mentioned, in closing, that Stevenson's letters contain many brief, vivid descriptions of artifacts, usually impressionistic in style,

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., I, 139.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., XIX, 243.
pictures formed, in the words of Balfour, "in much the same way that a painter of the school of Barbizon would form them."

We now arrive at the discussion of Stevenson’s descriptions of men and women. The following refers to man, in general:

He comprehends, he designs, he tames nature, rides the sea, ploughs, climbs the air in a balloon, makes vast inquiries, begins interminable labours, joins himself into federations and populous cities, spends his days to deliver the ends of the earth or to benefit unborn posterity; yet knows himself for a piece of unsurpassed fragility and the creature of a few days.

This paragraph contains a Stevenson picture of man, a typical one, perhaps as regards character, nearly the best of which he was capable. Epigrams, fragmentary flashes of insight, over-simplifications—these are the hall-marks of many of his portrayals of human character. As Raleigh remarks, the number of portraits, true to a hair, that are to be found in his works is very small indeed. "It is the effect of character seen at particular angles and in special lights... that Stevenson paints." Chapman compares Stevenson’s characters to those of Scott, a great, sunny, benign human

133 Balfour, 110.
134 Stevenson, Works, XXII, 553.
135 Raleigh, 67.
being. "We get a total impression of glorious and wholesome life. If we return to Weir of Hermiston, we seem to be entering the cell of an alchemist; all is intention, all calculation."\(^\text{136}\) Swinnerton criticizes the character portrayals of Prince Otto, David Balfour, St. Ites, Loudon Dodd, Archie Weir, Mackellar, and Kack Matcham. This question of Stevenson's understanding of and ability to portray character is not our concern, except insofar as character portrayal naturally intrudes itself into descriptions of the external appearances of men and women; it is these latter which are our chief concern.

Whether or not Stevenson understood human character, he did understand the art of word-painting, and he has penned many notable pictures of people. Many of them are genre paintings, quaint and statuesque, but striking, colorful, and vivid. Many are in the true Stevenson style, pithy and extremely brief. On his Travels with a Donkey he met a tall peasant, "perhaps forty years of age, of an ironical snuffy countenance, and arrayed in the green tail-coat of the country."\(^\text{137}\) The peasant's mother followed after him, "all in her Sunday best, with an elegantly-embroidered ribbon to her cap, and a new felt

\(^{136}\) Chapman, 234.
\(^{137}\) Stevenson, Works, XII, 151.
hat atop, and proffering, as she strode along with kilted petticoats, a string of obscene and blasphemous oaths." John Maccoll, the relative to whom Alan Breck appealed for help, was "a ragged, wild, bearded man about forty, grossly disfigured with the small pox, and looked both dull and savage."138 The following interesting delineation is of the appearance of Lord Winamore: "He was stout, elderly, and irascible, with a face like a full moon well-dyed with liquor, thick tremulur lips, a short purple hand in which he brandished a long pipe, and an abrupt and gobbling utterance."139 Few writers in English could surpass this picture, even in a larger compass; but then, it must be remembered, brevity is the thing we look for in Stevenson. Travelling in America, he met an Irish-American, who was "for all the world like a beggar in a print by Callot; one-eyed, with great splay crows-feet round the sockets; a knotty squab nose coming down over his mustache; a miraculous hat."140 One is reminded of his cryptic etching of Flint as a "boosy old seaman with a blue mug."141 Stevenson loved fine words, and he revelled in the sound of them, but he loved a vivid picture more, and tossed his fine

138 Ibid., V, 186.
139 Ibid., XXII, 318.
140 Ibid., XV, 29.
141 Ibid., II, 189.
words aside indifferently when words of a lower caste would serve his purpose better. The Bo's'un's mate on the voyage to America was "a gruff, cruel-looking seaman; square-headed, goat-bearded, with heavy blond eyebrows, and an eye without radiance." He seems to begin these brief black-and-white pictures bravely enough, a subject and predicate both in sight. Then as he hurries along, and it seems to him that the imagination can easily supply the lack of these important grammatical adjuncts, they simply vanish. It is the vivid picture always; everything else is secondary.

But there are longer and more elaborate word-pictures as well, some of them well-known and loved. We have already noted in Chapter III that many literary critics, as well as thousands of ordinary readers, have learned to know and love some of Stevenson's characters. Andrew Lang maintains that the common criticisms do not disturb him, i.e., claims that the seamanship of the stories is bad, too many people killed, sounds like an imitation, etc. Of Treasure Island he says:

Only genius could have invented John Silver, that terribly smooth-spoken mariner. Nothing like the simple yokel on the island, with his craving for cheese as a Christian dainty. The blustering Billy Bones is a little masterpiece: the blind Pew, with his tapping

142 Ibid., XV, 46.
stick...strikes terror into the boldest.
Then, the treasure is thoroughly satisfactory in kind, and there is plenty of it. The landscape, as in the feverish, fog-smothered flat, is gallantly painted. And there are no interfering petticoats in the story.143

Let us see what we can do again with making a composite picture of Long John Silver, this time a more complete and accurate picture, drawn from the book itself. The first time Jim Hawkins set eyes on the redoubtable Silver, this is what he saw:

His left leg was cut off close by the hip, and under the left shoulder he carried a crutch, which he managed with wonderful dexterity, hopping about upon it like a bird. He was very tall and strong, with a face as big as a ham—plain and pale, but intelligent and smiling. Indeed, he seemed in the most cheerful spirits, whistling as he moved about among the tables, with a merry word or a slap on the shoulder for the more favoured of his guests.144

Here we have the initial glance; the important features are present, and a shadow of what is to come. Just as Silver moves about among the tables of the waterfront tavern with a smile and a merry word, so he will move smilingly through the story. But we will come to know and fear the ruthlessness hidden behind the cheerful mask. Jim had learned to fear Silver even before he actually saw him in the flesh. The

143 Lang, 30.
144 Stevenson, Works, II, 43.
brown old seaman, with the sabre cut, had warned him to be on the look-out for "the seafaring man with one leg." Jim writes:

I would see him in a thousand forms and with a thousand different diabolical expressions. Now the leg would be cut off at the knee, now at the hip; now he was a monstrous kind of creature who had never had but one leg, and that in the middle of his body.145

We have further views of Silver, both on the voyage and on the island. We see him carrying the crutch by a lanyard round his neck, cooking like some one safe ashore with the foot of the crutch wedged against a bulkhead. We see him crossing the deck in the heaviest weather, handling himself neatly, now using his crutch, now trailing it alongside by the lanyard. We see him in the galley, kept as clean as a new pin, talking in a gush of sham servility to Jim and the parrot. On the island, after Jim has been captured, he and the pirates set off in the heat of the day. Later Jim wrote:

[Silver] hobbled, grunting, on his crutch; his nostrils stood out and quivered; he cursed like a madman when the flies settled on his hot and shiny countenance; he plucked furiously at the line that held me to him, and, from time to time, turned his eyes upon me with a deadly look.146

These pictures are vivid and clear, but they do not

145 Ibid., II, 3.
146 Ibid., 191.
explain the hold that Silver has on our imaginations. There
is not a great deal here to distinguish him from a hundred
other pirates of story-book fame. What has Stevenson done to
make Long John what Sir Arthur Conan Doyle calls "the king of
all seafaring desperadoes?" The answer is at hand. In
Chapter I we spoke of indirect description, in which the
effects of an object upon the beholder are described instead
of the object itself. Stevenson has included in the story
a masterful indirect picture of Silver's fearsomeness. The
strong effect is produced seldom by direct assertion, but
usually by comparison, innuendo, or indirect reference. The
objectionable Billy Bones is haunted by the dread of "a
seafaring man with one leg." Captain Flint, we are told,
was a brave man: "He was afraid of none, not he, only
Silver--Silver was that genteel." Or again, where John
himself says,

There was some that was feared of
Pew, and some that was feared of Flint;
but Flint his own self was feared of me.
Feared he was and proud. They was the
roughest crew afloat, was Flint's. The
devil himself would have been feared to
go to sea with them. Well, now, I tell
you, I'm not a boasting man, and you see
yourself how easy I keep company; but when
I was quartermaster, lambs wasn't the word
for Flint's old buccaneers."

So, by a touch here and a hint there, there grows upon us

147 Hemmerton, 243.
the individuality of this smooth-tongued, ruthless, masterful, one-legged devil. "He is to us not a creation of fiction, but an organic living reality with whom we have come into contact; such is the effect of the fine suggestive strokes with which he is drawn." 148

There are other lifelike figures in Stevenson's stories too—Pew, the fearful blind man with his horrible patch and tapping stick; Ben Gunn, clothed in tattered ship's canvas and craving a piece of English cheese; the four brothers of Kirstie in Weir of Hermiston; Alan Breck of David Balfour, and many others.

Of the character of women Stevenson had little understanding. A Mrs. Custer asked him, in the course of a conversation at Lake Saranac: "Mr. Stevenson, why is it that you never put a real woman in your stories?" Stevenson replied with twinkling gravity, "Madam, I have little knowledge of Greek." 149 It is generally conceded, however, that he improved as he went along, and that had he lived longer, he would have written finer character portrayals of both men and women. Stevenson, the picture-maker, did paint some excellent feminine figures upon his pages, the Lady of Ballantrae, Joanna Sedley,

148 Ibid., 153.
149 Chalmers, 43.
Otto's Princess Seraphina, Catriona, Barbara Grant, Kirstie, and others. But they are not many; in general, Stevenson avoided women in his stories, as he had little communication with them in life, outside of his own family circle.

There is a delightful picture in *Travels with a Donkey* of Clarisse, who served Stevenson a meal in the inn at Pont de Montvert.

What shall I say of Clarisse? She waited the table with a heavy placable nonchalance, like a performing cow; her great gray eyes were steeped in amorous languor; her features, although fleshy, were of an original and accurate design; her mouth had a curl; her nostrils spoke of dainty pride; her cheek fell into strange and interesting lines. It was a face capable of strong emotion, and, with training, it offered the promise of delicate sentiment.

He closes the picture with a note that Clarisse's figure was inclined to be ample. "Hers," he comments, "was a case for stays." In "The Beach of Falesa," we have a brief, but vivid picture of Uma. "She was young and very slender for an island maid, with a high forehead and a shy, strange blindish look, between a cat's and a baby's." A very excellent description of a woman is that of Senorita Teresa Valdevia in "The Brown Box."

Her face was warm and rich in colour; in shape, it was the kitten face, that piquant

150 Stevenson, *Works*, XII, 134.
triangle, so mysterious, so pleasingly attractive, so rare in our more Northern climates; her eyes were large, starry, and visited by changing lights; her hair was partly covered by a lace mantilla, through which her arms, bare to the shoulder, gleamed white; her figure, full and soft in all the womanly contours, was yet alive and active, light with excess of life and slender by grace of some divine proportion.152

We now arrive at that type of description in which Stevenson excelled. In portraying natural scenes, sky, wind, trees, water, and the like, he has few equals among English writers. Even his letters are full of his interest in the conditions of nature about him—the effects of the weather (there is always a great deal about clouds and wind in his letters); the trees and flowers. He is a thorough-going impressionist—there is always the general atmosphere and out of it one or two salient details obtruding. Rice says:

Stevenson's writing is full of what we may call sensations of place...The sheen of the rainy streets toward afternoon...the high canorous note of the Northeaster on days when the very houses seem to stiffen with cold; these, and a thousand such as these, crowd back upon him.153

Balfour notes that between 1871 and 1876 no less than nine of his papers deal with travel or with the external appearance of places known to him.154 Lionel Johnson writes that with

152 Ibid., III, 181.
153 Rice, 97.
154 Balfour, 109.
infinite pains and "a minute delicacy of skill, his art, the consolatory companion of his wanderings, has taken us on an enchanted journey from the rivers and woods of France to the seas and islands of the Pacific."\(^{155}\) We have already recorded the fact that Stevenson travelled all over the world; we are now to see that he could and did compose startlingly good word-pictures to enable his readers to see the things he saw. The first picture we shall view is from *Travels with a Donkey.* It is the lengthy description of the valley of the Tarn, quite possibly the best of all his descriptive passages. It is given here in full.

**IN THE VALLEY OF THE TARN**

A new road leads from Pont de Montvert to Florac through the hillsides and rich forests by the valley of the Tarn; a smooth sandy ledge, it runs about half-way between the summit of the cliffs and the river in the bottom of the valley; and I went in and out, as I followed it, from bays of shadow into promontories of afternoon sun. This was a pass like that of Killiecrankie; a deep turning gully in the hills, with the Tarn making a wonderful hoarse uproar far below, and craggy summits standing in the sunshine high above. A thin fringe of ash-trees ran about the hill-tops, like ivy on a ruin; but on the lower slopes and far up every glen the Spanish chestnut-trees stood each four-square to heaven under its tented foliage. Some were planted each on its own terrace, no larger than a bed; some, trusting in their roots, found strength to grow and prosper and be straight and large upon the rapid slopes of the valley; others, where there was a margin to the river, stood marshalled in a line and mighty like cedars of Lebanon. Yet even where they grew most thickly they were not to be

\(^{155}\) Johnson, 107.
thought of as a wood, but as a herd of stalwart
individuals; and the dome of each tree stood forth
separate and large, and as it were a little hill,
from among the domes of its companions. They gave
forth a faint sweet perfume which pervaded the air of
the afternoon; autumn had put tints of gold and
tarnish in the green; and the sun so shone through
and kindled the broad foliage, that each chestnut
was relieved against another, not in shadow, but
in light. A humble sketcher here laid down his pencil
in despair.156

Surely this is a splendid picture, perfect in form and spirit.
Technically it is beyond criticism. The point of view and the
general background are clearly indicated at the outset. Even
the upper and lower levels of the frame are painted in, the
Tarn below, the craggy summits above. Then the focus is
brought to bear on the mighty chestnut trees, and they are
presented with deft and sure strokes. Strong, vivid figures
of speech, bright colors, unmistakable sounds of wind and
water, all these are present. The passage is poetic beyond a
doubt; but it is also genuine and sincere; there is nothing
maudlin or sententious about it, nothing weak.

We now give seven additional pictures which will further
exemplify Stevenson's skill in portraying landscapes. The
first is taken from An Inland Voyage, the next five from
Travels with a Donkey, and the last from Treasure Island.

(1) The river before us was one sheet of intolerable
glory. On either hand meadows and orchards
bordered, with a margin of sedge and water flowers,

upon the river. The hedges were of great height, woven about the trunks of hedgerow elms. The atmosphere, after the rain, was of enchanting purity. The river double d among the hillocks, a shining strip of mirror glass; and the dip of the paddles set the flowers shaking along the brink.\textsuperscript{157}

The river is here the center of focus. For a background we have the elms, the high hedge, the meadows and orchards. The usual five details are present, if the pure post-rain atmosphere is taken as one.

(2) An infinity of little country by-roads led higher and thither among the fields. It was the most pointless labyrinth. I could see my destination overhead, or rather the peak that dominates it; but choose as I pleased, the roads always ended by turning away from it, and sneaking back towards the valley, or northward along the margin of the hills. The failing light, the waning colour, the naked, unhomely, stony country through which I was traveling, threw me into some despondency.\textsuperscript{158}

In this picture the five details are presented in a somewhat unusual order. The labyrinth of roads and the peak that marks the traveller's destination occupy nearly three-fourths of the picture. Then the other three details are compressed into the last sentence. The effect is one of bigness for the scene; there is no single dominating specific detail to correspond to the river in the preceding example, or the chestnut trees in the description of the valley of the Tarn.

(3) A tanned and sallow autumn landscape, with

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., XII, 26, 27.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 157.
black blots of fir-wood and white roads wandering through the hills. Over all this the clouds shed a uniform and purplish shadow, sad and somewhat menacing, exaggerating the height and the distance, and throwing into still higher relief the twisted ribbons of the highway.159

Only four details suffice to make this impressionistic picture a very vivid one. The phrase "tanned and sallow autumn landscape" provides a colorful and expansive background. The other details, though presented in a few words, are subdivided with admirable thoroughness; this is especially true of the cloud-shadows, which impress the dominant mood upon the scene.

(4) Moor, heathery marsh, tracts of rock and pines, woods of birch all jewelled with the autumn yellow, here and there a few naked cottages and bleak fields,—these were the characters of the country. Hill and valley followed valley and hill; the little green and stony cattle-tracks wandered in and out of one another, split into three or four, fled away in marshy hollows, and began again sporadically on hillsides or at the borders of a wood.160

In this description five details are listed, catalogue-fashion, in the first sentence. Since the details which follow are not closely associated with the first five, the effect is of generality and indistinctness. This picture is less vivid than the others—it is more of a moving picture.

(5) I was on the skirts of a little wood of birch,

159 Ibid., XII, 165.
160 Ibid., 171.
sprinkled with a few beeches; behind it adjoined another wood of fir; and in front, it broke up and went down in open order into a shallow and meadowy dale. All around there were bare hill-tops, some near, some far away, as the perspective closed or opened, but none apparently much higher than the rest. The wind huddled the trees. The golden specks of autumn in the birches tossed shiveringly. Overhead the sky was full of strings and shreds of vapour, flying, vanishing, reappearing, and turning about an axis like tumblers, as the wind hounded them through heaven... The day was tip-toe on the threshold of the east. We had not gone many steps along the lance, before the sun, still invisible to me, sent a glow of gold over some cloud mountains that lay ranged along the eastern sky. 161

This is an exceedingly poetic passage, not a little reminiscent of Francis Thompson's description of Shelley. The writer is obviously indulging his poetic fancy, but nevertheless, he presents his picture vividly. The effect is much clearer than in the last example given.

(6) I beheld suddenly a fine wild landscape to the south. High rocky hills, as blue as sapphire, closed the view, and between these lay ridge upon ridge, heathery, craggy, the sun glittering on veins of rock, the under-wood clambering in the hollows, as rude as God made them at the first. There was not a sign of man's hand in all the prospect; and indeed not a trace of his passage, save where generation after generation had walked in twisted footpaths, in and out among the beeches, and up and down upon the channelled slopes. The mists, which had hitherto beset me, were now broken into clouds, and fled swiftly and shone brightly in the sun. 162

161 Ibid., XII, 181.
162 Ibid., 192.
This passage has the fine cadence typical of Stevenson's best prose. Like poetry, it is improved when read aloud.

(7) Grey-coloured woods covered a large part of the surface. This even tint was indeed broken up by streaks of yellow sand-bank in the lower lands, and by many tall trees of the pine family, out-topping the others--some singly, some in clumps; but the general colouring was uniform and sad. The hills ran up clear above the vegetation in spires of naked rock. All were strangely shaped, and the Spyglass, which was by three or four hundred feet the tallest on the island, was likewise the strangest in configuration, running up sheer from almost every side, and then suddenly cut off at the top like a pedestal to put a statue on. 163

This description is cleverly constructed to lead the eye up higher and higher by stages, until it finally runs off the top of the picture at the peak of the Spyglass. The picture is extremely vivid, but startlingly different in its composition from the ordinary painting, in which all lines are so placed as to lead the eye of the beholder inward toward the central figure of the composed picture.

It is clear from the above selections that Stevenson could and did paint beautiful word-pictures of landscapes. Many additional illustrations could be adduced, but the compass of this paper will not allow it. It is now our intention to present composite pictures of some individual natural phenomena as they appear in Stevenson's books. The first, which we shall

163 Ibid., II, 71.
treat more fully than the others, is the wind. The author has gathered together references to the wind from a very large number of Stevenson descriptions. The wind must have fascinated Stevenson; as we have already remarked, his letters are full of descriptions of wind and its effects. We shall see that his stories and travel books likewise include many passages descriptive of the wind.

Sometimes the wind is calm and peaceful, as in the following poetic passage: "From time to time a warm wind rustled down the valley, and set all the chestnuts dangling their bunches of foliage and fruit; the air was filled with whispering music, and the shadows danced in tune." But more often the wind is wild and stormy.

The wind would rise and strike the gables like a solid body, or suddenly fall and draw away... Now the storm in its might would seize and shake the four corners of the roof, roaring like Leviathan in anger. And again the wind would break forth in a chorus of melancholy sounds, hooting low in the chimney, wailing with flutelike softness. The wind is personified, as nearly always, in this passage. Perhaps it is the fact that the wind is invisible and can be seen only in its effects in sound and motion, that results in the almost invariable use of figurative language, especially

164 Ibid., XII, 168.
165 Ibid., VII, 46.
personification and simile, in describing it.

In *The Master of Ballantrae* "the wind chopped suddenly into the northeast, and blew a hurricane."¹⁶⁶ In "The Great North Road" we read of "a clap of screaming wind that made the towers rock."¹⁶⁷ In a letter to his mother Stevenson speaks of "hearing the whistling and the roaring of the wind, and the gust-blown and uncertain flows of rain."¹⁶⁸ And in a letter to Mrs. Sitwell he complains of "the unruly, bedlamite gusts that have been charging at one around corners and utterly abolishing and destroying all that is peaceful in life."¹⁶⁹ "The great trees smack about like whips; the air is filled with leaves and great branches flying about like birds; and the sound of the trees falling shakes the earth."¹⁷⁰ This description is so entirely indirect that the wind, which caused the havoc described, is not once mentioned.

Wind is associated with the sea, and hence it is not uncommon for the sea to suggest to Stevenson figurative language to be applied to wind.

The wind among the trees was my lullaby. Sometimes it sounded for minutes together with a steady, even rush, not rising nor abating;
and again it would swell and burst like a great crashing breaker, and the trees would patter me all over with big drops from the rain of the afternoon.171

In a letter written from Samoa he speaks of a strong wind which caused "the great big dead leaves from the roadside planes" to scuttle about and chase "one another over the gravel round me like little waves under the keel of a boat."172 We have already seen many fine figures in Stevenson; the one in the next quotation is one of the best. It is taken from the sea, and is especially appealing because the effect it describes, the rippling of grass or grain in the wind, is so universally well-known. "The wind blew a gale from the north; the trees roared; the corn and the deep grass in the valley fled in whitening surges."173

As we have said, the wind is usually personified in Stevenson. Following are some striking examples of this practice. "The weather had somewhat lightened, and the clouds massed in squadrons; but the fierce wind still hunted them through heaven, and cast great ungainly splashes of shadow and sunlight over the scene."174 It will be observed that these passages, in which very figurative language is employed, are much inclined to be poetic in tone. Elsewhere

171 Ibid., XII, 179.
172 Ibid., XXI, 36.
173 Ibid., XV, 347.
174 Ibid., XII, 184.
Stevenson writes that the wind "drove a white cloud very swiftly over the hill-top;"\(^{175}\) and again, "the wind takes a run and scatters the smoke."\(^{176}\) This is a playful figure, reminding the reader of boys "taking a run" to slide on the ice. Another charming figure in the same light vein pictures the wind as "hustling and eddying among the tree-tops."\(^{177}\)

In a letter Stevenson writes "The wind swoops at me round the corner, like a lion, and fluffs the snow in my face."\(^{178}\) In another place he speaks of the wind rising and dying in "that tempestuous world of foliage," and in still another of "a truculent wind about the house, shaking the windows and making a hollow, inarticulate grumbling in the chimney."\(^{179}\) These pictures are very much like an excellent "character-study" of the wind in the trees which is found in David Copperfield:

> As the elms bent to one another, like giants who were whispering secrets, and after a few seconds of such repose, fell into a violent flurry, tossing their wild arms about, as if their late confidences were really too wicked for their peace of mind, some weather-beaten old rooks' nests burdening their higher branches, swung like wrecks upon a stormy sea.\(^{180}\)

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\(^{175}\) Ibid., XII, 258.
\(^{176}\) Ibid., 337.
\(^{177}\) Ibid., I, 342.
\(^{178}\) Ibid., XXIV, 99.
\(^{179}\) Ibid., XXI, 93.
\(^{180}\) Dickens, David Copperfield, 11.
The foregoing descriptions of the wind are typical of hundreds of similar pictures of natural phenomena to be read in Stevenson's pages. He has caught the attitudes of the weather and depicted them in sharp, vivid phrases, sometimes employing only a few distinctive adjectives, as in reference to "a bitter, foggy, frosty afternoon." Sometimes he felt and interpreted a certain spirit in the day. "The weather is hellish, ... the foul fiend's own weather, following on a week of expurgated heaven." Noteworthy here is the odd use of the extraordinary word expurgated, as if to heighten the contrast and even to surpass the unsurpassable beauty of imaginary heavenly weather. In the South Seas contains a fine picture of winter weather.

The weather was sultry, boisterous, and inconstant. Now the wind blew squally from the land down gaps of splintered precipice; now, between the sentinel islets of the entry, it came in gusts from seaward. Heavy and dark clouds impended on the summits; the rain roared and ceased; the scuppers of the mountains gushed; and the next day we would see the sides of the amphitheatre bearded with white falls.

This passage has a fine cadence, and presents vivid details of sea and land to ear and eye. The language is picturesque and figurative—"sentinel islets," "scuppers of the mountain," "bearded with white falls."

181 Stevenson, Works, II, 16.
182 Ibid., XVII, 209.
183 Ibid., XIX, 67.
The sun and its reflected rays, together with the shadows it causes, were also of interest to Stevenson. One suspects that he took a certain pride and pleasure in coining new names for the sun. They are often in evidence. In *Travels with a Donkey* it is "the big bonfire that occupies the kernel of our system;" 184 in "A Lodging for the Night" he calls it "that red-hot cannon ball, the rising sun;" 185 in St. Ives the sun is described as setting "like a red-hot shot," a figure reminiscent of the preceding one. 186 *The Merry Men* contains an exquisite picture of sunlight in the waters of Sandy Bay.

The sun shone clear and green and steady in the deeps; the bay seemed rather like a great transparent crystal, as one sees them in a lapidary's shop; there was naught to show that it was water but an internal trembling, a hovering within of sun-glints and netted shadows, and now and then a faint lap and a dying bubble round the edge. 187

Here is a water-color in words indeed. The usual five details are included in the customary order, but the effect is delicate and expressive beyond words.

Water, too, inspired Stevenson to heights of dramatic excellence. The sea, rivers, lakes, and brooks are all

184 Ibid., XII, 259.
185 Ibid., I, 342.
186 Ibid., XXI, 185.
187 Ibid., VII, 30.
depicted in the pages of his books. The sea which surrounds
Treasure Island is a noisy one; Jim Hawkins notes that one
is never out of hearing of its heavy roar. "We could both
hear and see," he says again, "the sea foaming and thundering
on the steep beach." 188 Later on in the story the sea is
described as "thundering and thundering," 189 an interesting
duplication of words. In David Balfour we read of waves that
"roared about the rock like thunder and the drums of
armies." 190 In a letter is contained a vivid and colorful
personification of the sea; it was given earlier in this
chapter. The sea about Honolulu is referred to as "an angry
little spitfire sea" that "continually spirts and thrashes in
impotent irascibility." 191 The following concise picture
of a waterfall is taken from The Dynamiter. "Cascade after
cascade thundered and hung up its flag of whiteness in the
night, or fanned our faces with the wet wind of its
descent." 192

"e have repeatedly referred to the poetic sense of nature
which Stevenson everywhere displays. The break of day inspired
him to poetic fancies unsurpassed in his descriptions of
other natural phenomena. There are quite a number of fine

188 Ibid., II, 72.
189 Ibid., 126.
190 Ibid., VI, 155.
191 Ibid., XXIV, 175.
192 Ibid., III, 36.
portrayals of dawn in his books, some of them brief, some comparatively lengthy and elaborate; but all colorful in the extreme. The following passage from The Black Arrow depicts the break of day as seen from the interior of a church.

Yet a little and the grey of the morning began to struggle through the painted casements of the church, and to put to shame the glimmer of the tapers. The light slowly broadened and brightened, and presently, through the south-eastern clerestories, a flush of rosy sunlight flickered on the walls. The storm was over; the great clouds had disburdened their snow and fled farther on, and the new day was breaking on a merry winter landscape sheathed in white.

This is a somewhat cryptic description, but suited to the point of view from which the dawn was perceived. A masterpiece of poetic description is to be found in Prince Otto. The Princess Seraphina flees into the forest and, for the first time in her life, spends "a night under the naked heavens. Suddenly she becomes aware of a glow of transfiguration in the woods" and cries,"O, it is the dawn!"

Soon she had struggled to a certain hill-top, and saw far before her the silent unfolding of the day. Out of the east it welled and whitened; the darkness trembled into light; and the stars were extinguished like street lamps of a human city. The whiteness brightened into silver; the silver warmed into gold; the gold kindled into pure and living fire; and the face of the East was barred with elemental

193 Ibid., VIII, 220.
scarlet. The day drew its first long breath, steady and chill, and for leagues around the woods sighed and shivered. And then at one bound the sun leaped up; and her startled eyes received day's first arrow, and quailed under the buffet. The day was come plain and garish; and up the steep and solitary eastern heavens the sun, victorious over his competitors, continued slowly and royally to mount. 194

A companion piece to this exquisite description pictures a tropic daybreak. It is from The Ebb Tide; the Farralones is just opening up the unknown island; it is four in the morning when the sound of breakers is first heard.

The sound was continuous, like the passing of a train; no rise or fall could be distinguished; minute by minute the ocean heaved with an equal potency against the invisible isle; and as time passed, and Herrick waited in vain for a vicissitude in the volume of that roaring, a sense of the eternal weighed upon his mind... Therew as little morning bank. A brightening came in the east; then a wash of some ineffable, faint, nameless hue between crimson and silver, and then coals of fire. These glimmered awhile on the sea-line, and seemed to brighten and darken and spread out, and still the night and the stars remained undisturbed; it was as though a spark should catch and glow and creep along the foot of some heavy and almost combustible wall-hanging, and the room itself is scarce menaced. Yet a little after, and the whole east glowed with gold and scarlet, and the hollow of heaven was filled with daylight. 195

These two passages are sheer poetry. They bring distinctly before the mind's eye of the reader the magnificence of the universe of which he is a part. It is not inconceivable

194 Ibid., IV, 194.
195 Ibid., XI, 311.
that, like Princess Seraphina, many a reader has spent his first night "under the naked heavens" and watched the breath-taking coming of the dawn for the first time, in the crystal-clear word-pictures of Robert Louis Stevenson.
CHAPTER V
SUMMARY

The purpose of the present thesis was to investigate the technique of description employed by Robert Louis Stevenson in his writings. In Chapter I were discussed the essential elements of the form of discourse known as description. Description was seen to be the portrayal of concrete objects by means of words, in an effort to furnish the reader with the same picture and impression that the writer derived from the place, object, or person described. It is analogous to portraiture, but does not imitate the full reproduction of detail characteristic of photography. Hence, the principal problems to be met in description are the selection of details to be portrayed and the achieving of a unified total effect.

In Chapter II were discussed certain aspects of Stevenson's ancestry, his life, and his temperament which would seem to be contributing factors to a facility for description. Stevenson's Scottish ancestry endowed him with more than ordinary romantic and imaginative tendencies. His imagination was developed very early in his life, since he was a sickly,
shut-in child, who learned to rely on story-telling and pretending as substitutes for the ordinary experiences of normal childhood and for healthy outdoor play. The constant wide travels which characterized his life also rendered him better fit for the art of description, since they gave him a vast fund of pictures to reproduce in his writings.

In Chapter III we studied certain general features of Stevenson's technique of description. We saw that by skillful selection and presentation of a small number of details he succeeded in painting surprisingly realistic word-pictures. Stevenson's descriptive phrases possess a certain vivid, cameo-like quality which he perfected by constant re-writing and polishing. He followed certain set technical practices in description, from which practices he varied only with good reason in particular cases. In general, he selected and presented a small number of details, usually arranged so that the more prominent, specific, and vivid followed the more general, which fulfilled somewhat the same function as the background in a painting.

Finally, in Chapter IV, specific Stevenson descriptive passages were selected and discussed. First certain passages were presented to exemplify Stevenson's use of figurative language, his appeals to other senses besides sight, and his unusual ability to combine words in striking and vivid,
though frequently very brief phrases. Then a number of general
descriptive passages were discussed. These were classified
as descriptions of moods or impressions, unusually brief
pictures, descriptions of man-made objects, descriptions of
men and women and, finally, descriptions of nature.

It is not our purpose to determine whether or not
Stevenson is to be classed with the "main stream writers." It is not even our purpose to give a comparative judgment
as to the qualities of his description. We can say, however,
that he has succeeded very well in this difficult art. He
himself once said that "language is but a poor bull's eye
lantern wherewith to show off the vast cathedral of the
world."¹ He has not been universally successful in doing
so, but has done unusually fine work. "In the technical
demands of his profession he is never wanting... He has,
whether in dialogue or description, a wonderfully supple
instrument of expression."² "He could draw landscapes.
One has only to look at this sketch-book or at some of the
backgrounds in the little engravings, to see that he was
a close observer of Nature."³ Clear it is that he was at
his best in describing things in nature; the out-of-doors

¹ Stevenson, Works, XIV, 91.
² Burton, 304.
³ Hammerton, 70.
was the field for his descriptive genius. "He has spoken to the poet that exists in every man. He has hung the common room of life with inimitable tapestries woven on the looms of God... Of all the boons that men can bring to man, none is greater than to give vision to his eyes, and make him feel the grandeur of that elemental life of which he is a part."  

4 Dawson, 252.
APPENDIX I

SOURCES FOR CHAPTER I

THE NATURE OF DESCRIPTION

The text selected as a principal source for the norms of the art of description is *The Working Principles of Rhetoric* by John Franklin Genung. This work was selected upon the recommendation of experienced teachers of English Literature. Although printed nearly fifty years ago, the work is of general excellence, and its treatment of description is more than adequate. The full list of dictionaries and rhetoric books consulted by the author of this thesis is listed below.


Crabb, George, *Crabb’s English Synonyms*, Boston, Grosset & Dunlap, 1934.


Knight, Marietta, Practice Work in English, New York, Longmans, Green & Co., 1914.


Mead, W.E., Composition and Rhetoric, Boston, Sibley & Co., 1909.


Rankin, T.E., College Composition, New York, Harper Bros., 1929.


Tanner, Wm. M., Composition and Rhetoric, Boston, Ginn & Co., 1922.


APPENDIX II

ORDER OF THE VOLUMES OF THE THISTLE EDITION OF R.L. STEVENSON

I The New Arabian Nights.
II Treasure Island.
III The Dynamiter; The Story of a Lie.
IV Prince Otto; The Island Night's Entertainment; Father Damien.
V Kidnapped.
VI David Balfour.
VII The Merry Men; Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.
VIII The Black Arrow, and Other Tales.
IX The Master of Ballantrae.
X The Wrecker.
XI The Wrong Box; The Ebb-tide.
XII An Inland Voyage; Travels with a Donkey.
XIII Virginibus Puerisque; Memories and Portraits.
XIV Familiar Studies of Men and Books.
XV The Amateur Emigrant; Across the Plains; Silverado Squatters.
XVI Ballads and Other Poems.
XVII Vailima Letters.
XVIII Memoir of Fleeming Jenkin; Records of a Family of Engineers.
XIX In the South Seas; A Foot-note to History.
XX Weir of Hermiston; Plays; Miscellanies.
XXI St. Ives.
XXII Sketches, Criticisms, etc.
XXIII Letters, I.
XXIV Letters, II.
XXV New Letters.

This edition of the works of Robert Louis Stevenson was published by Charles Scribner's Sons in New York in 1918. It is a well-known edition of the works, and references are frequently made to it in the writings of various critics.
APPENDIX III

STEVENSON'S DESCRIPTION OF HIS METHOD OF LEARNING TO WRITE.

All through my boyhood and youth I was known and pointed out for the pattern of an idler; and yet I was always busy on my own private end, which was to learn to write. I kept always two books in my pocket, one to read, one to write in. As I walked, my mind was busy fitting what I saw with appropriate words; when I sat by the roadside, I would either read, or a pencil and a penny version-book would be in my hand, to note down the features of the scene or commemorate some halting stanzas. Thus I lived with words.

And what I wrote was for no ulterior use; it was written consciously for practice. It was not so much that I wished to be an author (though I wished that too) as that I had vowed to learn to write. That was a proficiency that tempted me; and I practised to acquire it, as men learn to whittle, in a wager with myself. Description was the principal field of my exercise; for to anyone with senses there is always something worth describing, and town and country are but one continuous subject. But I worked in other ways also; often accompanied my walks with dramatic dialogues, in which I played many parts. And often exercised myself in writing down conversations from memory.

Whenever I read a book or a passage that particularly pleased me, in which a thing was said or an effect rendered with propriety, in which there was either some conspicuous force or some happy distinction in the style, I must sit down at once and set myself to ape that quality. I was unsuccessful and I knew it; and tried again, and was unsuccessful again, and always unsuccessful; but at least in these vain bouts I got some practice in rhythm, in harmony, in construction and the co-ordination of parts.

I have thus played the sedulous ape to Hazlitt, to Lamb, to Wordsworth, to Sir Thomas Browne, to Defoe, to Hawthorne, to Montaigne, to Baudelaire, and to Oebermann. I remember one of these monkey-tricks, which was called "The Vanity of Morals;" it was to have had a second part "The Vanity of Knowledge;" but the second part was never attempted, and the
first part was written (which is my reason for recalling it, ghost-like, from its ashes) no less than three times: first in the manner of Hazlitt, second in the manner of Ruskin, who had cast on me a passing spell, and third, in a laborious pasticcio of Sir Thomas Browne. So with my other works: Cain, an epic, was (save the mark!) an imitation of Sordello; Robin Hood, a tale in verse, took an eclectic middle course among the fields of Keats, Chaucer, and Morris; in Monmouth, a tragedy, I reclined on the bosom of Mr. Swinburne; in my innumerable gouty-footed lyrics, I followed many masters...

That, like it or not, is the way to learn to write, whether I have profited or not, that is the way. It was so Keats learned, and there was never a finer temperament for literature than Keats...

It is the great point of these imitations that there still shines, beyond the student's reach his inimitable model. I must have some disposition to learn; for I clear-sightedly condemned my own performances. I liked doing them indeed, but when they were done, I could see they were rubbish...

Thus the secret of learning was--for the right man--only the secret of taking pains: and yet in the history of his endeavours we find, where we should least expect it, a hereditary trait...I made consciously a thousand little efforts, but the determination from which these arose came to me while I slept and in the way of growth.

(Quoted from Graham Balfour, Life of R.L.S., 84-87.)
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The thesis submitted by Robert N. Hinks, S.J. has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that the necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

July 30, 1947

Date

Signature of Adviser