

“Truth to the fact and a good spirit in the treatment”
Lying and Truth in Robert Louis Stevenson’s Pivotal Years

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I propose to examine the ideas about lying found in one specific writer, Robert Louis Stevenson, more particularly in a handful of lesser-known writings of Stevenson’s from the period 1878 to 1881 when Stevenson was aged 27 to 30, a period that includes the year Stevenson abandoned his family and friends, abandoned all security, and journeyed as an amateur emigrant, as he called it, from Scotland to California, ruining his already frail health, with barely enough money to live on (at one point allowing himself only 25 cents a day for food), and uncertain when or even whether Fanny Osbourne, the lover for whose sake he had travelled all this way, would be able to obtain a divorce and marry him.

During this period Stevenson produced nineteen substantial essays, one travel book and a book about his native city, Edinburgh, nine short stories and novellas, and his first novel, *Treasure Island*, not to mention many short poems and collaborations on plays. One of the major themes in his writing at the time was the difficulty of discovering and then of expressing the truth—which is, of course, the other side of denying and hiding the truth, which we call lying. This essay aims to explore some of these attempts to understand the nature of truth and lying.

It will be appropriate to start with Stevenson’s essay “Truth of Intercourse,” which addresses the difficulty of speaking the truth in our relations with other people. The essay distinguishes between two kinds of truth: truth of fact and truth of sentiment. Truth of fact is relatively straightforward. It is easy to share “truth of fact,” as in the example Stevenson gives: “not to say that I have been in Malabar when as a matter of fact I was never out of England, not to say that I have read Cervantes in the original when as a matter of fact I know not one syllable of Spanish.” “This, indeed,” says Stevenson, “is easy and to the same degree unimportant in itself.” Such a lie is “unimportant in itself” because it concerns only outward, circumstantial details, but there is a more important kind of lie, which we might call *insincerity*. Someone who always violates *truth of fact*, “the habitual liar,” as Stevenson says, “may be a very honest fellow, and live truly with his wife and friends,” but the person who does not tell such lies may not necessarily be any better, may, in fact, be worse. This habitually *insincere* person, someone “who never told a formal falsehood in his life may yet

be *himself* one lie—heart and face, from top to bottom.” I could, for instance, be perfectly accurate about my inability to read Cervantes in Spanish (no big deal) but I might be someone who puts on a false front, who speaks words of sympathy and support when you are suffering, but underneath I actually am gloating about your misfortune. This, concludes Stevenson, “is the kind of lie which poisons intimacy. And, *vice versa*, veracity to sentiment, truth in a relation, truth to your own heart and your friends, never to feign or falsify emotion—that is the truth which makes love possible and mankind happy” (“Truth of Intercourse” 28).

We think the issue is settled, then: we should prefer truth of sentiment over truth of fact—though, of course, it is a good idea to be truthful in both ways. But it is not as simple as that. Truth of sentiment—that great goal we want to strive for—is nevertheless almost impossible to perceive and even harder to express with any useful precision. In a moral tract that Stevenson wrote shortly after “Truth of Intercourse,” revised but published only posthumously, given the title “Lay Morals,” Stevenson creates a beautiful, even astounding, image of the unattainability of either kind of truth. Trying to define or express any important kind of truth about life or especially about human nature (oneself in particular or human nature in general) is like trying to delineate the shadow of a tree upon the ground:

The shadow of a great oak lies abroad upon the ground at noon, perfect, clear, and stable like the earth. But let a man set himself to mark out the boundary with cords and pegs, and were he never so nimble and never so exact, what with the multiplicity of the leaves and the progression of the shadow as it flees before the travelling sun, long ere he has made the circuit the whole figure will have changed. Life may be compared, not to a single tree, but to a great and complicated forest; circumstance is more swiftly changing than a shadow, language much more inexact than the tools of a surveyor; from day to day the trees fall and are renewed; the very essences are fleeting as we look; and the whole world of leaves is swinging tempest-tossed among the winds of time. Look now for your shadows. (“Lay Morals” 11)

So what hope is there now for us ever to express any important truths? Perceptions of the world and of ourselves are constantly changing, Stevenson concludes, they differ from person to person, and the perceivers themselves are in constant evolution: “This is gone; that never truly was; and you yourself are altered beyond recognition. Times and men and circumstances change about your changing character, with a speed of which no earthly hurricane affords an image” (“Lay Morals” 11).

Stevenson’s habit was always—certainly in his non-fiction—to build up the difficulties in front of him and then heroically, or quixotically, to contend against them, to “do battle for the truth,” as

he put it (“Truth of Intercourse” 33). How does he contend against this seemingly impossible challenge to find some way of speaking truth?

Stevenson identified one situation in life in which it is acceptable, or at least understandable, to lie, to be untruthful to fact. In the essay “Child’s Play,” Stevenson explained that because children live in a world of imagination, the external world for them is merely raw material for their imaginative games: a chair turned upside down becomes the steed on which the boy dashes on his mission for the king; the top of a chest of drawers becomes the cliff from which he, playing an intrepid hero, has to hurl himself. The “real” world beyond these fantasies may go on as it will, but it means very little to the child, compared to the world in the imagination. And thus, Stevenson concludes,

Whatever we are to expect at the hands of children, it should not be any peddling exactitude about matters of fact. They walk in a vain show, and among mists and rainbows; they are passionate after dreams and unconcerned about realities [...]; and there is nothing in their own tastes or purposes to teach them what we mean by abstract truthfulness. [...] You do not consider how little the child sees, or how swift he is to weave what he has seen into bewildering fiction; and that he cares no more for what you call truth, than you for a gingerbread dragoon. (“Child’s Play” 97)

Stevenson, as always when writing about childhood, was speaking from experience. In his *Memoirs*, written in 1880, he tells that as a child, “I was ready to lie, although more often wrongly accused of it, or rather wrongfully punished for it, having lied unconsciously” (“Memoirs of Himself” 157).

And as it turns out, it is not just children who can be excused for being inexact with the truth. On the steamer taking Stevenson across the Atlantic, there was a stowaway, Alick, who entertained the steerage passengers with his exaggerated claims about himself (otherwise known as lies). Everyone knew there was no truth in all these stories but Stevenson tells us he could not find it in himself to condemn the man. “[A]t the bottom of all his misconduct,” he tells us, “there was a guiding sense of humour that moved you to forgive him” (*From Scotland to Silverado* 67). Playfulness seems to be the key, at least as far as *truth to the fact* is concerned. As long as it is accompanied by a spirit of playfulness, deviating from truth of fact is excused. So the adult who preserves the child’s sense of play is also excused, since, like the child, he is engaged in performance.

And this leads us to the highest form of imaginative play: literature, or more specifically fiction. During his bleak days in San Francisco early in 1880, Stevenson drafted, though he never completed, an ambitious essay “On the Art of Literature,” in which he worked out the ideas about literature that he would express more fully in three important essays over the next four years: “A Gossip on Romance” (1882), “A Note on Realism” (1883), and “A Humble Remonstrance” (1884). What is remarkable is the extent to which Stevenson’s discussion of literature in this period is couched in moral, as opposed, say, to aesthetic, terms, that is, as a concern for what is true and what is a lie in art.

“The justification of any art is that it shall be true,” he declares in “The Art of Literature” (133). That sounds good, but what sense of “true” is he using here? As we have seen with that memorable shadow of the oak tree image, we can never achieve the truth of anything in life. And, even supposing we could, most of this “truth” would be so mundane and boring that it would not be worth communicating to anyone else. As Stevenson explained in an unpublished article of this period, aimed at schoolboys, “Nobody could be got to write, and still less anybody to read, a really complete account of anything” (“Books and Reading, N° 2” 343)

But if all we can perceive is a small part of that truth, then let us express that small part. Such expressions of partial truth are what literature is made of. (Here we touch on Stevenson’s connections with Impressionism, which were strong, but a little off our point at the moment.) As with conversation, what matters more in literature than truth of fact is truth of sentiment. What is important, he says in “The Art of Literature,” is “not the natural facts of the fable”—that is, not how true to fact the story line or its details may be—but the “matter of performance,” or the “point of view, which dictates and controls the material invention or selection” (140), or the “moral”: “Information is easily forgotten,” as he told the schoolboys. “But the moral is of use all through” (“Books and Reading, N° 1” 348). Once the point of view is determined, then comes the challenge to be true to this point of view or, to change to a musical term, true to this “one particular key” (“On the Art of Literature” 138), and this, to return to our earlier term, is the truth of sentiment. This will require us both to be ruthless in selecting only those details that pertain to the point of view, and painstaking in finding the right words to make the reader feel that this point of view is true to life. And even then, only the best writers succeed in this endeavour.

And what about *lying*? “A lie in art,” Stevenson says, “is whatever is done for profit [...] or for profit to morality, as in cheap poetic justice” (“On the Art of Literature” 134). Stevenson cites an example

from Victor Hugo, which he had also, several years earlier, pointed out as an unlikely (thus untruthful) coincidence, appearing merely for artistic effect. In the novel *Les Travailleurs de la mer* Hugo describes a ship disappearing over the horizon at the precise moment when the hero's head disappears under water. Hugo brought these two details together, Stevenson says, only for an "unprincipled avidity after effect"; readers know this is a contrived effect; "a thing like that raises up a despairing spirit of opposition in a man's readers; they give him the lie fiercely, as they read" ("Victor Hugo's Romances" 25). Lying is thus not being faithful to your point of view but, instead, allowing other considerations to shape what you are saying.

Elsewhere Stevenson uses the term *fustian* with a meaning slightly different from its normal sense of inflated, pompous language. He gives the word the moral sense of insincerity, lack of truth to sentiment, or lying for effect, as in his discussion of Robert Burns's love letters to "Clarinda," in which he sees Burns adopting passionate language towards this woman when he was writing to her, but never strongly feeling these transports. And yet, Stevenson admits, "amid the fustian of the letters there are forcible and true expressions" ("Some Aspects of Robert Burns" 46), and these, in Stevenson's view, go some ways to redeeming Burns's morals, and his writing: amid the fustian lying we catch some glimmers of truth.

Stevenson is concerned at this period with the issue of truth and lying not only in fiction, but also in history, literary criticism, and journalism. And the demands for these genres are stricter than for fiction. Here it is not sufficient just to remain true to a point of view, whatever that point of view might be. The writer has a moral obligation to select a point of view that enlarges our understanding of the world, since, given our limitations, we need all the help we can get from the experience of others.

Not long after his return from America, Stevenson threw himself into a discussion in the press about the benefits of taking up writing as a profession, producing "On the Morality of the Profession of Letters," a little-known but significant essay. After speaking about "literature at its highest," he turns to the popular press, the form of literature that exerts the most influence upon people "in these days of daily papers." The papers, specifically the "copious Corinthian baseness of the American reporter or the Parisian *chroniqueur* [...] exercise an incalculable influence for ill [...]. The sneering, the selfish, and the cowardly are scattered in broad sheets on every table," increasing the general cynicism:

[when] we find two journals on the reverse sides of politics each, on the same day, openly garbling a piece of news for the interest of its own party, we smile at the discovery [...] as over a good joke and pardonable stratagem. Lying so open is scarce lying, it is true; but one of the things that we profess to teach our young is a respect for truth; and I cannot think this piece of education will be crowned with any great success, so long as some of us practise and the rest only approve of public falsehood. (“On the Morality of the Profession of Letters” 54–55)

And so again it comes down to the moral issue of telling the truth. “There are two duties incumbent upon any man who enters on the business of writing: truth to the fact and a good spirit in the treatment.” This means, first of all, that the writer must never suppress any truths of fact; “It must always be foul to tell what is false; and it can never be safe to suppress what is true. The very fact that you omit may be the fact which somebody was wanting [...]. Every fact is a part of that great puzzle we must set together” (“On the Morality of the Profession of Letters” 56). In other words, even if we cannot trace the shadow of that great oak tree, nevertheless just tracing the small part of it we *can* manage is conveying some sort of truth and may—who knows?—be useful to someone.

And the second duty “incumbent” on any writer: “good spirit in the treatment.” Here we come to the key point. Any writer who puts himself before the public “must see that his own mind is kept supple, charitable, and bright [...] and he should recognise from the first that he has only one tool in his workshop, and that tool is sympathy” (“On the Morality of the Profession of Letters” 58).

Sympathy—both a moral and an aesthetic quality, the practice of trying to get as close as possible to what we are looking at, with an open mind, with a willingness to examine views different from our own, exercising the three qualities of being “supple, charitable, and bright.” These, we might say, will be our weapons in doing battle for the truth, our shields against the temptations to lie. Our point of view on any subject must be *supple*, flexible enough so it can look at an issue, or a fact, from several different angles, not just looking to promote our own view on the subject. And our point of view must be *charitable*, resisting both cynicism and sentimentality, but, fully aware that we live in a world of imperfections, working hard to discover whatever good might be contained in other points of view than our own. And the third of those words: *bright*. It is no good presenting our point of view if it is merely a boring, bloodless account of the facts, or if we have overloaded it with excessive detail; we have to present our point of view in a vivid way, with a few right words and sharp images, which will catch our readers’ imagination and remain alive and memorable to them. Clichés, sloppy choice of words, garbled ideas all belie the truth of the sentiment we wish to express, and indicate that we are running away from doing battle for the truth.

A short paper is not the place to go into detail about how Stevenson himself in this period expressed points of view that were “supple, charitable, and bright,” except to look briefly at one example. His essay on Robert Burns, a combination of biography and literary criticism, begins by taking to task the respectable Principal Shairp, whose book on Burns was written from a narrowly moralistic point of view, condemning those poems deemed undignified and refusing even to attempt to understand the potentially scandalous incidents in Burns’s life. Shairp, Stevenson says, thus created “an imperfect sympathy between the author and the subject,” which led to “an inorganic, if not incoherent, presentation of both the poems and the man” (“Some Aspects of Robert Burns” 32). Stevenson was not going to accuse the esteemed Principal Shairp of *lying*, but he certainly implies that the inadequate point of view does not present the truth about Burns. Instead, in his own treatment of Burns, we see Stevenson being supple in examining Burns’s relations with women and the development (or decay) of his poetic career from many different angles. He charitably refuses to condemn Burns, as previous biographers and critics had, because he seduced many women, but recognises that Burns had trapped himself in the role of a Don Juan, and then traces the sad consequences. Look, for instance, at this carefully weighed assessment of Burns’s failure to sustain a high quality of poetry later in his life:

The man who had written a volume of masterpieces in six months, during the remainder of his life rarely found courage for any more sustained effort than a song. [...] The change was [...] the direct and very natural consequence of his great change in life; but it is not the less typical of his loss of moral courage that he should have given up all larger ventures, nor the less melancholy that a man who first attacked literature with a hand that seemed capable of moving mountains, should have spent his later years in whittling cherry-stones. (“Some Aspects of Robert Burns” 49)

And as for “bright” expressions, we have that final clause above—“that a man who first attacked literature with a hand that seemed capable of moving mountains, should have spent his later years in whittling cherry-stones”—the strong verb “attacked,” the focus on the “hand”, not writing poems but heroically “moving mountains” and then the same hand at the end degraded merely to “whittling cherry-stones.” This is the kind of memorable language Stevenson came to be known for.

John Jay Chapman praised the Burns essay as “the most comprehensible word ever said of Burns. It makes us love Burns less, but understand him more” (219–20). Or, in words suitable to our theme, the essay refuses to lie about Burns, but gives us, to the best of its ability, the truth about

the man and the poet, although necessarily only a part of the truth. And partial truth, after all, is the best that we can expect from anyone.

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