**ABSTRACT** — This paper relates an encounter between Robert Louis Stevenson and Ernest Dowson in 1873, when Stevenson was on the verge of his first publication, and Dowson was still a child. It attempts to show how this encounter may have led directly - though unconsciously - many years later to Dowson's poem 'A Coronal'. If accepted, the argument provides rare documentation for the Romantic theory of childhood as a source of artistic creation.

**KEY WORDS:** Childhood. Poetic inspiration. Decadence.

The work of the Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-94) is too well known to require citing; but it may be as well to quote a few lines from English poet Ernest Dowson (1867-1900) in order to establish his identity:

They are not long, the days of wine and roses:
Out of a misty dream
Our path emerges for a while, then closes
Within a dream.¹

Dowson was the quintessential *poète maudit* of the English 1890s – a depraved and sordid poet of the Decadent school who died, like Poe, in the gutter (more or less). So, at least, his 'legend' would have it; the reality may have been less sensational.
Stevenson’s reputation was rather different, his literary affiliations (W. E. Henley etc.) more robust. Yet it is known that the two were acquainted. True, Dowson at the time was just six years old; but there may be a little more to this acquaintance – in relation to Ernest’s later career – than has hitherto been noticed.

In the winter of 1873, Stevenson – whose first published essay was about to appear in the *Portfolio* – was prescribed a period of convalescence in the south of France. He chose to stay at a modest guest-house, the Hotel du Pavillon, in Mentone. His fellow guests were almost all English, and for the most part bored or irritated him. With one small family, however, he struck up a friendship. A reading of his letters of November and December yields considerable detail. The first references are comparatively mundane – even, initially, a little condescending:

*To his Mother, 15 November:*
There’s a very nice man here called Dowson, with a pretty wife and son; he talks literature heavily with me. . . .

*16 November:*
Dowson has leant me Clough, which I like a good deal. . . . Dowson and I expressed mutual incredulity in each other’s bad health. . . .

*17 November:*
I was down at the Dowsons’ room last night, smoking a pipe. Dowson is really a very pleasant man. . . .

*20 November:*
Dowson is very nice indeed; I go down to his room for a pipe previous to turning in often...

Then comes a reference revealing a closer meeting of minds:

*To Frances Sitwell, 4 December:*
If you had seen the moon last night. It was like transfigured sunshine; as clear and mellow, only showing everything in a new wonderful significance. The shadows of the leaves on the road were so strangely black that Dowson and I had difficulty in
believing they were not solid, or at least pools of dark mire. . . . Dowson is a shipbuilder; a member of the Arts Club; fond of Morris, Keats etc. His wife is very pretty, and I should think she is a nice little woman, but she is not very come-at-able. The little boy is also very pretty.⁶

From suchlike references it is clear that Stevenson and Alfred Dowson, the poet’s father, formed a friendship of some depth during this brief period. They alone among the hotel guests enjoyed a pipe of tobacco; they played billiards together each morning; they enjoyed – we can assume – more than one evening stroll in each other’s company. Their literary enthusiasms were compatible. Moreover they suffered the same affliction – incipient tuberculosis.

It is clear too that Stevenson was drawn to little Ernest (and vice-versa). In another letter to Frances Sitwell (26 November), he gives a vivid sketch of the growing bond between them:

I have made myself indispensable to the Dowsons’ little boy (aet. 6) [,] a popularity that brings with it its own fatigue as you may fancy; and I have been fooling around with him all afternoon, playing dominoes, and learning geography with him, and carrying him on my back a little.⁷

Stevenson summarizes his relations with the family in another letter to his mother on 9 December. Following a short, lightly satirical description of all his fellow guests, he states, ‘The Dowsons are of course my chief people.’⁸ It is a clear enough statement of the case. But so far, so – what? None of this is particularly revealing, vis-à-vis the later career of Ernest Dowson. However, with this particular letter we approach a point of considerable interest. We need to consider first, though, the extraordinary opening of a letter penned two days earlier, Sunday 7 December, to Frances Sitwell:

The first violet. There is more secret trouble for the heart in the breath of this small flower, than in all the
wines of all the vineyards of Europe. I cannot contain myself. I do not think so small a thing has ever given me such a princely festival of pleasure. I am quite drunken at heart; and you do not know how the scent of this flower strikes in me the same thought, as I think almost all things will do now; everything beautiful to me brings back the thought of what is most beautiful to me. My little violet, if you could speak I know what you would say! I feel as if my heart were a little bunch of violets in my bosom; and my brain is pleasantly intoxicated with the wonderful odour. I suppose I am writing nonsense but it does not seem nonsense to me. Is it not a wonderful odour; is it not something incredibly subtle and perishable? The first breath, veiled and timid as it seems, maddens and transfigures and transports you out of yourself; and yet if you seek to breathe it again, it is gone. — It is like a wind blowing to one out of fairyland. — No one need tell me that the phrase is exaggerated, if I say that this violet *sings*; it sings with the same voice as the March blackbird; and the same adorable tremor goes through one's soul at the hearing of it. I am writing about my little violet; and yet you know how much I am keeping back. It is [one] of these delicate penetrating sensations that passes, like a two-edged sword, through your heart; it presents itself in the holy of holies; it is there a sweet incense before the little image that one cherishes most secretly. This violet has known all my past and in a moment in the twinkling of an eye, showed me all that was beautiful and loveable in my bygone life. I beg pardon for this rhapsody. The violet has turned my whole mind out of doors; and my brain is swept and garnished, an empty house full of nothing but perfume and love... 9

‘Rhapsody’ indeed (and there is surely no need to explicate the personal subtext here – the strength of the writer’s feelings for Fanny Sitwell herself). . . It comes as no great surprise to read Stevenson’s subsequent explanation, appended the following day:

All yesterday, I was under the influence of opium; I had been rather seedy during the night and took a dose in the morning and, for the first time in my life it took effect upon me. I had a day of extraordinary happiness, and when I went to bed, there was something almost terrifying in the pleasures that besieged me in the darkness. Wonderful tremors filled me; my head swam in the most delirious but enjoyable manner; and the bed softly oscillated with me, like a boat in a very gentle ripple.¹⁰

Returning now to Stevenson’s letter of Tuesday 9 December, addressed to his mother, we find the same information, couched in much the same terms: ‘I took an opium pill on Sunday morning,’ he writes, ‘and for the first time it took full effect upon me. I lived all Sunday in the most inexpressible bliss. . .’¹¹ Then come the lines that strike a reader of Ernest Dowson’s poetry with such startling suggestiveness:

> I shall send you some violets and maidenhair in this letter. They are the first violets I have found; I got them (or rather little Dowson got them for me) on Sunday afternoon when I was walking in some olive yards with him and his father; and the effect of the perfume on my opium stimulated nerves was something wonderful to look back upon.¹²

It certainly gives one pause. Consider: Ernest Dowson, at the impressionable age of six, walking through Mediterranean olive groves with his father and their friend Mr Stevenson. . . And what does he do, the little boy, as his elders carry on their conversation? He gathers a posy of violets, and presents it with – one supposes – purity of heart, as a tribute to his particular friend, who plays dominoes with him and carries him on his back. And Mr Stevenson? The correspondence attests to his appreciation. ‘I do not think so small a thing has ever given me such a princely festival of pleasure.’

Is it unlikely that Stevenson expressed something at least of his heightened state of mind during this walk? Could he have failed to vocalise his responses on receiving this gift? ‘The first
breath,' he was shortly to write, ‘. . . maddens and transfigures and transports you out of yourself. . .' Imagine the impact of such enthusiasm, articulately voiced by a figure of some charisma, on a child of any sensitivity. I think we are entitled to assume an abiding impression, of some depth.

Ernest Dowson’s first collection of poetry, Verses, was published in 1895. The book opens with a preliminary lyric, *Vitae summa brevis spem nos vetat incohare longam* (partially quoted above). It then proceeds through an elaborate dedication to Adelaide Foltinowitz – the young girl to whom the poet was so notoriously (and hopelessly) attached – to Dowson’s first ‘collected’ poem, ‘A Coronal’:

Violets and leaves of vine  
Into a frail, fair wreath  
We gather and entwine.  
A wreath for Love to wear  
Fragrant as his own breath,  
To crown his brow divine,  
All day till night is near.  
Violets and leaves of vine  
We gather and entwine.

Violets and leaves of vine  
For Love that lives a day,  
We gather and entwine.  
All day till Love is dead,  
Till eve falls, cold and gray,  
These blossoms, yours and mine,  
Love wears upon his head.  
Violets and leaves of vine  
We gather and entwine.

Violets and leaves of vine,  
For Love when poor Love dies  
We gather and entwine.  
This wreath that lives a day  
Over his pale, cold eyes,  
Kissed shut by Proserpine,  
At set of sun we lay:
Violets and leaves of vine
We gather and entwine.\textsuperscript{13}

‘Violets and leaves of vine’: Dowson is said always to have claimed that the letter \textit{V} was the most beautiful in the alphabet. With a fellow member of the Rhymers’ Club, Victor Plarr, he planned a volume of verse, to be called \textit{Vineleaf and Violet}. The book never appeared; but the poem adumbrates it, perhaps. Written when its author was twenty-three, some years before its first appearance in print, it bears distinct traces of that encounter with another young author of twenty-three – one lovesick, enraptured, hopelessly enamoured, as was Stevenson of Frances Sitwell in 1873.

‘Perfectly meaningless verses’, Dowson called them in a letter to Plarr. ‘It is the only poem that I ever wrote straight off in less than an hour.’\textsuperscript{14} One may ask where such verses come from – for the source of Romantic inspiration. Not often, perhaps, is there such documentation for the argument of childhood experience.

The friendship of Stevenson and Alfred Dowson did not completely subside with Stevenson’s parting from Mentone. There exists a cordial letter to Dowson written in October 1875, in which Stevenson seeks to renew the acquaintance. He asks after Annie and Ernest, adding – ‘Does Ernest remember “What are the principal characteristics of Mr Stevenson.”’\textsuperscript{15} (A game, presumably; unfortunately – tantalisingly – the proper response is not recorded.) Stevenson and Dowson senior did meet at least once more, in London in August the following year. Any further letters between them, however (see below), seem now to be irretrievably lost.

The published correspondence of Ernest Dowson contains few references to the older writer; yet, in those that do occur, one detects more than a trace of nostalgia. ‘I wish Stevenson would come back,’ he writes to his friend and collaborator Arthur Moore in 1889. ‘I have been reading some of his old letters to my governor and would send him \textit{Ludovicus} [their projected novel] like a shot if he were only accessible.’\textsuperscript{16} And in a letter of 1892 to Victor Plarr, he refers to his mother’s ill health –

'These are parlous times,' he concludes; then shifts, most surprisingly: ‘Would God we were all in Samoa with others.’17 One wonders greatly at the associative link.

Alfred Dowson died in August 1894, worn down by illness and financial worries – a probable suicide. Annie Dowson hanged herself six months later. And far away in Samoa, at a point almost exactly midway between these two tragedies, Stevenson’s Pacific idyll came to its own sudden conclusion in that fatal cerebral haemorrhage.

The next few years were Ernest Dowson’s last, a rapid descent into his personal abyss. A brief glimpse of childhood happiness – a boy gathering flowers for a friend – is the closest we come to any sense of real contentment in his life. That these moments connect with the rapturous power of art hardly seems miraculous at all.

**UM BUQUÊ PARA O SR. STEVENSON - UM EPISÓDIO NA VIDA DE ERNEST DOWSON**


**PALAVRAS-CHAVE**: Infância. Inspiração poética. Decadência

**NOTES**


3 Id., ibid., p. 367

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