

Stevenson, Benjamin, and the Decay of Experience

Matthew Wickman

Nineteenth-century contemporaries like Henry James, Gerard Manley Hopkins, William Morris, and George Moore shared the conviction that Robert Louis Stevenson was a masterful writer. That Paul Maixner should have had to work so hard a century later to remind us of this fact may surprise readers who imagine Stevenson fitting squarely within the constellation of canonical authors. [\[1\]](#) The emergence of numerous books on Stevenson over the past fifteen years or so only strengthens our present-day impression of Stevenson as luminary. [\[2\]](#) Working successfully within multiple genres—novels, short stories, poems, essays, correspondence, and others—Stevenson was and is widely admired for the vivid pictures he painted with words, the sweep of his narratives, and his poignant observations on modern life.

However, as Maixner recognized in the early 1980s, it was not always so. Beginning perhaps with Frank Swinnerton's 1914 dismissal of Stevenson as a 'poseur' and 'a writer of the second class', Stevenson's reputation deteriorated in the early part of the twentieth century until he was seen as little more than a consumptive scribbler coughing up mere boys' books. [\[3\]](#) A similar thing had happened to Walter Scott in the nineteenth century, much as numerous female writers from that same period had been and were continuing to be dismissed as peddlers of vacuous romances. [\[4\]](#) Of course, tidal shifts swing in both directions, and given the massive recovery project devoted to a host of writers in this, our era of the so-called 'return to history' (synonymous for some critics with new historicism or, more ominously, the Information Age [\[5\]](#)), we should not be surprised that a spate of books and essays devoted to Stevenson's life and work have appeared over the past decade or two.

No, this resurgence of Stevenson studies is not surprising. But it may give us pause to recall one of Stevenson's true fans during the 1930s—that is, during the period of Stevenson's dimming reputation—and to reflect for a moment on the reason for this admirer's enthusiasm. I refer here

to Walter Benjamin, who regarded Stevenson as something of a prophet on the subject of the decay of experience, one of the most enigmatic but extensive problems the modern West had inherited from the Enlightenment. As Benjamin saw it—indeed, as a multitude of philosophers and cultural critics saw it, had seen it, and eventually would come to see it (ranging from Dilthey and Nietzsche and Heidegger and Adorno to Foucault and Derrida and Lyotard and Jameson, to say nothing of Stevenson's contemporaries, nor Walter Scott's, nor for that matter James Macpherson's)—experience had lost much of its luster in modernity; the quality of experience and, with it, of life itself, was in decline. My initial aim in this essay is to provide an overview of the reason why this was so, though less as an end in itself than as a backdrop for the ultimate purpose of explaining Benjamin's peculiar affinity for Stevenson.

Of course, I should acknowledge at the outset that a rigorous recounting of the story about the legacy of experience in the modern West requires considerably more space than I can allot to it here. As I discuss elsewhere, it is a story as much about the resurgence as the decay of experience, and it is a tale in which Scotland figures in provocative ways. [6] Nevertheless, if we restrict our scope for the time being to Benjamin, we may discern at least the general outlines of this complex issue. In an essay entitled 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', written early in his career (e.g., 1918) and unpublished in his lifetime, Benjamin commented on the transformation of experience during the Enlightenment. More specifically, he noted how the new empirical philosophy reduced experience 'to a nadir, to a minimum, of significance'. [7] The 'quintessence' of experience during this period of modern secularization, he argued, 'was Newtonian physics', meaning that experience became associated with discrete moments of sensation rather than with life considered holistically or with values held in common across communities (101). David Hume famously appealed to experience in precisely this 'Newtonian' way, proclaiming that 'we cannot go beyond experience' in matters of human understanding, and that experience itself was reducible to 'a bundle or collection of different perceptions which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity.' [8] Though unique in the conclusions he drew from this concept of experience, Hume was hardly alone in invoking the category in this way. As Peter Dear explains, this reduction of experience to a series of impressions and perceptions was a modern, enlightened development: 'An "experience" in the Aristotelian sense was a statement of *how things happen* in nature, rather than a statement of *how something had happened* on a particular occasion'. This is why Aristotle argues that poetry is philosophically superior to history: poetry deals in universals, or in experience at a general level, rather than with particular details and, hence, with aberrations from perfect form. 'But', Dear continues, 'the experimental performance, the kind of experience upheld as the norm in modern scientific practice, is unlike its Aristotelian counterpart; it is usually sanctioned by reports of historically specific events'. [9] It becomes, in essence, the empty repository of events rooted in sensation.

Benjamin was deeply suspicious of this winnowing of experience to a series of impressionable moments. Such moments are, as Dear observes, the product of modern science, though over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries they began to appear outside the laboratory in such fields as law (in the division of witnesses from jurors), religion (especially in modern evangelical religions which place emphasis on divine revelation as heightened moments of truth), and art (e.g., with the onset of romantic notions of art as a crystallization of intense moments of lived experience set against the 'fading coal' of everyday life). [\[10\]](#) Marxist critics perceived the logical propinquity of this divisive, sensationist dynamic to the dominant features of modern socioeconomic reality, primarily the division of labor and, by extension, the commoditized sensationalism of, say, advertising. For them, any formation inherently separating experience from the texture of everyday life was thus inherently dubious, a mere by-product of a deeper, material cause, and hence reducible to ideology. [\[11\]](#) As I will discuss below, Benjamin championed a contrary, collective notion of experience as a phenomenon uniting together both atomistic impressions and alienated individuals. But he held to this standard amidst a deeper conviction that experience had fallen into decay, or that it was fragmenting into a motley array of consciousness-bombarding instants—in Marshall McLuhan's vernacular, 'hot' media. [\[12\]](#) But it would not be sufficient, he believed, simply to take these instants of experience at face value and denounce them for their divisive logic; indeed, such instants were themselves subsumed into larger, systemic processes of industry and knowledge. This was perhaps most evident in the scientific 'method' for marshalling random facts into patterns of knowledge. What science shared here with capital was the tendency to divide sensation from reflection and sunder direct contact with objects from objective understanding of the same. To this extent, they each contributed to a social and epistemological dynamic of alienation.

Benjamin gave most eloquent expression to this dynamic in his 1936 essay 'The Storyteller'. 'Experience has fallen in value,' he lamented.

And it looks as if it may fall into bottomlessness.. Wasn't it noticeable at the end of the [First World W]ar that men who returned from the battlefield had grown silent—not richer but poorer in communicable experience?. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been more thoroughly belied than strategic experience was belied by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on horse-drawn streetcars now stood under the open sky in a landscape where nothing remained unchanged but the clouds and, beneath those clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body. [\[13\]](#)

As readers familiar with Benjamin's work might expect, the status of experience in this passage is shifting and complex. It designates both a phenomenological immersion in the world—the experience of the 'fragile body' beneath 'destructive torrents'—and also an epistemological mastery of that world—a transcendence of bodily experience which provides a knowledgeable perspective onto the causes of the chaos. [14] The passage thus embeds within itself two important and competing concepts of experience corresponding to the German differentiation of experience into the terms *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. *Erfahrung*, from the root *fahren*, meaning to pass through or sail over, is called 'long' experience because it implies something which occurs over time or which we inherit from tradition. *Erlebnis*, by contrast, is a nineteenth-century coinage signifying 'inner, lived experience', especially of 'short', transcendent moments (e.g., in Romantic notions of art). [15] As Benjamin (and numerous others) saw it, *Erfahrung* was under siege in a modern world implicated epistemologically in science (and, hence, in particular 'experiences' derived through observation) and economically in intensified divisions of labor; the romantic aura accruing to short bursts of aesthetic and religious experience thus emerged as compensation for the loss of tradition and meaning. [16] *Erlebnisse*, or intensely lived moments, did not heal the breach of experience; instead, they compounded it.

Despite the arresting image in Benjamin's essay of 'the tiny, fragile human body' standing beneath an infernal sky, Benjamin's argument there is less about warfare than narrative. Taking as his vehicle the purported decay of oral narrative tradition, Benjamin characterizes modern experiential anomie as 'a concomitant of the secular productive forces of history' which divide laborers from capitalists, specialists in one field from those in another, and 'narrative from the realm of living speech' (p. 146). This is why, he argues, the novel emerges in its modern form in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: its subject matter, mass production, profitability to authors, and consumption by solitary readers all reflect the divisive, fragment-producing forces of industrial society and the latter's relations of private property. However, he observes, the situation is not entirely bleak: the disappearance of traditional storytelling and, with it, a conception of collective experience is 'making it possible to find a new beauty in what is vanishing' (p. 146). The collective consciousness of decay (an important paradox: our collective awareness of the virtual impossibility of such collectivity) generates the type of communal sentiment reputedly under siege. As a sign of this redemptive possibility, Benjamin points to the vestiges of storytelling (and hence of solidarity) in modernity 'in Leskov [and] in Hauff, in Poe [and] in Stevenson' (p. 162). He concludes his essay on this note of hope.

Though he was a fine storyteller, Stevenson's is the one name that seems out of place in this context. After all, Benjamin's essay directly addresses the work of Nikolai Leskov, and Wilhelm Hauff was well known for his early nineteenth-century fairy stories. Poe's inclusion seems logical if only because of his powerful influence on Charles Baudelaire, who, in Benjamin's mind, was the

quintessential figure of burgeoning modernism during the nineteenth century. But Stevenson? True, Stevenson stories like 'Thrawn Janet' possess a strong, demotic flavor reminiscent of Leskov or Hauff, but Benjamin never speaks of these stories, here or elsewhere. He seems to have appreciated Stevenson more for his other work, notably the essay 'A Plea for Gas Lamps', which addresses nineteenth-century Paris, and *The Master of Ballantrae*, Stevenson's most complex novel.

Still, it is in the context of storytelling that Benjamin elicits Stevenson, converting him into an image of a quality of experience richer than that typically afforded by modernity, but immanent to those cultural critics who know how to perceive it. I say that Stevenson acquires the status of an 'image' in Benjamin's essay; Benjamin's more exact term would be a 'dialectical image': 'Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions—there the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of thought'. [\[17\]](#) Such momentary pauses represent for Benjamin the reflexive antithesis of experiential instants; through these disruptions we arrest the ideological flow of 'nature' as 'progress' and thus arrive at genuine historical (in Marxian terms: materialist; in the religious terminology sometimes employed by Benjamin: messianic; in modern speak: critical) consciousness. [\[18\]](#) On these grounds, Stevenson becomes doubly exemplary: he is part of a larger group of storytellers whose work supersedes or otherwise forestalls the decay of experience, and he is also set apart from that group by virtue of his 'dialectical' difference from it. Therefore, Stevenson's elliptical inclusion functions as something of a metonymic figure in Benjamin's essay: if we can discern why Stevenson belongs with Leskov, Hauff, and Poe, then perhaps we may perceive the 'new beauty' in what Benjamin claims is 'vanishing', and thereby come to understand how the drama of experience in modernity plays out in the particular case (for Benjamin, the virtually Leibnizian monad) of storytelling.

In a significantly longer version of this paper, I discuss Stevenson's—and more particularly his narrator's—role as storyteller in *Kidnapped* and *Catriona*. These novels, I claim, negotiate the complex dynamics of experience which Stevenson inherits partly from Walter Scott, but more especially from the legacy of late eighteenth-century Scottish Highland romance. More specifically, I interpret this legacy by way of an extended analysis of the 1752 Appin Murder and subsequent Trial of James Stewart, arguing that this trial delineates the contours of modernity's paradox of experience—the paradox, that is, of the allure accruing to experience for Benjamin and others as a function of its perceived decay. Stevenson's novels *Kidnapped* and *Catriona* take up the Appin Murder, the Stewart Trial, and this history of experience in acute and compelling ways which Benjamin reiterates not only in 'The Storyteller', but also across the breadth of his work. [\[19\]](#)

I do not have space here to address Stevenson's novels relative to the Stewart Trial, eighteenth-century Highland romance, Scott, or Benjamin. However, as a glimpse into the reasons for Benjamin's interest in Stevenson, we might briefly consider one of Stevenson's more provocative but often overlooked essays, 'A Plea for Gas Lamps,' first published in April 1878. Stevenson writes here in urbane but also mythical terms about the progress made in the lighting of large cities, specifically Paris. He idealizes the ante-modern (though not exactly primitive) device of the gas lamp: 'When gas first spread along a city. a new age had begun for sociality and corporate pleasure-seeking'. These lights brought people together outside the confines of the workplace: 'The city folk [now] had stars of their own; biddable, domesticated stars'. At the time at which he is writing, however, these lamps have regrettably been replaced by electricity, which causes Stevenson to pine for the lamplighter: 'not much longer shall we watch him speeding up the street and, at measured intervals, knocking another luminous hole into the dusk. The Greeks would have made a noble myth out of such an one; how he distributed starlight' in the manner of Prometheus. Now, however, 'like all heroic tasks, his labors draw toward apotheosis, and in the light of victory himself shall disappear. For another advance has been effected. Our tame stars are to come out in future, not one by one, but all in a body and at once. *Fiat Lux*, says the sedate electrician. Starrise by electricity, the most romantic flight of civilization; the compensatory benefit for an innumerable array of factories and bankers' clerks'. The new lighting befits a new age—one which is bureaucratic, technocratic, and instrumentalizing. 'In Paris' especially, Stevenson argues, 'a new sort of urban star [i.e., an electric lamp] now shines out nightly, horrible, unearthly, obnoxious to the human eye; a lamp for a nightmare. To look at it only once is to fall in love with gas, which gives a warm domestic radiance fit to eat by'. [\[20\]](#)

Stevenson's tone in this essay is clearly ironic, but this seems more posturing than disdainful; if anything, the young Stevenson affects here the urbane detachment of a figure like Baudelaire. And indeed, Stevenson felt entranced by Paris, where he lived periodically in the 1870s. His stepson, Lloyd Osbourne, observed that ' France had a profound influence on Stevenson; mentally he was half a Frenchman; in taste, habits and prepossessions he was almost totally French. [He] was more really at home in France than anywhere else'. [\[21\]](#) It may be overstating the case to label Stevenson 'almost totally French', but Stevenson certainly admired writers like Flaubert and Balzac, and his exposure to the artistic environment in Paris convinced him to take up the life of a bohemian. [\[22\]](#) Elsewhere, moreover, especially in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Stevenson evinces a kind of fascination with the urban lighting his essay associates with Paris. His later, famous tale variously describes streets 'all lighted up as if for a procession', 'the great field of lamps of a nocturnal city', the 'wider labyrinths of lamplighted city', 'lamps, unshaken by any wind', 'lamps, which had never been extinguished', 'lamps glimmer[ing] like carbuncles', and 'lamplit streets'. [\[23\]](#) Phosphorescence here is the basis of shape, color, and mood, and it plays a central role in creating the novella's morbid atmosphere. It even informs the

psychology of its characters, as when Utterson articulates his obsession with Hyde as 'a scroll of lighted pictures' in his mind (13)—a vivid prefiguration of cinema as a medium constructed around the notion of our modern obsession with illuminated images, frame by frame.

Benjamin shared Stevenson's interests, albeit a generation later. He mentions Stevenson's 'A Plea for Gas Lamps' two years after the publication of 'The Storyteller', in a glowing 1938 letter written to Theodor and Greta Adorno. [24] That same year, 1938, Benjamin referred to the Stevenson piece in his own essay 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire', where he likened Stevenson's reflections to Poe's 1840 short story 'The Man of the Crowd'. Poe's narrator in that story is an observer of London 'throng[s]'—'tribe[s] of clerks', 'the race of swell pick-pockets', 'gamblers', 'Jew pedlars', 'sturdy professional street beggars', 'feeble and ghastly invalids', and so forth. Crucially, this narrator is as sensitive to the atmosphere of his observations as he is to their objects; he pointedly notes how 'the rays of the gas-lamps. threw over every thing a fitful and garish lustre. All was dark yet splendid'. [25] Benjamin loved this tale, alluding to it several times in his *Arcades Project*. [26] In his later book on Baudelaire, Benjamin remarks that Poe's narrator 'lets it grow dark. He lingers over the city by gaslight' in a manner evocative of Baudelaire's idyllic *flâneur*. [27]

The significance of Stevenson's essay becomes apparent as we follow Benjamin's train of associations: Stevenson's 'A Plea for Gas Lamps' evokes Poe, who in turn elicits Baudelaire's *flâneur*. This in turn takes us back to Benjamin's reflections on storytelling and the alleged decay of experience, for Benjamin cast the *flâneur*, the peripatetic urban onlooker, as a figure akin to the modern-day storyteller. Although obviously distinct in superficial ways—the *flâneur* is an idle gazer rather than a *raconteur*—Benjamin situates each figure 'on the threshold' separating premodern, communal sensibilities from modern, alienated ones. [28] This is the same place where, in 'The Storyteller', we behold an eroding *sensus communis* even as we 'find a new beauty in what is vanishing'. For Benjamin, ours is a 'dialectical', 'messianic' position which stakes out a vantage point between two broadly historical moments: the *flâneur*'s casual gaze conjures images of small townships traversable on foot and digestible to everyday experience even as his locale, by contrast, is the present-day city, which is increasingly sprawling and opaque.

In a way—compellingly, in fact—Stevenson created a *flâneur*-type figure in David Balfour, the callow narrator-protagonist of *Kidnapped* and *Catriona*. The 'city' in these particular novels is less Edinburgh or Inveraray than Scotland itself, a significant portion of which David absorbs peripatetically even as he describes and symptomatically exhibits multiple ways in which the complexities and corruptions of modernizing Scotland bewilder and escape him. Douglas Gifford comments on the symptomatic quality of these Balfour novels, remarking that Stevenson self-consciously utilizes David's naïveté to criticise 'the corrupt legal system [and] the ubiquitous

expediency and social hypocrisy [of] a debased modern Scotland'. [29] Stevenson's vivid (but, to David, opaque) characters in these texts—from the miserly Ebenezer, the dour Hoseason, and the fastidious Rankeillor to the calculating Prestongrange and the odious James More—resemble the motley crew of Poe's gas-illuminated city-dwellers. What is more, and as Berthold Schoene argues, the very figure of the *flâneur* itself has legs in Scottish fiction: Alan Warner provocatively resets this bewildered, ironic, peripatetic motif in his 2002 novel *The Man Who Walks*. [30] Warner refers liberally to Stevenson's *Kidnapped*; the novel's protagonist even stumbles across a Hollywood production of the story.

Ultimately, it may be the radical difference of Warner's vision from Stevenson's—a vision now become apocalyptically postmodern, violently hip, and frantically dystopian—which actually confirms Benjamin's and, as he imagines it, Stevenson's point about experience. For Benjamin, especially, the decay of experience, that is, the hypertrophied distillation of our engagement of life into discrete units of overloaded sensation, is not a feature of either 'modernist' or 'postmodernist' culture, nor of nineteenth-century industrialization, nor even of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century secularization in the shift toward modern science. The decay of experience paradoxically—because holistically—encompasses all of these historical moments; the decline 'in value' and the perception of 'beauty in what is vanishing' are part of the same dialectical process. Modernity, Benjamin implies (by way of storytellers, *flâneurs*, gas lighting, and hence Stevenson), is the era of a long farewell, an indefinitely extended moment of our heightened experience of the decay of our experience.

Stevenson's 'A Plea for Gas Lamps' takes precisely this sort of extended view, albeit in miniature. Its readers vicariously gaze, *flâneur*-like, on a public space at once effulgent and eroding: the space, that is, of nineteenth-century Paris. As it turns out, Benjamin's *magnum opus*, *The Arcades Project*, essentially reproduced Stevenson's essay on a grander scale. In doing so, Benjamin cobbled together thousands of historical, aesthetic, and archaeological excerpts pertaining to nineteenth-century Paris. Benjamin refers in several instances to gas lighting (see, for instance, convolutes Q 1,4; R 2,2; S 2a,2; and all through convolute T). From these fragments, Benjamin crafts a mosaic of voices and perspectives from which he hopes to instill in his readers an appreciation of the ruinous nature of experience in modernity. At the same time, however, Benjamin wishes to impart an understanding of the modern forces responsible for this ruin, and to inspire an epiphany regarding the experience of fragmentation which alienated human subjects increasingly share. [31] He took his cue here from Marx and Engels, who, in *The German Ideology*, insisted that the dynamics of alienation inspired rather than suppressed the likelihood of revolution. More specifically, Marx and Engels argued that industrialization etiolates social bonds, fragmenting collective units into composites of discrete individuals. However, Marx and Engels claim, 'only by this fact' of alienation are these modern subjects 'put into a position to enter into

relation with one another *as individuals*'. [32] The effect is one of dialectical reversal: once alienation becomes 'universalized', collectivity again prevails. But this time, predicated on the mutual experience of alienation, it attends the heightened self-consciousness of its subjects. This consciousness—this 'enlightenment'—putatively separates solidarity in an advanced egalitarian society from mere self-sameness in a primitive one. Only in this 'late' stage of self-awareness, presumably, is revolution—or, for Benjamin, the fullest experience—possible.

It was this sort of enlightened consciousness which Benjamin hoped to instill in his readers, for whom understanding the mass of fragments in *The Arcades Project* would require a Herculean interpretive effort. The difficulty of such a feat presumably rivals that of assembling all the loose and ludic threads of Joyce's *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*. One key difference between Joyce and Benjamin, however, is that Benjamin did not imagine that only the grandest, most complex artifacts of high modernist culture required such perspicuity, his own *Arcades Project* included; indeed, even a ritual as folksy and (purportedly) endangered as storytelling required similar interpretive acumen. In our modern era, Benjamin believed, we must have an eye for the (displaced) *form* of storytelling even as we rediscover an ear for the tales themselves; such criticism alone merits the title of dialectical (or, later, for Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams, cultural) materialism. This sort of heightened and multi-mediated sensibility—this acuteness of vision and hearing—would presumably restore a measure of fullness to the quality of our experience. In Benjamin's mind, Stevenson was one of a select group of storytellers most capable of inspiring this experience in us.

This does not mean that Stevenson perceived either the problem or the redemption of experience in quite the same way as his later admirer. Indeed, their visions of experience delineate similar rather than strictly identical perspectives. One conviction they definitely shared concerned the lamentable reduction of experience to sensation. Benjamin, as we have discussed, believed that the constriction of experience to sensation followed from the logic of science. Stevenson, for his part, speaks to this issue in his dialogue with Henry James on the nature of literature. James defined the novel as 'a direct impression of life' in a way which conjures Hume's sensationist model of cognition: 'Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spiderweb of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every airborne particle in its tissue'. [33] While Stevenson greatly respected James, he held to a different aesthetic principle: rather than fixating on 'the welter of impressions', writers of fiction should pursue 'an independent and creative' trajectory akin to geometry. [34] Literature should be something other than life in its rawest, mimetic form. However, it was precisely this ideal which separated Stevenson from Benjamin. As I discuss in the longer piece from which this essay is taken, Stevenson held faster than Benjamin (or at least with less

inner conflict) to a notion of literary transcendence, of literature in 'its immeasurable difference from life', and hence (in Benjamin's view), to 'inner' experience, or *Erlebnis*. [35]

And yet, despite these apparent differences, Benjamin discerned a more encompassing, holistic, or storytelling impulse at work in Stevenson's writing—something more akin to *Erfahrung*. True, Stevenson's belief in literary transcendence (a notion shared with other modern critics of experience, like Wilhelm Dilthey [36]) may strike us as naïve beside Benjamin's more sweeping and penetrating reflections on the problem. Still, we might recall Adorno's affectionate remarks concerning Benjamin's similarly romantic tendencies: 'instead of rejecting the promises of fairy tales and children's books. [Benjamin] took them so literally that real fulfillment was now within sight of knowledge'. [37] Stevenson and Benjamin thus shared a profound intellectual kinship in their inherent optimism, a oneness of spirit rendered all the more compelling given their differences of nationality, era, and literary background. And, in this spirit, Benjamin probably would have preferred Frank Swinnerton's Stevenson—the Stevenson of the so-called 'second class' of writers, the disregarded or overlooked Stevenson—to the cagey, urbane, and now, in our era, newly-fashionable man of letters. This is because Benjamin's Stevenson provided an alternative to the hegemonies and fashions of modern thought, including the changing tastes from which Swinnerton's dismissal of Stevenson was born. As Benjamin would have it, Stevenson's fate was most powerful if uncoupled from high modernism and linked instead to the forgotten class of the storyteller, a figure whose critical significance depended on his partial disappearance from view.

NOTES

I express my gratitude to the University of Pennsylvania Press for its permission to republish short excerpts of my book. Equal thanks are due to John Corbett for organizing the MLA session which generated the various essays in this cluster.

[1] For an overview of Stevenson's reputation among his contemporaries, see Paul Maixner, ed., *Robert Louis Stevenson: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1981).

[2] Consider, for instance, a short list of books which have appeared in the past five years: Julia Reid, *Robert Louis Stevenson, Science, and the Fin de Siècle* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), Richard Ambrosini and Richard Dury, eds. *Robert Louis Stevenson: A Writer of Boundaries* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), Barry Menikoff, *Narrating Scotland: The Imagination of Robert Louis Stevenson* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), Ann C. Colley, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Colonial Imagination* (Aldershot,

Hampshire: Ashgate, 2004), William Gray, *Robert Louis Stevenson: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), and William B. Jones, ed. *Robert Louis Stevenson Reconsidered: New Critical Perspectives* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2003).

[3] See 'Frank Swinnerton on Stevenson as a Writer of the Second Class' in Maixner, *Robert Louis Stevenson*, 507-10.

[4] A short list of such Scottish writers would include Elizabeth Hamilton, Jane Porter, Mary Brunton, and Susan Ferrier, as well as authors who are now slightly better known, like Anne Grant and Margaret Oliphant. The grand scholarly corrective of this historical oversight is, of course, *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, ed. Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997). See especially chapters 11 and 12: 'The Other Great Unknowns: Women Fiction Writers of the Early Nineteenth Century', by Carol Anderson and Aileen M. Riddell, and 'Rediscovering Scottish Women's Fiction in the Nineteenth Century', by Moira Burgess.

[5] Alan Liu perceives an insidious thread not only connecting but also reducing 'history' to 'information' in the present age. See *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), esp. pp. 14-72.

[6] See *The Ruins of Experience: Scotland's "Romantick" Highlands and the Birth of the Modern Witness* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). For a study of experience that provides less of a narrative than a wide-ranging catalogue, see Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005).

[7] 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', trans. Mark Ritter, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, 4 vols. 1: 101 (100-110). Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

[8] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Ernest C. Mossner (London: Penguin, 1984), 44. 300.

[9] Dear, *Discipline and Experience: The Mathematical Way in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 4.

[10] In *The Ruins of Experience*, I focus most directly on the division in modern jurisprudence between witnesses and jurors as those, respectively, who 'experience' events and those who 'know' these events based on probabilistic inferences derived from witness testimony. The attendant oppositions in the fields of science, art, religion, and others are in some ways most legible from that evidential vantage-point if for no other reason than 'evidence' is how our modern world processes the question of 'truth'. See especially ch. 1.

[11] On the complications of reducing experience to ideology, see the rejoinder made by Raymond Williams to the theory of Louis Althusser in Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with the New Left Review* (London: NLB, 1979), 168-72. See also my discussion of this debate in *The Ruins of Experience*, 10-11.

[12] On the rhetoric of 'hot' and 'cool' media, see especially McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

[13] 'The Storyteller', trans. Harry Zohn, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, 3: 143-44.

Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

[14] Benjamin elicits this type of transcendental, epistemological experience in 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy'. He called this 'metaphysical' experience, arguing that '[t]o say that knowledge is metaphysical means in the strict sense: it is related via the original concept of knowledge to the concrete totality of experience—that is, to *existence*' taken as a whole (110, Benjamin's emphasis).

[15] For more on the difference between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, see Jay, *Songs of Experience*, chs. 2, 3, and 6.

[16] For an extended and rigorous critique of aesthetic experience as *Erlebnis*, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1998), esp. pp. 1-169.

[17] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999), 475. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

[18] On the dynamics of dialectical images in Benjamin, see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989). On the specifically religious quality of these images—specifically, their implication in Benjamin's understanding of the Kaballah—see Vincent P. Pecora, *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, and Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), ch. 2.

[19] I am referring here to *The Ruins of Experience*, chapters 1 and 2.

[20] 'A Plea for Gas Lamps', "*Virginibus Puerisque*" and *Other Papers: Memories and Portraits* (New York: Standard Book Company, 1930), 150-52.

[21] Quoted in Frank McLynn, *Robert Louis Stevenson: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1993), 96.

[22] See McLynn, *Robert Louis Stevenson*, 97-98. See also Philip Callow's lyrical and *flâneur*-like description of Stevenson's love for Paris: 'On the verge of falling in love with Paris at first sight, seeing the brilliant posters pasted on round pillars, hearing the shouts of glaziers and grocers as he walked the streets, wandering through the village that was rural Montmartre with its trees, vineyards, windmills, and panoramic views, [Stevenson] was overwhelmed by the color on all sides—swarms of soldiers everywhere in red trousers—and by the sheer pace of it all; masons at work on their huge lumps of stone and buildings rising on all sides'. Etc. *Louis: A Life of Robert Louis Stevenson* (London: Constable, 2001), 61. Of special interest is a biography of Stevenson which preceded Benjamin's stated interest in him, Rosaline Masson's 1923 *The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes), which quotes from Stevenson letters and other

sources on Stevenson's love for Paris. See especially Ch. 4: 'R. L. S.: "New Artist of First Promise"'.

[23] Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, and Other Tales of Terror*, ed. Robert Mighall (London: Penguin, 2002), 7, 13, 14, 23, 28, 64. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

[24] See Benjamin's letter of August 28, 1938, trans. Nicholas Walker, *Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 273-74.

[25] 'The Man of the Crowd' in *Edgar Allan Poe: Tales and Sketches*, 2 vols., ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 1: 505-17 (508-09).

[26] See especially Convolute M, 'The Flâneur', specifically M 12a,2; M 12a,3; M 14,1; M 15a,2; passim.

[27] Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire : A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 50.

[28] Benjamin, 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century', trans. Howard Eiland. In *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, 3: 39.

[29] Gifford, 'Stevenson and Scottish Fiction: The Importance of *The Master of Ballantrae* ', in Jenni Calder, ed. *Stevenson and Victorian Scotland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981 [62-87]), 67.

[30] 'The Walking Cure: *Heimat*, Masculinity and Mobile Narration in Alan Warner's *The Man Who Walks* ', *Scottish Studies Review* 7:1, 2006.

[31] Adorno remarks that Benjamin 'never wavered in his fundamental conviction that the smallest cell of observed reality offsets the rest of the world. To interpret phenomena materialistically meant for him not so much to elucidate them as products of the social whole but rather to relate them directly, in their isolated singularity, to material tendencies and social struggles'. 'A Portrait of Walter Benjamin', *Prisms*, trans. by Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT, 1981), 236.

[32] *The German Ideology*, trans. unnamed, ed. C. J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 92, authors' emphasis.

[33] James, 'The Art of Fiction', in *The Art of Criticism: Henry James on the Theory and the Practice of Fiction*, ed. William Veeder and Susan M. Griffin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 170, 172.

[34] Stevenson, 'A Humble Remonstrance', in *R. L. Stevenson on Fiction: An Anthology of Literary and Critical Essays*, ed. Glenda Norquay (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 85.

[35] 'A Humble Remonstrance', 85. I am grateful to Scott Hames for reminding me of the pertinence of Stevenson's dialogue with James to the issue of experience.

[36] See, for instance, Dilthey's extended celebrations of literature's difference from and transcendence of quotidian reality in *Poetry and Experience*.

[37] Adorno, 'A Portrait of Walter Benjamin', 230.