Reading the ‘sea runes’: hermeneutics in ‘The Merry Men’

*Flora Benkhodja*

When defending ‘The Merry Men’ after having received criticisms from W. E. Henley, Robert Louis Stevenson stated in a letter that ‘It’s really a story of wrecks, as they appear to the dweller on the coast.’¹ This unexpected summary does not leave much room to the characters, who only appear as mere instruments filling up the scenery. Indeed, as he was working in 1881 on ‘The Merry Men’, ‘Thrawn Janet’ and ‘The Body Snatcher’ while staying in Pitlochry, he vividly remembered the landscape he admired during his three-week stay on the island of Earraid in 1870. It seems that he cared to pick the atmosphere first, and then added three inhabitants in relation to this tableau, as he explained to Graham Balfour:

I remember very distinctly his saying to me: ‘There are, so far as I know, three ways, and three ways only, of writing a story. You may take a plot and fit characters to it, or you may take a character and choose incidents and situations to develop it, or lastly – you must bear with me while I try to make this clear –’ (here he made a gesture with his hand as if he were trying to shape something and give it outline and form) – ‘you may take a certain atmosphere and get action and persons to express and realise it. I’ll give you one example – *The Merry Men.*’²

If we care to develop this rather pithy outline, we may give these shadowy characters a little bit more substance and reassemble the family triangle, which is made up by Charles Darnaway, his uncle Gordon, and his beloved cousin Mary.³ Visiting his family
on Eilean Aros, Charles soon realises that Gordon has pillaged the recent wreck of the *Christ-Anna*. Noticing the shipwreck and a makeshift grave nearby, Charles grows convinced that his uncle has murdered a survivor. As a result Charles, putting two and two together, plays the role of yet another self-appointed detective, while his uncle Gordon assumes the character of the alleged murderer. As we can see, and as Stevenson claimed, the narrative of ‘The Merry Men’ does stem from the presence of wrecked ships on the bay. This idea must be contrasted to contemporary reviews which sought to make Uncle Gordon the main character – and therefore the main interest – of the short story: ‘It is, in a few words, a story of a Hebridean wrecker who has murdered the only survivor from the wreck, and has become touched in the head by brooding over his crime.’

Although we cannot understate Uncle Gordon’s role in the narrative, as well as the family relations between uncle, nephew and daughter/cousin, it seems crucial here to understand that the actual tale is the one that relies on the interpretation of events. Therefore, the use of the first-person narrative makes perfect sense as it leaves more room to imagination and, more importantly, to (mis)interpretations and errors of judgment. The task of telling the story is left to Charles, who – according to E. T. Cook – ‘does not make a particularly definite impression.’ If Cook severely criticised the apparent dullness of the narrator, it is precisely because he failed to grasp the idea that, in Stevenson’s stories, characters are inferior to events, which prove to be the actual protagonists: ‘Drama is the poetry of conduct, romance the poetry of circumstance.’

If RLS’s interest did not lie in the accurate and objective descriptions of the wrecks, it is because he wished to focus on the way they are perceived by the narrator and characters. The act of interpretation is the key to the understanding of the story. As a matter of fact, when reading ‘The Merry Men’, we might even distinguish three distinct stories that appear like a watermark:
(i) The untold narrative of the shipwrecks on Eilean Aros.
(ii) The inscription and impression of the wrecks onto the bay.
(iii) The reading and interpretation of that phantom-narrative by Charles and Gordon.

Writing a story about wrecks not as they are but ‘as they appear’ to the characters involves leaving spaces and blanks in the narrative for the reader’s imagination to fill up. Marcel Schwob defined Stevenson’s tour-de-force as the art of silence: the art of not saying.7 Stevenson himself wrote to his cousin Bob that ‘there is but one art – to omit!’8 We must therefore take great precautions when dealing with his uncle Gordon’s madness and the origins of his insanity. Indeed, if E. T. Cook unblinkingly assumed that Gordon is a murderer, it is worth noting that recent articles also adopt such an unequivocal reading of the story. In the otherwise essential and outstanding *Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson*, both Penny Fielding and Stephen Arata still assert that Gordon undoubtedly killed a survivor.9 Maureen Martin’s fine talk at the conference on ‘God, Satan, and the Scottish Ethos in Stevenson’s “The Merry Men”’ also astutely pointed to the fact that Charles, although believing in more modern and moderate religious views than Gordon, must be seen as a somehow unreliable narrator who does benefit, both romantically and financially, from his uncle’s alleged guilt and eventual death. My paper therefore aims at focusing on the first-person narrative of ‘The Merry Men’ and offers to analyse the reading of signs ‘as they appear’ to Charles and Gordon.

**A proliferation of signs**
The art of omission, as it was put by Stevenson himself, was fully shared by Arthur Conan Doyle in his article ‘Mr. Stevenson’s Methods in Fiction,’ published in February 1890 in the *National Review*: ‘Mr. Stevenson, like one of his own characters, has an excellent gift of silence.’10 Interestingly enough, Conan Doyle’s
praise for Stevenson’s ‘gift of silence’ can be found in Holmes’s mouth, when he tells his narrator in chief: ‘You have a grand gift of silence, Watson.’11 Arthur Conan Doyle and Robert Louis Stevenson, who knew and certainly admired each other as we can read in their correspondence, which spanned from 1893 to 1894, were well aware of the importance of textual deficits in order to build suspense.12 But not only did Conan Doyle admire Stevenson’s ‘gift of silence,’ he also lauded his gift for ‘stamp[ing] the impression upon the readers’ mind’.13 This is what Stevenson himself defined as the ‘plastic part of literature’:14 the strength to define characters metonymically thanks to images, which rely on the use of striking details. This explains the propagation of signs in Stevenson’s stories – signs that may even become clues when it comes to ‘The Merry Men’, which, as we have seen in our introduction, bears traces of the detective story. The textual deficit is, ironically enough, very much linked to the proliferation of traces. The blank in the text – or, as I have called it, the phantom-narrative – forces Sherlock as well as Charles Darnaway to find and collect clues in order to reconstruct and read the missing story. In Sherlock Holmes’s stories, signs tend to swarm: not only does Holmes bring them out (when, for instance, he notices footprints) but he also manages to make other signs appear, the most famous example being the way he can read the signature out of an anonymous letter in ‘A Scandal in Bohemia’ (1891):

He threw over a sheet of thick, pink-tinted notepaper which had been lying open upon the table. ‘It came by the last post,’ said he. ‘Read it aloud.’

The note was undated, and without either signature or address. [...]

‘The “G” with the small “t” stands for “Gesellschaft,” which is the German for “Company.” It is a customary contraction like our “Co.” “P,” of course, stands for “Papier.” Now for the “Eg.” Let us glance at our Continental Gazetteer.’ He took down a heavy brown
Flora Benkhodja

volume from his shelves. ‘Eglow, Eglonitz – here we are, Egria. It is in a German-speaking country – in Bohemia, not far from Carlsbad. ‘Remarkable as being the scene of the death of Wallenstein, and for its numerous glass-factories and paper-mills.’ [...] And the man who wrote the note is a German. Do you note the peculiar construction of the sentence – “This account of you we have from all quarters received.” [...] It only remains, therefore, to discover what is wanted by this German who writes upon Bohemian paper and prefers wearing a mask to showing his face.’

Holmes masters both levels of signs as they were categorised by Umberto Eco: first, he overcomes natural signs, which are unintentionally produced and which are originating from a natural source, without a human or intentional sender (such as grey clouds signifying an approaching storm, or the symptoms of a patient). Second, he conquers artificial signs, which are consciously emitted and intentionally produced in order to signify (such as language, or a road sign). As we can see, Sherlock Holmes can retrace a story thanks to natural signs such as prints left in the snow or in the mud (‘The Adventure of the Engineer’s Thumb’ March 1892, ‘The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet’ May 1892), but he is also able to decipher artificial signs – such as the coded dancing men – even leading to his appropriation of the secret code, and to its reproduction. With the exception of one case (‘The Adventure of the Yellow Face,’ 1893), Holmes manages to stabilise signs and their meaning by offering – often arbitrarily – a clear-cut resolution. In this Victorian desire for classification, Charles and Gordon Darnaway will make no exception and will prove eager to gather the traces and symbols which surround them.
Temptation to decipher

In Chapter 2 of ‘The Merry Men,’ Charles and Gordon gaze upon the surface of Sandag Bay and notice what appears to be ‘undecipherable marks – sea-runes’. Doubly illegible, those marks are cryptic, secret, and do not plainly present themselves to the eye; logically enough, the undecipherable sea-runes will need to be deciphered. Gordon wishes not to influence his nephew and asks him to give him his own reading first, and then his own interpretation: “Do ye see yon scart upo’ the water?’ he inquired; ‘yon ane wast the gray stane? Ay? Weel, it’ll no be like a letter, wull it?” (p. 21). Gordon’s obvious reluctance to associate these runes with letters implies, as we shall see later on, that they might stand for the metonymies of his own sins. However, unfortunately for Gordon, Charles is already well experienced in the task of reading: before leaving for Aros, he explains that he was ‘set to work on some papers of an ancient date to rearrange and sift of what was worthless’ (p. 8). Already in the position of a reader/interpreter, Charles continues the deciphering process while on the island. Nevertheless, although both characters manage to read the same letters on the sea (‘C’ and ‘M’), their interpretations considerably differ. Indeed, while Charles conflates the runes and the letter C, he explains: ‘I used to suppose, sir, it was for myself,’ said I; ‘for my name is Charles’ (p. 21). Similarly, as he notices the letter M, he reveals that ‘[he] had always thought it to mean Mary’ (p. 21). Therefore, Charles reads the world through the very limited, narrow prism of his own identity. He considers the reading of the sea runes as playful and engages in what is called pareidolia – that is to say the ability to perceive familiar patterns where there is none, for instance recognising an animal in a cloud – as he declares: ‘many a boy must have amused himself as I did, seeking to read in them some reference to himself or those he loved’ (pp. 20-21) If we follow the definition of Umberto Eco, the sea-runes may be categorised into natural signs, as he perceives them as unintentionally produced and originating from a
natural source, without a human or intentional sender. Charles’s amusement then offers a striking counterpoint to Gordon’s grim deciphering, since he believes the C-rune to be an embodiment of the shipwreck he plundered: ‘He heaved a sigh as if heavily disappointed with my answer, and then added below his breath: ‘Ay, for the CHRIST-ANNA” (p. 21). Gordon and Charles offer a dual interpretation; an innocuous, childish explanation on the one hand, which must be contrasted with a loaded, bleak definition on the other. This ambivalence is well-established from the start: while the title of the story may remind us of Robin Hood’s jolly band also named the Merry Men, it makes no mystery as to the treacherous nature of the island reefs. Towards the end of the narrative, Charles has perfectly understood the double nature of the landscape as he defines the Merry Men’s ‘portentous joviality’ (p. 46). This oxymoron aptly illustrates the playfulness embodied by Charles and the gloominess exemplified by Gordon. Indeed, according to him, the sea-runes as letters assume the form of a theophany; in other words, they are the manifestation of God in sensible form. The world is the product of a divine design, and the objects of nature are therefore the means of communication with men; in Gordon’s mind, the sea-runes proliferate and are hypercoded. They are codified as artificial signs, as Umberto Eco called them, i.e. signs that are consciously emitted and intentionally produced in order to signify something.

Obsessed as he is by the Bible, Gordon engages in a literal interpretation of the scriptural texts, as Saint Thomas Aquinas proposed to do. In Chapter 2, when Rorie tells the stories of ‘mermen, mermaids, and sea-horses,’ Gordon doubts his tales, stating ‘I may be wrang; but I find nae word o’ mermen in the Scriptures’ (p. 19). Charles and Gordon are therefore hermeneuts, in both meanings of the definition: they read and interpret obscure signs (the sea-runes) as well as the Holy Scriptures, which they quote in turns. In Chapter 2, Gordon recites Psalms 65 and 107:
Lord save us a’! but it’s an unco life to be a sailor – a cauld, wanchancy life. Mony’s the gliff I got mysel’ in the great deep; and why the Lord should hae made yon unco water is mair than ever I could win to understand. He made the vales and the pastures, the bonny green yaird, the halesome, canty land –

And now they shout and sing to Thee,
For Thou hast made them glad,
as the Psalms say in the metrical version. No that I would preen my faith to that clink neither; but it’s bonny, and easier to mind. ‘Who go to sea in ships,’ they hae’t again –
And in
Great waters trading be,
Within the deep these men God’s works
And His great wonders see. (p. 15)

Following his uncle’s example, Charles too cites Psalm 93:

And then I quoted as solemnly as I was able a verse that I had often before fitted to the chorus of the breakers:

But yet the Lord that is on high,
Is more of might by far,
Than noise of many waters is,
As great sea billows are. (p. 54)

The religious contamination gains ground in the text; Gordon therefore tends to print letters onto the world, which literally becomes literal and needs to be deciphered. In fact, Gordon himself appears physically coded. Suggesting that her father will soon die, Mary tells Charles that ‘The mark is on his brow’ (p. 43). Referring to Cain, and thus implying that Gordon is a murderer, Mary suggests that her father’s face must be read and interpreted the very same way Dr Lanyon, in chapter 6 of Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, is said to have ‘his death-warrant written legibly upon his face.’ Mary is at a crossroads, between religion
(Calvinism) and medicine; being at the same time able to read her father’s tragic fate, which is predestined, and being able to pick up the symptoms of his madness.

Charles’s and Gordon’s highly differing interpretations may lead us to believe that they are both willing to invest meaning in what is, by nature, meaningless. It might remind us of the test Herman Rorschach developed in 1920: the inkblots, as well as the sea-runes, are actually devoid of any meaning. The sign becomes an excuse, and its interpretation says a lot more about the interpreter than about the sign itself.  

**Failure to decipher**

If Charles and Gordon both read the same letters, they fail to reach to the same interpretation, and therefore fail to construe the world in a plain, definite way. Although the world is legible, it does not mean that it is understandable. The initials C and M are obviously polysemic, and offer no stable point of reference. Seeing Gordon’s transformation after having read the letter M, Charles tries to read the world through his uncle’s eyes and goes through the words which start with the letter M: ‘misery, mercy, marriage, money, and the like’ – it seems here that Charles has not completely abandoned his glasses, as he plans on marrying his cousin Mary – until he ‘was arrested with a sort of start by the word murder’ (p. 22). However, all we have is Charles’s own interpretation; the nephew and his uncle are unable to understand each other, as each one is absorbed in his own meditation. There is no interconnection between the two: ‘But we were each following his own train of thought to the exclusion of the other’s’ (p. 21). Being an intra-diegetic narrator, Charles lacks omniscience and his experience, as well as his knowledge, is disjointed, fragmented, limited. The reader has no access to Gordon’s mind and Charles’s explanation is bound to remain dubious. Indeed, should the letter M stand for Murder, or for Madness? As the short story develops, Gordon is less and less referred to in terms
of family bonds or even by his name, and seems to be only recognisable thanks to his insanity. Talking about Gordon’s probable murder, Charles explains that ‘it was an act of madness no more to be condemned than to be pardoned. My uncle was a dangerous madman’ (p. 48). Later on, as his uncle runs away from the black survivor, he wonders ‘[h]ow to capture the madman’ (p. 62) and how to communicate with ‘the unhappy madman’ (p. 63). Towards the conclusion of the short story, Gordon’s flight is eventually defined as ‘the madman’s last escape’ (p. 66). Since he deliberately runs into the sea, should the M stand for the Merry Men? After all, they do give their name to the title and happen to represent Gordon, as he wholly identifies with them and ultimately becomes at one with them – ‘I’m wi’ the sea, I’m just like ane o’ her ain Merry Men’ (p. 54).

Reaching a stable signifier for the letter M seems impossible, and all the more risky as Charles is an unsatisfactory hermeneut who failed to understand the warnings of nature, as some sort of belated prophet. In that respect, he may be compared to Prometheus’s brother, Epimetheus, literally ‘the afterthinker’: the titan who understands all but too late. Charles’s perception of the world is overdue; as he grabs a human bone while trying to find some treasure, he realises:

> Mankind is a material creature, slow to think and dull to perceive connections. The grave, the wreck of the brig, and the rusty shoe-buckle were surely plain advertisements. A child might have read their dismal story, and yet it was not until I touched that actual piece of mankind that the full horror of the charnel ocean burst upon my spirit. (p. 33)

The irony here clearly lies in what Ian Watt defined as ‘delayed decoding’; that is to say the interval between the discovery of the signs and their eventual understanding. Charles’s partial comprehension of his surroundings is a crucial narrative device,
since it allows Stevenson to present and to focus primarily on his character’s perceptions before providing an interpretation – if any at all. The use of the first-person narrative is absolutely central to the perception of the tale. Relying on a highly subjective view of the story allowed Stevenson to build a ‘fantastic sonata about the sea and wrecks’\(^2_4\), which could not have been accomplished with an omniscient focalisation. Remembering what Maureen Martin said about the unreliability of Charles as a narrator, we can also refer to Douglas Gifford’s article on *The Master of Ballantrae*, in which he develops the idea that James Durie’s diabolical nature might after all be Mackellar’s pure construct of the mind.\(^2_5\) Evidence of such an evil character partly revolves around subtle and ineffable details (such as a look, a smile or a tone of voice); similarly, Gordon’s supposed guilt only relies on Charles’s biased point of view. If there was indeed a murder, then ‘The Merry Men’ appears quite peculiar as a detective story with no corpse, no material evidence and no confession. Charles’s blurred judgement is actually rather coherent, if we take into consideration the importance of haze in the text. Significantly enough, in chapter 1, he refers to the mountain Ben Kyaw, which translates as ‘*The Mountain of the Mist*’ (p. 2). It seems that the mist of perception here is directly linked to Stevenson’s gift for ‘stamp[ing] the impression upon the readers’ mind’: the elaboration of a somewhat ‘literary impressionism’\(^2_6\) prevents the characters from plainly expressing and communicating their understanding of the world. Sensations must precede sense; ‘the physical impression must precede the understanding of cause.’\(^2_7\)

**Conclusion**

Charles’s character, with no hindsight, thus proves unable to take the right hold of his reason, as Rouletabille puts it;\(^2_8\) he cannot turn the fragmentary links in his possession into one logical chain (of events). As Lestrade or Watson would say, ‘I can make neither head nor tail of it.’\(^2_9\) However, if the doctor and the
inspector are both desperately blind, Sherlock Holmes always clears up the mist. In ‘The Adventure of the Empty House’, written in 1903 and directly following ‘The Final Problem’ (1893), Sherlock Holmes survives a murder attempt plotted against him by Colonel Sebastian Moran. After having arrested him, Holmes leafs through his index of biographies and states:

‘My collection of M’s is a fine one,’ said he. ‘Moriarty himself is enough to make any letter illustrious, and here is Morgan the poisoner, and Merridew of abominable memory, and Mathews, who knocked out my left canine in the waiting-room at Charing Cross, and, finally, here is our friend of to-night.’

He handed over the book, and I read:

*Moran, Sebastian, Colonel.*

Holmes is successfully able to pin down the world and people into categories. Everything is definable: ‘For many years he had adopted a system of docketing all paragraphs concerning men and things, so that it was difficult to name a subject or a person on which he could not at once furnish information.’

Sherlock Holmes evolves in an all-encompassing, stable, Victorian/Edwardian world – so much so that he manages to write a *Book of Life* (*A Study in Scarlet*, 1887). Even though Conan Doyle may portray a potentially gothic, threatening world (*The Hound of the Baskervilles* 1902, ‘The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire’ 1924), the latter always ends up being conquered or overcome by the supreme power of reason. Quite on the contrary, Stevenson’s characters are meant to live in a genuinely unsteady universe. Either the letter stands for a Hitchcockian M for Murder or for a Fritz Langian accursed M, this vain quest for meaning emphasises the characters’ impossibility to give a simple and unequivocal interpretation of the world, which remains deeply doubtful. The uncertainty surrounding Gordon’s sins, or even
his supposed death at the very end of the narrative, will never be cleared up and will be left pending. Robert Louis Stevenson elaborates a world in which signs and clues must be picked up, without giving any solution. His refusal to reveal the key to the mystery might be read as a symptom of a post-Darwinian loss of faith: a place in which God’s designs – if they exist – are unfathomable because meaningless. Man is transient, ephemeral and uncertain. Although Sherlock Holmes is able to deduce a client’s history thanks to his belongings (a hat in ‘The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle’, a pipe in ‘The Adventure of the Yellow Face’), thus proving that man and object are inherently linked and coherent, it is impossible to reconstruct or read the Darnaway family history through their furniture:

there were chairs in the kitchen covered with strange brocade; curtains of brocade hung from the window; a clock stood silent on the dresser; a lamp of brass was swinging from the roof; the table was set for dinner with the finest of linen and silver; and all these new riches were displayed in the plain old kitchen that I knew so well. (p. 11)

The uncanniness of this scene, as it is felt by Charles, is emphasised by the use of the past tense (‘that I knew so well’) and stems from the overwhelming accumulation of odd, varied and incongruous objects which do not fit in ‘the plain old kitchen.’ The looted goods create a patchwork of an artificial family memoir and make it impossible for Charles, as well as for the reader, to classify and identify the Darnaways. Therefore, the loss of faith and identity is mirrored once again in the loss of any kind of satisfactory and comprehensive narrative which would explain it all, like some sort of impossible philology.
NOTES


5 Ibid., p. 252.


9 See Penny Fielding, ‘Introduction’ in The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson, ed. by Penny Fielding (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 5: ‘In the novella ‘The Merry Men’, the treasure-hunting theme becomes murderous as the insane Gordon Darnaway kills the survivor of a wreck to claim the goods from it’. See also Stephen Arata, ‘Stevenson and Fin-de-Siècle
“The Merry Men” consists of two interwoven narrative strands. The first involves the spectacle of Gordon Darnaway’s descent into madness. His collapse is triggered by guilt at having murdered the survivor of a recent shipwreck for the sake of the goods washed ashore [...]."


19 Umberto Eco, op. cit., pp. 189-190: ‘Et si le monde était le produit d’un dessein divin, qui aurait organisé les objets de la nature pour en faire les instruments d’une communication avec l’homme ? [...] C’est l’hypothèse néoplatonicienne qui sous-tend les premières métaphysiques médiévales : que l’on pense au pseudo Denys l’Aréopagite et à Scot Erigène, qui suit ses traces. Pour eux, l’univers est une Théophanie : Dieu se montre à travers les signes que sont les choses, et, à travers ceux-ci, opère le salut de l’homme.”

20 Ibid., p. 190 : ‘Et dans sa formulation de règles pour l’interprétation
de l’écriture sainte, Thomas d’Aquino précise : les signes de l’Ecriture ne sont pas à lire sur le mode allégorique, mais sont rigoureusement univoques ; quand l’auteur sacré dit que tel miracle s’est produit, c’est signe qu’il a bien eu lieu.’


(1) Le véritable ‘sens’ n’est pas dans le signe, ni impliqué par le signe (la tache), mais dans la forme de sens qu’un individu particulier donne au signe.

(2) La donation de sens n’apprend rien sur le signe mais apprend beaucoup sur l’individu qui donne ce sens.’


26 Ian Watt, op. cit., p. 172.

27 Ibid., p. 178.


Flora Benkhodja


32 See Nathalie Jaëck, Les aventures de Sherlock Holmes, une affaire d’identité, p. 42

33 Fritz Lang’s 1931 film ‘M’ was – conveniently enough – translated in French as M le Maudit.

34 On this subject, see ‘The Suicide Club’ in New Arabian Nights (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1895), in which a character wants to commit suicide because he cannot bear ‘to be descended from an ape,’ (p. 21). Also see Gordon being described as an animal, especially towards the end of the story: ‘he felled me to the ground, burst from my grasp, leaving the shoulder of his jacket, and fled up the hillside towards the top of Aros like a deer.’ (p. 58), ‘He fled, and he was silent, like a beast; and this silence had terrified his pursuer. [...] How to capture the madman, how to feed him in the meanwhile, and what to do with him when he was captured, were the three difficulties that we had to solve.’ (p. 62, my emphasis).