That Crafty Artifice: Stevenson's Brownies and the Writing Process

By Kevan Manwaring

In 'A Chapter on Dream'[1] Robert Louis Stevenson describes a creative process informed by dreams and possibly by other, more mysterious forces. If we are to accept Stevenson's self-reflexive examination of methodology as sincere and not as some ironical stance or whimsical apologia, which, as Henry James notes in 'The Art of Fiction' was all-too-common at the time, it appears to describe a species of Fairy as an active agency in the creative process.[2]

Stevenson, recounting examples of particularly vivid dreams — 'that small theatre of the brain' (122) — posits the nocturnal machinations of presences ('players') which bequeath him inspiration. He identifies them as Brownies, benign beings usually associated with households. If treated kindly (e.g. left a saucer of cream) they enact useful household chores, cleaning, polishing, preparing and so forth. The Reverend Robert Kirk mentions them in *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies*:

> *The Brounies, who in some families are Drudges, clean the house & dishes after all go to bed, taking with him his portion of food, & removing befor [sic] day break.*[3]

Are these 'Drudges' the genius loci of dream states? Super-terrestrial beings who access human consciousness through the backdoor of the brain? The foot-soldiers of Fancy? Whatever their nature and providence, it seems an appropriate metaphor for the actions of the un- or sub-conscious, which prior to Freud and Jung, Stevenson would not have had conceptual framework for. Bound by his literary milieu and available metaphors, he charmingly describes these 'Little People' as a company of unruly players awaiting his authorial direction:

> *[…] the little people who manage man's internal theatre had not as yet received a very rigorous training; and played upon their stage like children who should*

have slipped into the house and found it empty. (124)

And yet even without his intervention, it would seem this lively troupe of 'rude mechanicals' soon take matters in hand, even despite his conscious implementation of craft:

And yet how often have these sleepless Brownies done him honest service, as he sat idly taking his pleasure in the boxes, better tales than he could fathom himself. (125; my emphasis)

It would appear that the Brownies have their own agency, which suggests an autonomous race dwelling within (or accessed through) his mind:

My Brownies […] who do one-half my work for me while I am fast asleep, and in all human likelihood, do the rest for me as well, when I am wide awake and fondly suppose I do it myself. (126)

This is an argument foreshadowed by Kirk, who described them as: 'Hollanders or Hollow-cavern inhabitants [who] live and traffick among us, in another State of Being without our Knowledge', and further developed by the Irish mystic, AE, a.k.a. George William Russell in *The Candle of Vision*:

[…] at times in meditation there broke in on me an almost intolerable lustre of light, pure and shining faces, dazzling processions of figures, most ancient, ancient places and peoples, and landscapes lovely as the lost Eden. These appeared at first to have no more relation to myself than images from a street without one sees reflected in a glass; but at times meditation prolonged itself into spheres which were radiant with actuality.[4]

It is a tantalising notion, and aligns with my hypothesis that many examples of the Fairy Tradition (the entering of hollow hills, the receiving of artistic gifts, the fixation upon an unattainable object of desire, a certain feyness) articulate the creative process in a metaphoric, or figurative way – limning the secret agency of the consciousness. This is not to fillet out the supernatural aspect and claim all Fairy folklore can be explained away; they may not be mutually exclusive, but part of the same phenomenon, or certainly on a continuum.

Stevenson relates examples of vivid dreams at length, as illustrations of this detailed, indigenous creation of narrative material, but also as a pathology which leads to the reification of such dream residuum in the *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* – an 1886 novel which seems to be an attempt to create a visceral Mystery Play of this double-life: the waking man unable to control the wild nocturnal adventures of his dreaming self. Much has been written on Stevenson's Gothic masterpiece — that it is a deconstruction of a hypocritical society, an exploration of the Id, a dramatisation of the demi-monde, and so forth, but as Stevenson was prone to taking laudanum, it seems just as likely to be the 'raw-head and bloody-bones' of his own nightmares. He is in good company with fellow Lotophagi such as Coleridge, De Quincey and Poe. Aldous Huxley was aware of Stevenson's essay, and it is an interesting footnote that the English intellectual experimented with hallucinogens to open his own 'doors of perception', perhaps keen to awaken his own inner 'Brownies'.

Can they be artificially invoked? Or are they endogenous to a writer's genius? This question has haunted those interested in creative writing for centuries. Some would give no credence to the (Classical and Romantic) notion of inspiration, and yet even they appreciate it when it strikes. Writers crave the adrenaline rush of inspiration and seek it wherever they can but it often comes unbidden. One of the best descriptions of it is in Michael Chabon's *Wonder Boys*:

> *The midnight disease is a kind of emotional insomnia; at ever conscious moment its victim — even if he or she writes at dawn, or in the middle of the afternoon — feels like a person lying in a sweltering bedroom, with the window thrown open, looking up at a sky filled with stars and airplanes, listening to the narrative of a rattling blind, an ambulance, a fly trapped in a Coke bottle, while all around him the neighbours soundly sleep.*[5]

Chabon's evocative term, the 'midnight disease', redolent of both guilty pleasures and parasomniac activity was seized upon by neurologist Alice W. Flaherty in her examination of the pathology of writerly compulsion and method.[6] She cites examples of hypergraphia, the overwhelming compulsion to write — what could be called Obsessive Narrative Disorder — which allowed the writer no more more control than an addict over his vice. But it is a form of mania from which emerge works of great depth and daring, and Stevenson would have been familiar with it:

there can be no Hyde without Jekyll.

Although Iain McGilchrist[7] deconstructs the crude distinction of left- and right-brain activity (the former being 'literal and logical', the latter 'lateral and artistic', in his examination of hemispherical activity, could the inchoate, minute and infinitely complex operations of the mind be ultimately what Stevenson was groping towards, using an arresting (and relatable) analogy? Stevenson never asks us to believe literally in his Brownies, just to believe that something indubitably happens beyond his volition to enable him to write and to write with success:

> *I am awake, and I live by this business; and yet I could not outdo – could not even equal – that crafty artifice. (126)*

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