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# Language Evolution, Literary Craft, and Aesthetic Mysticism in Robert Louis Stevenson's Theory of Style

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Robert Louis Stevenson's essays on literary style construct a complex theory of creative practice in which deliberate, calculated authorial choices intermingle with mysterious intuitions and unconscious compulsions. The article argues that this theory resisted efforts in late Victorian culture and education to methodize writing as an instrumental skill reducible to fixed, objective rules. Drawing on evolutionary models of language and aesthetics, which problematized the conventional opposition between thought and discourse, inspiration and production, Stevenson appealed to an expansive concept of craft in which practitioners simultaneously used their tools and were shaped and guided by them. However, he envisaged intellect and tact existing in composition less as a balance than as a tension so that the former managed the instinctive pleasures of pattern-making with increasing self-consciousness as humanity advanced. His theory of style thus engaged with a wider discourse of optimistic evolutionary aestheticism which envisioned humanity progressing towards perfection through the transcendental developments of art and literature. It also resonates suggestively with contemporary theories of 'craft consciousness' and linguistic-aesthetic enchantment as sources of resistance and ideological disruption. Stevenson's phenomenology of literary style further offers a historical analogue to ecocritical concepts of language as a means of connecting to the wider universe.

In an 1883 essay Robert Louis Stevenson presented literary composition as a process in two stages: the 'ideal' and 'realistic'. These terms were typically used to discuss the formal features of completed texts. In Stevenson's formulation, though, they stood for successive phases of *poiesis*: the initial mental vision and then 'the technical method' of manifesting it on the page. 'A work of art', he explained,

> is first cloudily conceived in the mind; during the period of gestation it stands more clearly forward from these swaddling mists, puts on expressive lineaments, and becomes at length that most faultless, but also, alas! that incommunicable product of the human mind, a perfected design. On the approach to execution all is changed. The artist must now step down, don his working clothes, and become the artisan. He now resolutely commits his airy conception, his delicate Ariel, to the touch of matter; he must decide, almost in a breath, the scale, the style, the spirit, and the particularity of execution of his whole design.[1]

The passage chimes with Carl Fehrman's observation that post-Romantic era imaging of literary creation has typically been divided between 'an aesthetics of inspiration', characterized by images of 'growth' and 'organic life', and 'an aesthetics of work' figured as 'craftsmanship, industry, and artifacts'.[2] Stevenson's two-stage model of composition seemed to keep these imaginaries separate, much as Lynn Worsham notes contemporary 'neoromantic' compositional pedagogy separates writing into 'genesis' and 'technique'. Worsham argues this conceptual division and sequential ordering has the effect of downplaying writing's mystery and potential disruptiveness in the classroom. Its creative element, she writes, is framed as individual and mercurial while attention is focused on the rational, practical 'skill or craft of writing, which devolves into mechanics'.[3] Stevenson, similarly, seemed to reduce the quasi-spiritual category of 'style', much speculated upon by Victorians, into a mundane system of learnable rules. Thus he declared that, regardless of an author's innate genius, 'Style [...] is still the one quality in which he may improve himself at will.' He would expand on this idea two years later in his essay 'On Style in Literature: Some Technical Elements'.[4]

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[1] Robert Louis Stevenson, 'A Note on Realism', in Stevenson, *Essays in the Art of Writing* (Chatto & Windus, 1908), pp. 93–110 (p. 98).

[2] Carl Fehrman, *Poetic Creation: Inspiration or Craft*, trans. by Karin Petherick (University of Minnesota Press, 1980), p. 4.

[3] Lynn Worsham, 'The Question Concerning Invention: Hermeneutics and the Genesis of Writing', *Pre/Text*, 8 (1987), pp. 197–244 (p. 199).

[4] Later collections of Stevenson's essays entitled the paper 'On Some Technical Elements of Style'. Hereafter, I will refer to it in the main text simply as 'On Style'.

Yet, upon closer examination, Stevenson's apparent dichotomy between mysterious inspiration and methodical stylistic craft falters. His hypothetical writer chose materials and modes of execution not systematically but 'almost in a breath', proceeding intuitively and tactfully rather than logically. Further, contrary to his apparent sequential separation of 'ideal' inspiration from 'realistic' execution, Stevenson's choice of words suggested the two activities were intertwined. Instead of manifesting a 'design' through a predetermined 'technical method', his writing technique emerged through the act of writing. The description of the 'design' being 'perfected' implied the 'ideal' was a developmental process of testing and reworking, like the artisanal labour of drafting and editing. On the other hand, although the inspiration/craft binary echoed that of the soul and body, the genesis of the text's 'spirit' was located not in an initial imaginative conception but in the work of writing it out. The soul of the text did not precede its body but evolved in parallel to it.

Stephen Arata claims Stevenson's statements on aesthetics resisted trends towards 'the regularization of reading' in late Victorian psychology, education, and literary criticism. While academic authorities were framing reading as a methodical attentiveness, Arata suggests, Stevenson asserted the value of distraction and reverie.[5] This article argues that Stevenson's comments on style similarly resisted the regularization of writing into an instrumental skill serving extra-literary aims and reducible to fixed, methodical rules. In an era when educational reformers increasingly deprecated languages and literature in favour of the supposedly 'objective' and 'useful' natural sciences, he framed writing as a sublime, transcendental force that embodied and catalysed moral-spiritual progress. Further, while academic English studies were shifting from production-focused rhetoric to more empiricist literary scholarship, and the emerging system of national education emphasized the drilling of grammatical and compositional rules, he foregrounded the phenomenological occultism of the writing process.[6] Late Victorian aesthetes led by Walter Pater modelled a subjective, sagacious cultural criticism, which endowed artistic beauty with a quasi-religious significance and mystery.[7] Such mystification of art and literature dovetailed with growing interest in alternative forms of enchantment amid the erosion of orthodox Christian doctrines by secular science.[8] Similarly, as many late

[5] Stephen Arata, 'Stevenson, Morris and the Value of Idleness', in *Robert Louis Stevenson: Writer of Boundaries*, ed. by Richard Ambrosini and Richard Dury (University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), pp. 3–12 (p. 10).

[6] See Ian Small, *Conditions for Criticism: Authority, Knowledge, and Literature in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Clarendon Press, 1991); Carol Atherton, *Defining Literary Criticism: Scholarship, Authority and the Possession of Literary Knowledge, 1880–2002* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 3–6.

[7] Hilary Fraser, *Beauty and Belief: Aesthetics and Religion in Victorian Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), doi:10.1017/CBO9780511896460.

[8] Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 4–5.

Victorians imagined a mysterious, progressive power animating the universe, artistic creation and appreciation could be conceptualized as forms of this cosmic evolution, manifested in an aesthetic tact that resisted methodization.[9] It was in this cultural context that Stevenson mystified composition.

Key to his compositional mysticism was an expansive idea of craft in which the literary artisan became entangled with and partly conditioned by his working material, language, or rather, the aesthetic potentialities of language. Stevenson framed this aphesis as not disempowering but ennobling. Drawing on evolutionary models of language, he portrayed literary style as a progressive force that grew in tandem with the imagination and sympathy. However, his phenomenology of stylish composition was complex and fraught. He imagined style deriving from instinctive pleasures in pattern-making, but he also envisaged the intellect managing these tendencies with increasing calculation and self-consciousness as humanity advanced. Further, he suggested a point came where methodical reason gave way to mysterious tact, a kind of higher aesthetic instinct which seemed to adumbrate a future state of perfection.

I contend Stevenson's analysis of style as craft, and his equivocation over the degrees of agency and consciousness it involved, offer a suggestive historical analogue with more recent concepts in cultural theory of writerly 'craft consciousness' and of enchantment as a source of resistance. As distant as such politicized, socially engaged theory can seem from Stevenson's elitist and spiritualistic aestheticism, it echoes his enchanted view of language and cultural production as sites of potential revelation and liberation. Dennis Denisoff has recently argued Stevenson's travel writing contributed to a *fin-de-siècle* discourse of 'open ecology' that contemplated 'a shift of authority away from both society and the humanist ego to a vaster organic force of life, death, and decay'.[10] I suggest Stevenson's theory of style accorded with this eco-ontology, portraying writing as not a self-enclosed system but a means of connecting with the wider universe and giving up some of one's agency to it.

First, I sketch the late Victorian context that encouraged Stevenson to construct writing as a mystical craft, involving changing ideas about the nature of labour, language, and aesthetics. I then show how his thoughts about verbal aesthetics and composition developed through his essay-writing career, culminating in 'On Style'. I suggest his writing theory was shaped by his interest in evolutionary psychology and vestigial Calvinist faith, which mystified both the private self and work as an activity.

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[9] See Lindsay Wilhelm, 'The Utopian Evolutionary Aestheticism of W. K. Clifford, Walter Pater, and Mathilde Blind', *Victorian Studies*, 59.1 (2016), pp. 9–34, doi:10.2979/victorianstudies.59.1.01.

[10] Dennis Denisoff, *Decadent Ecology in British Literature and Art, 1860–1910: Decay, Desire, and the Pagan Revival* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 108, doi:10.1017/9781108991599.

He thus envisaged writing as disciplining and managing the body's primitive sensual urges in order to render it receptive to higher aesthetic promptings, which inhered in language but which mere human reason could neither comprehend nor instrumentalize at will. Finally, I consider how his literary-linguistic mysticism resonates with recent theoretical discourse on the themes of writing craft and enchantment.

## Mystifying the craft of writing

Craft had long been conceptualized in opposition to art or fine art: the former being associated with manual skills and practical ends while the latter appeared autotelic, intellectual, and spiritual.[11] However, the Protestant and, specifically, Calvinist notion of work as a quasi-priestly calling had the potential to imbue labouring life with similar nobility. This potential was increasingly manifested through the nineteenth century via rising middle-class power. Thomas Carlyle thus declared that 'all work [...] is noble' and 'work is alone noble' since it constituted the means by which one got 'his destiny as a man fulfilled'.[12] Such rhetoric coincided with fresh figurations of masculinity in terms of muscular strength and stamina, which came to align with the gendered moral virtues of restraint and rational self-control.[13] Instead of being defined in contrast to mindless work, art could now be imagined as a form of work, and if it contained bodily, unconscious elements these need not necessarily be degrading but could form part of its transcendent character. Hence, Carlyle imaged his writing as a kind of muscular exertion in which ideas and forms sprang forth, unanticipated by the reasoning ego, and the seemingly organic spontaneity of this process guaranteed for him its exaltedness. As he wrote: 'Manufacture is intelligible, but trivial; creation is great, and cannot be understood.'[14] The same logic underlay John Ruskin's attacks upon industrialism and celebration of medieval handcrafts. For him, industrial production treated work too instrumentally, valuing only efficiency of output, whereas labour's true value lay in developing workers' moral-spiritual natures. He claimed the old crafts performed this function better because they allowed workers to follow their intuitions instead of controlling every movement and so reducing them to machines.[15] From this

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[11] Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[12] Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (Little and Brown, 1843), pp. 154, 157.

[13] See Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 27, 41, 60. On feminine valences of craft, see Talia Schaffer, *Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Oxford University Press, 2011), doi:10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780195398045.001.0001.

[14] Thomas Carlyle, *Characteristics* (Osgood, 1877), p. 11.

[15] *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, Library edn, 39 vols (Allen, 1903–12), XI: *The Stones of Venice volume III and Examples of the Architecture of Venice* (1904), pp. 47–48.

perspective, craft signified creative freedom and transcendence because it was not completely subordinated to intellectual systems and worldly interests: it made space for nobler, necessarily obscure impulses and purposes.[16]

Conceptualizing literature as such a craft could help to preserve its mystical aura amid scientific and philosophical trends that tended to disenchant it. The Romantic philologist Wilhelm von Humboldt had described language as at once a human production and a mysterious 'emission of force', which unfolded through history as a form of 'spiritual progress'.[17] Romantic philology framed languages as things simultaneously made and grown, moving towards teloi beyond their users' anticipations. Such notions contrasted sharply with the empiricist tradition derived from John Locke and undergirding much modern science, which regarded language as simply a passive tool constructed by humans for practical and rational ends.[18] However, as the discipline developed, comparative philology had increasingly decoupled language from the moral-spiritual 'culture' of literature, suggesting the former evolved through predictable, mechanistic shifts in sound and grammar, irrespective of meaning. Further, from the 1860s onwards, some linguists such as William Dwight Whitney argued that meaning was determined by arbitrary social convention, which followed not the careful work of literary masters but mere majority usage. Formal beauty came to be so mystified and revered in late Victorian literary culture partly because it seemed to offer a means of defending literature's transcendental dignity against such linguistic mechanization and philistine instrumentalism.[19]

Conceptualizing literature as a craft involving bodily skill and unconscious intuition might seem to clash with the writerly 'self-consciousness' often associated with late Victorian aestheticism and with Stevenson's painstaking writing habits.[20] However, consciousness was a problematic and ambiguous category in *fin-de-siècle* culture. Developments in psychology had constructed 'attention' as a limited psychic resource of narrow scope that flitted across the surface of mental phenomena, while the Romantic heritage had differentiated 'aesthetic consciousness' as a special, elusive state which

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[16] See Glenn Adamson, *The Invention of Craft* (Bloomsbury, 2013).

[17] Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On Language: On the Diversity of Human Language, Construction, and Its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*, ed. by Michael Losonsky, trans. by Peter Heath (Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 31, 215.

[18] On philology and Victorian culture, see Hans Aarsleff, *The Study of Language in England, 1780–1860* (Princeton University Press, 1967); Will Abberley, *English Fiction and the Evolution of Language, 1850–1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), doi:10.1017/CBO9781316181683; and Chris Jones, *Fossil Poetry: Anglo-Saxon and Linguistic Nativism in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2018), doi:10.1093/oso/9780198824527.001.0001.

[19] See Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton University Press, 1986).

[20] On Stevenson's 'self-consciousness', see Alan Sandison, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Appearance of Modernism: A Future Feeling* (St Martin's Press, 1996), p. 4, doi:10.1057/9780230376397.

'open[ed] the mind to modes of being and modes of thinking beyond quotidian consciousness'.[21] This concept of aesthetic consciousness, derived, ultimately, from Friedrich Schiller's model of aesthetics as spontaneous mental 'play', suggested a different kind of consciousness to the methodical logic and inferences of rationalism. Angela Leighton argues that his notion that forms were vital and dynamic rendered them 'uncanny' things which had occult ends and perhaps used and took possession of writers and artists as much as vice versa.[22] Aesthetic consciousness could involve grappling with obscurity, feeling one's way tactfully, and this notion helped to solidify the binary between the artist and man of science, the latter working by explicit method and the former by mysterious promptings.[23]

Richard Adelman argues Victorians such as Walter Pater imagined aesthetic consciousness as a product of hard work. Their artists needed to engage in prolonged, disciplined toil in order to render their minds receptive to the mysterious hints of beauty (pp. 114–48). Artistry was thus portrayed as a paradoxical combination of strict self-control and reflectiveness and passive yielding to unconscious (or perhaps supra-conscious) tact. For example, in 'Style' (1889), Pater depicted writers mastering language similarly as craftsmen mastered their tools and materials, with prolonged acquaintance enabling graceful, automatic manipulation of them. 'The literary artist is of necessity a scholar', he wrote, studying the 'abundant and often recondite laws' of the language in which he worked through 'systematic reading of a dictionary'. The stylist chose his words carefully, 'resist[ing] a constant tendency on the part of the majority [...] to efface the distinctions of language' while having an 'architectural conception' of the whole text 'which foresees the end in the beginning and never loses sight of it, and in every part is conscious of all the rest'. Unlike the reader, who experienced the text phenomenologically, the scholar-stylist envisioned it all at once via an atemporal, ideal design. Yet such systematic effort was allied with obscure intuitions, as Pater wrote: 'every language possesses a genius, a very fastidious genius, of its own', and the stylist developed a 'sympathy' with the 'genius' of his language, grasping each *mot juste* by some 'electric affinity'.[24]

Such literary theory drew on a new evolutionary psychology, which traced aesthetic appreciation and production to a progressive refinement and elaboration of the nervous

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[21] Richard Adelman, *Idleness and Aesthetic Consciousness, 1815–1900* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 146, doi:10.1017/9781108539791. On Victorian studies of attention, see Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (MIT Press, 1999).

[22] Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 8, doi:10.1093/oso/9780199290604.001.0001.

[23] See Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (Zone Books, 2007), pp. 229–31.

[24] Walter Pater, *Appreciations with an Essay on Style* (Macmillan, 1889), pp. 8, 9, 11, 18, 12, 23.

system.[25] Herbert Spencer argued the arts had evolved from a Schillerian 'play-impulse', manifested originally in 'Movements [...] that bring many muscles into moderate harmonious action and strain none'.[26] As players developed psychologically, they came to derive further pleasure from externalizing these movements into material patterns that stimulated subtler correlative movements on their sensory nerves, as well as on those of spectators. The pleasurableness of such pattern-making rested on the same principles of 'moderate harmonious action' as Spencer declared all artworks required 'a variety sufficient to prevent monotony, but not a variety that too much distracts the attention'. The primary aim of art, then, was, perhaps, not any kind of 'truth' (mimetic or ideal) but simply the ongoing development of 'greater heterogeneity' and, therefore, 'greater variety of excitements' without overstraining any part of the perceptual apparatus.[27]

This aesthetic theory aligned for Spencer with a view of literary style as a manifestation of 'force'. He seemed to demystify style, reducing it to quasi-industrial 'economy' of verbal material.[28] Nonetheless, he denied stylish writing could be manufactured to technical rules because it was inextricable from the writer's subjective, embodied experiences. Style, he insisted, was a skill that emerged partly from 'natural aptitude' and partly from reading 'well-framed sentences', combining instincts with a kind of training of the sensorium. 'The ideal form for a poem, essay, or fiction', he wrote, 'is that which the ideal writer would evolve spontaneously. One in whom the powers of expression fully responded to the state of feeling, would unconsciously use that variety in the mode of presenting his thoughts, which Art demands.'[29] Spencer's comments confirm Michael Hurley and Marcus Waithe's observation that style in the nineteenth century had 'a habit of returning to the body' and 'the physical scene of composition', resonating with the term's etymology in *stylus*, which connoted the unique indentations made by the writer's pen.[30]

Yet Spencer, like Pater, did not view art and literature as simply opposed to the intellectual self-consciousness associated with the progress of science and civilization. Stressing the complexity of modern art, he suggested writing, like speech, was driven by primordial, bodily energies and the challenge for the literary artist was to manage these

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[25] See Benjamin Morgan, *The Outward Mind: Materialist Aesthetics in Victorian Science and Literature* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), doi:10.7208/chicago/9780226457468.001.0001.

[26] Herbert Spencer, *Principles of Psychology*, 2 vols (Appleton, 1897), II, p. 639.

[27] Ibid., p. 640.

[28] Herbert Spencer, *Philosophy of Style: An Essay* (Appleton, 1891), pp. 9–11.

[29] Ibid., pp. 9, 47.

[30] Michael D. Hurley and Marcus Waithe, 'Introduction: Thinkers, Thinking, Style, Stylists', in *Thinking through Style: Non-Fiction Prose of the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Michael D. Hurley and Marcus Waithe (Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 1–10 (p. 3), doi:10.1093/oso/9780198737827.001.0001.

energies and facilitate their development without deadening them into mechanistic rules. Thomas Babington Macaulay had declared that, as science and civilization advanced, 'poetry almost necessarily declines', since intellectual theorizing blunted people's immediate perceptual sensitivities.[31] However, the notion that art forms evolved, along with the mental faculties, suggested a more complex dynamic in which primitive instincts, managerial reason, and obscure, rarefied intuitions combined in a delicate balance.

It should be stressed that, although Spencer was a linchpin of scientific naturalism, which sought to separate scientific authority from the Church and its creeds, this did not render him an atheistic materialist.[32] His visions of universal, progressive evolution allowed for a vaguely spiritual cosmology and teleology behind seemingly mechanistic natural processes, signalled in his rhetoric of future perfection and of a mysterious agency propelling all things towards it, which he named 'the Unknowable'.[33]

Such spiritualistic evolutionism would be echoed not only in Paterian aestheticism but also by parapsychologists such as Edmund Gurney, who regarded art as a form of clairvoyance driven by the progressive tendencies of the cosmos. Spencer had argued music both embodied the development of human feelings and catalysed this development, opening up new vistas of sympathy.[34] Building on this idea, Gurney claimed all art shadowed forth 'infinite potentialities in one's own being' that surpassed methodical comprehension.[35] Similarly, as psychical research sought to combine rigorous scientific method with experiences of enchantment, Gurney presented aesthetics, like life in general, as knowable and controllable only up to a point. As he wrote, 'imaginative work', like the variation of 'Natural organisms', 'is continually taking new and unforeseen directions, and producing new and unforeseen combinations of material' (p. 47). Stevenson's writings on writing echoed these views of aesthetics as methodical reason merging with cosmic enchantment and mysticism.

## Stevenson's phenomenology of composition

Stevenson's view of style as a mystical craft was shaped by his varied interests and sympathies. Hailing from a family of lighthouse engineers, he was fascinated by science,

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[31] Thomas Babington Macaulay, 'Milton', in Macaulay, *Critical and Historical Essays*, 6th edn, 3 vols (Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1849), I, pp. 1–61 (p. 5).

[32] On the complexities of this movement, see *Victorian Scientific Naturalism: Community, Identity, Continuity*, ed. by Gowan Dawson and Bernard Lightman (University of Chicago Press, 2014), doi:10.7208/chicago/9780226109640.001.0001.

[33] Herbert Spencer, *First Principles*, 3rd edn (Williams and Norgate, 1875), pp. 3–23.

[34] Herbert Spencer, 'The Origin and Function of Music', in Spencer, *Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative* (Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1858), pp. 359–84.

[35] Edmund Gurney, *The Power of Sound* (Smith, Elder, 1880), p. 201.

especially evolutionism, and once named Spencer as his greatest intellectual influence.[36] At the same time, he retained vestiges of religiosity, insisting on some kind of immortality, however uncertain. He knew Gurney through the Savile Club and showed an interest in psychical research.[37] He also envisaged art as, simultaneously, deriving from primitive instincts and embodying some higher power that drove humanity's progress. However, like Spencer and Pater, he suggested this channelling of the aesthetic unconscious could only be the precarious outcome of methodical effort and self-discipline.

Stevenson's essays consistently echoed Spencer's model of art as a refinement of pleasurable bodily movements. 'Notes on the Movements of Young Children' (1874) claimed toddlers' first clumsy efforts at dancing represented 'the beginning of gracious impulses and the springs of harmonious movement laid bare to us with innocent simplicity'.[38] The young children's unselfconsciousness, he suggested, revealed the primitive substratum art grew from: the intrinsic pleasurableness of certain repetitions and combinations of movement which humans engaged in automatically. The line he traced here from bodily movement to aesthetics sheds light on his later comments in an essay on the painters of Fontainebleau, which celebrated these artists' focus on material craft and indifference to subject matter:

> For art is, first of all and last of all, a trade. The love of words and not a desire to publish new discoveries, the love of form and not a novel reading of historical events, mark the vocation of the writer and the painter. The arabesque, properly speaking, and even in literature, is the first fancy of the artist; he first plays with his material as a child plays with a kaleidoscope.[39]

Alan Sandison observes that for Stevenson the non-mimetic patterns designated by 'the arabesque' signified 'form for its own sake', and this comparison would have evoked

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[36] See Stevenson, 'Books which Have Influenced Me', in *Essays in the Art of Writing*, pp. 75–93 (pp. 81–82). On Stevenson and science, see Julia Reid, *Robert Louis Stevenson, Science, and the Fin de Siècle* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), doi:10.1057/9780230554849; Olena M. Turnbull, 'Robert Louis Stevenson and Nineteenth-Century Theories of Evolution: Crossing the Boundaries between Idea and Art', in *Robert Louis Stevenson: Writer of Boundaries*, ed. by Ambrosini and Dury, pp. 228–36; Anne Stiles, 'Robert Louis Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde* and the Double Brain', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 46.4 (2006), pp. 879–900, doi:10.1353/sel.2006.0043. On Stevenson and language, see Annette R. Federico, *Thus I Lived with Words: Robert Louis Stevenson and the Writer's Craft* (University of Iowa Press, 2017); and Adrian Poole, 'Touch-and-Go with Robert Louis Stevenson', in *Thinking through Style*, ed. by Hurley and Waithe, pp. 248–63, doi:10.1093/oso/9780198737827.003.0016.

[37] Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy, 1870–1901* (Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 185–95.

[38] 'Notes on the Movements of Young Children', in *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, Edinburgh edn, 28 vols (Longmans Green, 1894–98), XXI: *Miscellanies, Volume IV* (1896), pp. 124–31 (p. 125).

[39] Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Fontainebleau: Village Communities of Painters', in Stevenson, *Across the Plains with Other Memories and Essays* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897), pp. 108–42 (p. 114).

orientalist notions of the Middle East as primitive and impulsive, as in Stevenson's image of the child lost in unreflective play (p. 7). These analogies further clarify his depiction of art and writing as crafts or 'trade[s]', determined more by muscular engagement with physical materials than by abstract contemplation or goals.

Several of his writings traced this impulsive pattern-making to literature. Taking issue with Henry James's description of fiction as an intense impression of life, 'A Humble Remonstrance' (1884) claimed literary aesthetics derived from the instinctive rhythmic and tonal patterns of orality. Literature, he wrote, 'imitates not life but speech: not the facts of human destiny, but the emphasis and suppressions with which the human actor tells of them', derived from 'the first men who told their stories round the savage camp-fire'.[40] He further traced his literary efforts to childish enjoyment of language as pure sensory form in a late, unfinished essay. 'I must have been taught the love of beautiful sounds before I was breeched', he wrote, recalling a religious phrase voiced by his nurse that 'rings still in my ear from my first childhood [...]. There was possibly some sort of image written in my mind by these loud words, but I believe the words themselves were what I cherished.' Writing achieved beauty, he claimed, by recalling such vocal patterns, but its disembodied nature and practical uses were 'dangerous' for verbal art because they numbed people to the sensuality of language. He declared that many who passed from speech to text suffered a Falstaffian 'malady of not marking' and 'read thenceforward by the eye alone and hear never again the chime of fair words or the march of the stately period', and, consequently, also failed to produce such beauty in their own discourse.[41] Producing beautiful, stylish writing, then, would seem to depend on a different 'malady of not marking' in which the literary artist forgot conventional meanings and rational purposes and focused on automatic responses to the sensual material of language. Ruskin had claimed the 'technical power of painting' depended on recovering 'the *innocence of the eye*; that is to say, of a sort of childish perception of these flat stains of colour, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify'.[42] Stevenson's valuation of 'the ear' suggested a similar perceptual innocence was needed in writing, resisting the linguistic instrumentalism of intellectualist modernity.[43]

However, Stevenson also suggested the mature artist managed his primitive aesthetic impulses with an intellectual distance and calculation to produce the

[40] Robert Louis Stevenson, 'A Humble Remonstrance', in Stevenson, *Memories and Portraits* (Nelson, 1900), pp. 259–81 (p. 267).

[41] Stevenson, 'Random Memories: *Rosa Quo Locorum*', in *Works*, XXI, pp. 302–12 (pp. 303–07).

[42] 'The Elements of Drawing', in *Works of Ruskin*, ed. by Cook and Wedderburn, XV: *The Elements of Drawing, etc* (1904), pp. 5–228 (p. 27), emphasis in original.

[43] On notions of the poetic 'ear', see Meredith Martin, *The Rise and Fall of Meter: Poetry and English National Culture, 1860–1930* (Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 99–102.

richest effects. In 'Child's Play' (1878), he distinguished children's ludic fantasies from 'conscious art', claiming the latter 'is itself an abstract, impersonal thing, and depends largely upon philosophical interests beyond the scope of childhood'. Although such art, he admitted, was 'derived from play', 'the true parallel for play' lay rather in idle, disorganized daydreaming 'when we make castles in the air'.[44] Similarly, in his essay on Fontainebleau, he qualified the association of art with instinctive play, explaining this beginning was followed by 'a second stage' in which the artist began to seek 'the end of representation' and a final step when he did 'the business of real art — to give life to abstractions and significance and charm to facts'.[45] The mature artist, it seemed, did not sacrifice intellect for aesthetics but synthesized them.

He developed the linkage of art with adult responsibility and rational purpose further in 'A Gossip on Romance' by accusing Walter Scott of failing to plan and reflect on his writing with sufficient rigour. Scott, he concluded, was

> a great day-dreamer [...] but hardly a great artist; hardly, in the manful sense, an artist at all. [...] Of the pleasures of his art he tasted fully; but of its toils and vigils and distresses never man knew less. A great romantic — an idle child.[46]

Herein lay an alternative connotation in Stevenson's coding of writing as craft: the strenuous effort and self-control associated with the masculine poetics of Carlyle. A need for discipline and mental detachment further animated his discussion in 'A Humble Remonstrance'. A good novel, he wrote, assembled

> a certain artificial series of impressions [...] all aiming at the same effect, all eloquent of the same ideas [...]. From all its chapters, from all its pages, from all its sentences, the well-written novel echoes and re-echoes its one creative and controlling thought.

In this way, he remarked, the artwork was like 'a proposition of geometry', an artificial order hewn out of chaotic existence by purposeful intellect.[47]

Nonetheless, like Pater, he also imagined such calculation yielding to the higher mysterious impulses of aesthetic tact. Glenda Norquay argues Stevenson's ideas

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[44] Stevenson, 'Child's Play', in *Works*, XI: *Miscellanies, Volume III* (1895), pp. 157–71 (p. 165).

[45] Stevenson, 'Fontainebleau', p. 114.

[46] Stevenson, 'A Gossip on Romance', in *Memories and Portraits*, pp. 234–58 (p. 258).

[47] Stevenson, 'A Humble Remonstrance', pp. 266–67.

about reading were shaped by his Calvinist heritage, which stressed the uncertainty of textual interpretation and the tendency of readers to discover their own moral-spiritual conditions mirrored in the text.[48] I suggest Calvinism similarly marked his theory of composition. A key Calvinist doctrine was the need for special moments of 'conversion' when the Holy Spirit entered and purified the heart, qualifying the worshipper for salvation. Unable to force this spiritual intervention, individuals could only prepare themselves for it by strict self-surveillance and discipline, resisting their innate sinfulness while hoping for divine virtue to enter in its place.[49] Stevenson echoed this mixture of strenuous self-policing and passive receptiveness to an external power in his portrayals of the writing process. In a letter to his friend Edmund Gosse in 1891, he lamented,

> you know, as well as Flaubert, and as well as me, that it [prose] is *never done*; in other words, it is a torment of the pit [...]. I am to the neck in prose, and just now in the 'dark *interstylar* cave,' all methods and effects wooing me, myself in the midst impotent to follow any. I look for dawn presently, and a full flowing river of expression, running whither it wills.[50]

Stevenson here misquoted Shelley's 'Song of a Spirit' in which an unnamed anthropomorphic power surveyed its creation of the world, culminating in 'light, whose interfusion dawns | In the dark space of interstellar air'.[51] Stevenson's pun '*interstylar*' figured style as celestial illuminations, which writers must await impotently. Such inspiration would help the writer to choose between the numerous 'methods and effects' he had worked out, turning his static ruminations into 'a full flowing river of expression' with an unforeseen destination. Ultimately, like God, beauty had mysterious ways, which the writer could only trust in and hope to become the vessel of.

Stevenson suggested failing to respect this mystical element of writing led to laughable ugliness, exemplified by excessively intellectual authors such as Walt Whitman. 'Whitman [...] writes up to a system', he wrote: 'He was a theoriser about society before he was a poet' and framed himself as 'the declared enemy of all living by reflex action'. This hyperfocus on an 'ulterior end', Stevenson wrote, numbed Whitman to the

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[48] Glenda Norquay, *Robert Louis Stevenson and Theories of Reading: The Reader as Vagabond* (Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 29–30.

[49] See Charles Lloyd Cohen, *God's Caress: The Psychology of Puritan Religious Experience* (Oxford University Press, 1986).

[50] Stevenson, letter to Edmund Gosse, April 1891, in *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson to His Family and Friends*, ed. by Sidney Colvin, Biographical edn, 2 vols (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), II, pp. 271–74 (pp. 271–73), emphasis in original.

[51] Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Song of a Spirit', in Shelley, *Posthumous Poems* (printed for Hunt, 1824), p. 209.

mysterious craft of verbal aesthetics.[52] His doctrinaire insistence on the omnipresence of beauty blinded him to its contingency upon appropriate words and images. Stevenson remarked, 'To show beauty in common things is the work of the rarest tact. It is not to be done by the wishing' (p. 122). He suggested Whitman had violated this law by climaxing 'I Hear America Singing' with a 'hatter' adding his voice to the nation's chorus. 'The word "hatter"', Stevenson declared, 'cannot be used seriously in emotional verse; not to understand this, is to have no literary tact' (p. 123). Whitman must have half recognized the bathos of his diction, Stevenson speculated, but his democratic insistence on men's equal dignity overrode this aesthetic intuition. The fundamental error, then, was to assume a word could become graceful simply because one's logical principles dictated it ought to be so. Conversely, it would seem, in order to produce the emotional effects they desired through language, writers needed to stop seeking to fully control it, and respect and work with its sometimes inexplicable valences.

Stevenson's 'On Style' constituted his most detailed evocation of this idea of literary aesthetics as a combination of methodical, calculating management of the aesthetic instincts and tactful receptiveness to the obscure diktats of beauty. It began, paradoxically, by declaring that its aim of reducing style to 'technical elements' was impossible. 'There is nothing more disenchanting to man', Stevenson wrote,

> than to be shown the springs and mechanism of any art. [...] [Yet] those disclosures which seem fatal to the dignity of art seem so perhaps only in the proportion of our ignorance; and those conscious and unconscious artifices which it seems unworthy of the serious artist to employ were yet, if we had the power to trace them to their springs, indications of a delicacy of the sense finer than we conceive, and hints of ancient harmonies in nature. This ignorance at least is largely irremediable. We shall never learn the affinities of beauty, for they lie too deep in nature and too far back in the mysterious history of man.[53]

Stevenson's description of aesthetic techniques as both 'conscious and unconscious' foregrounded his uncertain phenomenology of composition. His imagery of surfaces and depths highlighted the inevitable partiality of any analysis of the mental operations involved because, like Calvin's believers (and Stevenson's Dr Jekyll), humans were strangers to themselves, incapable of probing their psychic life to the bottom. The

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[52] Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Walt Whitman', in Stevenson, *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* (Chatto and Windus, 1882), pp. 91–128 (pp. 93, 96, 120).

[53] Stevenson, 'On Some Technical Elements of Style in Literature', in *Works*, XI, pp. 236–60 (pp. 236–37). Subsequent references are given in parentheses in the main text.

apparent disenchantment of intellectual inquiry gave way to new wonderment at the sublime mysteries of aesthetic appreciation and production.

Like Pater, Stevenson framed aesthetics as rescuing language from mechanistic conventionality and instrumentalism, coaxing unexpected effects from it like some sorcery. 'It is, indeed, a strange art', he wrote,

> to take these blocks [words], rudely conceived for the purpose of the market or the bar, and by tact of application touch them to the finest meanings and distinctions, restore to them their primal energy, wittily shift them to another issue, or make of them a drum to rouse the passions. (p. 238)

His phrasing renders the agential relations in the process ambiguous: do writers shape verbal effects to their will, or do they merely help these effects into being as the latter discharge themselves like electricity? He further explored this idea through poetic descriptions of vivid writing. For example, 'the words in Carlyle seem electrified into an energy of lineament, like the faces of men furiously moved' (p. 238). Like the physiognomy in his simile, Stevenson's enchanted view of diction opposed substantive objects (words or faces) to ethereal aesthetic powers animating them. Style appeared to involve the harnessing of something imperceptible and, perhaps, incomprehensible.

Nonetheless, he contended, one general principle could be determined as 'the motive and end of any art', and this was 'to make a pattern' (p. 239). Recalling his previous depictions of aesthetics as the outgrowth of pleasurable movements, he framed literary style as the harnessing of this instinctive pleasure, specifically in sonic patterns, to create a 'Web' of repetitions and variations, as in music. Characterizing style as 'synthetic', he portrayed stylish composition as a complex interweaving of different kinds of sensory pattern in the writing. 'A satisfying equipoise of sound', he wrote, should exist between the parts of each sentence, although not 'too striking and exact, for the one rule is to be infinitely various; to interest, to disappoint, to surprise, and yet still to gratify' (p. 240). This did not mean the literary artist disregarded the intellectual meanings of words; rather, he viewed language with a double consciousness, taking in at once its subtleties of sense and its purely sensual aesthetics. The writer, he continued, must 'plait or weave his meaning, involving it around itself', producing 'a kind of knot', which 'after a moment of suspended meaning, solve[s] and clear[s] itself' (p. 240). This portrayal of writing as an infinitely subtle manipulation of readers' emotions framed the writer as a masterful technician. While the reader experienced the text as a series of emotional sequences, the writer surveyed all its parts simultaneously. As he wrote: 'That style is

therefore the most perfect, not, as fools say, which is the most natural, for the most natural is the disjointed babble of the chronicler; but which attains the highest degree of elegant and pregnant implication unobtrusively' (p. 242). Style seemed to inhere in bodily, instinctive 'babble' giving way to conscious calculation. Hence, he added, style might involve 'the derangement of the phrases from their (so-called) natural order' since 'such designed reversal' made sentences more 'luminous for the mind' (p. 242).

He further stressed the conscious deliberateness of style when discussing the roles of metre and rhythm in literary beauty. 'No man ever made good verse by accident', he wrote, and impressive poetry involved not one monotonous rhythmic scheme but two 'simultaneously followed' and 'balance[d] [...] with such judicial nicety before the reader, that neither shall be unperceived and neither signally prevail' (pp. 251, 249). The hasty or inexperienced prose writer, he claimed, showed his lack of attention to rhythm by 'tend[ing] to fall at once into the production of bad blank verse', because, 'since he remains unconscious that he is making verse at all, it can never occur to him to extract those effects of counterpoint and opposition' (p. 251). Such statements associated literary aesthetics, again, with transcendence of the instinctive aspects of language, replacing impulsive babble with methodical design.

He also linked style with the avoidance of excessive alliteration, another instinctive tendency that dominated and vulgarized the copy of inattentive authors. He portrayed Thomas Babington Macaulay as an extreme example of such 'daubing', quoting a short passage from *The History of England* which repeated the /k/ phoneme twenty-five times. Stevenson commented:

> It was probably from this barbaric love of repeating the same sound, rather than from any design of clearness, that he acquired his irritating habit of repeating words; [...] such a trick of the ear is deeper seated and more original in man than any logical consideration. (p. 258)

Amid Macaulay's scholarly research and logical arguments, his alliterative monotony appeared to constitute a survival of earlier, uncivilized mental life. Stevenson accentuated this connotation by describing Macaulay as 'a player of the big drum' (p. 257), evoking colonial stereotypes of non-European percussion as primitive and childlike. He even confessed to having detected this primitive instinct in his own writing, recalling a time when he was puzzled at the pleasure he found in substituting a certain word when correcting a manuscript. 'The mystery was solved', he explained, when he reread his earlier corrections and realized 'the second word contained an open A, and for nearly half a page he had been riding that vowel to the death' (p. 259). The

confession modelled an attitude of vigilant self-scrutiny and restraint of unconscious and, therefore, simplistic verbal propensities. By contrast, he quoted passages from Shakespeare and Coleridge of sophisticated alliteration that 'delicately varied' similar phonemes such as /s/ and /z/ or /f/ and /v/ to achieve the desired effect of unpredictability within regularity. Listing the patterns of recurring letters beneath each line, he encouraged readers to view these passages like his draughtsman-stylist, foregrounding their complex technical 'niceties', which, he thus implied, could not have come about by mere chance (pp. 255–56).

However, he also suggested all this conscious calculation relied on a tactful receptiveness that eluded methodical rules. He declared that rhythmic beauty could only be felt by 'the ear' and not inferred by the intellect, for 'it is impossible to lay down laws' (p. 246). Similarly, as Pater had found a unique 'genius' in every language which writers strove to manifest, Stevenson suggested the importance of rhythm in composition arose from the long-term evolution of English as a 'canorous language' in which 'rhythm is always at the door'. This rhythmic element, he remarked, was 'probably decaying' in modern English (p. 252); yet, instead of imagining the literary artist resisting this philological trend, he encouraged acceptance of it, declaring: 'As in verse no element, not even rhythm, is necessary; so, in prose also, other sorts of beauty will arise and take the place and play the part of those that we outlive' (p. 252). His comment blurred the boundaries between language and literature, suggesting the progress of the latter was part-and-parcel with the quasi-organic development of the former.

A similar sense that unconscious linguistic agencies drove literary aesthetics inflected his discussion of alliteration. 'One sound suggests, echoes, demands, and harmonises with another', he wrote: 'The vowel demands to be repeated; the consonant demands to be repeated; and both cry aloud to be perpetually varied' (p. 253). As in his comparison of words to expressive faces, his figuring of phonemes as beings that 'cry aloud', like hungry infants, to be used in certain ways, framed composition as a kind of Paterian listening to the quasi-organic propensities of language. Although Stevenson criticized Macaulay's alliterative obliviousness, he also suggested some unconsciousness was inevitable in the crafting of sonic patterns in words because composition involved a creative harnessing of occult energies. 'Few writers, indeed, are probably conscious of the length to which they push this melody of letters', he wrote, so that when an author 'is running a particular consonant, he will not improbably rejoice to write it down even when it is mute or bears a different value' (pp. 258, 253). His equestrian imagery portrayed composition as bodily motion instead of abstract intellectual calculation. Like readers, he implied, writers could not help being swept

up in the sensual and emotional movements of language. Although they needed to maintain some mental distance from these movements to exercise designing control over the work, these movements, and their intuitive responses to them, remained the creative catalysts without which nothing would be produced.

Stevenson concluded the essay by expanding the meaning of style's 'synthetic' character. Style was not simply the synthesis of different linguistic patterns, he suggested, but, rather, the synthesis of different parts of the writer's mental life. 'How many faculties', he declared,

> whether of taste or pure reason, must be held upon the stretch to make it [...]. From the arrangement of according letters, which is altogether arabesque and sensual, up to the architecture of the elegant and pregnant sentence, which is a vigorous act of the pure intellect, there is scarce a faculty in man but has been exercised. We need not wonder, then, if perfect sentences are rare, and perfect pages rarer. (p. 260)

Although he stressed the importance of the organizing, calculating intellect here, the intellect did not oversee the whole of style like some industrial planner. Instead, it stood alongside the more primitive 'arabesque and sensual' instincts, while some unknown agency brought these elements into 'perfect' alignment. The resigned tone of his final comment, implying writers must accept the rareness of stylistic perfection, framed it as a quasi-miracle, which, like holy conversion, could not be produced at will. Beautiful writing would seem to emerge through the strenuous efforts of authors at their desks, but not in a way that could be reduced to formulae or replicated systematically.

## Mystifying verbal 'craft' in cultural theory

Stevenson's figuring of composition as a mystical craft resonates with contemporary theoretical discourse about writing, which finds radical potential in concepts of craft and enchantment. Theorists have argued that widening the definition of compositional 'craft' resists the instrumental rationality of capitalist realism and technocratic extractivism. Drawing upon Martin Heidegger's notion of *Techne* as a mysterious 'bringing forth' (*Hervorbringen*) of things out of concealment, Tim Mayers proposes composition might be envisioned as 'listening to language' instead of 'forcing language to submit to intention'. Such craft criticism, he writes, avoids both 'the individualistic, apolitical stances of Romanticism' and 'the deterministic extremes of some literary theories'.[54] Similarly, Ben Ristow claims the definition of writing craft needs to be

[54] Tim Mayers, *(Re)Writing Craft: Composition, Creative Writing, and the Future of English Studies* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), pp. 93, 74. See Martin Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', in Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. by William Lovitt (Garland, 1977), pp. 3–35.

expanded from fixed technique to responsive, perspectival 'consciousness'. This approach, he suggests, renders writing 'inclusive, collaborative, [and] exploratory', while opposing Western modernity's 'fixation with substance and a material existence based in fixed and observable features of reality'.[55] Ristow's processual conception of writing craft further accords with theories of 'ecocomposition', which challenge dualistic views of writing by conceptualizing it as a communal activity shaped by and responsive to material environments.[56]

Such arguments fit with a rehabilitation of enchantment in cultural theory as critics explore this category's ecopolitical potential. Jane Bennett observes that 'the mood of enchantment may be valuable for ethical life', nurturing a 'spirit of generosity' and openness to the world's mysteries and 'surprises' rather than regarding them as adversaries to be conquered.[57] This notion coheres with her larger project of deconstructing the binaries of subject/object and thing/being, and reconfiguring agency and value as immanent features of an expansive matter.[58] David Tagnani proposes that such enchanted materialism depends on a correlative 'ecomysticism', since its assumption that ideas and discourse are forms of matter implies that they can never fully abstract from the world into the fantasized position of objectivity.[59]

It follows that language, long invoked as the proof of Cartesian mind, might undergo a process of enchanting materialization. Vicki Kirby and Karen Barad have critiqued the Saussurean assumption that signs can be neatly divided into material signifying marks and mental meanings or representations, connected arbitrarily.[60] Many ecocritics have instead gravitated towards C. S. Peirce's tripartite model of meaning as object, sign, and 'interpretant' (an open-ended agency that extends beyond the human interpreter), and such semiotic monism underlies theories of bio- and zoosemiotics.[61] The reverse side of this materialization of meaning is an eco-mystification of language. Science cannot hope to conquer language by fully codifying it because, like thought, it is not solely our possession or invention but an

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[55] Ben Ristow, *Craft Consciousness and Artistic Practice in Creative Writing* (Bloomsbury, 2022), pp. 64, 2.

[56] See Robert P. Yagelski, *Writing as a Way of Being: Writing Instruction, Nonduality, and the Crisis of Sustainability* (Hampton, 2011).

[57] Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 3.

[58] See also, Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2009), doi:10.1215/9780822391623.

[59] David Tagnani, 'New Materialism, Ecomysticism, and the Resolution of Paradox in Edward Abbey', *Western American Literature*, 50.4 (2016), pp. 317–46, doi:10.1353/wal.2016.0001.

[60] Vicki Kirby, *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal* (Routledge, 1997), pp. 7–50; Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 46–70.

[61] Timo Maran, *Ecosemiotics: The Study of Signs in Changing Ecologies* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), doi:10.1017/9781108942850.

emergent property of our ecological being. Hence, David Abram described language as 'not a purely mental phenomenon but a sensuous, bodily activity born of carnal reciprocity and participation [...]. This language "belongs" to the animate landscape as much as it "belongs" to ourselves.'[62] Being attentive to the subliminal subtleties and enigmatic moods of language emerges as a correlative to attending to one's connectedness with an expansive web of life.

Stevenson's aesthetic theory seems at first an unlikely parallel to such radical theorizing, given his defence of free-market capitalism and vestigial Calvinism.[63] Nonetheless, in recent years, scholars have highlighted his interest in cross-species psychology and proto-ecological view of life as a complex web of symbiotic connections.[64] His model of writing as a sublime cosmic evolution similarly envisaged language and aesthetics forming bridges between humans and the wider living universe. Further, the transcendental inflection of his stylistics resonates with new materialist and eco-mystical problematizing of the subject/object binary. His literary artist playing with language was, at the same time, being played with by language, blurring into and being reshaped by his materials. He underlined this view, and its proto-ecological implications, in an 1882 essay, which framed the flow of human discourse as a vital growth that connected minds with bodies and culture with the wider living universe. 'Literature in many of its branches', he declared, 'is no other than the shadow of good talk.' In contrast to dead letters, he continued, talk 'is fluid, tentative, continually "in further search and progress" [...]. Speech runs forth out of the contemporary groove into the open fields of nature.'[65] This characterization of verbal artistry as an expansive flow downplayed individual authorial design. Beauty in language seemed not just to be a product of the wills of its users but to generate novelties and revelations of its own, pursuing its own mysterious destiny and carrying users along with it. Central to this vision was an expansive, mystical notion of craft as a realm of activity in which the conscious ego came into contact with a vast cultural-biological nexus that exceeded comprehension, destabilized the division between mind and body, and seemed charged with numinous intimations.

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[62] David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (Vintage, 1996), p. 82.

[63] See Robert Louis Stevenson, 'The Day after To-Morrow', *Contemporary Review*, April 1887, pp. 472–79.

[64] See Chris Danta, 'The Metaphysical Cut: Darwin and Stevenson on Vivisection', *Victorian Review*, 36.2 (2010), pp. 51–65, doi:10.1353/vcr.2010.0015; Louis Kirk McAuley, 'Walking and Weeding in a Shrinking World: The Strange Case of Robert Louis Stevenson', *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 26.3 (2019), pp. 570–93, doi:10.1093/isle/isz029; Julia Ditter, 'Wayfaring in the Outlands: Borders, Mobility, and Nature in Robert Louis Stevenson's Writing', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 43.3 (2021), pp. 369–89, doi:10.1080/08905495.2021.1925866; and Denisoff, *Decadent Ecology*, pp. 96–122.

[65] Stevenson, 'Talk and Talkers: First Paper', in *Memories and Portraits*, pp. 140–62 (p. 141).