

Murder by Suggestion

El sueño de los héroes *and* The Master of Ballantrae

DANIEL BALDERSTON

It was a slightly odd experience for me to be at the Stevenson Conference in Gargnano. I finished a dissertation on Borges and Stevenson in 1981 and published it in Spanish in Argentina in 1985, and apart from an occasional reference to Stevenson's work (and its importance to Borges) I haven't really worked on the Scottish writer since. I was quite surprised to learn that some kind people—some of whom are here—had consulted the microfilm version of my dissertation, just as I was surprised to find my interviews with Borges and Bioy Casares (from 1978) in French translation¹ in the volume of L'Herne that Michel Le Bris devoted to Stevenson in 1995 and to find a somewhat misleading reference to my "thèse, hélas inédite" [alas unpublished thesis] in Le Bris's *Pour saluer Stevenson* (2000)—my book had, as I've mentioned, been published by a major Argentine publisher in 1985, but obviously its Spanish language version didn't find its way to many Stevenson scholars. Today I'm going to talk not about Borges but about his friend and close collaborator Adolfo Bioy Casares (1914–1999), whose work in the crucial period of their collaborations (roughly 1940 to 1955) provides important evidence of Borges's ideas about narrative theory and favorite reading. Bioy has long been known to have been enthusiastic about Stevenson—he mentions him in several essays and interviews—but his own fiction has not been examined much for evidence of the relation. So here goes.

In 1943, Borges and Bioy Casares included an excerpt from Stevenson's *The Master of Ballantrae* in their first anthology of crime fiction (*Los*

mejores cuentos policiales). They titled it "La puerta y el pino" ("The Door and the Pine Tree"), a title they invented themselves, because in the original the tale comes in the middle of a chapter titled "Mr Mackellar's Journey with the Master" (the eighth chapter in some editions, the ninth in others). In their headnote they call Stevenson "el preclaro escritor escocés" [the eminent Scottish writer], and comment: "Escribía con felicidad, pensaba con precisión e imaginaba con lucidez" [He wrote joyfully, thought precisely, and imagined lucidly].² The list of Stevenson's fiction in the headnote consists of the stories of the *New Arabian Nights* and *Island Nights' Entertainments*, as well as *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and only four of the novels: *Treasure Island*, the unfinished *Weir of Hermiston*, and two of the books written in collaboration with Lloyd Osbourne, *The Wrecker* and *The Ebb-Tide*. Two secondary works are listed: Chesterton's book *Robert Louis Stevenson*, and Sir Walter Raleigh's *R. L. Stevenson*, one of the first works of criticism to appear after Stevenson's death.

The excerpt from *The Master of Ballantrae* is clearly a detective story, though a highly unusual one, especially when it is considered in relation to the detective story of the time, dominated by the figures of Auguste Dupin and Sherlock Holmes: that is, by the figure of the detective, an individual marked by his mannerisms and opinions, whose way of conducting an inquiry into a case takes precedence over the original crime of violence. Borges, in an article on the detective fiction of Chesterton, says that one of the rules of detective fiction is "primacía del cómo sobre el quién" [predominance of the how over the who] (Borges 1935: 93), but the Holmes stories tend to stress the *who* and *how* of the detective more than the identity of the criminal and the mechanics of the crime. The Stevenson story, by way of contrast, dispenses with the detective altogether, and even with any discussion of the prehistory (or motivation) of the crime or of its later consequences: that is, with the investigation that normally takes precedence in the classic detective story. The story plunges us directly into the working out of a crime, a murder that is a pure act of imagination or, as De Quincey says, "one of the fine arts."

In the Stevenson novel, the narrator (an unimaginative old servant, Mackellar) is forced to cross the Atlantic in company of the Master of Ballantrae, the evil older brother of his master, Henry Durie, whom he insists on seeing as purely good in contrast to the monstrosity of the brother. In the middle of a storm, the Master "must tell me a tale, and show me at the same time how clever he was and how wicked. . . . [T]his tale, told in a high key in the midst of so great a tumult, and by a narrator who was one

moment looking down at me from the skies and the next peering up from under the soles of my feet—this particular tale, I say, took hold upon me in a degree quite singular” (Stevenson 1889: 209). Borges and Bioy (who we must assume are the translators for lack of evidence to the contrary) provide a fairly faithful translation of the tale, omitting only occasional references to Mackellar and the Master, and sharpening the effect of the tale as a whole by isolating it from its context.

The Master’s story consists of four distinct moments or scenes and includes only two characters: a count (a friend of the Master) and a German baron, whom the count hates for some undisclosed reason. The first scene shows the count riding outside of Rome one day and discovering an ancient tomb by a pine tree. He enters a door in the tomb, takes the right fork of a passage, and barely escapes falling down a deep well. Reflecting on the event, he asks himself: “a strong impulsion brought me to this place: what for? what have I gained? why should I be sent to gaze into this well?” (210). In the second scene he makes up a dream about himself and the baron, in order to tempt the baron to enter the tomb; besides describing the place, he says that when the baron entered the door and turned to the right, “there was made to you a communication, I do not think I even gathered what it was, but the fear of it plucked me clean out of my slumber, and I awoke shaking and sobbing” (212). The third scene shows them riding together, passing the tomb, and the count feigning an attack of fright—which he will not explain, but which is sufficient motive for the baron to look around and recognize the place from the description of it in the supposed dream. On their return to Rome, the count “took to his bed and gave out he had a touch of country fever” (213). The fourth scene is the briefest of all: “The next day the baron’s horse was found tied to the pine, but himself was never heard of from that hour.” And the Master, “breaking sharply off,” adds: “And now, was that a murder?” (213).

The tale, brief and understated as it is, is structurally quite complex. The first and last episodes involve only one of the two characters, first with the near death of the count, and later with the death of the baron. In each case the approach to the well provokes a question and a story: the count’s questions about why he has been brought there (which he answers by making up a plot, and by slightly changing his experiences in making of them a “dream,” which satisfies his own and the baron’s wishful thinking in different ways), and the Master’s question whether the death of the baron was a murder (which provokes Mackellar to try to kill the Master by pushing him overboard, but which even in the fragment published in

Borges and Bioy’s anthology demands an answer from the reader, a sequel, or supplement). The second and third episodes mirror each other in a similar fashion. Both consist of excursions on horseback by the two characters together, first in a fiction (the count’s “dream”), and later in fact. In both the count pretends (the dream, the attack), and the pretense allegedly portends ill for him (he wakes in a fright from his “dream,” he takes to bed after the excursion). And in both episodes something mysterious is communicated without being stated: in the “dream,” according to the count, “there was made to you a communication,” but he doesn’t know what it was; during the excursion, the count refuses to say what has upset him, and his silence serves to “make a communication.”

The story’s success depends on its being told in an understated way, that is to say, on the narrator’s keeping silent about a number of essential issues (the motive for the tale, the communication from the well, the exact manner of the baron’s death, the question of whether or not this was a murder). Thus, the reader has to fill in the gaps, to supplement what is given by work of the imagination, to answer the questions posed by the text. The reader is made to perform the same mental operations that the count performed when he concocted the plan; the tale is a question directed at the reader, and challenging his or her morality by stating baldly: if murder can be accomplished by the mere power of suggestion, then what is the reading of imaginative literature but the enactment in the mind of every kind of crime? And the question is a telling one within the frame tale of *The Master of Ballantrae*: the narrator, staid old Mackellar, after listening to the Master’s tale, answers it in his own way by trying to shove him overboard. Such, indeed, is the power of suggestion.

The tale functions within the whole of *The Master of Ballantrae* as an only too literal *mise-en-abyme*: a story within a story that, by mirroring the whole of which it is a part, but only in essence, in outline, serves to reveal the shape of the whole more clearly.³ The hatred that the Master feels for his brother Harry, and which is repaid in kind, is as unmotivated as the count’s hatred for the baron and as lethal. In the tale the Master dramatizes the immense power of suggestion (which allows him, in the novel as a whole, to control his brother so completely that the latter ends an abject parody of himself), as well as the moral ambiguity of that suggestion. He forces Mackellar to confront the question, at the very moment when the narrative is passing from home and Scotland to the American wilderness, of who is responsible when violence is done—the author or the actors. Even after the excursion into the wilderness that has left both brothers

dead, Mackellar is left with the question of who is to blame for the tragedy, if blame is to be assigned; and by abnegating his role when he presents a simplified view of the story to the reader, in which the Master is villain and Henry is martyr, he passes the question along to us.

Speaking of the famous "problem of the closed room" in the history of crime fiction, Borges says: "En alguna página de algunos de sus catorce volúmenes piensa De Quincey que haber descubierto un problema no es menos admirable (y es más fecundo) que haber descubierto una solución" [In some page of one of his fourteen volumes De Quincey affirms that to have discovered a problem is no less admirable (and is more fruitful) than to have discovered a solution] (Borges 1938: 24). He credits Poe (in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue") with having discovered the problem of the closed room; I don't know whether to credit Stevenson with the *discovery* of the problem of murder-by-suggestion in the tale we have been discussing, but can affirm with confidence that it was a problem that was fruitfully and passionately explored in the crime fiction of Borges and Bioy Casares (and in that of their joint creation Honorio Bustos Domecq). To cite a few examples: Borges's "La muerte y la brújula" (1943) explores the manipulation and eventual murder of the detective by the criminal, who bases his plot initially on some chance events (just as the count begins with his chance experience of discovering the tomb), which he later elaborates into a complicated system;⁴ Bustos Domecq's "Las previsiones de Sangiácomo" (1942)⁵ tells of the enormously intricate plot by which a father forces his supposed son (who is actually the product of an adulterous relation on the part of his wife) to commit suicide;⁶ Borges's "Abenjacán el Bojarí, muerto en su laberinto" (1951) recounts the trap set by Zaid, servant of Abenjacán, for his master, using the telling symbols of the labyrinth and the spider web. However, the closest parallel to "La puerta y el pino" is Bioy Casares's novel *El sueño de los héroes* (1954), the whole of which can be viewed as an attempt to answer the questions posed by Stevenson's brief text, or to pose those questions in a different, more insistent, way.

El sueño de los héroes is the story of a young Argentine man, Emilio Gauna, who becomes obsessed with a mysterious event in his past, until the obsession leads to his death. Shortly before carnival in 1927, Gauna wins a lot of money at the races, which he decides to spend in a three-day drinking spree with a number of friends, led by an older father figure, Sebastián Valerga, who is at once sinister and brave. Toward the end of the three days, Gauna's hold on the situation becomes increasingly loose, and when he is

found in the Bosque de Palermo, he has vague, contradictory memories of what has happened to him, including one very intense memory of something that did not happen—a fight at knife-point between him and Valerga. Three years pass, during which Gauna gets married and draws away from the group and from Valerga; then, during carnival in 1930, Gauna again wins a sum of money and decides to try to repeat the earlier experiences, hoping to penetrate the mystery of the third day of the 1927 carnival. Valerga and his friends play along with his obsession, and on the third day of the 1930 carnival, after an approximate repetition of the earlier spree, Gauna faces Valerga in the Palermo woods, each with knife in hand, and is killed by him. The narrator explains that the first time Gauna was protected by the intercession of a sorcerer, Taboada, whose daughter will become Gauna's wife; the second time Taboada is dead, and the events take the course they were fated to take the first time when Taboada interrupted them.

The parallels with the Stevenson story are numerous and striking. Bioy also uses the motif of the asymmetrical repetition of a series of events, which the first time almost leads to death (that of the count, and that of Gauna), and which the second time does lead to death (of the baron, of Gauna). The driving force of the middle portion of the novel, as of the tale, is the principal character's fascination or obsession with his near death, which leads to investigations and plans that include other people. In both fictions one person controls another by the power of suggestion, leading him to his death in a very subtle way, so that it appears that it is always the latter who is seeking his own death. Control is exerted over the victim by the suggestion that something was communicated to him, or was about to be communicated, at the moment of the near death: I have already cited the count's remark, and although Valerga doesn't say anything so explicit, his conduct leaves Gauna "muy resuelto a ver lo que había entrevisto esa noche, a recuperar lo que había perdido" [very decided to see what he had glimpsed that night, to recover what he had lost] (41). And in both stories, this hidden communication spurs the victim on, working on his curiosity (that is to say, on an incomplete faculty of the imagination, since it cannot recapture the whole communication except by leading to the death of the "curioso impertinente"), until the moment of his death, on the outskirts of a great city.⁷

Furthermore, in both the motif of the dream is of utmost importance. The count invents a dream to tantalize the baron, by giving him a vicarious sense of *déjà vu* when they "chance" to pass the tomb in the course of

their excursion. Gauna, toward the end of the second carnival, dreams “the dream of the heroes” that gives the book its title: in his dream the heroes play a card game to decide who will have the right to walk down a red carpet and take his place on a throne as the greatest of the heroes (212). At the end of the book, Gauna recalls the red carpet and understands that it is spread for him (239): as a brave man, but also as a dead one, since the red is that of his own blood. Both dreams serve to inspire the victims to hurry on to their encounter with death, which will reveal the significance of the dreams and of the heroes (though it must be added that we are privy not at all to the baron’s point of view at the decisive moment, so we cannot say with confidence whether he meets death with Gauna’s resolution and conviction of his own courage—and one suspects that he has no time to reflect on these questions before sliding into the slimy hole).

Furthermore, *El sueño de los héroes* makes an enigmatic question of the death of the hero, much as the Master’s tale ends with the question: “And now, was that a murder?” Is the death of Gauna the death of a hero or that of a suicide? Or is it murder? Bioy and his narrator leave these questions open at the end. In his review of the book, Borges touches on the enigmatic nature of the ending:

Al final se revela que este mentor es un hombre siniestro; la revelación nos choca y hasta nos duele, porque nos hemos identificado con Gauna, pero confirma las fugaces sospechas que inquietaron nuestra lectura. Gauna y Valerga se traban en un duelo a cuchillo y el maestro mata al discípulo. Ocurre entonces la segunda revelación, harto más asombrosa que la primera; descubrimos que Valerga es abominable, pero que también es valiente. El efecto alcanzado es abrumador. Bioy, instintivamente, ha salvado el mito. ¿Qué pasaría si en la última página del Quijote, don Quijote muriera bajo el acero de un verdadero paladín, en el mágico reino de Bretaña o en las remotas playas de Ariosto? (Borges 1955: 89)

[At the end it is revealed that this mentor is a sinister man; the revelation shocks and even pains us, because we have identified with Gauna, but it confirms the passing suspicions that disturbed our reading. Gauna and Valerga have a knife fight and the master kills the disciple. Then the second revelation occurs, which is much more surprising than the first one: we discover that Valerga is odious but is also brave. The effect that is achieved is striking. Bioy, instinctively, has saved the myth. What would happen if on

the last page of Don Quixote the hero were to die beneath the sword of a true paladin in the magic kingdom of Briton or on the remote beaches of Ariosto?]

The reference to Don Quixote and heroic legend is far from casual. Gauna, like Don Quixote, has sought the death of a hero, and through his obsession has been granted some measure of fulfillment. But Bioy is kinder to his hero than is Cervantes:⁸ he doesn’t demand that his hero wake up and die sane according to the norms of the everyday world, granting him instead access to the heroic world of myth.

If we consider the Master’s little tale as part (a *mise-en-abyme*) of the whole of *The Master of Ballantrae*, we notice some further parallels with *El sueño de los héroes*. Both novels are concerned with a relation between two people marked by animosity and attraction: the antagonists need each other to be themselves, to fulfill their destinies. This rivalry leads first to the near murder of one by the other (Henry’s duel with the Master, whom he leaves for dead, and Valerga and Gauna’s shadowy duel in the first carnival, which allegedly only happens in Gauna’s imagination), and then to death (of both brothers in the Stevenson novel, of Gauna in *El sueño*). The stronger of the two rivals—and the older in both cases—is evil (“sinistro,” as Borges says in his review), and yet strangely brave and attractive, a heroic figure after all. And the victim in both cases is the focus of the narrators’ sympathy, yet that sympathy is highly ambivalent—Mackellar insists on taking Henry’s part throughout, but portrays his weaknesses only too clearly, while the enigmatic narrator of *El sueño de los héroes* seems to take Gauna’s part and yet makes fun of him throughout the novel (as do Gauna’s “friends” in the group).

An important difference between *El sueño de los héroes* and both the Stevenson pieces we have been considering—the whole of *The Master of Ballantrae*, and the interpolated story of the count and the baron—is that Valerga’s evil influence on Gauna is offset in Bioy’s novel by the protection afforded him by the sorcerer Taboada, while both the baron and Henry are helpless before their adversaries, although Henry has the benefit of Mackellar’s common sense and good advice. The existence of Taboada as well as Valerga—a good as well as a bad influence—gives Gauna freedom to resist the call of death, a freedom not granted the baron or Henry Durie. His destiny is equivocal (more so, perhaps, than he is ready to admit), as the sorcerer points out to him: “En ese viaje no todo es bueno ni todo es

malo. Por usted y por los demás, no vuelva a emprenderlo. Es una hermosa memoria y la memoria es la vida. No la destruya" [On that journey not everything is good and not everything is evil. For your own sake and that of others don't try to take it. It is a beautiful memory and memory is life. Don't destroy it] (47–48). So when he chooses to repeat the earlier adventure, it is a choice, an act of will on his part, a decision to obliterate a memory *qua* memory by realizing or enacting it.

The juxtaposition of "La puerta y el pino" and *El sueño de los héroes* is useful because it helps us interpret a number of factors that would otherwise be difficult to discuss. In the Stevenson tale we are given a skeletal form of the intricate plot of the Bioy novel: a chance event that almost leads to death, the elaboration of that event by means of imagination and memory, and a repetition of it leading to death. By contrasting the dynamics at work in the earlier tale, which is acted out by only two characters, with that of the group of characters in *El sueño*, we can see more clearly the specific kinds of complexity introduced by the figures of Taboada, Clara, and Larsen, and the ambivalent nature of Gauna. More importantly, the intertext of "La puerta y el pino" serves to explain the presence of elements of the detective story in *El sueño de los héroes*, as well as the deviations from the norms of the genre: Gauna's investigations lead to his own death (as in "La muerte y la brújula"); the initial act of violence turns out to be a mere rehearsal of the final one; and the process of revelation or explanation that usually pertains to the detective is—with the death of Gauna—fulfilled by the narrator instead, though the latter's explanations may not be completely convincing.

Moreover, the noting of the similarities between Bioy's novel and "La puerta y el pino" points up the need to study Bioy's (as well as Borges's) interest in Stevenson, an interest that should not surprise us, in view of the close association of Borges and Bioy and of Borges's fondness for Stevenson's fiction, but which has not been explored up to now.⁹ It also serves to explain the inclusion of the Stevenson story in an anthology with the provocative title *Los mejores cuentos policiales*, since Stevenson's treatment here of some elements of the detective story—stressing the plotting or imagination of a crime more than the investigation of it,¹⁰ omitting the superfluous character of the detective, and achieving a high degree of ambiguity—anticipates the experiments with the genre some half-century after Stevenson's death in Samoa by the Argentine writers Borges, Bioy Casares, Bianco, and H. Bustos Domecq.

NOTES

1. The interviews were also published in the original English in Balderston 1999.
2. This glowing comment is very different in tone from the other headnotes in the volume, which tend to be mere lists of biographical and bibliographical data.
3. The classic example of this device, discussed in Borges 1949, is the play within the play in *Hamlet*.
4. The story further resembles "La puerta y el pino" in its open ending: Lönnrot's posing of a geometrical problem at the end invites the reader to go on with the story in much the same way as the Master's posing of the final question.
5. This story, co-authored by Borges and Bioy under the pseudonym of Honorio Bustos Domecq, appeared in *Seis problemas para don Isidro Parodi* (1942), and is included in Borges et al. 1979.
6. "Sangiácomo" is similar to "La puerta y el pino" (unlike the other stories mentioned here) in that no murder is committed directly: the baron's death, like Sangiácomo's, could be interpreted as suicide.
7. The Italian name of the park where Gauna meets his death, Palermo, perhaps is meant to recall the Italy of Stevenson's story, though of course it is also a real park in Buenos Aires, and the neighborhood is central to Borges's early poetry.
8. Cf. the comments in Borges 1956 on Cervantes's final cruelty to his hero, a note that is almost contemporary to his review of Bioy's novel.
9. The only critic I know of who touches on Stevenson's anticipations of some of Bioy's fiction is Julio Matas (1978: 123).
10. Cf. Borges's review of Bianco's *Las ratas*: "su tema es la prehistoria de un crimen, las delicadas circunstancias graduales que paran en la muerte de un hombre" (Borges 1944: 76). Dorothy L. Sayers included the same extract, titled "Was It Murder?" in *Tales of Detection: A New Anthology* (1936), which Borges reviewed in *El Hogar* (19 Feb. 1937).

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