‘The strangely fanciful device of repeating the same idea’: chiasmus in Robert Louis Stevenson’s essays

Ivan D. Sanderson, Mark J. Sanderson

Chiasmus is a lesser-known but characteristic feature of Robert Louis Stevenson’s essays. Beginning with his earliest published essays Stevenson uses this rhetorical figure to draw attention, please the ear, and develop his arguments. Previous studies on Stevenson’s use of chiasmus have been minimal. F. C. Riedel (1969) identifies an example in Stevenson’s ‘Pulvis et Umbra’ (1888) and describes it as an expression of his ‘juxtaposition of opposites’ in both ‘thought’ and ‘form.’ More recently, Farnsworth’s Classical English Rhetoric (2010) identifies a variety of rhetorical figures in Stevenson’s essays and of chiasmus in *Treasure Island*. This paper will identify no less than three types of chiasmus that Stevenson employs in his essays in order to heighten our understanding of his syntax and provide a more nuanced understanding of his writings.

Introduction

Chiasmus, a form of reverse order parallelism of ‘words or other elements’ in a text, is a lesser-known but characteristic feature of Robert Louis Stevenson’s essays. Beginning with his earliest published essays, Stevenson uses this rhetorical figure to draw attention, please the ear, and develop his arguments.

F. C. Riedel (1969) identifies an example of chiasmus in ‘Pulvis et Umbra’ (1888) and describes it as an expression, in both ‘thought’ and ‘form’, of the ‘juxtaposition of opposites’ common in Stevenson’s essays.
In this chiasm, initial ‘one’ corresponds to final ‘one’ and final ‘millions’ corresponds to initial ‘millions’. Here Stevenson describes an atomic view of life in context of a discussion on the recent advances of science. Specifically, as paraphrased by Riedel, ‘the paradoxical impression that life, generally thought of as wholesome and healthy, is on the contrary [...] something like a disease which, as it progresses through varying stages, affects matter in all its atoms and of them forms tumors or organisms’.³

To facilitate recognition and interpretation (especially of longer chiasms), examples in this paper are diagrammed according to the ABBA format, as follows:⁴

A: **one** splitting into
   B: **millions**,
   B: **millions**
   A: cohering into **one**,

More recently, *Farnsworth’s Classical English Rhetoric* (2011) identifies a variety of rhetorical figures in Stevenson’s essays and chiasmus in a description of Mr Arrow in *Treasure Island*.⁵

Watch him as we pleased, we could do nothing to solve it;
and when we asked him to his face,
A: he would only laugh
B: if he were drunk,
B: and if he were sober
A: deny solemnly that he ever tasted anything but water.

This chiasm is based on antithetical relationships in both elements: ‘laugh’ corresponds to ‘deny’ and ‘if he were drunk’ corresponds to ‘if he were sober’.

A review of Stevenson’s essays reveals chiasmus in nearly all of them. This paper introduces three types of chiasmus that Stevenson employs in his essays: small form (ABBA), extended form (ABCCBA), and long-range structure (consisting of an entire text). This paper then explores three possible literary influences on Stevenson’s use of chiasmus: the Bible, William Shakespeare, and French writers (Gustave Flaubert, Victor Hugo, and Michel de Montaigne).

**Part 1: Stevenson’s use of chiasmus**

*Small Form (ABBA)*

The most basic type of chiasmus is small form, consisting of two sets of corresponding elements inversely arranged. Stevenson’s earliest published writing, ‘The Pentland Rising: A Page in History, 1666’ (1866), which he wrote when he was sixteen years old and his father had privately printed, features two small form chiasms arranged back-to-back.

Besides this,
A: landlords were fined for
   B: their tenants’ absences,
   B: tenants for
   A: their landlords,
A: masters for
B: their servants,
B: servants for
A: their masters,
even though they themselves were perfectly regular in their attendance.

These chiasms emphasise the religious persecution experienced by Presbyterians at the hands of the government and elicit an emotional response from readers.⁸

As he matured as a writer, Stevenson continued to make use of this rhetorical figure. In his preface to *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* (1882), Stevenson uses a small form chiasm to critique his own essay on Henry David Thoreau.⁹ He compares his perspective, gained through books, with that of a man who had known Thoreau personally.

A: I was looking at the man
B: through the books,
B: while he had long since learned to read the books
A: through the man,

Part of the appeal of chiasmus is that much can be said with a minimum of words; the relationships between the words within the pattern add entirely new dimensions of meaning. In this chiasm, Stevenson simultaneously identifies the crux of their disagreement, explains the common understanding they reached, and expresses the wisdom gained by the encounter.

**Extended Form (ABCCBA)**

Extended form chiasmus follows the same pattern as small form chiasmus, but is larger, consisting of three or more sets of elements. In ‘My First Book: Treasure Island’ (1894), Stevenson uses a brief but complex extended form chiasm that uses humour and unrequited love to describe the cold and rainy Scottish
weather that orchestrated the creation of *Treasure Island*.\textsuperscript{10}

A: I
B: love
C: my native air,
C: but it
B: does not love
A: me;

In the central element, notice his use of the pronoun ‘it’ for added subtlety.

Applying this pattern to a larger passage, Stevenson uses an extended form chiasm in ‘A Gossip on Romance’ (1882) to describe the experience of an illiterate man who learned how to read and emphasise the dramatic change it brought into his life.\textsuperscript{11}

A: A friend of mine, a Welsh blacksmith, was twenty-five years old and could neither read nor write, when he heard a chapter of *Robinson* read aloud in a farm kitchen.
B: Up to that moment he had sat content, huddled in ignorance, but he left that farm another man.
C: There were day-dreams, it appeared,
C: divine day-dreams, written and printed and bound, and to be bought for money and enjoyed at pleasure.
B: Down he sat that day, painfully learned to read Welsh, and returned to borrow the book. It had been lost, nor could he find another copy but one that was in English.

Down he sat once more, learned English,
A: and at length, and with entire delight, read *Robinson*.

First, he heard *Robinson Crusoe* read aloud, which contrasts with being able to read *Robinson Crusoe* ‘with entire delight’. Next, he ‘sat content, huddled in ignorance’, which contrasts with when he ‘sat’ to learn Welsh and then English. At the centre, ‘day-dreams’, or fiction, dramatically changed his perspective
about books and motivated him to learn how to read.

Stevenson was also skilful at using both a chiasm and a parallelism in the same passage. In ‘Thomas Stevenson: Civil Engineer’ (1887), written following the death of his father, Stevenson uses a parallelism followed by an extended form chiasm ‘to show [...] the inverted nature of his [father’s] reputation’, being more highly ‘esteemed’ outside of Scotland than within, even eclipsing the fame of his esteemed son.¹²

And to show by one instance the inverted nature of his reputation,

A: comparatively **small**
B: **at home**
A: yet **filling**
B: **the world**,  

a friend of mine was this winter on a visit to the Spanish main, and was asked by a Peruvian if he ‘knew

A: **Mr. Stevenson** the author,
B: because his works were much **esteemed in Peru**.
C: **My friend** supposed the reference was to the writer of tales;
C: but **the Peruvian** had never heard of **Dr. Jekyll**;
B: what he had in his eye, what was **esteemed in Peru**,
A: were the volumes of **the engineer**.  

Notice how he sets up the chiasm like a joke, using ‘Mr.’ to obscure the identity of the reference. Only at the end do we see it as a reference to his father, ‘the engineer’. Here, Stevenson uses humour and self-deprecation to honour his father. This is another example of the ‘juxtaposition of opposites’ in both ‘thought’ and ‘form’ described by F. C. Riedel.
Stevenson also used chiasmus to organise the long-range structure of an entire text. For example, he uses a chiasm to structure his argument in ‘Aes Triplex’ (1878).

A: **Death is the worst possible experience.**
B: This belief is **not supported by human behaviour.**
C: **We don’t understand life and death.**
D: **We love living** (not life).
D: Awareness of accidents leads to risk and **love of living.**
C: **We don’t understand life and death.**
B: Love of living is **supported by human behaviour.**
A: Not embracing life is **worse than death.**

At the beginning, Stevenson introduces the conventional wisdom that death is the worst possible experience, having ‘no parallel upon earth’, but ends with the opposite view, that not embracing life is worse than death, for ‘[i]t is better to live and be done with it, than to die daily in the sick-room’. The crux of his argument is that ‘we do not, properly speaking, love life at all, but living’, and that an awareness of death motivates us to take risks. As this essay illustrates, one of the advantages of using chiasmus to shape the long-range structure of an argument is that it accommodates a ‘dialogue’ between conventional wisdom and ‘the drama of daily life’.

**Part 2: The Bible**

In seeing to identify literary influences on Stevenson’s use of chiasmus we must look to his youth, since that is when it first appears in his writings. A logical starting point is the Bible, since he was a student of the Bible from a young age and since chiastic scholarship began among biblical scholars a century prior to his birth.
Robert Louis Stevenson was raised in a devout Christian home where he was daily exposed to the text of the Bible. According to Evelyn Blantyre Simpson in *Robert Louis Stevenson’s Edinburgh Days* (1898), his father ‘gathered his household for “worship” after breakfast ‘and for this purpose a big volume of the Book stood handy’.

She also reports that his nurse, Alison ‘Cummy’ Cunningham, recalled reading ‘the Bible three or four times through to him before he could read’ and specifically remembered Isaiah 58 being ‘Lew’s chapter’. Simpson considers it a ‘curious chapter to fix a child’s attention’, yet, ‘the sixth, seventh, and eighth verses’ contain a ‘rough outline of […] the gospel as practiced by him’. Interestingly, Isaiah 58 contains several chiasms, including one in verse 8.

A: Then shall **thy light** break forth as the morning,

B: and **thine health** shall spring forth speedily:

B: and **thy righteousness** shall go before thee;

A: the **glory of the LORD** shall be thy reward.

John Kelman in *The Faith of Robert Louis Stevenson* (1908) emphasises that he had a ‘close acquaintance with the language of the Bible’ and ‘was literally steeped in its thought and sentiment’. In Kelman’s estimation, whereas the biblical influence on other writers may have been indirect or the product of living in a culture where ‘[t]he matchless power and beauty of its language in the Authorised Version have so permeated our literature’, Stevenson ‘quotes and alludes to it with a frequency, an aptness, and a sympathy, that bear witness to much first-hand knowledge’. Stevenson himself confirms an early influence of the Bible by including ‘the New Testament, and in particular the Gospel according to St. Matthew’ in ‘Books Which Have Influenced Me’ (1887). However, he does not include the Bible as one of the books to which he ‘played the sedulous ape’ as he learned how
to write. Since a biblical influence was universal among writers of his generation, perhaps it was not necessary or fashionable to mention, or perhaps Stevenson was focusing only on secular literary influences. Although a familiarity with the Bible does not necessarily correlate with a knowledge of chiasmus, Stevenson was ‘steeped’ in a text containing extensive chiasmus from a young age and may have developed an appreciation for the logic and thought process inherent in this rhetorical figure.

Biblical Chiastic Scholarship

Next, let us consider Stevenson’s awareness of biblical chiastic scholarship. Beginning in 1741, Robert Lowth, who is credited with the discovery of ‘scripture parallelisms’, presented a series of lectures on the topic while Professor of Poetry at Oxford. These lectures were later compiled and published as Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews (1753). Lowth’s parallelisms followed an ABAB word order. At this same time in Germany, Johann Albrecht Bengel, who is considered the ‘Father of Modern Biblical Scholarship’, identified parallel figures and used the term ‘χιασμός’ (transliterated as ‘chiasmus’) in his Gnomon of the New Testament (1742). Bengel’s χιασμός included both ABAB and ABBA word orders, which he labelled ‘direct’ and ‘inverted’ chiasmus. By Stevenson’s lifetime, a century later, scholarship of biblical parallel structures had continued to develop with additional books published on the subject, but terminology was fluid and non-standard. For example, John Jebb’s Sacred Literature (1820) references both the works of Lowth and Bengel, but rather than use the terms ‘chiasmus, synchysis, [or] epanodos’, introduces his own term: ‘introverted parallelism’.

Stevenson was aware of biblical parallel figures. In ‘On Style in Literature: Its Technical Elements’ (1885), he describes them as ‘the strangely fanciful [Hebrew] device of repeating the same idea’. However, he discusses them in a section on poetic forms, not considering them flexible enough to also appear in prose.
This assessment is likely due to the ‘poetic’ focus of Robert Lowth’s influential book, suggesting that Stevenson’s awareness of biblical parallel figures is at least partly due to biblical chiastic scholarship. Interestingly, in discussing prose forms in this same essay, Stevenson argues that ‘the motive and end of any art whatever is to make a pattern’ and describes what he calls ‘the web’ in terms that recall the x-shape of chiasmus:

[T]he true business of the literary artist is to plait or weave his meaning, involving it around itself; so that each sentence, by successive phrases, shall first come into a kind of knot, and then, after a moment of suspended meaning, solve and clear itself.

Travis R. Merritt (1968), who describes Stevenson’s knot as ‘the audible interweave of meanings themselves, a sensuous realization of syntax’, provides a similar analysis, although he sees it as a description of parallelism:

Stevenson seems to think that such a figuration of the sentence is achieved where the meaning’s completion is deferred through the internal elaboration of one or more of its parts. He is not necessarily recommending periodic structure, but rather any structure or tying-together which is a system of linked elements, each contributing to the sense and each associated with its predecessor (or successor, or both) by some similarity in propositional function or form. Parallelism, both substantive and grammatical, is thus the key to his conception of prose style, because it conduces to moderate elaboration. (Emphasis added)

Merritt’s interpretation is strengthened by recognising that Stevenson structures this passage as the first half of a parallelism – a sort of showing while telling:

A: [T]he true business of the literary artist is to plait or weave
his meaning,
involving it around itself;
B: so that each sentence, by successive phrases, shall first come into a kind of knot,
C: and then, after a moment of suspended meaning, solve and clear itself.
A: In every properly constructed sentence
B: there should be observed this knot or hitch;
C: so that (however delicately) we are led to foresee, to expect, and then to welcome the successive phrases.

To Stevenson, the purpose of this parallel pattern is two-fold: (i) ‘to please the supersensual ear’ by leading the reader ‘to foresee, to expect, and then to welcome the successive phrases’ and (ii) ‘to forward and illuminate the argument’ by being logical and neat. Significantly, Stevenson reinforces this second purpose with a chiasm, showing that the parallel pattern of ‘the web’ includes both types of parallelism:

A: Pattern and
B: argument live in each other;
B: and it is by the brevity, clearness, charm, or emphasis of the second,
A: that we judge the strength and fitness of the first.

How do we reconcile Stevenson’s view of chiasmus as a strict poetic form with his practice of using it in his prose? One possibility is that he adapted chiasmus to prose forms, which he viewed as more flexible and needing to be ‘invented’ by each writer, an approach that invites dynamic and innovative prose forms reflecting influences from across the literary spectrum. This fits well into Richard Dury’s (2012) description of Stevenson’s
style, that it ‘partly resides in [...] his ability to take stylistic features from different languages, linguistic registers, and literary traditions and use them to produce a fresh creation that is “Stevensonian”’.

**Part 3: William Shakespeare**

William Shakespeare is another writer who made an innovative use of chiasmus in his writings. Although separated by three centuries, Stevenson considered Shakespeare his ‘dearest and best friend’ and placed him first in his collection of ‘eternal books that never weary’. His first exposure to Shakespeare as a child was ‘a landmark in the boy’s life’, which he later recalled in detail in a letter to his friend, Charles Baxter:

I remember the day my mother read *Macbeth* to me. A terrible, black, stormy day, when neither of us could go out of the house; and so we both sat over the fire and she read and I had snakes and newts and others to crawl up and down my spine.

It is unclear when Stevenson first began studying Shakespeare’s style, but he speaks authoritatively about it in his first letter to William James in 1884, when he was in his early 30s:

Seriously, from the dearth of information and thoughtful interest in the art of literature, those who try to practise it with any deliberate purpose run the risk of finding no fit audience. People suppose it is ‘the stuff’ that interests them; they think, for instance, that the prodigious fine thoughts and sentiments in Shakespeare impress by their own weight, not understanding that the unpolished diamond is but a stone. They think that striking situations, or good dialogue, are got by studying life; they will not rise to understand that they are prepared by deliberate artifice and set off by painful suppressions.
William Shakespeare, like Stevenson, used chiasmus ‘throughout his writing career’ and learned about it in his youth. William L. Davis (2003, 2005) argues that Shakespeare’s early exposure to chiasmus likely came during his ‘grammar school training’ where he ‘learned rhetoric according to the classical model’, which included chiasmus. At this same time, he ‘would have observed’ chiastic structures in his youthful study of the Bible. Making innovative use of these influences, he ‘constructed his complex chiasms using rhetorical devices from both the classical and Hebrew traditions, merging them together into a unique system which, in many respects, is singularly characteristic of Shakespeare’s work’.\textsuperscript{36}

This ‘unique system’ included using chiasmus ‘in the comic repartee between characters’, to ‘reveal the central themes of passages’, and ‘as a structural blueprint for the dialogue in entire scenes and even for the structure of plays’. In addition, Shakespeare ‘constantly manipulat[ed] the complex structures to create new variations, and he often achieve[d] these results by combining a number of rhetorical devices and chiastic patterns into systems that express greater complexity’.\textsuperscript{37}

The following example from Hamlet (2.2.220-256) is a complex sequence of ten interlocking chiasms. Notice how some chiasms are joined by a common ‘A’ element and how the central element often consists of repeated lines for emphasis.

\begin{verbatim}
A: Now I am alone.
B: what a 
B: and peasant slave
A: am I!

A: Is it not monstrous that this player here,
B: But in a fiction,
B: In a dream of passion,
\end{verbatim}
A: Could force **his soul**

B: So **to his own conceit**

C: that from her working **all the visage wann’d,**

D: **Tears in his eyes,**

D: **Distraction in his aspect,**

D: A **broken voice,**

C: An’ **his whole function suiting**

B: With forms **to his conceit?**

A: and all **for nothing, for Hecuba!**

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A: What’s **Hecuba**

B: To **him,**

B: Or **he**

A: To **Hecuba** that he should weep for her?

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A: What **would he do, had he**

B: **the motive**

B: And **the cue** for passion

A: That **I have?**

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A: **He would** drown the stage with tears

B: And **cleave the general ear** with horrid speech,

C: Make **mad the guilty,**

C: and **appal the free**

C: **Confound the ignorant,**

B: And **amaze** indeed the **the very faculties of eyes and ears.**

A: Yet **I, a dull and muddy-mettle rascal,**

B: **Peak** like John-a-dreams,

B: **Unpregnant** of my cause,

A: And can say **nothing; no, not for a king,**

B: Upon **whose property**

B: and **most dear life** a damn’d defeat was made.
A: **Am I a coward?**

B: **Who calls me** villain,

C: **Breaks my pate across**,  
C: **Plucks off my beard**  
C: and **blows it in my face**,  
C: **Tweaks me by the nose**,  
C: **Gives me the lie i’ th’ throat** as deep as to the lungs?

B: **Who does me** this? Hah, ’swounds, I should take it;

A: for it cannot be but **I am pigeon-liver’d**

B: And **lack gall** To make oppression bitter,  
B: **Or ere this** I should ’a’ fatted all the region kites  
B: with **this slave’s** offal  
B: Bloody, bawdy **villain**!

C: **Remorseless**,  
D: **Treachurous**,  
D: **Lecherous**,  
C: **Kindless**

B: **Villain!**

A: Why, what **an ass am I!**

Davis observes that ‘the form of repetition inherent in a complex chiastic system inevitably deepens the meaning of a text by providing multiple viewpoints of a single idea, making it rich with three-dimensional language and imagery’. In this chiastic sequence, Hamlet contrasts his own self-judged cowardice with Claudius’s apparent ability to persuade and act decisively. This contrast is enhanced by the repetition of lines in the central element of several chiasms, which reveals strong emotion and intense inner turmoil. Shakespeare has a masterful ability to use chiasmus to enhance the emotion of a scene and direct attention to the central theme of a passage.

Like Shakespeare, Stevenson was an innovative writer who experimented with literary forms. His ‘one rule’ concerning the
'web’ or ‘pattern’ is that it ‘be infinitely various; to interest, to disappoint, to surprise, and yet still to gratify; to be ever changing, as it were, the stitch, and yet still to give the effect of an ingenious neatness’. To Stevenson, this is ‘style’ or ‘the foundation of the art of literature’. 39

Stevenson’s use of chiasmus frequently appears in his essays, like in Shakespeare’s plays, as part of an interlocking series of parallel figures. For example, the first paragraph of ‘An Autumn Effect’ (1875) is constructed of an alternating sequence of seven chiasms and parallelisms that emphasises different aspects of the ‘unity of impression’ gained through rapid travel by foot and, perhaps, represents the right-left rhythm of walking. 40

A: A country rapidly passed through under favourable auspices
B: may leave upon us a unity of impression that would only be disturbed and
  dissipated if we stayed longer.
B: Clear vision goes
A: with the quick foot.
B: Things fall for us into a sort of natural perspective
A: when we see them for a moment in going by;
B: we generalise boldly and simply,
A: and are gone

A: before
B: the sun is overcast,
A: before
B: the rain falls,
A: before
B: the season can steal like a dial-hand from his figure,
A: before
B: the lights and shadows, shifting round towards nightfall,
A: can **show us**
   B: the **other side of things**,  
   B: and **believe**
A: what they **showed us** in the morning.

A: We **expose**
   B: **our mind** to the landscape 
A: (as we would **expose**
   B: the **prepared plate in the camera**)
A: for the **moment**
   B: only during which the **effect endures**;
A: and we are **away**
   B: before the **effect can change**.

A: Hence we shall have in our **memories**
   B: a long scroll of **continuous wayside pictures**, 
   C: all imbued already with **the prevailing sentiment of the season**, 
   C: **the weather, and the landscape**, 
B: and certain to be **unified** more and more, as time goes on,
A: by the **unconscious processes of thought**.

A: So that **we who have only looked at a country over our shoulder**, so to 
   speak, as we went by,
B: will have a **conception of it far more memorable and articulate**
A: than a man who has lived there all his life from a child upwards,
B: and had his **impression of to-day modified by that of to-morrow, and**
   **belied by that of the day after**,  
A: till at length the **stable characteristics** of the country
In this chiastic sequence, Stevenson argues that rapid travel provides the memory with a ‘unified’ image of a landscape, rather than the ‘confusion’ that results from seeing the same landscape under differing weather and light conditions. By using a series of parallel figures, Stevenson makes the reader feel as though they are walking together and conversing as they go. Here, like in the passage from Hamlet, the use of parallel figures ‘deepens the meaning of [the] text by providing multiple viewpoints of a single idea, making it rich with three-dimensional language and imagery’.  

Was Shakespeare Stevenson’s introduction to chiasmus? At what point did Stevenson begin studying Shakespeare’s style? The available evidence suggests that Shakespeare had an early and significant impact on Stevenson, who developed an appreciation for Shakespeare’s style by the early 1880s. Since both writers created large, varying, interlocking sequences of parallel figures, it is probable that Shakespeare had an influence on Stevenson’s use of chiasmus.

**Part 4: French Writers: Gustave Flaubert, Victor Hugo, and Michel de Montaigne**

Lastly, let us consider the influence of French writers. Although Stevenson made use of chiasmus as early as 1866, his use increased dramatically beginning with his 1874 essays that reflected his travels in France and an interest in French literature. Harriet Dorothea MacPherson, in *R. L. Stevenson: A Study in French Influence* (1930), argues that Stevenson ‘gained the rudiments of his style from the French’. A ‘formative period’ was the latter half of the 1870s, when he associated with ‘the artist colony to which his cousin belonged’ in Fontainebleau. Here he ‘learned
to think of writing as work’ and became ‘a serious student of French literature’. In ‘Fontainebleau: Village Communities of Painters’ (1884), Stevenson writes reverentially about the ‘technical inspiration’ that immersed him in France:

[T]here is something, or there seems to be something, in the very air of France that communicates the love of style. Precision, clarity, the cleanly and crafty employment of material, a grace in the handling, apart from any value in the thought, seem to be acquired by the mere residence; or if not acquired, become at least the more appreciated. The air of Paris is alive with this technical inspiration. And to leave that airy city and awake next day upon the borders of the forest is but to change externals. The same spirit of dexterity and finish breathes from the long alleys and the lofty groves, from the wildernesses that are still pretty in their confusion, and the great plain that contrives to be decorative in its emptiness.

**Gustave Flaubert**

In describing how Stevenson ‘distilled out and assimilated French literary ideals’, J. C. Furnas in *Voyage to Windward* (1952) emphasises Gustave Flaubert’s ‘doctrine of mot juste’ or the careful and deliberate effort to find the ‘right word’. This attention to detail is reflected in Flaubert’s use of chiasmus. The following example expresses the need to maintain a balance between doubt and hope, or optimism and realism.

A: Il faut toujours **espérer**

B: **quand**

C: on **désespère**, C: et **douter**

B: **quand**

A: on **espère**.
Flaubert not only applied chiasmus to word order, but, similar to Stevenson, used it as a narrative device in structuring stories and the relationships between characters. Jennifer Yee (2011) explains how ‘Flaubert’s projected modern oriental novel was to be based on a structure of chiasmus: a “civilised” man was to become a “barbarian” and vice versa’. A similar chiastic structure governs the relationship between the title characters in *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1881), as described by Michal Peled Ginsburg (1986):

Though the relationship between Bouvard and Pécuchet remains polarised throughout the novel, a process of reversal takes place by which they exchange qualities – a chiastic movement by which Bouvard becomes Pécuchet, and Pécuchet Bouvard.

Stevenson incorporated *mot juste* into his own style to such an extent that MacPherson considers him ‘a Flaubert of English literature’ and explains how Stevenson, ‘in his early days, [...] revelled in the beauty of Flaubert’s phrasing’. Significantly, MacPherson detects a French treatment in ‘On Style in Literature: Its Technical Elements’ (1885), discussed earlier, and specifies how ‘[i]n its conscious voicing of the elements of a smooth and clear-cut style, this essay echoes Flaubert’.

**Victor Hugo**

Another French writer who makes significant use of chiasmus is Victor Hugo. Isabelle Thomas-Fogiel (2014) explains that chiasmus was ‘over-abundantly used by the Romantics, particularly the French Romantics. Victor Hugo, for instance, made it one of his main rhetorical tools’. Joyce O. Lowrie (2008) describes how Hugo ‘used it with gusto, since it formed part of the way in which he expressed his thoughts’. Lowrie then shares the following ‘significant example’ of chiasmus from Hugo’s poem, ‘Booz endormi’ (1859).
Since Stevenson considered Hugo ‘[t]he great contemporary master of wordmanship, and indeed of all literary arts and technicalities’ it is likely that he recognised and admired Hugo’s use of chiasmus. Perhaps, then, it is no coincidence that Stevenson makes repeated use of chiasmus in ‘Victor Hugo’s Romances’ (1874). The following example emphasises how Notre Dame Cathedral does not dominate the Paris skyline as it does in Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris*:51

A: It is purely an effect of mirage;
B: Notre Dame does not, in reality, thus dominate and stand out above the city;
C: and anyone who should visit it, in the spirit of the Scott-tourists to Edinburgh or the Trossachs,
C: would be almost offended at finding nothing more
B: than this old church thrust away into a corner.
A: It is purely an effect of mirage, as we say; but it is an effect that
permeates and possesses the whole book with astonishing consistency and
strength

Michel de Montaigne
Writing much earlier in French history, Michel de Montaigne, the French Renaissance essayist, may have played a larger role in Stevenson’s use of chiasmus. According to Stevenson’s essay,
'Books Which Have Influenced Me' (1887), Montaigne was a major literary influence:

A book which has been very influential upon me fell early into my hands, and so may stand first, though I think its influence was only sensible later on, and perhaps still keeps growing, for it is a book not easily outlived: the *Essais* of Montaigne.\(^\text{52}\)

Stevenson included Montaigne in ‘the inner circle of my intimates’, or the six authors he ‘re-read the oftenest’, and as one of the authors to which he ‘played the sedulous ape’ as he learned how to write.\(^\text{53}\)

Phillip John Usher (2014) describes how Montaigne not only applied chiasmus to ‘local word order’ but, like Stevenson, to ‘long-range structure’, including the ‘disposition of major themes’.\(^\text{54}\) For example, the structure of Montaigne’s essay on sexual impotence, ‘On the Power of the Imagination’ (1580), is chiastic. As Usher explains:

Impotence, argues Montaigne *contra* Bodin and popular belief, is caused by the imagination (Non-impotent state → Talking about impotence → Imagining impotence → Impotence). It can be cured, he advances, through a chias
tic reversal of terms (Impotence → Imagining impotence → Talking about impotence → Non-impotent state).\(^\text{55}\)

When diagrammed according to the ABBA format, the essay’s chiastic structure is readily observed:

A: **Non-impotent** state

B: **Talking about** impotence

C: **Imagining** impotence

D: **Impotence**
D: Impotence
C: Imagining impotence
B: Talking about impotence
A: Non-impotent state

Far from being ‘ornamental’, Usher shows that the inverted structure of chiasmus allows Montaigne to ‘argue against dogmatism’, ‘unseat knowledge’, and reveal ‘the inherent multiplicities and uncertainties in the world around us’. In the case of impotence, Montaigne challenges the conventional wisdom of his day that attributes impotence to ‘demons and witches’ and argues instead that ‘man must invert his thinking’ and control his ‘own psychology’.56

As discussed earlier, Stevenson uses chiasmus for the long-range structure of ‘Aes Triplex’ (1878), which concludes with the position that not embracing life is worse than death. Montaigne touches on similar themes in his essays, ‘The Taste of Good and Evil Things Depends on Our Opinion’ (1580) and ‘On Repenting’ (1588). In the first, he writes, ‘I grant that pain [rather than death] is the worst disaster that can befall our being’, and in the second, ‘It is my conviction that what makes for human happiness is not, as Antisthenes said, dying happily but living happily’.57 With its similarity in thought and form to Montaigne’s writings, it is probable that Stevenson’s use of chiasmus in ‘Aes Triplex’ was a result of Montaigne’s influence.

Flaubert, Hugo, and Montaigne are a sample of the many French writers Stevenson admired and who shaped his style. Though Stevenson likely did not learn about chiasmus from the French, their influence appears to have enhanced and expanded his understanding and practice. Perhaps this growing awareness of chiasmus helped him recognise or more fully appreciate chiasmus in the Bible, Shakespeare, and wherever else he had encountered it before.
Conclusion
The focus of this paper has been to demonstrate the significant presence of chiasmus in Robert Louis Stevenson’s essays and to present possible literary influences. An awareness of chiasmus in Stevenson’s rhetorical style can help us better appreciate why his writings are pleasing to the ear and more fully understand the nuance and structure of his arguments.

Looking forward, further study of the writers who most influenced Stevenson may reveal additional insights into Stevenson’s adoption, development, and usage of chiasmus. An understanding of how Stevenson used chiasmus in his writings can aid translators in their efforts to make Stevenson’s writings available in other languages. While this paper has focused on Stevenson’s essays, preliminary research suggests the presence of illuminating chiasmus in his fiction, as well as unique insights into the dual aspects of Robert Louis Stevenson himself.

Notes
3 Ibid., p. 192.
4 The discerning eye will notice that ‘splitting into’ and ‘cohering into’ also correspond, although antithetically, creating a third element in this chiasm.
5 Farnsworth, p. 108. This passage from *Treasure Island* is found in ‘Chapter 10: The Voyage’.
6 ‘Small form’ and ‘extended form’ are terms used by Robert Hariman in ‘What is Chiasmus? Or, Why the Abyss Stares Back’, in *Chiasmus and Culture*, ed. by Boris Wiseman and Anthony Paul (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014), pp. 45-68; and ‘long-range’ is used by Phillip John Usher in ‘Quotidian Chiasmus in Montaigne: Arguing Impotence and Suicide’, in the same volume, pp. 58, 149.
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8 Five years later, Stevenson uses this same back-to-back style in ‘An Old Scotch Gardener’ (1871):

A: The earth, that he
   B: had digged so much in his life,
   B: was dug out
A: by another for himself;
A: and the flowers that he
   B: had tended
   B: drew their life
A: still from him, but in a new and nearer way.


12 ‘Thomas Stevenson: Civil Engineer’, ibid., p. 125, Google ebook.

13 Alice D. Snyder recognises this same long-range structure in several of Stevenson’s essays, but, rather than focusing on its parallel attributes, discusses it in terms of antithesis. See Alice D. Snyder, ‘Paradox and Antithesis in Stevenson’s Essays: A Structural Study’, Journal of English and German Philology, 19 (October 1920), 540-59. Thank you to Richard Dury for making us aware of this article. Although not specified in Snyder’s article, Alfred H. Lloyd includes parallelism as an element of antithesis in his theory of antithesis, which she follows – Alfred H. Lloyd, ‘The Logic of Antithesis’, The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods, 8 (May 1911), 281-89.

14 In The Biographical Edition [...] Virginibus Puerisque and Other Papers (1911), pp. 146-163.

15 Ibid., pp. 146, 154, 155, 161.


17 Evelyn Blantyre Simpson, Robert Louis Stevenson’s Edinburgh Days

18 Ibid., pp. 129, 130. Simpson sees in these verses the sentiment, ‘Be good yourself, make others happy’, which his mother described as ‘the gospel according to Robert Louis Stevenson’. (Ibid, p. 128).

19 Ivan D. Sanderson, *Isaiah: The Times of Fulfillment. A Verse by Verse Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Westbench Publishing, 2009), p. 579. With Stevenson’s frail health, it is understandable why this verse would be part of his personal gospel. In this chiasm, ‘thine health’ corresponds to ‘thy righteousness’, the former referring to ‘physical wellbeing’ and the latter referring to ‘spiritual wellbeing’. ‘When we are protected by the Lord, our health is sustained and others will know and acknowledge our righteousness’.


22 *Memories and Portraits* (1911), p. 57.


27 A review of Stevenson’s personal library finds no match with any of the major works on scripture parallelisms. It is possible that he encountered scripture parallelisms through the influence of his grandfather, Reverend Lewis Balfour (1777-1860). In ‘The Manse’ (1887), Stevenson describes his grandfather’s residence as having ‘a
library of bloodless books – or so they seemed in those days, although I have some of them now on my own shelves and like well to read them’ (Memories and Portraits, p. 103). See ‘What Stevenson Read – His Personal Library’, RLS Website <robert-louis-stevenson.org/robert-louis-stevensons-library>.


30 Essays and Criticisms (1903), pp. 184, 185.


38 Ibid., p. 255.


41 Ibid., p. 255.

42 Harriet Dorothea MacPherson, R. L. Stevenson: A Study in French

43 ‘Fontainebleau: Village Communities of Painters’, Across the Plains with Other Memories and Essays (1907), p. 267.

44 Furnas, Voyage to Windward, p. 112.


48 MacPherson, pp. 37, 42, 72. Stevenson does not hide his admiration for French literature in this essay, but openly declares that ‘French prose is distinctly better than English’ and that the French are ahead of the English in adopting ‘the pattern of the web’ (Essays and Criticisms, p. 200).


‘A Gossip on a Novel of Dumas’s’, *Memories and Portraits* (1911), p. 212. Stevenson’s ‘inner circle’ includes: ‘One or two of Scott’s novels [possibly *Guy Mannering*, *Rob Roy*, or *Redgauntlet*], Shakespeare, Molière, Montaigne, *The Egoist* [by George Meredith], and *Vicomte de Bragelonne* [by Alexandre Dumas]; ‘A College Magazine’, see *Memories and Portraits* (1911), p. 57. The authors to whom Stevenson ‘got some practice in rhythm, in harmony, in construction, and in the coordination of parts’ are Hazlitt, Lamb, Wordsworth, Sir Thomas Brown, Defoe, Hawthorn, Montaigne, Baudelaire, and Obermann. In this same essay, he also mentions Ruskin, Robert Browning, Keats, Chaucer, Morris, Swinburne, John Webster, Congreve, Thackeray, and Dumas.


Ibid., p. 152.

Ibid., pp. 148, 150, 152, 156, 158.