The playwright, the moralist and the poet: a Brechtian reading of Stevenson's writings on François Villon

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Far from being a real-life schizophrenic and model for *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Robert Louis Stevenson was nevertheless a problematic literary personality. It is no chance that nowadays Stevenson is best remembered for his achievements in two different – and to an extent contrasting – genres such as popular fiction and essay writing. Stevenson had his place within the literary establishment as a master stylist of the essay before he started experimenting with popular forms[1], and, although in his essays he actually defended his romances from a theoretical standpoint against the supporters of the novel, he was not entirely at ease with his position in between high and popular culture. Most significantly, he could not help confiding to Edmund Gosse: 'There must be something wrong in me, or I would not be popular'.[2]

Stevenson's anxiety about his literary status, however, highlights the fact that his production seems to be born of two different concerns, namely for morality and ethics on the one hand, and for ambivalence on the other hand. In his essays Stevenson can be considered a Victorian 'happy moralist',[3] often relying on common sense, while in his fictional work he is acknowledged as a master of the disturbing representation of ambiguity for his ability to question in a subtle way the accepted notions of good and evil. For instance, Henry Jekyll's actions are depicted as morally despicable, but, at the same time, the text undermines the stability of Victorian conceptions of ethics and morality; in is essays, however, Stevenson endorses these very conceptions.

The presence of this problematic dualism is particularly evident when one compares the essay 'François Villon: Student,

Poet, Housebreaker' and the short story 'A Lodging for the Night', both written in 1877, at a very early stage of Stevenson's career. Both works deal with the fifteenth century poet François Villon, the first *poète maudit* of French literature and definitely a controversial figure. Villon was not only a poet, but also a thief and a murderer; blasphemous and brilliant, sarcastic and vital, 'this gallows-bird was the one great writer of his age and country, and initiated modern literature for France',[4] Stevenson remarks in the essay. Stevenson was both attracted and repelled by Villon, and in both texts the poet stands out as a highly ambivalent figure. A comparison between these two works is particularly interesting. The subject matter is basically the same, therefore it is possible to observe with clarity the different attitudes, literary strategies and narrative voices that Stevenson deploys in his essays and in his fiction respectively. More importantly, considering the close relationship between the essay and the short story, in this context such differences are likely to be quite deliberate. This allows us to make some guesses as to why Stevenson decided to interrogate a complex figure such as Villon by using two different approaches simultaneously, and on the contrasting imperatives of morality and ambiguity that characterise Stevenson's writing as a whole.

In addition, the short story and the essay bring to light some revealing analogies with Bertolt Brecht. The German playwright had read Stevenson in his youth, and he always held him in great esteem. His admiration is undisguised, for instance, in his enthusiastic praise of *The Master of Ballantrae* in 'Glossen zu Stevenson', published in 1925 – he defines Stevenson's work as 'the outstanding example of an adventure novel in which the reader's sympathy for the adventurer himself (the sole sustenance of all other adventure novels) asserts itself only with effort'.[5] It is significant that Brecht should comment on Stevenson's ability to problematise the reader's sympathy, as it is precisely on this point that a closer analysis reveals some affinities between Stevenson's narrative technique and Brecht's theory of epic theatre.

'François Villon: Student, Poet, Housebreaker' and 'A Lodging for the Night' are particularly suited to establish a comparison between the two authors, because Brecht also dealt with Villon at a certain point of his career, when he rewrote some of Villon's poems as songs in *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera,* 1928), bending the poet's cynical criticism of society towards a more political direction. We cannot be certain that Brecht actually read Stevenson's essay and short story, although he was possibly familiar at least with the latter, which was translated into German in 1918.[6] At any rate, the two texts really seem to anticipate Brecht's interpretation of Villon's poetry.

In 'François Villon: Student, Poet, Housebreaker', Stevenson deals extensively with Villon's life and with his artistic and criminal career. His source is the French scholar Auguste Longnon, whose book *Étude biographique sur François Villon,*[7] according to Stevenson, finally managed to shed some light on the mysterious life of the poet. In this 'sudden bull's-eye light' (p. 89) cast on Villon, however, there is a form of ironical retribution. Stevenson immediately reminds his readers of a passage of Villon's major work, 'Le Testament' ('The Testament'), in which the poet bequeaths his spectacles to the hospital for blind paupers:

> Item, I leave to the Fifteen Score [the hospital]
> whom we might also call the Three Hundred
> (of Paris, now, not of Provins,
> for it's to them I feel indebted) –
> they shall have, with my full consent
> my big spectacles (but not their case)
> to sort out, at [the cemetery of] the Innocents
> the good men from the miscreants.
>
> [...]
>
> When I consider all these heads

> heaped up in the charnel houses:
> they were Magistrates of Petitions
> or Comptrollers of the Chamber
> – or they were all poor peddlers!
> I can call them one as well as the other;
> bishops or lamplighters,
> I can't see any difference.[8]

Stevenson points out that, as we can understand from this passage, Villon believed that in death everybody, the lamplighter as well as the bishop, disappears into the anonymous uniformity of the mud. It becomes impossible to distinguish between good and evil even with the best pair of spectacles – that is why we might as well leave the futile task to the blind. However, the poet's confidence in oblivion as the ultimate fate of man was to be disappointed.

Centuries after his death, says Stevenson, Villon has been brought under the spotlight at last, to be finally judged by history:

> A pair of critical spectacles have been applied to his own remains; and though he left behind him a sufficiently ragged reputation from the first, it is only after these four hundred years that his delinquencies have been finally tracked home, and we can assign him to his proper place among the good or wicked. (p. 89.)

It is immediately clear that Stevenson intends to take a moral stance. Certainly he deploys a brilliant, enjoyable style and a good degree of humour, consistent with the refined conversational style that is generally expected from a nineteenth century essayist.[9] Nevertheless, he overtly takes on the role of the righteous moralist, adopting a critical attitude towards Villon right from the beginning of the essay. Clearly also Stevenson is about to wear the critical spectacles and to observe the poet with attentive

and inquisitive eyes.

Throughout the essay, Stevenson makes no attempt to find positive or redeeming features in Villon's life. He displays irony, bitterness, and even emotional involvement, but there is never indulgence for Villon's dissolute existence, let alone romantic idealisation. For instance, after the introduction, he describes with a half-mocking tone the Paris of the late Middle Ages, most notably the chaotic and corrupted university system in which Villon is educated. The portrait is particularly harsh, especially when Stevenson comments on Villon's academic career:

> The burlesque erudition in which he sometimes indulged implies no more than the merest smattering of knowledge; whereas his acquaintance with blackguard haunts and industries could only have been acquired by early and consistent impiety and idleness. He passed his degrees, it is true; but some of us who have been to modern universities will make their own reflections on the value of the test. (p. 91.)

Here, as in many other passages, Stevenson endeavours to detach himself from the object of his study and to judge him impartially from an ethical and aesthetical point of view.

An important part of this process of detachment consists in rationalizing and explaining the controversial and ambivalent aspects of Villon's personality, to rescue the reader from a moral and epistemological impasse. For example, shortly afterwards, Stevenson discusses whether Villon is really to be trusted when he deploys emotion in his poetry. His answer is rather outspoken: '[Villon's] sentiments are about as much to be relied on as those of a professional beggar; [...] he comes towards us whining and piping the eye, and goes off again with a whoop and his finger to his nose (p. 91)'. What prompts Stevenson's reaction are two stanzas from 'Le Testament', in which the poet bequeaths his

library to the adoptive father, Guillaume de Villon:

> Item, to my more-than-father,
> Master Guillaume de Villon,
> more tender to me than a mother
> to an infant fresh from swaddling clothes
> (he's rescued me from many a jam
> and this current one won't make him glad;
> so I ask him, on my knees,
> that he let me face it alone),
>
> I give my library, including
> *The Epic of the Devil's Fart*
> as copied out by Master Guy
> Tabarie,[10] who is an honest man.
> It's under the table in loose quires,
> and although it's rudely made
> its substance is so notable
> it compensates for any faults.[11]

Stevenson points out that the contrast between the seemingly well-meaning display of affection and the unbecoming content of the library must be read either as a vicious attack by an ungrateful scoundrel against a benevolent and pious father-figure, or as the proof of an 'unbecoming complicity' (p. 92) between the two. At any rate, these two stanzas epitomise a recurring pattern in Villon's work – a supposedly sincere appeal to the reader's sympathy and compassion is followed by particularly bawdy or roguish lines.

Stevenson, therefore, warns the reader that, whenever he perceives an outburst of sentiment in Villon's poetry, he should remember that the poet is actually a 'professional beggar', whose made-up emotions are methodically constructed to gain sympathy and indulgence. Seeing Villon this way dismisses any

sentimental or romantic reading of his life and art – he cannot be redeemed by the naïve compassion the reader might happen to feel as Villon narrates his misfortunes or shows his emotional side. Stevenson employs the image of the professional beggar to emphasise Villon's pettiness and opportunism whenever he displays sentiment in his work, so that the reader may gain an increased degree of detachment towards the poet.

The essay, however, is not a systematic attack on Villon. Stevenson's words actually reveal an unmistakable fascination for the French poet, despite the ironic and judgemental tone he adopts. Consider, for instance, this passage, in which Stevenson imagines Villon's descent into the criminal world:

> For a man who is greedy of all pleasures, and provided with little money and less dignity of character, we may prophesy a safe and speedy voyage downward. Humble or even truckling virtue may walk unspotted in this life. But only those who despise the pleasures can afford to despise the opinion of the world. A man of a strong, heady temperament, like Villon, is very differently tempted. His eyes lay hold on all provocations greedily, and his heart flames up at a look into imperious desire; he is snared and broached-to by anything and everything, from a pretty face to a piece of pastry in a cookshop window; he will drink the rinsing of the wine cup, stay the latest at the tavern party; tap at the lit windows, follow the sound of singing, and beat the whole neighbourhood for another reveller, as he goes reluctantly homeward; and grudge himself every hour of sleep as a black empty period in which he cannot follow after pleasure. Such a person is lost if he have not dignity, or, failing that, at least pride, which is its shadow and in many ways its substitute. (p. 93.)

The point Stevenson wants to make is quite Victorian –

Villon's inclination towards earthly pleasures and his lack of dignity seal his fate. However, he also spends considerable energy in depicting Villon's yearning towards every physical sensation, his seething desire for new experiences and his desperate joy for the pleasures of life. There is no attempt to hide the disturbing charm of this 'man who is greedy of all pleasures'.

Fascination and ambivalence do indeed surface rather often in the text. Yet, they are always counterbalanced by a number of strategies. For instance, shortly afterwards, Stevenson discusses the infamous period in which Villon was expecting the death sentence and, in the meantime, composed one of his greatest poems, 'Le Ballade des Pendus' ('The Ballad of the Hanged') – a graphic and gruesome description of death by hanging sung by the executed men themselves, combined with a touching call for pity and forgiveness. The Ballad's third stanza – which Stevenson quotes in the French original in his essay, and is possibly the most intense passage of the poem – goes as follows:

> The rain has soaked us through and washed us clean
> and the sun has dried and blackened us.
> Magpies and crows have cored out our eyes,
> trimmed our beards and plucked our eyebrows.
> We never get a moment to rest:
> this way and that as the wind shifts direction,
> it swings us at its whim continually,
> more needled by birds than a darning thimble.
> No, ours is a club you should not rush to join,
> but pray to God that he absolve us all.[12]

Stevenson reacts to Villon's ballad – one of his most famous poems, which in fact Brecht rewrote[13] – with sympathy and even emotional involvement:

> He wrote a ballad, by way of epitaph for himself and his companions, which remains unique in the annals of mankind. It is, in the highest sense, a piece of his biography. [...] Sharp as an etching, written with a shuddering soul. There is an intensity of consideration in the piece that shows it to be the transcript of familiar thoughts. It is the quintessence of many a doleful nightmare on the straw, when he felt himself swing helpless in the wind, and saw the birds turn about him, screaming and menacing his eyes. (pp. 100-101.)

Stevenson's involvement, however, seems to be more connected with the mysteries of artistic creation rather than with the predicament of the prisoner. He shows a softer side because he remains, at least in part, in the realm of literary criticism. He certainly feels more sympathetic towards the artist than towards the criminal; and perhaps it is not irrelevant that this ballad represents one of the few occasions in which Stevenson acknowledges some degree of sincerity in Villon ('Here is some genuine thieves' literature after so much that was spurious', p. 101). Whatever the case, sympathy is perceivable, but it is mediated by a critical perspective. It does not compromise Stevenson's position as a moral guide.

The final section of the essay is a deliberate attempt to provide the reader with moral guidance in the form of a comprehensive artistic and psychological profile of Villon. After having praised Villon's 'Le Testament' – 'A hurly-burly of cynical and sentimental reflections about life' in which 'he could draw at full length the portrait of his own bedevilled soul, and of the bleak and blackguardly world which was the theatre of his exploits and sufferings' (p. 103) – Stevenson describes the peculiar *Weltanschauung* that we can draw from this remarkable poem:

> The world to which he introduces us is, as before said,

> blackguardly and bleak. [...] In our mixed world, full of green fields and happy lovers, where not long before, Joan of Arc had led one of the highest and noblest lives in the whole story of mankind, this was all worth chronicling that our poet could perceive. His eyes were indeed sealed with his own filth. [...] High purposes and brave passions shake and sublimate men's spirits; and meanwhile, in the narrow dungeon of his soul, Villon is mumbling crusts and picking vermin. (p. 104.)

Stevenson would rather throw his lot with 'high purposes and brave passions' than with Villon's sordid life. The detachment of the moralist and critic from his object of study is particularly pronounced in this passage. Villon's art is great, but Stevenson refuses the very ideological premises of Villon's poetry and explicitly condemns his way of life. No romantic idealisation is possible.

In particular, Stevenson stresses how Villon's poetry can only generate a shallow kind of pathos, which is ultimately artificial. This lack of sincerity has serious aesthetical and moral implications: 'On a first reading, the pathetic passages preoccupy the reader, and he is cheated out of an alms in the shape of sympathy. But when the thing is studied the illusion fades away' (p. 104). We are to appreciate Villon's energy, vitality, and stylistic ingenuity; he is, no doubt, an exceptional artist. However he is, in the end, contrived and inauthentic. It is no chance that in this very passage Villon is called again 'professional beggar'.

According to Stevenson, Villon is capable of absolute sincerity in two things only. Firstly, in 'the undisguised envy of those richer than himself' (p. 105). When Stevenson comments on this aspect, his Victorian moral vigour rises to a climax:

> Poverty, he protests, drives men to steal, as hunger makes the wolf sally from the forest. The poor, he goes on, will

> always have a carping word to say, or, if that outlet be denied, nourish rebellious thoughts. It is a calumny on the noble army of the poor. Thousands in a small way of life, ay, and even in the smallest, go through life with tenfold as much honour and dignity and peace of mind, as the rich gluttons whose dainties and state-beds awakened Villon's covetous temper. (p. 105.)

Stevenson refers to two lines from 'Le Testament' ('Hardship makes men go astray / and hunger drives the wolf from the woods'[14]). Interestingly, he seems to disagree with the very argument that Villon – as a character – makes in 'A Lodging for the Night', namely that only when the poor have something to eat can the privileged start reproaching them for their lack of moral integrity. This is also more or less the core of Brecht's political reading of Villon's poetry in *Die Dreigroschenoper*, which boils down to the well-known Brechtian adage 'food is the first thing, morals follow on'[15]. In the essay, however, this idea is overtly dismissed as hypocrisy, a blatant self-justification, although it should be noted that Stevenson strengthens the allure of Villon's point by reproposing the poet's powerful image of the hungry wolf.

The other aspect in which Villon is sincere is 'a deep and somewhat snivelling conviction of the transitory nature of this life and the pity and horror of death' (p. 105). For Stevenson this is a key feature of Villon's art, as the poet is able to find 'his truest inspiration [...] in the swift and sorrowful change that overtakes beauty' (p. 105). However, Villon's genius cannot be separated from his pettiness: 'It is a poor heart, and a poorer age, that cannot accept the conditions of life with some heroic readiness' (p. 106). Once again, the emotional involvement prevails only in the form of literary criticism, and the judgement on Villon's human qualities is disenchanted.

Stevenson's final words epitomise the stylistic devices and the

ethical-aesthetical tensions that characterise the essay. His verdict on Villon is trenchant: 'A sinister dog, in all likelihood, but with a look in his eye, and the loose flexile mouth that goes with wit and an overweening sensual temperament. Certainly the sorriest figure on the rolls of fame' (p. 106). Stevenson's attraction for Villon manifests itself through the presence of compelling images and descriptions – here we have the mysterious look in Villon's eye and his 'loose flexile mouth', just like in the previous passages we were presented with the portrait of the 'man greedy of all pleasures' and with the figure of the hungry wolf. Nevertheless, the very last sentence of the text is an authoritative, assertive and final moral judgement on the poet. It is clear that Villon's 'proper place among the good or wicked' has been found, and the result is quite obvious. The *poète maudit*'s predicament does not generate true sympathy – morality and common sense prevail.

Stevenson's verdict in the essay, however, should now be compared with his representation of Villon in 'A Lodging for the Night'. The short story is set in a cold winter night, and the poet is initially portrayed in a small tavern in the company of other bandits. In this first passage Villon shows his sarcastic and caustic side, as he makes fun of the rest of the gang. After one of the bandits, Theverin Pensete, is murdered by another, Montigny, the remaining thieves are forced to leave the tavern. Villon wanders through the frosty streets of Paris, reflecting on life and death. At a certain point he realises he has been robbed while he was leaving the tavern, and is forced to ask for shelter from an old nobleman, the lord of Brisetout.

Once inside Brisetout's house, the two have a heated conversation on honour and virtue. Villon maintains that stealing can be justified, since people like himself are forced to steal out of necessity. He compares commoners' thefts with soldier's looting; the latter rob poor people of their belonging and are generally unpunished for their actions. The nobleman, on the other hand,

sets himself as an example of righteousness, and asks Villon to renounce all his subtleties and repent. Villon, however, is in no mood for being lectured by a rich, privileged man. He informs his host that he should not be dismissed as an honourless rascal, as he did at least restrain himself from murdering and robbing Brisetout, even though he had the chance to do so with ease. It is the last straw: Villon has to leave the nobleman's house at once. The short story ends with Villon, standing in front of Brisetout's door, thinking to himself: 'I wonder what his goblets may be worth'.[16] It is not clear whether he is planning to steal the goblets, or has already taken one or is simply regretting the cost of his honourable behaviour.

If we considered only this small summary of the plot, there would be perfect consistency between the two portraits. They would be no more than variations on the same theme. Indeed many aspects of Villon's portrayal in 'François Villon: Student, Poet, Housebreaker' can be found in 'A Lodging for the Night' and are useful to understand the character as he is presented in the short story. For instance: we find once again Villon's cynicism and sarcasm, and his unorthodox sense of justice – which Stevenson in the essay suspected to be mere self-indulgence – dominates the conversation with Brisetout; lastly, the fascinating aspects of his personality and his ability to reflect with hopeless bitterness about the human condition are clearly present throughout both versions.

There is, however, a crucial difference between the two texts. At the end of the essay the reader, guided by the authoritative voice of the moralist, has the impression that the controversial aspects of Villon's art and life have been somehow resolved. Ambiguity is still there, but is kept under control, because a moral centre has been established and readers can overcome the moral impasse that Villon's contradictions represent. On the other hand, at the end of the short story, we are not quite sure what to think. Instead of being led towards a solution, we are left in doubt. This effect is

achieved mainly through a radical change in the way the narrative voice works. While in the essay Stevenson takes the role of an authoritative, truth-telling narrator, in the short story this mode is just one of the different stances adopted by the narrative voice, which becomes increasingly polyphonic. As a consequence, it is almost impossible for the reader to determine a fixed ideological standpoint from which he can tackle the narrative.

Stevenson's use of a polyphonic narrator can be read in terms of Mikhail Bakhtin's conceptions of heteroglossia and dialogism. Bakhtin claims that 'at any given moment of its evolution, language is stratified not only into linguistic dialects in the strict sense of the word [...], but also [...] into languages that are socio-ideological'.[17] Language is hybrid – or rather, heteroglot – as every utterance is the expression of many linguistic, social and ideological forces. This multiplicity finds its artistic representation in specific literary forms, most notably the novel and other artistic-prose genres connected to it. Such texts present, therefore, an intrinsic internal tension, as 'all languages of heteroglossia [...] are specific points of view on the world' and 'as such they all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically'.[18] A novelist's words are charged with a plurality of tones and intentions, generating internal dialogue and conflict.

Stevenson relies on a similar dialogic principle in his short story. 'A Lodging for the Night' is characterised by an ambiguous narrative style in which a variety of conflicting and interrelated voices and languages emerge. Bakhtin, in this sense, functions as a useful starting point, providing us with a theoretical background and critical categories – and the terms and concepts that I use, such as polyphony, hybridization and plurality of narrative voices, are indeed of Bakhtinian origin. It should be noted, however, that I refer first and foremost to Brecht's theory of epic theatre to comment on Stevenson's technique. The reason for this is not just that Brecht and Stevenson share mutually illumi-

nating methodological and poetical concerns, but also because, in some crucial aspects, Stevenson's technique is a better fit to a Brechtian rather than Bakhtinian framework.

The short story starts with a certain judgemental tone that echoes the essay's narrator:

> Yet there was a small house, backed up against the cemetery wall, which was still awake, and awake to evil purpose, in that snoring district. [...] Within, behind the shuttered windows, Master Francis Villon, the poet, and some of the thievish crew with whom he consorted, were keeping the night alive and passing round the bottle. (pp. 318-319.)

Expressions such as 'evil purpose' and 'thievish crew with whom he consorted' immediately suggest a firm moral starting point from which the narrator recounts the scene. During the tavern scene the narrator does not show much sympathy for the members of Villon's gang. Each bandit is described in grotesque and ironic terms. Poignant examples are the monk Dom Nicholas, whose face is 'covered with a network of congested veins' (p. 319), the about-to-be-killed card player Theverin Pensete, with 'his little protuberant stomach [that] shook with silent chucklings as he swept in his gains' (p. 320), and Villon himself, on whose face 'the wolf and pig struggled together' (p. 319). The thieves are not friends, but rather a gang of opportunistic and violent men, brought together by a common interest but by no real bonds. Villon is depicted as he mocks all his companions in one way or another, using his wit and sarcasm to provoke and offend. The narrator, in short, describes the gang with the same detachment, irony and slight repulsion as the essayist.

Such stance, however, is not consistently carried out till the end of the narration. After Theverin Pensete is killed, the focus shifts from the gang in its entirety to Villon walking alone through

the frozen streets of Paris, and the narrative voice becomes more sympathetic towards the poet. In the tavern scene he was certainly the most appealing character, but not one to whom we could actually relate. Now that Villon is left by himself, the narrator allows us to enter his mind and share his own perspective and anxieties. The narrator's voice and Villon's inner thoughts alternate and partly overlap in this section. For instance:

> Villon cursed his fortune. Would it were still snowing! Now, wherever he went, he left an indelible trail behind him on the glittering streets; wherever he went, he was still tethered to the house by the cemetery of St. John; wherever he went, he must weave, with his own plodding feet, the rope that bound him to the crime and would bind him to the gallows. The leer of the dead man came back to him with new significance. He snapped his fingers as if to pluck up his own spirits, and, choosing a street at random, stepped boldly forward in the snow. (p. 326.)

Using the free indirect speech, in sentences such as 'would it were still snowing!', Stevenson tries to bridge the gap between the narrative voice and Villon's own thoughts. For instance, in the passage quoted above, the narration is structured around Villon's concern for his safety and tries to transmit the same urgency to the reader. The reader, having access to the character's thoughts, is arguably invited to develop some kind of identification with Villon.

As the narrative unfolds, the relationship between the narrator and the protagonist changes again, and the two perspectives become more and more hybridised. At a certain point Villon spots a patrol coming in his direction. In order to evade it, the poet enters a porch where he finds the body of a dead woman. He notices that she died without spending her two remaining coins. Villon's reflection at this point are particularly poignant:

> In her stocking, underneath the garter, Villon found two of the small coins that went by the name of whites. It was little enough, but it was always something; and the poet was moved with a deep sense of pathos that she should have died before she had spent her money. That seemed to him a dark and pitiable mystery; and he looked from the coins in his hand to the dead woman, and back again to the coins, shaking his head over the riddle of man's life. Henry V of England, dying at Vincennes just after he had conquered France, and this poor jade cut off by a cold draught in a great man's doorway before she had time to spend her couple of whites – it seemed a cruel way to carry on the world. Two whites would have taken such a little while to squander; and yet it would have been one more good taste in the mouth, one more smack of the lips, before the devil got the soul, and the body was left to birds and vermin. He would like to use all his tallow before the light was blown out and the lantern broken. (pp. 329-330).

On the one hand, this really looks like an emotional and moving moment in the narration. On the other hand, we know that Stevenson – in the essay – warns his readers against Villon's sentiments, which are the same as those of a professional beggar, and are not to be trusted. Besides, Villon is not reflecting on the woman's death in itself, but on the fact that she died without spending the little money she had – expressions like 'deep sense of pathos', 'dark and pitiable mystery' and 'the riddle of man's life' might sound excessively grand and lofty, considering Villon's strictly materialistic approach. All these reflections on the cruelty of the world could be interpreted as another self-justification, considering that Villon is about to loot the corpse. We may legitimately interpret this passage as an ironic commentary of the narrator, who exposes Villon's hypocrisy by allowing him to indulge in self-serving pathos.

This is not, however, the only possible reading. We may also perceive the passage as painfully serious in its urgency and bitterness. The kind of truth it reveals is not noble, and Villon may be slightly melodramatic. Yet there is indeed a sense of cruelty and injustice in the fact that the woman died before tasting the small, trivial pleasure that the two coins could have bought her. What makes this passage so ambiguous is that, unlike the previous part of the short story, it is very difficult to decide whether the narrator invites us to participate in Villon's reflections, and whether he shares his views, as far as emotional involvement is concerned – in other words, it is not easy to decide whether the passage must be interpreted ironically or sympathetically. Moreover, it is not even clear which words belong to Villon's own thoughts, and which ones belong to the narrator's perspective.

This section establishes a highly ambivalent relationship between the character and the narrative voice, and in this sense it is indeed very Brechtian. As we mentioned earlier commenting on Brecht's response to *The Master of Ballantrae* in 'Glossen zu Stevenson', the German playwright was particularly interested in Stevenson's ability to force his readers – even within the supposedly uncomplicated framework of the adventure novel – to face an ambivalent emotional response towards his characters. It is no accident that Brecht's theory of epic theatre was to be based on a very similar dynamic.

Let us consider this passage from Brecht's *Kleines Organon für das Theater* (*A Short Organum for the Theatre*), his best-known theoretical work, from 1942. Speaking of the role of the actor in epic theatre, Brecht states:

> At no moment must [the actor] go so far as to be wholly transformed into the character played [...] He has just to show the character, or rather he has to do more than just get into it; this does not mean that if he is playing passionate parts he must himself remain cold. It is only that

> his feelings must not at bottom be those of the character, so that the audience's may not at bottom be those of the character either. The audience must have complete freedom here.[19]

By asking the actor to show the character, rather than interpreting the role in a traditional sense, Brecht defines acting as a narrative process. This is often intended as an emotional detachment from the character in order to enhance the didactical element of the performance. However, Brecht states that the premise of this way of acting is not a diminished level of emotional involvement, but a different degree of identification with the character. The actor must find a common ground between himself and the character, enriching his interpretation with an outside awareness that overlaps with the character's own consciousness. This is possible because there is no complete identification with the character and the actor remains, at the same time, himself.

Therefore, in order to understand Brechtian characters, one must be able to contemplate at once both the reality of the character and the reality of the actor, embodied in a single individual on the stage. This ultimately implies the blending of empathy and detachment, as the character is constantly scrutinised by an external, rational perspective. Such method does not override emotional involvement, but emotion should never be caused by an unthinking identification with the character, as the transformation is never complete. The actor must remain in between. The public, being free from the burden of compulsory identification, is also implicitly charged with the task of making sense of the whole process.

As an example, let us consider one of the main characters of *Die Dreigroschenoper*, namely Peachum the 'King of the Beggars'. This ruthless businessman forces all the beggars in London to work under his wing and teaches them – in exchange for considerable shares of their 'income' – how to behave in

order to evoke compassion and obtain alms from the passers-by. In the 'First Threepenny Finale Concerning the Insecurity of the Human Condition', Peachum sings:

> Let's practice goodness: who would disagree?
> Let's give our wealth away: is that not right?
> Once all are good His kingdom is at hand
> where blissfully we'll bask in His pure light.
> Let's practice goodness: who would disagree?
> But sadly on this planet while we're waiting
> the means are meagre and the morals low.
> To get one's record straight would be elating
> but our condition's such it can't be so.[20]

Peachum of course can be dismissed as a hypocrite, who claims he would like to be good but cannot be so, because of the unfortunate circumstances of life. However, if we interpret these words as those of the actor, we understand that Peachum's cynicism offers an insight to be taken seriously. The world is indeed a cruel place where men are forced to kill each other to survive. Ultimately, this passage points the finger not only at those who find excuses for their cruelty, but also at those who can afford morality because they have the material means to choose between good and evil.

In the short story, particularly in the passage mentioned above, Stevenson uses a very similar technique. We are presented with Villon's point of view but his reflections are hybridised with the narrator's, just as the Brechtian character is narrated by the actor. Thus, we are forced to reflect critically both on the character and on his words, as it remains unclear whether each sentence is meant to be pronounced by the character or is a commentary by the narrator. The narrator, on the other hand, never takes a clear-cut position explicitly. He might even side with the character and share his point of view. Once the border between

character and narrator blurs, the meaning of each sentence doubles and ambiguities multiply.

Bakhtin's dialogic principle is certainly at work within this hybrid, ambivalent language; however, it should be noted that although Bakhtin's conception of linguistic stratification does imply ideological and social conflict, it affects mainly the stylistic and verbal level of a given text. It does not necessarily involve the reader in an ethical controversy. Stevenson, on the other hand, systematically resorts to polyphony to stage complex moral issues, in which the problem of whether the reader should sympathise with the character plays a crucial role, mirroring Brechtian poetics and his technique of representation.

Stevenson, like Brecht, aims at doubling the perspective to put the reader in a status of moral ambiguity and epistemological uncertainty. This mechanism – in this case – enables us to read a supposedly hypocritical character as a potential source of wisdom, because his words benefit also from the narrator's awareness and consciousness. Are we to interpret sentences such as 'It seemed a cruel way to carry on the world' as a joke, a self-justification, a superficial comment, a moral truth or a disenchanted consideration on the human condition? Needless to say, all these alternatives are possible.

Stevenson deploys strategies to enhance the ambiguity of the narration also in the short story's final sequence, the conversation between Villon and Brisetout on honour and virtue. The dialogue is the climax of the short story, as it dramatises the ideological confrontation at the core of 'A Lodging for the Night'. However, exactly at this point, the narrator virtually disappears. He simply reports the actions of the characters and only makes a few comments. Due to the large proportion of dialogue and the lack of narrative intervention, this part of the short story is strikingly theatrical, an impression which is further enhanced by Villon's manner of interaction with Brisetout – he taunts the nobleman with the witty, popular irreverence of a Shakespearean fool. Such

a theatrical turn, however, ensures that the two positions are staged without any guidance from the narrator's side.

This is made even more complex by the fact that both positions are greatly controversial. Villon maintains that a rich lord and former warrior has no right to reproach a poor thief, as both the thief and the soldier commit morally despicable acts, but the soldier is protected by a patently unjust honour code. In doing so, Villon is very argumentative. A particularly poignant example of the poet's rhetorical power is the following section of the dialogue:

> 'You may still repent and change.'
> 'I repent daily' said the poet, 'There are few people more given to repentance than poor Francis. As for change, let somebody change my circumstances. A man must continue to eat, if it were only that he may continue to repent' (p. 342.)

Stevenson's Villon, with his sagacity and verbal resourcefulness, is particularly effective in supporting his claims. He relentlessly brings down idealistic abstractions to the material reality of life. The social and political implications of his argument really seem to anticipate Brecht in polemical vigour. Indeed 'food is the first thing, morals follow on' sums up Villon's argument in the short story perfectly, reinforcing – along with the overall theatricality of the passage – the connection between Stevenson's rewriting and Brecht's later practice.

Neverthless, we also know what Stevenson's public persona thought of his character's argumentations: 'It is a calumny on the noble army of the poor', as he said in the essay, meaning that being poor does not necessarily doom people to dishonesty and sin, and certainly does not justify their crimes. Moreover, Villon's assumption that Brisetout must be a hypocrite just because he is wealthy is equally unfair. On the other hand Brisetout's argu-

ments are not entirely convincing either. When he reminds Villon that he is 'disregarding another appetite in [his] heart' (p. 345) and claims that material suffering and social status are irrelevant when compared with spiritual salvation, he seems blissfully unaware of his ideological rigidity and his personal privilege. In the end neither character can be fully embraced without incurring contradiction or further moral dilemmas. Instead of suggesting a solution, the narrator remains silent, displaying 'the chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis'[21] that Walter Benjamin considered one of the distinguishing characteristics of the master storyteller.

The style of the short story is deliberately fragmentary and heterogeneous, so that it is very difficult to determine the relationship between narrator and character. Stevenson is consciously using a versatile and protean narrator who sometimes criticises Villon, sometimes seems to sympathise with him, sometimes even borrows his character's voice, and sometimes simply remains a silent spectator of the action. Due to this instability and blurring of boundaries, the narrative voice moves between empathy and detachment, and refuses to provide explicit answers to moral problems, which are thus forced on the reader.

It is a technique Stevenson will continue employing throughout his career. Indeed, all of his major works – *Treasure Island*, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, The Master of Ballantrae,* his South Sea writings – involve unreliable narrators, polyphony, multiple perspectives, or an ambivalent dislocation of ethical standpoints. Stevenson will frequently ask the reader to go beyond a surface reading and to actively participate in the construction of the text's meaning, thus carrying out a decentring of narrative authority that anticipates the modernist approach to fiction. It is worth noting that Stevenson, in 1877, at such an early stage of his career, should already be employing a writing technique that prefigures the ethical and aesthetical concerns of his mature fiction.

'A Lodging for the Night' becomes particularly interesting when its stylistic devices are played against those employed in 'François Villon: Student, Poet, Housebreaker'. The short story deploys a variety of strategies to enhance epistemological and moral ambiguity, but the essay attempts to rationalise and downplay the very same aspects of his subject matter. The two texts are thus connected in a dialectical relationship. Furthermore Stevenson's work in this respect goes beyond Bakhtin's theoretical framework. Bakhtin's heteroglossia implies the presence of a dialogic tension *within* the language and style of a given literary text. But the polyphony we encounter in the short story confronts the external, autonomous dimension of the essay, which relies on radically different epistemological and moral premises. By creating a dynamic interplay between these genres, Stevenson forces the reader to adopt two epistemologically different standpoints at the same time – just as Brecht's plays make a simultaneous and paradoxical appeal both to empathy and to detachment.

Stevenson's diptych might be said to merge different literary genres into a single, albeit heterogeneous, reflection upon the figure of François Villon. Stevenson asks the reader – in Spinoza's words – 'not to mock, lament, or execrate but [...] to understand human actions',[22] presenting him, in Alex Thompson's words, with 'a work whose moral complexity stems directly from the effort to bypass the pointing of moral lessons'.[23] Yet, at the same time, Stevenson also exhorts the reader to actually take sides whenever a moral question presents itself. The negative – in Keatsian terms – knowledge of ambiguity and the practical knowledge of shared morality become inextricably intertwined, in order to respond, simultaneously, to complementary epistemological and moral needs. Ultimately, Stevenson creates an ethical system that encompasses ambivalence, which he urges the reader to acknowledge and also to play a part in such complexity.

Notes

1 Richard Ambrosini, 'History, Criticism, Theory and the Strange Case of Joseph Conrad and R. L. Stevenson', in *Robert Louis Stevenson and Joseph Conrad: Writers of Transition*, ed. by Linda Dryden, Stephen Arata and Eric Massie (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2009), pp. 15-29 (p. 18).

2 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'To Edmund Gosse', in *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. by Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Mehew (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 8 vols, V, pp. 170-172 (p. 171).

3 Robert Kiely, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Fiction of Adventure* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. vii.

4 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'François Villon: Student, Poet, Housebreaker', in *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp. 89-106 (p. 103), henceforth cited in text.

5 My translation of 'das außerordentliche Beispiel eines Abenteuerromans, in dem die Sympathie des Lesers zu dem Abenteurer selbst (von der allein doch alle anderen Abenteuerromane leben) sich erst mühsam durchsetzen muß'. Bertolt Brecht, 'Glossen zu Stevenson', in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 18 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976), pp. 24–26 (p. 26).

6 'A Lodging for the Night' was first published in German translation in Robert Louis Stevenson, *Quartier für die Nacht / Will von der Mühle. Zwei Erzählungen* (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1918). See Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, http://www.dnb.de/DE/Home/home_node.html, accessed 9 March 2015.

7 Auguste Longnon, *Étude Biographique sur François Villon* (Paris: Menu, 1877).

8 François Villon, *Poems*, trans. by David Georgi (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2013), p. 143.

9 Giovanna Mochi, 'La prosa del romanticismo: i saggisti', in *Storia della civiltà letteraria inglese*, ed. by Franco Marenco (Torino: UTET, 1996), pp. 522-541 (p. 522).

10 Guy Tabarie (or Tabary) was one of Villon's accomplices and fellow thieves. He is mentioned in 'François Villon: Student, Poet, Housebreaker' and appears as a character in 'A Lodging for the

Night'. In both instances Stevenson describes him as a dim-witted and pathetic man, constantly in awe of more charismatic figures like Villon. Needless to say, he was *not* an honest man, despite Villon's claim in this line.

11 *Poems*, p. 85.

12 *Poems*, p. 175.

13 The ballad is one of Villon's poems that Brecht re-elaborated for *Die Dreigroschenoper,* combining 'La Ballade des Pendus' with another work by Villon, 'La Ballade de Mercy' ('The Ballad of Forgiveness'). It is Mackie Messer, the anti-hero of the play, who sings the song, when he is about to be hanged towards the end of the third act. Mackie combines the plea for forgiveness to his 'fellow men' – taken from 'La Ballade des Pendus' – with another, more disturbing appeal to the inhabitants of the underworld – thieves, prostitutes, psychopaths – and, most importantly, with a bitter and violent attack to 'those filthy police employees' who would 'chuck me crusts to stop my hunger' – a rhetorical strategy Brecht takes from Villon's 'La Ballade de Mercy'. Brecht, of course, is more explicitly political than Villon, for the figures he evokes delineate a much more precise social pattern of oppression and injustice compared to Villon's original poem. This is a good example of how Brecht manages to bring out the latent political side of Villon's poetry. See Bertolt Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (London: Penguin, 2007), pp. 79-80.

14 *Poems*, p. 39.

15 *The Threepenny Opera*, p. 57.

16 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'A Lodging for the Night', in *New Arabian Nights* (Rockville: Wildside Press, 2009), pp. 317-346 (p. 346), henceforth cited in text.

17 From 'Discourse in the Novel' (1935) in *The Dialogic Imagination,* cited by Pam Morris, ed., in *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov* (London: Arnold, 1997), p. 75.

18 Ibid., p. 115.

19 Bertolt Brecht, 'A Short Organum for the Theatre', in *Brecht on Theatre: the Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. by John Willet (London: Eyre Methuen, 1977), pp. 179-205 (pp. 193-194).

20 *The Threepenny Opera*, p. 34.

21 Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', in *Illuminations*, (New York:

Schocken Books, 2007), pp. 83-109 (p. 91).

22 Baruch Spinoza, 'A Political Treatise', in *The Chief Works of Benedict De Spinoza: A Theological Political Treatise and A Political Treatise* (New York: Dover Publications, inc., 1951), pp. 286-387 (p. 288).

23 Alex Thompson, 'Stevenson's Afterlives', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. by Penny Fielding (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 147-159 (p. 156). Thompson's statement refers to *Treasure Island*, but it is certainly applicable to 'A Lodging for the Night' and, I would argue, to most of Stevenson's fictional works as well.