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The Poetics of Talk in Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island

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"I am Not a Novelist Alone": Robert Louis Stevenson's Adventures in Talk

In "Talk and Talkers" (1882), a two-part critical essay that first appeared in the popular monthly, *Cornhill*, Robert Louis Stevenson elevates the phenomenon of talk over and above any kind of literary endeavor: "Literature in many of its branches is no other than the shadow of good talk."[1] This particular statement—and his broader advocacy of talk in this essay—demonstrates that Stevenson, near the start of his career, had concluded that "good talk" presented a significant challenge to the artistic preeminence conventionally accorded to literary print. In "Talk and Talkers," Stevenson ascribes to "good talk" an unmatchable vitality, such that "the excitement of a good talk lives for a long while after in the blood, the heart still hot within you," while in stark contrast, "written words remain fixed, become idols even to the writer, found wooden dogmatisms" (pp. 150 and 145). For Stevenson, such robust, living dynamism enabled talk to overshadow any kind of writing. The present study argues that his first success in fiction, *Treasure Island* (serialized in *Young Folks* 1881–2; published as a volume in 1883), does everything it can to incorporate the qualities of "good talk" into its composition process and narrative. Throughout *Treasure Island*, Stevenson draws a special connection between talking and adventuring: namely, that both activities share an open embrace of indeterminacy in interaction, whether remaining responsive to the changing whims of a talking partner or negotiating the contingencies of new environments.

While critics—most notably, Robert Kiely—have identified Stevenson's investment in an openness to contingency as central to the author's critical understanding of how adventure romance offers a pleasurable reading experience, no one has yet investigated the ways in which

Stevenson directs the unpredictable dynamism of talk to realize a similar ideal.[2] Stevenson's

strong appreciation for talk's vitality ultimately focuses on two characteristics that emphasize a

uniquely experiential or phenomenological mode. First, talk's participants ideally engage in

moment-to-moment acts that "co-create" oral discourse, and secondly, the experience of

interaction possesses an aspirational quality that depends on the absence or even impossibility of

closure. These two aspects of talk inform the various strategies Stevenson adopts in *Treasure

Island* to tests the limits and possibilities of translating the experiential into print.[3] Through the

partial success of such strategies, Stevenson explores the larger stakes of extricating a novel from

the "wooden dogmatisms" of its printed forms.

Certainly, from start to finish, *Treasure Island* broadcasts its own interest in talk (from

Squire Trelawney's fateful "blabbing" and Ben Gunn's loquacity to Long John Silver's unctuous

speech and his pet parrot). The critical literature on Stevenson's adventure classic, however,

hardly references talk at all, whether as a topic within the narrative or as an artful narrative

strategy. For the most part, scholars have tended to view Stevenson's first novel as either

conservative or immature from an artistic point of view. In pointing out that "author and reader

know the rules," Peter Hunt emphasizes Stevenson's general adherence to adventure romance's

generic conventions.[4] When Oliver S. Buckton suggests that *Treasure Island* marks Stevenson's

"shift from dilettante bohemian travel writer to professional novelist," he intimates that the work

lacks the skillfulness of his later novels.[5] To be sure, recent scholarship has fortunately rescued

Treasure Island from its longstanding reputation as mere escapist classic of popular boys'

fiction: the work of Victoria Ford Smith, Julia Reid, and Fiona McCulloch, for example, brings

important focus to the artistic value of the childish imagination.[6] A wide range of rich, contextual research has also complicated our understanding of *Treasure Island*'s intelligent engagements with the literary marketplace, imperialism, and contemporary class structures.[7] But in comparison with the criticism on works such as *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) or *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889), that of *Treasure Island* still tends to steer towards thematic investigations, and away from considerations of narrative form.

In light of these observations, I seek to illuminate the ways in which Stevenson, in the writing of his first novel, was already conducting some fairly radical yet carefully developed narrative experimentations with talk. The opening section focuses on "Talk and Talkers" to demonstrate Stevenson's counter-intuitive hierarchization of talk above literature in the production of art. In order to better elucidate the experiential or phenomenological aspects unique to talk's poetics, I adopt critical vocabularies—including terms such as "co-creation"—from current studies in linguistic anthropology: a field that analyzes the formal complexity of everyday talk. When placed in conversation with Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of novelistic dialogism, the arguments that linguistic anthropologists make offer fresh insight into the difficulties of translating talk into print. Thereafter, I look closely at an essay that has unwittingly furthered convictions that *Treasure Island* is a work of immature authorship, Stevenson's "My First Book" (1894), originally published for *The Idler*'s "My First Book" series, which featured a different author every month. Significantly, however, Stevenson makes no suggestion in "My First Book" that *Treasure Island* is any more rudimentary than any of his other works. Eleven years after the publication of *Treasure Island*, "My First Book" constructs a story of the novel's origins that reinforces Stevenson's much earlier articulations of talk's co-creative and aspirational

dynamics. The final section discusses how the narrative of *Treasure Island* imagines itself as a form of "living print" that gestures towards what I conceptualize as a parrot-like text: one that is at once more dynamic and vital than print but ultimately incapable of talk's truly interactive responsiveness.

I. On Stevenson's "Talk and Talkers" (1882)

In the first part of "Talk and Talkers," Stevenson offers a pithy definition of talk in its ideal and most naturally expressed form: simply, "the harmonious speech of two or more" (p. 90). The definition emphasizes the necessity of more than one participant, and the (harmonious) interactional dynamic between these participants. Together, these components articulate Stevenson's metaphorical understanding of talk as the difficult coordination of distinct musical parts. Just as different tones shift in relation to other tones, so too do talkers calibrate their words in relation to those of others. From the point of view of the individual talker, "harmonious speech" requires an "amicable counter-assertion of personality," another talker possessed of different tones (p. 92). In Stevenson's view, therefore, the particular artistry of talk is shared and co-creative, as well as sensitive to the constant movement of a continuing exchange. In another formulation, Stevenson describes the ideal talker as a "genuine artist [that] follows the stream of conversation as an angler follows the windings of a brook…He trusts implicitly to hazard; and he is rewarded by continual variety, continual pleasure" (p. 92). In other words, in talking, a willingness to improvise in order to fit the shifting conditions of an interaction produces the most satisfying aesthetic results.

Stevenson's notion of ongoing collaborative negotiation within talk resonates with the

vocabularies of modern conversation analysis: a sociological methodology initially developed in the 1960s to describe the patterns, procedures, and conventions of "natural" talk in everyday settings.[8] More recently, linguistic anthropologist Elinor Ochs has advocated zeroing in on the richness of the experiential in everyday talk, emphasizing the complexity of processes such as "co-experience" and "co-narration" that occur in the most mundane conversational settings, from dinner table chatter and gossip to pleasantries exchanged with a stranger. Ochs echoes Stevenson's interest in talk's sophistication and talkers' potential for masterful artistry—their skillful embrace of instability over certainty and willingness to cede central control in favor of continuing co-creation. This curiosity about talk as an unfolding process signals a turn towards phenomenological study and adopts a descriptivist's approach to understanding experience in itself as it takes place.[9] According to Ochs:

> [E]veryday language in motion [is] a source of vitality beyond stifled conventionalism. Alongside the hero of Lacan, who breaks away from conventional societal technologies, including language, to carve an authentic self, there is another kind of hero. While acknowledging the ravages of institutional discourses, we can also construe the hero as one who allows herself or himself to be vulnerable to the contingent informality of ordinary enacted language and thereby to learn; that is, to grow…Interlocutors involved in everyday situations are certainly at times consumed by conventional tropes; but, at other times, they are thoroughly consumed by the imaginative force of language at hand or are uncertain, awkward crafters of meaning, painting and repainting what matters in the flow of their lives.[10]

Ochs argues that the careful and complex calibrations required of everyday talk elevate the

ordinary into the artistic. Like Stevenson, Ochs believes that rendering oneself "vulnerable to the

contingent informality of ordinary enacted language" is a particular capability of talkers. As

"uncertain, awkward crafters of meaning," talkers revel in endless "painting and repainting."

In the first part of the quotation, Ochs ascribes the devaluation of everyday language as

rigidly conventional to a legacy of deconstruction—specifically Lacanian psychoanalysis. Ochs

essentially argues that deconstructive suspicion directed towards everyday speech's ideological

underpinnings precludes us from seeing talk as artistic. In literary studies, Bakhtin's influential

discussion of dialogism in the novel, while groundbreaking in its formal exegesis, may

additionally contribute to a bias against talk. According to Bakhtin in "The Problem of Speech

Genres" (1986), everyday talk is decidedly non-artistic: simply one among many forms of

discourse, oral or written, that art forms such as the novel can "absorb" and "digest."[11] Such a

conception obscures talk's experiential uniqueness, as well as the attendant difficulties of

rendering one form of art into another. The problems of translating talk into print are reminiscent

of the kinds of issues critics have long identified with other artistic transformations from one

medium to another, such as ekphrasis, the representation of a visual medium into a verbal one.[12]

If we are to understand talk as possessing an artistry all its own, its translation in print constitutes

an ekphrastic-like relation with its own problems. There are, of course, obvious difficulties to

translating the kind of co-creation involved in talk into print. Such fluid, moment-to-moment

experiences cannot be sufficiently constituted within a form that, at best, offers a basis for

interaction with long delays (such as through the exchange of letters, or the publication of a

critical response or review) that inevitably diminish talk's improvisatory poetics.[13]

Besides co-creation, another ideal Stevenson identifies as crucial to talk's experiential or

phenomenological mode is its aspirational quality, something which proves slightly easier to translate into print than active interaction. In "Talk and Talkers," Stevenson describes the way in which the best "talkers, once launched, begin to overflow the limits of their ordinary selves, tower up to the height of their secret pretensions, and give themselves out for the heroes...they aspire to be" (p. 93). Stevenson's vivid description of talkers—how they "launch," "overflow," or "tower up"—emphasizes the vigorous movement of their reaching, which again stresses the contingent instability of process over the certainty of an ending (incidentally, in the quotation above, Ochs also ascribes a sense of heroic striving to talk's artistry, in which an everyday talker's openness to the unpredictability of interaction renders them an intrepid "hero" that will enable them "to learn…to grow"). For Stevenson, heroism connects talk with imaginative daring, precisely the quality that he values in adventure romance. In his well-known manifesto on the genre, "A Gossip on Romance" (1882), Stevenson explains that romance "may be nourished with the realities of life, but their true mark is to satisfy the nameless longings of the reader, and to obey the ideal laws of the day-dream."[14] Here, he emphasizes the same aspirational movement of the talker's "secret pretensions." Though ostensibly ordinary, in its own way, talk, as much as adventure, offers the experience and excitement of openly exploring new realms.

It is no accident, then, that Stevenson titles his manifesto a "gossip" rather than an essay. Penny Fielding has helpfully commented that Stevenson's use of the word "gossip" in lieu of essay seeks to reflect "an exchange at a literary club," though I think that Stevenson's idea of a "good talk" extends even beyond the confines of a literary setting.[15] As Stevenson clarifies in "Talk and Talkers":

Talk is a creature of the street and market-place, feeding on gossip; and its last resort is

still in a discussion on morals. That is the heroic form of gossip; heroic in virtues of its

high pretensions; but still gossip, because it turns on personalities (p. 153).

Gossip is playfully attuned to surrounding contingencies—in the street, the marketplace, *or* the

literary club. In the first part of the quotation, Stevenson asserts that talk "feed[s]" on gossip, but

in the second, gossip seems to become synonymous with talk. The collapse of the terms "talk"

and "gossip" into each other expands the understanding of gossip beyond its usual associations

with trivial, scandalous, female speech.[16] We see in gossip's high pretensions to moral

importance another iteration of talk's aspirational tendencies. Finally, as a "gossip" itself, the

essay tries to translate both talk's co-creative sensitivity by shifting from one point to another as

if responding to the whims of a talking partner, and its aspirational movement by pursuing the

demanding task of delineating a philosophy on art.

Treasure Island seeks the same kinds of translations, but the story of its composition and

its narrative evince a much sharper awareness of its own failures and limitations. Stevenson's

contemporaries, and particularly those who loved him, clearly honored the author's sense that it

was impossible to fully capture the experiential poetics of talk in print. In numerous comments,

friends and family praise Stevenson as a great talker, but none played James Boswell to

Stevenson's Samuel Johnson. These comments frequently take the tone of a polite refusal to

write down his talk, as when George Lisle asserts that he "cannot, for the life of me, recall any of

his jokes; and written down in cold blood, they might not be funny if I did," or when Isobel Field,

Stevenson's stepdaughter, unconvincingly claims that she made no notes of his talk because he

always held his listeners spellbound.[17] More to the point, M.G. Rensselaer and Jeanette Glider assert that "to mummify [his] beautiful, vivid speech is to do it deep injustice."[18] In the section that follows, I argue that this sense of injustice borne of the improper translation of talk into print is at the very center of Stevenson's account of *Treasure Island*'s production in "My First Book."

II. Talk and Literary Production in "My First Book"

"My First Book" indicates that *Treasure Island* was partly generated from talk. Specifically, Stevenson calls attention to a daily scene of interactive oral exchange with his family during their extended summer stay at cottage in Braemar, Scotland in 1881. According to Stevenson, the initial period of developing *Treasure Island* (then called *The Sea Cook*) involved quick writing at a pace of a chapter a day and after-lunch readings out loud. Significantly, every day, as he read out a portion of his story to his family, he would integrate their suggestions along the way in acts of co-creation that, I argue, mark his storytelling as a form of talk. The vision that Stevenson presents of himself as a co-creative storyteller notably departs from Walter Benjamin's suggestion that Stevenson may be included under his classification of the storyteller as "the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story" or "the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself." While Benjamin's famous characterization may accurately express the orality at the center of *Treasure Island*'s telling, its focus on the storyteller's self-reflexivity is at odds with Stevenson's clear emphasis on a collaborative oral encounter. In contrast, critics that *have* concentrated on the importance of authorial collaboration to the scene at Braemar tend to miss the particular significance of orality to Stevenson's exchanges with his family.[19] My own contention is that we can understand the interaction at Braemar as talk by way of sociologist Harvey Sacks's conception of storytelling as

a particular mode of talk in which a speaker may take a longer "turn" than usual ("turn-taking" is a term in conversation analysis to describe talk's interactive orientation and structure). In Sacks's theoretical framework, recipients of a story "actively reshape both the interpretation and course of an emerging story," such that "stories are...not…self-contained descriptions but…modes of action situated within interaction."[20]

In bringing notice to the speed with which he wrote, Stevenson importantly suggests that the writing was done as much in the service of talking as vice versa. Writing for talking counters the notion that publication is necessarily the destination for a story. Moreover, it implies that writing may not be a superior medium to talking in the art of storytelling. I argue that Stevenson's description of his father participating in the story's co-creation evinces a fondness for unfinished stories that resonates with Stevenson's idealizations of process over destination in "Talk and Talkers":

> His own stories, that every night of his life he put himself to sleep with, dealt perpetually
> with ships, roadside inns, robbers, old sailors, and commercial travellers before the era of
> steam. He never finished these romances; the lucky man did not require to! But in
> *Treasure Island* he recognized something kindred to his own imagination…and he not
> only heard with delight the daily chapter, but set himself acting to collaborate.[21]

Stevenson represents the world of his father's stories as one unburdened by modernity, "before the era of steam" which revolutionized not only modes of travel but also print culture. The late Victorian period, it goes without saying, was an era unprecedented in its development of mass-market print, owing to a combination of factors including technological improvements and the lowering of legislative barriers to production. The remarks here suggest that Thomas Stevenson,

a lighthouse engineer by occupation, never needed to finish his romances, for unlike his son, he was not subject to commercial demands for literary production—the same demands that Robert Louis Stevenson references at the start of his essay where he derisively addresses "my paymaster, the Great Public" (p. 3).

In the context of Stevenson's implied preferences—for co-creation, interactivity, and process open to contingency—his explicit remark that *Treasure Island* was not, in fact, intended for publication until the intrusion, "*ex machina*…[of] Dr. Japp" (a secret ambassador for *Young Folks* publisher James Henderson) comes as no surprise (p. 7). According to Stevenson, although he and his family "recoiled" at including Alexander Japp in their circle of storytelling (Stevenson unconvincingly says it is because he thought *The Sea Cook* was not very good), Japp "carried away the manuscript in his portmanteau" when he left Braemar (p. 7). Essentially, Stevenson suggests that if Japp had not come along, the story that eventually became *Treasure Island* would have remained as interesting daily talk. Under these circumstances, Japp emerges somewhat negatively as an interrupter of continuing acts of co-creation. Like Coleridge's Person from Porlock, Japp disrupted the easy flow of creativity with a mundane commercial errand. Soon after the interruption and the "positive engagement" of serial publication, Stevenson alleges that suddenly his "mouth was empty; there was not a word of *Treasure Island* in my bosom" (p. 8). Noticeably, Stevenson chooses to focus on his incapacity for talk rather than his inability to write. In short, Stevenson claims that the talk was lost because Japp was going to translate it into print. Consequently, this episode by no means typifies writer's block, but carefully stages an important artistic clash between talk and print. The publication's "positive engagement" gave

Treasure Island a written destination that destroyed the primacy of talk's indeterminate poetics. In agreeing to print publication, even if reluctantly, Stevenson engaged talk in the service of another medium that betrayed its experiential ideal.

Appropriately enough, the "resolution" to Stevenson's conundrum as to how to return to the volubility of talk after it had been marked out for translation into print would eventually come as a counter-assertion against the fixed destination to which *Treasure Island* was now bound. Stevenson writes:

> I was very indeed very close on despair; but I shut my mouth hard, and during the journey to Davos, where I was to pass the winter, had the resolution to think of other things and bury myself in the novels of M. Du Boisgobey. Arrived at my destination, down I sat one morning to the unfinished tale; and behold, it flowed from me like small talk; and in a second tide of delighted industry, and again at a rate of a chapter a day, I finished *Treasure Island* (p. 8).

While en route to Davos, and engaged in other tasks—thinking of other things, reading popular French detective novels—Stevenson recovered something of his earlier creative interactions. The process of journeying, both literalized in the physical travel to Davos and metaphorized as the mental indirection of "think[ing] of other things," opposed the fixed ending that Japp's interruption had occasioned. Yet, it is significant that Stevenson is careful not to say that he was able to recover the easy experience of talk; his writing merely "flowed…*like* small talk," a simile that abstracts the poetics of talk to show that the true recovery of *Treasure Island*'s originary "small talk" at Braemar proved impossible. The emphasis that this description places on process may counteract, in a measure, the forces of arrival and destination that Japp had unleashed, but

ultimately, any textual form of *Treasure Island* would not be able to translate the experience of talk that he and his family engaged during the narrative's co-creation.

By insisting that what his public had come to regard as his first literary success would never recover the experience of "good talk," Stevenson was seeking to undo a particular model of author-reader relations that *The Idler*'s "My First Book" feature embodied. The "My First Book" series desired expert, celebrity authors to share the methods of their production with a ravenous readership that wanted conventional explanations—that a spark of genius, perhaps, inspired a frenzied period of writing. In a way, Stevenson's contribution follows this formula, offering up the tidy anecdote that *Treasure Island* was inspired by a map that he had drawn for his stepson Lloyd. However, as I have hoped to illustrate, there is an important artistic translation other than that of the visual into the textual that commentators on "My First Book" have missed. In this piece, Stevenson clearly maintains talk's integrity as an art form in its own right, one that operates through co-creative and ongoing interactions that deliberately undercut conventional notions of the individual authorial genius at work to produce his finished literary masterpiece.

III. *Treasure Island:* Imagining Living Print

"My First Book" belies *Treasure Island*'s carefully executed attempts at capturing talk's experiential qualities in print. The adventure romance imagines itself as—and aspires to—what I call "living print" through two primary strategies: first, by indicating talk's generative role in precipitating incident within the story, and secondly, by using the parrot motif to position itself as a textual body that possesses some measure of talk's vitality. John Silver's parrot, therefore, is more than just a figure that dramatizes its owner's rapacious desires for "pieces of eight." The

creature is an organizing, central metaphor that suggests the hybrid medium that *Treasure Island* strives to be: not exactly print or talk but something in between.

Dialogue dominates the diegesis, such that *Treasure Island* as a whole feels like a record of many different forms of talk. In "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin characterizes talk in real life as mostly "topics in the engaged transmission of practical information," but talk within the world of *Treasure Island* is far more creative on its own terms, and certainly more than a vehicle of "transmission."[22] In the story, talk both generates the incidents of adventure, indicating that even "everyday speech" is an immensely productive force, and *is* itself incident.[23] Despite Stevenson's stipulation in "A Gossip on Romance" that "incident" ought to dominate concerns over wording or narrative style, in *Treasure Island,* talk is clearly inextricable from incident.[24] Two crucial instances of talk generating incident may be found in the early part of the narrative: Squire Trelawney's "blabbing" triggers the central conflict of the story by attracting Silver on board the *Hispaniola*, and Jim's inadvertently overhearing Silver while hidden in the apple barrel sets the officially sanctioned authorities (the doctor, the captain, and squire) and the pirates on the road towards open confrontation. Notably, the squire claims, "'[b]y the merest accident, I fell in talk with [Silver],'" an articulation consistent with Stevenson's appreciation for talk's embrace of risk in interaction.[25] While the narrative's conventional triumvirate of male authority censures and mocks Trelawney for his effeminately marked and gossipy inability to control his talk, without Trelawney's "blabbing" there would be no adventure story. Thus, from the point of view of Stevenson's principles on romance, Trelawney's openness is artistically productive. Jim's accidental eavesdropping is a similar case in which "[falling] in talk" crucially moves the action

along. When the captain and Silver finally confront each another in a face-to-face interaction, they engage in a talk rather than a physical fight, an episode that underscores the way in which talk, as experience, can also *be* incident.

In *Treasure Island*, the corollary to the idea that talk generates incident—that the restraint of talk precludes incident—also holds true. In an early confrontation between Trelawney and Captain Smollett, Smollett's suppression of Trelawney's talk shuts down an opportunity to uncover Silver's treachery. The captain berates the squire for "blabbing" the map and location of treasure to everyone on the ship and curtly silences the squire's defense that he had done no such thing. Jim, who is almost always correct in his judgment, confidentially informs the reader: "I believe [Trelawney] was really right, and that nobody had told the situation of the island" (p. 92). Jim's retrospective narration, moreover, emphasizes the dramatic irony of the captain's choice of words in making his accusation against the squire—"'the secret has been told to the parrot'"— since it is none other than the treacherous Silver that owns a parrot (p. 91). In this brief but tightly woven exchange, Stevenson reveals that the discretion the captain envisions is nothing more than an obstacle to narrative action. As the least talkative character, it is probably no accident that Smollett happens also to be the least charismatic: Jim informs his reader in a confidential aside that he "hated the captain deeply" soon after meeting him (p. 95). Smollett wears the stinting nature of his talk as a virtue—"on his part, [he] never spoke but when he was spoken to, and then sharp and short and dry, and not a word wasted"—but we get the sense that there is little support in the story for such utilitarian regulation (p. 98). Even here, the cutting monosyllables that Jim employs to describe Smollett's speech mock his rigid control.

For Stevenson, the inflexibility of print or any other textual form is just another iteration of the restraint that Smollett places on the flow of talk's natural interactivity. My contention that *Treasure Island* asks readers to imagine it as a parrot-like text with more dynamism than regular print is based on Stevenson's meticulous deployment of the parrot motif in relation to three major characters: Silver, Ben Gunn, and Jim. Each of these three characters serves as a representation—or even a case study—of the limits and possibilities that attach to the translation of talk's ideal interactivity in print. I begin with Silver, the character most closely associated with the figure of the parrot and appropriately, as Smollett's antagonist, the most charming (silver-tongued) talker in *Treasure Island.* Jim's initial description of Silver, even before the reader becomes acquainted with his pet parrot, sets up the recurring connections that the narrative will make between owner and pet: "His left leg was cut off close by the hip, and under the left shoulder he carried a crutch, which he managed with wonderful dexterity, hopping about upon it like a bird" (p. 85). Indeed, largely because of his ability to parrot the different speech patterns of men he has encountered, Silver speaks with equal facility to aristocrats, men of professional distinction, or mutinous pirates. On first meeting Silver, Jim becomes completely enamored with Silver's immensely interesting talk:

> On our little walk along the quays, he made himself the most interesting companion, telling me about the different ships that we passed by, their rig, tonnage, and nationality, explaining the work that was going forward—how one was discharging, another taking the cargo, and a third making ready for sea; and every now and then telling me some little anecdote of ships and seamen, or repeating a nautical phrase till I had learned it perfectly (p. 89).

Silver is the master of "small talk," ably relaying bits and pieces of nautical expertise as well as varying his talk by sharing gossip in the form of "anecdotes of ships and seamen." In teaching Jim specifically to repeat phrases until he learns them, Silver seeks to make Jim his protégé, passing on to him the capability of parroting different forms of talk.[26]

The way in which Silver's talk adapts itself to the persons and situations of the interaction seems to make him Stevenson's good talker. But the interactivity of Silver's talk is false, for Silver only pretends to be open to co-creative encounters. In fact, Silver's talk focuses solely on securing Silver's own personal ends. Despite his charismatic eloquence, Silver's talk is poor because it is systematic rather than truly responsive. While in the apple barrel, Jim overhears Silver "addressing another in the very same words of flattery as he had used to [him]self," a detail which reinforces the idea of Silver's reliance on parrot-like repetitions rather than flexible adaptations (p. 102). Silver's false interactivity, I argue, represents one particular limitation encountered in texts that attempt to translate talk's experiential aspects. Like Silver, texts may seem to contain talk's interactive qualities but remain in actuality mere imitations of adaptability. In this context, Jim's contemptuous comment late in the narrative that he could "read [Silver's thoughts] like print" emerges as an echo of Stevenson's preference for talk's ideal unpredictability (p. 214). In other words, Jim's comment suggests that talk that works against its own capacity for co-creative indeterminacy is a step closer to print.

The parrot motif again usefully diagnoses the problem with Ben Gunn's talk. Gunn is an ex-member of Captain Flint's ship (Flint buries the treasure on Treasure Island that everyone seeks) who has been marooned for three years on Treasure Island before Jim encounters him.

Gunn, like Silver, fails to honor interactivity in talk, but for the reason of a psychology warped by long solitude. Specifically, Gunn plays both himself and his long absent talking partner, imagining a second person response that essentially parrots his own first person. When he finally finds a real talking partner in Jim, Gunn's ingrained talking patterns disable any sense of co-creative spontaneity:

> "Just you mention them words to your squire, Jim"—he went on: "Nor he weren't,
> neither—that's the words. Three years he were the man of this island, light and dark, fair
> and rain; and sometimes he would, maybe, think upon a prayer (says you), and
> sometimes he would, maybe, think of his old mother, so be as she's alive (you'll say); but
> the most part of Gunn's time (this is what you'll say)—the most part of his time was took
> up with another matter"…Then, he continued—"then you'll up and say this:—Gunn is a
> good man (you'll say), and he puts a previous sight more confidence—a precious sight,
> mind that—in a gen'leman born than in these gen'leman of fortune, having been one
> hisself" (p. 126).

For Gunn, the harmonic distinctions among talkers that Stevenson deems crucial to "good talk" do not exist. As Jim later remarks of Gunn, "he kept talking as I ran, neither expecting nor receiving an answer," for Gunn has played the part of "I" and "you" for so long a time that the distinctions have blurred in his mind (p. 127). Presented with a true "other" with whom he could ostensibly have a genuine talk—with all of the inherent instabilities of interaction—Gunn fails to recognize Jim's difference because he has too fully adapted to the absence of any talking partner (his frequent need to pinch Jim seems further evidence of his inability to conceptualize Jim as an

individual apart from himself). Gunn's parenthetical, second-person reminders of what Jim should say to the doctor and the squire completely disregard Jim's co-creative agency in determining the direction of talk. Ultimately, in attempting to script Jim's talk, Gunn, just as Silver had before, tries to make Jim his parrot.

Significantly, Gunn is the most literary and textual character in *Treasure Island.* First of all, he is a parodic Robinson Crusoe—the eponymous marooned hero of Daniel Defoe's 1719 adventure novel—while all of the other major characters are based on living or historical persons.[27] Moreover, Gunn's strange talk specifically alludes to a genealogy of textual records that includes Defoe's novel as well as one of *its* sources, Captain Woodes Rogers's account of marooned Scottish sailor Alexander Selkirk. According to Rogers, Selkirk upon his rescue "had so much forgot his Language for want of Use, that [he] could scarce understand him, for he seem'd to speak his words by halves."[28] Eric Jager argues that Robinson Crusoe, unlike Selkirk, resourcefully avoids "the psychological and emotional strain" of solitude by actively engaging in talk with successive partners: first his rational (as opposed to emotional) self, then a parrot, Friday, and finally God.[29] In Jager's view, Crusoe finally finds an apt talking partner in God, whose difference from Crusoe enables a true interactive exchange that prevents Crusoe from meeting Selkirk's linguistic fate. Gunn, in contrast to Selkirk, does not "speak his words by halves," but rather oppositely, speaks the part of two participants interacting in talk. However, I argue that both Selkirk's too few words and Gunn's too many are symptoms of the same problem: both men desire another participant to supply and require a response, but are unable to find one. Whereas "speak[ing]…by halves" mimetically obsesses over the missing partner,

parroting oneself to supply the partner fantasizes his existence. In Gunn's world, as opposed to

Crusoe's, rational and emotional selves blur impossibly together, there is no parrot or Friday, and

God seems noticeably absent. As evinced in Gunn's long speech to Jim above, prayer serves the

purpose of social signaling rather than intercourse with God.[30]

      Given Gunn's connection to Crusoe, Stevenson's adventure story may seem a

Robinsonade of sorts, a genre of fiction that imitates key aspects of Defoe's novel, often in order

to capitalize on *Crusoe*'s success. In deploying Gunn's interaction-deprived talk as comic relief,

however, I argue that *Treasure Island* primarily seeks to distance its own narrative from that of

the eighteenth-century ur-text of the adventure novel. By singling out Gunn as a character

trapped within a network of textuality, Stevenson seems to suggest that *Treasure Island* itself as

a whole transcends Gunn's inextricability from text. Gunn, like Silver, calls attention to a

problem of texts: like "written words," Gunn's talk consists of "fixed...idols, found wooden

dogmatism[s]" that are unable to get outside of themselves. As talkers, then, both Silver and

Gunn fail to meet Stevenson's ideal, even if they are trapped by different "dogmatisms"—Silver

by his own scheming, and Gunn by his warped, recursive talking. Their mutual association with

parrots only emphasizes the way in which they both seem to occupy a place somewhere between

human and text.

      It is Jim, finally, that emerges as Stevenson's ideal talker. Like Silver, Jim talks with

equal ease to everyone, whether the doctor, the squire, the murderous coxswain Israel Hands,

Gunn, or Silver himself, but not as a result of scheming. As the narrative repeatedly

demonstrates, Jim does not readily comprehend talk that is directed at some particular end. He

rejects both Silver's calculated flattery and Gunn's frenetic bid to supply other people's

responses. Jim's specific response to Gunn's harried speech—"I don't understand a word that you've been saying. But that's neither here nor there; how am I get on board?" (p. 126)—suggests that, like Stevenson, Jim prefers talk that generates action. In making Jim the primary narrator of *Treasure Island*, Stevenson seeks to transfer the qualities of Jim's "good talk" into the narrative itself. While the narrative owns that it is written, it stages from the start that it is writing that aspires to open co-creativity. As the very first lines proclaim, in Jim's voice: "Squire Trelawney, Dr Livesey, and the rest of these gentlemen having asked me to write down the particulars about Treasure Island…I take up my pen" (p. 45). Jim's statement parallels Stevenson's own deferred agency when Japp supposedly whisked away his manuscript—both Jim and Stevenson write because others desire it, and both would rather talk for the sake of interaction itself than to write for the sake of publication. Stevenson further consolidates similarities between his writing and Jim's in the epigraph to *Treasure Island*:

"To the Hesitating Purchaser":

If sailor tales and sailor tunes,
Storm and adventure, heat and cold,
If schooners, islands, and maroons,
And buccaneers, and buried gold,
And all the old romance, retold
Exactly in the ancient way,
Can please, as me they pleased of old,
The wiser youngsters of today:

--So be it, and fall on! If not,
If studious youth no longer crave,
His ancient appetites forgot,
Kingston, or Ballantyne the brave,
Or Cooper of the wood and wave:
So be it, also! And may I
And all my pirates share the grave
Where these and their creations lie! (pp. 37-38).

Stevenson disavows that he directs his words towards any specific aim, whether commercial or personal. In the conditionals, Stevenson values the reciprocity of interactivity by acknowledging readers' agency in determining the story's success. In the refrain, "So be it," Stevenson indicates his acquiescence to the co-creative process of reception. But Silver reminds us that interactivity may be falsified, and Gunn reminds us that even the desire for interactivity is hardly enough to bring about its existence. As a text, *Treasure Island* cannot ultimately offer the reader the kind of co-creative experience available through talk. Inevitably, talk in print gets stuck within parrot-like articulations, whether deliberate imitations of interactively oriented talk (Silver) or mimicry of oneself in place of an absent responder (Gunn).

Yet, the way in which *Treasure Island* sets up comparisons between parrots and texts also points to their essential difference. Unlike texts, parrots, as living beings, can engage experience in time as it unfolds. Their limitations do not owe to being trapped by the inflexibility of the print medium but to a lack of mental sensitivity and sophistication. In a study of how parrots figure in eighteenth-century periodicals, Manushag Powell traces a literary association of these birds with an "unthinking-though-articulate" presence, one that provokes response and engages openly in interaction though without any systematic, philosophical intent to do so.[31] According to Powell, the talk of parrots often proves dangerously uncontrollable and disruptive of authority. This is important, Powell points out, because such a characterization— simultaneously of danger and revolutionary possibility—reveals ambivalence towards "unthinking-though-articulate" talk. In noting examples of parrots as stand-ins for disempowered individuals (whether women, racial others, or members of the economic underclass) that may talk with unpredictable abandon, Powell illuminates a connection between parrots and the radical overthrow of dominant power structures. I argue that "unthinking-though-articulate" readily

describes Jim, the mere son of an innkeeper whose talk, like that of the disruptive sort of parrot that Powell describes, offers a significant challenge to the textually based authority of figures such as Doctor Livesey.[32]

In the end, *Treasure Island* takes on all of the characteristics of parrots that I have described, both negative and positive. As print, its fixed words cannot access the co-creative instabilities of talk, and inevitably, like Gunn, it can only respond to an imagined response ultimately generated from within itself. Stevenson would likely allow that *Treasure Island* is a little bit like the charismatic Silver too, deliberate in its careful imitations of talk truly open to interaction. But ultimately, *Treasure Island* aspires to "talk" as Jim talks within the story: the "unthinking-though-articulate" speaker who is open to interaction without a hidden aim or agenda—not even an agenda of maintaining an openness to interaction—yet all the same, manages to speak an entirely innovative kind of language. It is, ironically, through its reaching for this particular kind of impossible responsiveness—and its inevitable failure—that brings a measure of success to *Treasure Island*'s experiment in capturing talk's untranslatable qualities. Again, "talkers…tower up to the height of their secret pretensions, and give themselves out for the heroes…they aspire to be." In talk and in adventure, it is not the destination that matters, but the unending aspirational experience that receives no closure. *Treasure Island* always tries for talk's living responsiveness, and never quite reaches it, but then again, that is the entire point.

I want to close with the idea that if we are to take Stevenson's project to aspire beyond the inflexibility of print seriously, it may be limiting to think of *Treasure Island* as a novel at all. In spite of the stature he enjoyed as a novelist by the time "My First Book" appeared, Stevenson's remarks reveal a distinct disdain for the novel form itself, suggesting that it is not he but his

public who invests such import into the writing of a novel: "It was far indeed from being my first book for I am not a novelist alone. But I am well aware that my paymaster the Great Public regards what else I have written with indifference if not aversion…and when I am asked to talk of my first book, no question in the world but what is meant is my first novel" (p. 3). While Stevenson allows *Treasure Island* to be called a novel, it is for him no easy concession, for it seems he does not think much at all of the novel as a genre. With regard to the triple-decker novel's inordinate length and excessive demands upon the author, Stevenson complains tellingly (also in "My First Book") of unchangeability: "[f]or so long a time, the slant is to continue unchanged, the vein to keep running, for so long a time your puppets are to be always vital, always consistent, always vigorous!" (p. 4). If "good talk" is the linguistic activity that affords the most dynamism, then writing a novel is probably that which affords the least. I am advocating, therefore, that to understand *Treasure Island* on Stevenson's terms is to realize it is not so much a dialogic or discursive text that "absorbs" or "digests" talk, but a text somewhat transformed by talk. *Treasure Island* is a book that tries to be talk and, despite the constraints of its written condition, moves unceasingly forward in an urgent attempt to fulfill this aim.

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[1] Robert Louis Stevenson, "Talk and Talkers," in *Memories and Portraits* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1906), p. 145. All subsequent references to this essay will be cited parenthetically by page number.

[2] Robert Kiely, *Stevenson and the Fiction of Adventure* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964).

[3] Throughout this essay, I adopt the terminology of "translation" to describe the rendering of talk, or aspects of talk, in print. Unlike the probably more familiar term "representation," translation indicates a greater attention to preserving the artistic character of the original medium.

[4] Peter Hunt, Introduction to *Treasure Island*, by Robert Louis Stevenson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. xxix.

[5] Oliver S. Buckton, "Faithful to his Map," in *Cruising With Robert Louis Stevenson: Travel, Narrative, and the Colonial Body* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007), p. 98.

[6] See Victoria Ford Smith, "Toy Presses and Treasure Maps: RLS and Lloyd Osbourne as Collaborators," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 35, 1 (2010): 26-54; Julia Reid, "Childhood and Psychology," in *The Edinburgh*

Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson, ed. Penny Fielding (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 41-42; and Fiona McCulloch, "'Playing Double': Performing Childhood in Treasure Island," *Scottish Studies Review* 4 (2003): 66-81.

[7] For discussions of *Treasure Island*'s conscientious manipulations of commercialism see Buckton, pp. 97-125; Glenda Norquay, "Negotiations of the Professional and the Popular in the Case of *Treasure Island*," in *Robert Louis Stevenson: Writer of Boundaries*, eds. Richard Ambrosini and Richard Dury (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), pp. 60-69; and Naomi J. Wood, "Gold Standards and Silver Subversions: *Treasure Island* and the Romance of Money," *Children's Literature* 26, 1 (1998): 61–85. For discussions of the work's engagements with imperialist ideology, see Ann Colley, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Colonial Imagination* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004); Bradley Deane, "Imperial Boyhood: Piracy and the Play Ethic," *Victorian Studies* 53, 4 (2011): 689–714; and Diana Loxley, *Problematic Shores: The Literature of Islands* (New York: Macmillan, 1990). For discussions of how the work negotiates social shifts such as the rise of the working class and the British civil service, respectively, see Robert P. Irvine, "Romance and Social Class," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson*, pp. 27-40 and Christopher Parkes, "Treasure Island and the Romance of the British Civil Service," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 31, 4 (2006): 332–345.

[8] See Charles Goodwin and John Heritage, "Conversation Analysis," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19 (1990): 284.

[9] In literary studies, the turn towards the phenomenological that Ochs advocates has its counterpart in realms such as affect theory, especially the work of theorists interested in the experience of reading. See, for example, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 123-151' Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108, 1 (2009): 1-21; and Rita Felski, "After Suspicion," *Profession* (2009): 28-35.

[10] Elinor Ochs, "Experiencing Language," *Anthropological Theory* 12, 2 (2012): 155.

[11] Mikhail Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres," in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004), p. 62. In the shift from "Discourse in the Novel" (1981) to "The Problem of Speech Genres" (1986), Bakhtin seems to move away from textuality towards the formal analysis of oral language, even beginning to articulate talk's interactive features, such as its orientation towards response. Given this possibility, Ochs and other linguistic anthropologists might be the true heirs of the Bakhtinian critical trajectory.

[12] Ekphrasis's long history of use as a rhetorical and/or critical term has unfortunately led to a general sense of the word's impossibility to pin down. Peter Wagner has usefully noted its most widely accepted definition as any "verbal representation"—whether critical, literary, or otherwise—"of visual representation" in his introduction to *Icons, Texts, Iconotexts: Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediality* (New York: Gruyter, 1996), p. 14.

[13] Recently, John Miles Foley has brought attention to the ways in which digital print media is able to replicate the more interactive aspects of oral language in *Oral Tradition and the Internet: Pathways of the Mind* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012), and in his "Pathways Project" at <pathwaysproject.org>.

[14] Stevenson, "A Gossip on Romance," in *Memories and Portraits*, p. 156. Evidently, Stevenson regards the term romance as practically equivalent to adventure romance, perhaps because adventure perfectly literalizes aspirational striving he identified at the heart of all romance genres. This regard for adventure as a kind of "ur-romance" informs the outlook of other male "romance revivalists" such as Andrew Lang, H. Rider Haggard, and George Saintsbury. Recent scholarship has only begun to acknowledge the importance of women such as Marie Corelli's unique contributions to the romance revival.

[15] Penny Fielding, introduction to *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson*, p. 4.

[16] Patrick Leary has noted that by the middle of the nineteenth century, the term "gossip" had lost much of its "older, salacious meanings" in *The Punch Brotherhood: Table Talk and Print Culture in Mid-Victorian London* (London: The British Library, 2010), p. 58.

[17] George Lisle, "A Wonderful Talker," in *Robert Louis Stevenson: Interviews and Recollections*, ed. R.C. Terry (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 54-55; Isobel Field, "The Best of All Good Times at Grez," in *Robert Louis Stevenson: Interviews and Recollections*, p. 70.

[18] M.G. van Rensselaer and Jeanette L. Glider, "A Most Affectionate Observer," in *Robert Louis Stevenson: Interviews and Recollections*, p. 121.

[19] Stevenson's late-in-life collaborations with his stepson Lloyd Osbourne on *The Wrong Box* (1889), *The Wrecker* (1892), and *The Ebb-Tide* (1894) are especially well known; Stevenson also wrote three plays with W.E. Henley, *Deacon Brodie* (1880), *Beau Austin* (1884), and *Admiral Guinea* (1885). Ford Smith's recent article focuses on the intergenerational authorial dynamics between Stevenson and Osbourne, and succinctly points to the co-creative artistry that "informed his role as a professional author—relationships between adult and child, between creative author and businessman, between a writer and his literary predecessors, [as well as] among multiple contributors to a text" (p. 29). Nathalie Jaeck similarly identifies the frequently unstable, parthogenetic, and multiple nature of texts in Stevenson's works—in *Treasure Island*, the sealed bundle of papers that Jim Hawkins steals from Billy Bones bursts forth into a map and a logbook, and the narration splits into those of Jim and Doctor Livesey ("Stevenson's Stories as Textual Matrices," in *Robert Louis Stevenson: Writer of Boundaries*, pp. 48-59).

[20] Goodwin and Heritage, p. 300.

[21] Stevenson, "My First Book," in *The Idler* 6 (August 1894): 7. All subsequent references to this essay will be cited parenthetically by page number.

[22] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004), p. 399.

[23] What I describe as talk's capacity to generate incident here is akin to what happens in the notion of a speech act. However, as Ochs clarifies, a phenomenological view of talk notices not only that talk does things, but also that it is itself an experience.

[24] Stevenson, "Gossip on Romance," pp. 247-248.

[25] Stevenson, *Treasure Island* (Buffalo, NY: Broadview Press, 2012), p. 81. All subsequent references to the novel will be from this edition and cited parenthetically by page number.

[26] Alan Sandison has argued that the death of Jim's father early in the narrative prompts him to seek replacements throughout the story; Billy Bones, Pew, Smollett, Trelawney, Dr. Livesey, and Silver all emerge as competing father figures that Jim ultimately rejects. Sandison reads the parrot's having the narrative's final words and its continued presence within Jim's dreams as evidence that Silver is the father Jim could not transcend, hence Jim remains a "parrot" of Silver's words by recording them in print ("*Treasure Island*: The Parrot's Tale," in *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Appearance of Modernism: A Future Feeling* [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996], pp. 48-80).

[27] Silver was based on Stevenson's close friend and collaborator, W.E. Henley, Dr. Livesey on temperance reformer Joseph Livesey (1794-1884), Squire Trelawney on biographer and adventurer Edward John Trelawny (1792-1881), and Captain Smollett on Scottish writer and adventurer Tobias Smollett (1712-1777). "Gunn" probably puns on Friday's mistaking Crusoe's gun as a deity deserving of worship in *Robinson Crusoe*.

[28] Qtd. in Eric Jager, "The Parrot's Voice: Language and the Self in Robinson Crusoe," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 23 (1988): 316.

[29] Jager, p. 319.

[30] Thomas Stevenson was bothered that Ben Gunn was not a devout Christian character, and expressed his that Gunn needed to seem more evidently Christian in a letter to Robert Louis on 26 February 1887.

[31] Powell offers a brief "archive" of the parrot motif in eighteenth-century literary and periodical culture, and discusses the complex ways in which two female authors/editors, "Penelope Prattle" and Eliza Haywood, manipulate the motif for their own ends ("Parroting and the Periodical: Women's Speech, Haywood's Parrot, and Its Antecedents," in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 27, 1 [2008]: 63–91).

[32] Jim's orphan status (after his father dies, he abandons his mother) makes him particularly suited as Stevenson's mouthpiece for his own desire to depart from traditional literary forms. See Irvine for a discussion on how Stevenson's adventure departs from a prior tradition of adventure romance in which established social hierarchies become reiterated and reconstituted in natural, remote, and exotic settings.