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Robert Louis Stevenson's Fabulous Salubriousness

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Away with funeral music — set
The pipe to powerful lips —
The cup of life's for him that drinks
And not for him that sips. (*Collected Poems* 246)

<1>Composed in the autumn of 1872, this Horatian ode suggests that by the age of twenty-two, and just one year on from his decision to devote his energies towards becoming a professional writer, Stevenson had made up his mind about what sort of verse he was going to write. He wanted his work to be wholeheartedly consumed, not meekly sipped; to exude power and strength, qualities not associated with his own frail physical state, having been bedeviled by tuberculosis since infancy. Stevenson's ode also belongs to a body of work that has been hitherto neglected by his critics, and with which this essay will be concerned: namely, the many drinking poems he wrote between the early seventies and mid eighties. It will be argued that Stevenson's reasons for writing such pieces are infused with personal, exploratory tactics that fortify critics' views of him as 'the fin-de-siècle laureate of the double life' (Showalter 106).

<2>An initial clue to Stevenson's motives for trying his hand at drinking verse is intimated by the 'powerful lips' of the above, which might be a reaction against the languid eroticism of the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* ('who knows/From what once lovely Lip it springs unseen!' (1st ed. XIX); 'and the cold Lip I kiss'd/How many Kisses might it take — and give!' (1st ed. XXXV)). Stevenson's precise thoughts on Edward FitzGerald are unknown but he later inspired his friend John Addington Symonds to publish *Wine, Women and Song*, a collection of Latin drinking poems translated into English which Symonds, in turn, dedicated to Stevenson.⁽¹⁾ Given the cult status which the *Rubáiyát* had won among Britain's poets and literati by the eighties, Symonds's collection may have been partly meant to rival that of FitzGerald by offering strong, full-blooded Latin, rather than effete Arabic and Persian, models of drinking verse. The difference in styles of these models may be a modern cliché but it has ancient resonances. It is suggested in the last of Horace's first Book of *Odes* (35) in which the poet, settling down alone to drink, instructs his servant to bring him wine, telling him: 'Persicos odi, puer, apparatus (*Persian pomp, my boy, I hate*) and announces his preference for 'simplici myrto' (*the simple myrtle*).⁽²⁾

<3>Horace's charge against 'apparatus' and 'allabores', *pomp* and *laboriousness*, could, however, be made against Stevenson's own rendering of Horatian alcaics into English, as a poem written for an appropriately named friend, Horatio F. Brown, makes clear (*CP* 292). Here is its second stanza:

Moon-seen and merry, under the trellises,
Flush-faced they played with old polysyllables
Spring scents inspired, old wine diluted,
Love and Apollo were there to chorus.

'Moon-seen' and 'Flush-faced' are quirky, eye-catching compounds, and the palindromic middle sounds in 'under the trellises./old polysyllables' — in which 'llis' is phonologically reversed to produce 'syll' — are a deft touch, but tricks like these hardly accord with Horace's rebuff of over-embellishment. That Stevenson occasionally struggled in his attempts to recreate traditions of drinking poetry is attested by the tortuous notebook drafts of this poem, composed over several bedridden weeks in early 1881, and while the final version stands at twenty-eight lines, the notebook version has almost three hundred.

<4>Notebook drafts (*CP* 579-581) reveal that their author found it difficult to incorporate ornate

Latinate word-arrangements into English, and sometimes sacrificed both eloquence and syntax in doing so. During the process of revision, for example, 'Great-heart ancient boys by ale-house doors in the evening' becomes 'Brave old bearded lads by the alehouse doors at night'. The latter is slightly less tongue-tying, and the muddled word-order of the former (it is surely not the chanting lads who are supposed to be ancient, but the times in which they chanted) is lessened as 'old' can be read simply as an affectionate addendum. Drafts also show Stevenson toying with the idea of using 'tavern' ('Before the dawn, behind the moon/And chanting at the tavern door') but settling on the less FitzGerald-sounding, and more Anglicized 'ale-house' ('tavern' derives from the Latin *taberna*, via the old French *taverne*, while both parts of 'ale-house' are of old English origin: from *alu* and *hus*). Ultimately, any similarities between the above and the *Rubáiyát* may be traced to the debt owed by both Latin and Persian verse to Greek prosody. In the introduction to his various editions of the *Rubáiyát*, after all, FitzGerald acknowledges that some of his quatrains recall 'the Greek Alcaic, where the third line seems to lift and suspend the Wave that falls over in the last' (FitzGerald 8). This technique suits both what FitzGerald calls the 'strange Farrago of Grave and Gay' often found in oriental poetry, and the giddy mood-swings incurred by drinking.

<5>At this point in his professional life, moreover, Stevenson was driven by seemingly conflicting motives which come to the fore in his drinking verse: the desire to capture Horatian robustness, itself inspired by the swaggering, masculine verse of Alcaeus, and the eloquence of poetic language to create what he describes in his 1885 essay 'On Some Technical Elements of Style in Literature' as 'an arrangement of according letters, which is altogether arabesque and sensual' ('Pentland edition', XV, 228). That 'To Horatio F. Brown' contains certain contradictions in its use of poetry to produce melodious language, and its call to 'lore Horatian' — as drinking-song tradition is described in his epistle 'To Charles Baxter' (*CP* 275) — to celebrate the adventures of masculine 'Brave lads', is partly explained by the poem's genesis. Like so many of his drinking poems, Stevenson's excursion into classical territory was motivated by friendship. In a prefatory note on 'To Horatio F. Brown', Sidney Colvin states that 'The following experiment in English alcaics was suggested by conversations with Mr Brown and J[ohn] A[ddington] Symonds on metrical forms, followed by the despatch of some translations from old Venetian boat-songs by the former after his return from Venice' (qtd. *CP* 579).

<6>Brown, Symonds and Stevenson were all mutual friends but the latter did not partake in the others' regular trips to Venice. In his memoirs, Symonds recalls one such trip as the occasion of his first encounter with Angelo Fusato, a local man with whom he became besotted for several years: 'While we were drinking our wine [Horatio] Brown pointed out to me two men in white gondolier uniform, with the enormously broad black hat which was then fashionable... and one of them was strikingly handsome' (repr. White 333). The act of drinking wine translates from one of initiation to consummation, as Symonds records at the beginning of what he calls a 'strictly accurate' sonnet on their first lovemaking experience together:

I am not dreaming. He was surely here
And sat beside me on this hard low bed;
For we had wine before us, and I said —
'Take gold: 'twill furnish forth some better cheer' (repr. White 334).

Wine provides Angelo with enough courage and strength to see the act through to fruition. It is a substance loaded with possibilities and is as ambiguous and contradictory as the drinking verse of Alcaeus itself: strong and masculine on the one hand, gentle and sensuous on the other. Symonds finds these same qualities in his gondolier, who is 'manly in the truest sense, with the manliness of a soldier' but also in possession of 'a warm soft heart of an exceptionally kindly nature'.

<7>Horatio Brown, to whom Stevenson's poem is addressed, also admired strong masculine men, whose qualities he traced back to strong, masculine verse, especially in Latin. On Symonds's death, Brown became his literary executor and biographer and, as a poet in his own right, wrote homoerotic pieces inspired by classical tradition, as well as others detailing his own experiences. In this respect Brown and Symonds belong to a tradition anathema to the likes of Oscar Wilde, even if both employ classical motifs and forms to forge their erotically-charged worlds. As Alan Sinfield points out, 'The embarrassment for writers of heroic, lad-love poetry was the constitutional effeminacy of literary writing; they, above all, needed poetry to be masculine' (113). Such differences in taste were manifested in life-choices as much as in writing. Pale Cockney street urchins may have been entertainment enough for Wilde who, on plying them with drink, would transform them in his own mind so that they could come to resemble his various poetic progeny, such as Charmides, 'coming home/With pulpy figs and wine from Sicily' (53). But there seems little doubt that Symonds preferred rugged, apple-cheeked boys, whose glowing

health was apparently inseparable from their rustic masculinity. ('Dearer to me is the lad village-born with sinewy members/Than the pale face of a fine town-bred effeminate youngling' starts one Symonds poem (repr. White 330).)

<8>The agendas of both Symonds and Brown regarding their interest in classical verse, especially of the drinking variety, are clear enough (the love that dare not speak its name need not seem so daring after a few glasses of wine, even if the name of such love remains unspoken). The verdict is inconclusive, though, as to whether or not Stevenson shared some of his friends' inclinations. Queer readings have arisen of his work, particularly of *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (see, for example, Kostenbaum 31-55). And poems like 'To Horatio F. Brown' potentially open further avenues of commentary on this grey area of his life and work even if they remain, to the end, speculative. Stevenson's magnetism to homoerotically-inclined men has been highlighted by biographers — Jenni Calder notes that within his coterie 'male appreciation of Stevenson was often intensely physical' (65) — and Andrew Lang, a friend and fellow writer, recalled that 'Stevenson possessed, more than any man I ever met, the power of making men fall in love with him' (51). The spell Stevenson cast over his male friends is, moreover, in curious keeping with the mythical allure of the sensually potent consumptive. Susan Sontag usefully points out that 'Having TB was imagined to be an aphrodisiac, and to confer extraordinary powers of seduction' (18) and Stevenson may have enjoyed, even encouraged, the attention of his charmed circle. Given the importance of friendship to Stevenson, it is likely that any traces of eroticism in the vertiginous male-bonding scenes in 'To Horatio F. Brown' were deliberately meant to titillate its addressee, and that its author gained pleasure from giving pleasure. But it would be presumptuous to deduce that Stevenson himself found erotic delight in a poem that left him teetering uncomfortably on the cusp of two divergent currents: the sturdy masculinity of the classical forms to which it aspires, and the rather more elaborate, and, by implication, more effeminate, world of literary language.

<9>Stevenson may have been thrilled by the homosocial qualities of Venetian boat-songs but the remainder of this essay will argue that his reasons owed less assuredly to eroticism than to another, though equally personal, concern. Like another friend and sometime collaborator W. E. Henley, who also dabbled in drinking verse, Stevenson admired the masculinity of Latin models of the form. Stevenson was introduced to Henley in the winter of 1874 and was immediately taken with him. By that time, Henley had already lost one foot and was lame in the other resulting from tuberculosis of the bone but his spirit consistently remained, in the words of Stevenson's wife, 'fervid, boisterous' and he occasionally encouraged Stevenson to drink to excess, one of the reasons why Fanny Stevenson came to distrust and dislike him (see MacKay 169-177). For Stevenson, however, Henley was a perfect model of 'maimed strength and masterfulness', later admitting that he based certain aspects of his character John Silver from *Treasure Island* on him (*Letters*, IV, 102). This masterfulness of character is projected by Henley's own drinking poems, one of which, 'The Spirit of Wine' (110-111), makes an explicit connection between wine and vitality, beginning its first stanza with: 'I am health, I am heart, I am life!'. Unlike much Dionysian and Bacchic convention, Henley's Spirit of Wine is unashamedly masculine, not in the least bisexual or transgendered, and any melliferousness implied by 'the savour and scent of his music' is surpassed by 'his flushed and magnificent... his magnetic and mastering song'. This provides a stark contrast with Pater's celebration of Dionysus as 'the god... "of things too sweet"' in his 'A Study of Dionysus' (qtd. Dellamora 177), and pertains more to the robustly masculine figure of Apollo.⁽³⁾ Indeed, in a letter to Henley dated August 1st 1892, Stevenson applauds Henley's latest volume *The Song of the Sword* for containing 'an undertone of the true Apollo' (*Letters*, VIII, 172).

<10>In Stevenson's admiration for Henley's verse and character lies a more plausible reason why drinking attained such a heady presence in his own verse. Although Stevenson boasted of having spent much time as an undergraduate in Edinburgh's public houses as 'the companion of sea-men, chimney-sweeps, and thieves... a circle continually changed by the action of the police magistrate' (qtd. Balfour 83), the older Stevenson was not, generally, an avid drinker as his increasingly poor health did not permit excessive intake. This does not mean that he did not enjoy the stuff; to borrow his own metaphor from that early Horatian ode, the man became more of a sipper than a drinker. In the final throes of life, he complained about having to renounce what Graham Balfour, Stevenson's cousin and first biographer, calls 'even the very moderate quantity of red wine which seemed to be a necessity of life to him' (353). In his verse, however, he employs a facade of vitality that could never be attained to the same level in life and this is specifically augmented by references to communal drinking, of friends and comrades celebrating their shared good health together. This process cannot be considered in isolation from the rest of Stevenson's work. In his

together. This process cannot be considered in isolation from the rest of Stevenson's work. In his essay 'A Chapter on Dreams', he lays bare the ambition underlying *Jekyll and Hyde* to 'find a body, a vehicle for that strong sense of man's double being which must at times come in upon and overwhelm the mind of every thinking creation' ('Pentland edition', XV, 209). Writing drinking poems allowed Stevenson to inhabit a body teeming with health and strength, rather than one governed by sickness; to imagine and live out a salubrious and sociable persona in verse, forging a temporary space for him to escape the tuberculosis that perennially, and increasingly, troubled him.

<11>The relations between drinking and health have a hazy, complex history. T. P. Lucas, one of a multitude of late Victorian writers on the subject, concedes that 'Alcohol used carelessly is one of the most subtle destroyers of vitality, and has been the active agent in causing the death of thousands' (5). Unlike the mass of temperance tracts, this is a cautious claim; its author does not overstate the danger but refers to the negative aspects of alcohol only when 'used carelessly', that is to say, he means excessive, not moderate, drinking. The reference to 'vitality' calls forth one of the many sources of alcohol's enduring ambiguity. The word itself is a peculiar one; as a noun it originates from the late sixteenth century from the Latin *vitalitas* via old French, and is associated with strength and activity as qualities 'vital' to life itself. However, *vital* has another, archaic, meaning: viz, 'fatal to or destructive to life'. (The *OED* gives an example of this usage in a nineteenth-century reference to 'vital gashes'.) While this latter use of the term may be lost, its sense is still buried deep in its modern meaning. Death is, after all, an essential part of life and, like *mortal*, *vital* becomes a word that brings to mind the inter-dependency of these things. Stevenson plays on this overlap in a dramatic epistle to his friend Charles Baxter on a man, who, after many years of excessive drinking is finally 'deid o' Aqua-vitae' (*CP* 275). Although Stevenson's poem is deliciously ironic, the 'water of life' is an entirely appropriate expression for something that is also the stuff of death: the two things are not always so clear-cut and while alcohol animates the drinker's moods, giving an illusion of health and energy, excessive and prolonged consumption (in a sense, living too much) brings the drinker closer to death. That T. P. Lucas calls alcohol a 'subtle destroyer of vitality', then, shows that the line between moderation and excess, life and death, can be an extremely precarious one, a fact that takes on particularly cruel ironies among consumptives. Susan Sontag notes that 'it is characteristic of TB that many of its symptoms are deceptive — liveliness that comes from enervation, rosy cheeks that look like a sign of health but come from fever — and an upsurge of vitality may be a sign of approaching death' (17-18). Such a paradox is, however, less surprising given the historical interplay between notions of vitality and fatality.

<12>Stevenson recognized the benefits of social drinking and he was quick to sing its praises in verse even if the reality of his illness made him all the more alert to the dangers of excess. The period in which he lived also served up a plethora of mixed messages regarding alcohol's health-giving, and health-draining, effects. Although the current perception of wine is that a small regular intake can be beneficial, some nineteenth-century doctors went so far as to advocate the consumption of two litres a day. Certainly, most believed wine to be a preferable, safer social drink to beer and spirits and when temperance societies questioned the health-giving properties of wine, doctors defended it, often prescribing it (and other alcoholic beverages) for various ailments. In his 1884 medical handbook, Albert Buck, for example, states that 'Alcohol, if taken in full dose and very early, especially with an abundance of water, is most valuable in breaking up an impending cold' (192).

<13>With regards to the relations between alcohol and tuberculosis, the picture becomes all the more bewildering. The last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed a surge in medical discoveries that led to the birth of bacteriology and Louis Pasteur, a key figure in that movement, pronounced that 'wine was the healthiest and most hygienic of drinks' (qtd. Phillips 35). Arising from this new science, Robert Koch was able to identify the bacillus responsible for tuberculosis in 1882. Despite this advance, physicians retained muddled attitudes towards both the cause and treatment of tuberculosis, particularly regarding the question of alcoholic intake. In New York in 1859, one doctor, in an essay titled 'On the effects of the use of alcoholic drinks on tuberculous diseases', discredited the widespread idea that alcohol could, in fact, protect against tuberculosis (Bell, qtd. Sournia 72). In France, around the same time, another acknowledged that 'In some cases the development of miliary tuberculosis is undoubtedly influenced by alcohol abuse' (Lancereaux, qtd. Sournia 72). Influence and causation are not one and the same, though, and any caution implied by this latter observation is somewhat diminished by the same doctor's subsequent assertion that alcohol played a significant part in more than half of all tuberculosis cases.

<14>In Victorian Britain, most physicians took a more balanced view of things. In his medical guidebook, E. H. Ruddock urges consumptives to take regular doses of cod-liver oil mixed with a teaspoonful of French brandy, and to have a 'moderate allowance of beer, wine, or rum and milk' (288). Even if the quantitative specifics of a 'moderate allowance' remain open to individual interpretation, Ruddock stresses that 'In conclusion, all excesses must be avoided, whether in wine, the pleasures of the table, exercise, or in the gratification of any passion which over-stimulates the mind or body' (292). This suggests that the author takes a harsh view of immoderation for its own sake as something detrimental to the consumptive's well-being, rather than any specific chemical effects of alcohol on the mind and body. It is over-stimulation in general, rather than chemical stimulation per se, that Ruddock forbids.

<15>The ways in which consumptive poets reacted to their own illnesses, and reflected on them in writing, are no less eclectic than the debates that took place among doctors. Like Stevenson and Henley, Ernest Dowson suffered acutely from tuberculosis but unlike them, he spent more time drinking heavily than writing about it, a fact that may have helped lead him to death at the age of thirty-two. References to drinking that do find their way into Dowson's verse take the form of Dionysian appraisals placed alongside love, but are often tainted with sickness and gloom. 'Dregs' (148), for example, contains the lines:

The golden wine is drunk, the dregs remain,
Bitter as wormwood and as salt as pain;
And health and hope have gone the way of love
Into the drear oblivion of lost things.

There is a play here on the double meaning of 'drunk' as both predicative and past participle, signifying the mutual states of being drunk and of having been consumed, the latter creating a sense of passion (and vitality) spent. Their dark, forlorn tone, in the views of one of Dowson's biographers, shows the poet's 'mood of resignation' during a period of intense 'mortal difficulty' (Adams 156).

<16>For the more Epicurean Stevenson, on the other hand, alcohol provides a means of affirming individual identity within the firm context of a community, something that could only benefit the human spirit, the idea being that a happy, healthy mind would produce a healthy, or at least healthier, body. In the second stanza of a verse epistle 'To Mrs MacMorland' (*CP* 293), composed in February 1881, Stevenson sets out his dream of vitality as something imagined in terms of drinking:

Up from the laboured plain, and up
From low sea-levels, we arise
To drink of that diviner cup,
The rarer air, the clearer skies;

These lines were inspired by their author's time in the Swiss Alpine town of Davos-Platz, a place he moved to for reasons dictated by health. The following month he published an article on 'The Stimulation of the Alps' in which he strives to pinpoint the experience of walking in 'the rare air, clear cold, and blinding light of Alpine winters'. This task is undertaken with some difficulty as Stevenson admits, 'There is nothing more difficult to communicate on paper than this baseless ardour, this stimulation of the brain, this sterile joyousness of spirits' ('Pentland edition', XX, 293). Stevenson proceeds to compare this experience with 'a certain wine of France' that 'when drunk in the land of its nativity, is still as a pool, clean as river water, and as heady as verse'. The analogy is a curious, but ultimately fruitless, one for when it comes to substantiation he simply reverts back to the original experience, comparing the drinking of this wine to the 'fairy titillation of the nerves among the snow and sunshine of the Alps... a mode, we need not say of intoxication, but of insobriety'. All of this amounts to a 'dream of health' that 'is perfect while it lasts' ('Pentland edition', XX, 295).

<17>The ideal offered by Stevenson's elusive 'dream of health' — as well as its limitations — is verified by those poems composed on behalf of various clubs he had been affiliated with. The anti-clerical and anti-establishment Society of Liberty, Justice and Reverence, referred to in correspondence as the 'L.J.R.', had been formed by Stevenson, his cousin, and a few others in 1872 and met regularly in an Edinburgh pub. The story goes that when Stevenson's father discovered a copy of its constitution, he was appalled by its blasphemy and demanded the

society's immediate cessation. Apparently, Thomas Stevenson blamed these bad companions for corrupting his son (see Balfour 113). Failing in this attempt at rebellion, Stevenson naturally turned to verse, commemorating the star-crossed society in his 'Inscription for the Tankard of a Society now Dissolved' (CP 316), the closing stanza of which ends with a salubrious image of its members' 'Flushed and glad... mirrored faces!' in the gleaming metal of the tankard. This particular piece was also something of a technical experiment for its author. Till that point, Stevenson had written almost exclusively in iambic tetrameters — save for a few Whitmanian experiments — but the trochees here suit the genially imperative tone - 'Take this tankard'; 'Drink one silent toast'; 'Stoop and in the metal see': all strong words for a strong-minded poem.

<18>In some respects, Stevenson uses the language of drinking to bolster otherwise humdrum poetic exercises by overcoming weakness and adding spirit where spirit lacks. As Horace asks in the fifth of his first book of *Epistles* (282-283), 'fecundi calices quem non fecere disertum?' (*The flowing bowl: whom has it not made eloquent?*), a claim surely all the truer for drink as a subject for poetry than for any actual effects of drink on poets. Indeed, by the end of his first prolific decade of verse-writing, Stevenson had become aware of the formal limits of his talents, confessing in a letter written in April 1879 to being 'a weak brother in verse', the first of many expressions of self doubt (*Letters*, II, 310). The 'Flushed... and glad' homosociality of drinking-verse tradition thus supplied a poetically invigorating force for their author and, more crucially, a personal one. For Andrew Lang, Stevenson was 'more like a lass than a lad' (repr. Terry 58) and if he occasionally feared his own illness to be an emasculating condition, particularly on his marriage to a domineering wife, the drinking poems provided one way in which living through literature could counter the reality of having to 'live the life of a delicate girl' (Balfour 215). The world depicted by the drinking poem is, after all, a predominantly male one, and the world of its production, even more so.⁽⁴⁾

<19>Stevenson would write many commemorative verses so, unsurprisingly, the youthful enthusiasm that marks the 'Inscription for the Tankard of a Society now Dissolved' waned. His 'Poem for a Class Reunion' (CP 321-322) is memorable for its wistful refrain: 'We, who were seventy-two, Are now only seven or eight'. In a letter written the following day Stevenson describes that evening — January 15th 1875 to be precise — as 'great fun', prizing the 'vinous enthusiasm' of his audience when he read his poem. (*Letters*, II, 108-109). But Stevenson's own enthusiasm was, even then, a contentious matter, a clue to which appears in the opening lines:

Whether we like it, or don't,
There's a sort of bond in the fact
That we were all by one master taught,
By one master were bullied and whackt.

The clubability of old schoolfellows provides guaranteed companionship, welcomed or not. However, a 'sort of bond' seems less secure than the communal stability such things are often presumed to be remembered for. Perhaps the problem is that Stevenson's affection is limited and if the only thing he has in common with his colleagues is being taught and beaten by the same master, who can blame him?

<20>As Stevenson grew older his lifelong consumption inevitably reached its wildfire state, leaving him unable to lead the life he once lived. His drinking poems thus become more metaphorical than literal, and their dramatic complexity enriched. At the same time, though, the 'laboured plain' of his poem 'To Mrs MacMorland' becomes an increasingly fitting epitaph for this body of work as Stevenson's ventures into drinking-verse territory became increasingly strained, as attested by the laborious drafts of 'To Horatio F. Brown'. By the time he came to compose 'To the Thompson Class from their Stammering Laureate' (CP 323-324) in 1883, certain cracks in the process of creating his affected persona were starting to show, even if the final product still achieves the required communal jollity. The poem in question takes fourteen quatrains to propose a toast beginning:

Friends, that here together met
Toast the flying year,
Do not at the board forget
Friends afar from here.

The 'friends afar' refers to, amongst others, Stevenson himself who was residing in Hyères in the south of France at the time. Despite his absence, he was still the elected laureate of the club who

lined together once a year and it was the custom for him to contribute a poem for the occasion even if he could not be there to read in person. The verses rumble along nicely until the sixth stanza in which the poet's exile becomes explicit:

Still, as feasted, rosy, warm
Round the board you sit
Vanished schoolday faces swarm,
Vanished figures flit.

Until this point Stevenson speaks as 'we' and 'us', drawing himself and his schoolmates together, but he is unable to avoid the fact that he is separated from them and his sudden second person address ('Round the board you sit') is awkward and conspicuous. The matter of forging an illusion of all-inclusiveness, yet acknowledging his obvious absence, must have preyed on his mind.

<21>Pieces like these are indebted to the convivial tradition in Latin verse, particularly Martial, another of Stevenson's literary heroes. They are, therefore, devised to be spoken and heard at occasions on which lots of wine has been drunk, and require their audience to be in certain frames of mind — preferably slightly intoxicated ones — in order to take full effect. In keeping with this convention, Stevenson could afford to be occasionally both irreverent and irrelevant, but he could not overstep the mark required of him, something that 'To the Thompson Class from their Stammering Laureate' comes close to doing. Stevenson attended the Edinburgh Academy for just two years so he was not as closely bound to the club as some of the other members, but he seemed to hold affectionate memories for his school days. In a letter to John Wilson Brodie dated December 20th 1883, he outlines the circumstances of the poem's composition:

You will think me a most truculent ogre and unlicked bear to have been so long of answering; but I did not wish to write at all till I had strung some doggerel, and this, overpressed as I was with work and a good deal out of sorts, I found no easy job. However — now the deed is done, and I inclose some seasonable but most halting stanzas. I shall say better in prose how very heartily I wish to you and all my old

schoolfellows, the wale of good living and good luck. Salute them from the exile...
(*Letters*, IV, 221-222)

The sentiments expressed here are well meaning, honest and sincere, even if Stevenson had retired to Hyères to recuperate from ill health and was not at all in high spirits at the time. He plays down the severity of his sickness (he was more than 'out of sorts', he was confined to bed for six months after a horrific lung haemorrhage) so as not to dampen his friend's mood but the strain placed on him to write a poem he did not especially want to write shows. Take the eighth quatrain:

Dux and booby, fill your glasses
And with beaming eye
To your friends of Thomson's classes
Drain the goblet dry.

Curiously, the most recent edition of Stevenson's poems places the letter p in both the title and text of this poem. Other sources (such as *Letters*, IV, 222-224, in which the poem follows Stevenson's letter to Brodie) have 'Thomson', not 'Thompson', in the poem but retain the p in the title. This anomaly doubtless owes to the fact that while 'Thompson' refers to Stevenson's former teacher, Mr D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson, 'Thomson' alludes to the Scottish expression 'We're all Jock Thomson's bairns', meaning, we are all essentially the same. Even if the joke was lost in performance, the poem was included in a contemporary issue of the *Edinburgh Academy Chronicle*. And if, like the lazy closing toast to 'Auld Lang Syne', Stevenson's reliance on such convention seems jaded, it is because the process of composition was a particularly arduous one. Originally Stevenson had the following version of the above for the poem's opening:

Dux and boobies, fill your glasses
And with beaming eye,
To your friends and fellow asses,
Drain the goblets dry. (*CP* 599)

The alterations made to these lines involve small but cunning manoeuvres. Stevenson must have realised that 'To your friends and fellow asses' seemed slightly audacious and decided to replace

realised that 'to your friends and fellow asses' seemed slightly audacious and decided to replace it with something more politic. Also, in dropping the 's' from 'goblets', he conceives a stronger sense of union, of everyone draining the communal goblet together rather than each man selfishly tending his own. These are minor matters in the art of versification but they intimate Stevenson's need to maximise the idea of communal union. There is a significant amount of literary posturing in this poem: its author was not nearly as cheerful as its lines suggest. However, some carefully calculated drinking metaphors make the whole thing appear to be a lot more convincing.

<22>The majority of Stevenson's poems concerned with drink and drinking were written during two periods of his life: between 1871 and 1873, and from 1881 till 1884. The relationship between these periods is a remarkable one as the Hyères drinking poems often focus on nostalgia for the earlier period. The *Brasheana* (CP 307-311), a sequence of eleven sonnets dedicated to a former wine merchant near Edinburgh University, and the 'Ode by Ben Jonson, Edgar Allan Poe, and a bungler' (CP 311-312) that contains the dictum 'Let us be fools, my friend, let us be drunken/Let us be angry and extremely silly' capture the older Stevenson's recollections of his youthful frivolity. Such lines may have been written by an older Stevenson, but they employ a dramatic persona of a younger Stevenson.

<23>It is the beery Edinburgh of his student days that makes the greatest mark on Stevenson's later sensibilities. In a letter written at Hyères to Baxter dated December 15th 1881, Stevenson recalls his student days with a fondness and tenderness quite unlike the ferocious tone of poems — with opening lines like 'Hail! childish slaves of social rules' — penned around the time being recalled:

Ah! what would I not give to steal this evening with you through the big, echoing, college archway, and away south under the street lamps, and to dear Brash's, now defunct! But the old time is dead also; never, never to revive. It was a sad time too, but so gay and so hopeful, and we had such sport with all our low spirits, and all our distresses, that it looks like a lamplit, vicious fairy land behind me. O for ten Edinburgh minutes — sixpence between us, and the ever glorious Lothian Road... Do you remember Brash? the L.J.R.?... the compass near the sign of the Twinkling Eye? the night I lay on the pavement in misery? I swear it by the eternal sky
Johnson — nor Thomson — ne'er shall die!
Yet I fancy they are dead too; dead like Brash. (*Letters*, III, 263-264)

The mood swings and fragmented lines of thought in this letter are untypical of Stevenson's pristine letter-writing generally, but perhaps intimate something of his mental state at this point in his life. Stevenson spent much of his life in pursuit of stable bodily and mental health, changing homes and countries with the changing of seasons, doing anything, and going anywhere, to find a climate that suited his circumstances. Balfour reads his subject's life and work as an incessant struggle between aspiring to the 'strong' and 'healthy' on the one hand, and the suppression of 'dark fancies' on the other, oppositional forces that he believes come to the fore in *Kidnapped* and *Jekyll and Hyde* respectively (252). The ideals of communal drinking may aspire to the former but before he died in 1894, Stevenson witnessed the decline of Baxter — with whom he had spent many drinking sessions as an undergraduate in the early seventies, and sent mock-drinking songs imagined as one drunken persona addressing another after leaving university — into alcoholism following a breakdown on the death of his wife. This event particularly disturbed Stevenson because he had left Baxter in charge of negotiations on his behalf over editing and publishing (see *Letters*, VIII, 356-366). By the end of Stevenson's life, the idealised dream-world of drinking verse had given way to the nightmarish reality of excess.

<24>Certainly in Stevenson's verse, the 'strong' and 'healthy' dominate, a fact that led the Bishop of Oxford in an 1891 work titled *The Spirit of Discipline* to praise his 'graceful, noble lines' for their triumph of 'the virtue that is called *fortitude* or strength' over 'gloom and sloth and irritation' (qtd. Balfour 195). In his private life, it was precisely these darker qualities, arising largely from illness, that prompted him to seek and explore alternative, healthier personae in verse. His time at Hyères, however, may have skewed his ability to balance these oppositional forces, his haemorrhage, in particular, calling to attention the delicate line between vitality and fatality and consequently disturbing his sense of inner peace. Ten years later and after having moved to Samoa for health reasons, he recalled: 'Happy (said I), I was only happy once, that was at Hyères; it came to end from a variety of reasons, decline of health, change of place, increase of money, age with his stealing steps; since then, as before then, I know not what it means' (qtd. Balfour 203).

<25>One thing in all of this is certain: the haemorrhage at Hyères seriously changed the way Stevenson was to live the rest of his life. As Fanny wrote to her mother-in-law on 18th May 1884: ‘he must live the life of an invalid. He must be perfectly tranquil, trouble about nothing, have no shocks or surprises, not even pleasant ones; must not eat too much, drink too much, laugh too much; may write a little, but not too much; talk very little, and walk no more than can be helped’ (repr. Balfour 215). Stevenson had lived his adult life as an Epicurean, but now his lifestyle accorded with Epicurus’s concept of the ideal life being the pursuit of *eudaimonia*, translated literally as well-being, in the purest sense. Unlike Pater’s re-evaluation of Epicurean ideals, in which life is but a brief ‘interval’, and a fulfilled life ought to be spent ‘in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time’ (62), Stevenson had to do his best to avoid any form of over-excitement if he was to maintain pleasantness and personal well-being.

<26>Stevenson not only changed the way he lived his life; the evidence of his poetry suggests that he also changed the way he lived his life through verse. Still ill and hiding out in Hyères, this splenetic little epigram presents a very different attitude towards drink-fuelled sociability at this particular stage in his life (CP 302):

I had companions, I had friends,
I had of whisky various blends.
The whisky was all drunk; and lo!
The friends were gone for evermo!
And when I marked the ingratitude,
I to my maker turned and spewed.

These lines were written in May 1884 and were borne out of their author’s irritation that his friends were not writing to him while he recuperated from one of the worst bouts of illness he had ever suffered. Here drinking is exposed as an artificial means of forging friendship: after the whisky is done, there is nothing remaining to bind people together. It is unusual for Stevenson to be as cynical in verse as this, although this piece was never intended for oratory or publication, nor was it written for any of his friends. But the poem was to be Stevenson’s last on the subject of drinking, save for his ‘Heather Ale’ ballad in 1889. The dreams of a consumptive can only remain healthy and strong for so long and Stevenson’s ‘cup of life’ contained, after all, a limited supply.

Endnotes

(1) Symonds’s dedication, addressed to Stevenson, reads ‘To you, in memory of past symposia...’. The title of this collection sparked moderate controversy. The editors of Symonds’s letters point out that the book’s sole original reviewer, ‘[Edmund] Gosse liked the book better than the title, which he found misleading and frivolous and not a reflection of the book’s scholarly concerns’. (Schueller and Peter Eds., 962n.). That the title is partly ironic, given Symonds’s homosexual tastes, is confirmed by the Luther-attributed epigraph attached to the collection: ‘Wer nicht liebt Weib, Wein, und Gesang,/der bleibt ein Narr sein Leben Lang’. (‘Who loves not woman, wine and song/Remains a fool his whole life long’.) (△)

(2) Horace’s ‘simple myrtle’, celebrated for strength and glory was adopted by late nineteenth-century homosexual writers, becoming an official emblem of the ‘Order of Chaeronea’, a homoerotic spiritual society founded in 1897 by the poet George Cecil Ives and whose roll-call included Laurence Housman (Conner et al. 244). Prior to this, it had been a literary trope, as seen in Symonds’s poem ‘Hesperus and Hymenaeus’, a dramatic tale of a shepherd who invokes the Greek God Hesperus to guide him to his lover, Myrtilus, in return for ‘the gift of flowers/And golden honey and sweet myrrh and wine’ (Conner et al. 177). (△)

(3) On the gender and sexual ambiguity of Dionysus, see Conner et al. 123. The Apollonian/Dionysian (masculine/feminine) dualism has permeated western literature and art and its myth is perpetuated and explored in Camille Paglia’s *Sexual Personae*, especially the chapter titled ‘Apollo and Dionysus’ (72-98). (△)

(4) While nineteenth-century women writers did not write drinking poetry, many temperance poets were women and their poems use techniques similar to those found in drinking poetry. Julia A. Moore’s ‘Temperance Reform Clubs’, for one, urges men to wear their ribbon badges with pride, for ‘It shows you’ve joined the club to be/A man among the rest’ (repr. Robins 129). By employing the language of male social inclusion and collectivity, the aim is to seduce those eager

Employing the language of male social inclusion and connectivity, the aim is to secure those eager to belong. Temperance verse thus often employs the language of drinking poetry — its ideological converse — to get its message across, something that extends to the mutually inclusive ideals of health (which, in temperance verse, means avoiding alcohol, rather than indulging in it) and of homosociality (which, it is stressed, can be achieved without inebriation). (△)

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