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Robert Louis Stevenson Among Criminals

Javier Marías

PERHAPS BECAUSE he died so young or because he was ill all his life, perhaps because of those exotic journeys which, at the time, seemed nothing short of heroic, perhaps because one began reading him as a child, whatever the reason, there is about the figure of Robert Louis Stevenson a touch of chivalry and angelic purity, which, if taken too far, can verge on the cloying.

Stevenson was undoubtedly chivalrous, but not excessively so, or rather, he was simply chivalrous enough, for every true gentleman has behaved like a scoundrel at least once in his life. Stevenson's once may have occurred near Monterey in California, when he accidentally set fire to a forest. A fire had broken out elsewhere and was spreading so rapidly that Stevenson, out of scientific curiosity, wondered if the reason for this rapid spread might be the moss that adorns and covers the Californian forests. In order to test this out, he had the brilliant idea of applying a match to a small piece of moss, but without first taking the precaution of removing the experimental piece from the tree. The tree went up like a torch, and Stevenson doubtless felt this provided a satisfactory conclusion to his experiment. His unchivalrous behavior came afterwards, for not far off, he heard the shouts of the men fighting the original fire and realized that there was only one thing he could do, namely, flee before he was discovered. Apparently, he ran as he had never run in his entire life and as only the very wise and the very cowardly run.

He had gone to California in order to go to the aid of the American woman who would later become his wife, Fanny van de Grift Osbourne, whom he had met earlier in Europe; she was ten years older than him, married to a Mr. Osbourne (who ignored her and showed her no consideration), and was the mother of two children. She had urged him to visit her, although we do not know precisely in what terms, and Stevenson, without a word to his parents (for he was a spoiled only child), set out from Edinburgh and then, on reaching New York, crossed the whole of America, traveling in the same wretched trains as immigrants. The adventure provoked a general worsening of his always fragile health; indeed, ever since he was a child, he had endured the coughs and hemorrhages of a poorly diagnosed case of tuberculosis which kept him awake at night and more than once brought him close to death. His initial relations with Fanny van de Grift are somewhat obscure, since after that mammoth journey, Stevenson did not stay with her once he had helped her in whatever way it was that she needed help, but instead set off alone to a goat ranch,

and it was not until much later, almost coolly one might say, that they married. From then on, she became not only a highly conspicuous, indeed ubiquitous, wife, but also his nurse and nursemaid. Stevenson said on one occasion that had he known he would have to live like an invalid, he would never have married. He also said: "Once you are married, there is nothing left for you, not even suicide, but to be good." And on another occasion, he added: "It was not my bliss that I was interested in when I was married, it was a sort of marriage *in extremis*; and if I am where I am, it is thanks to the care of that lady who married me when I was a mere complication of a cough and bones, much fitter to be an emblem of mortality than a bridegroom." His wife, on the other hand, did not seem much bothered by that "complication"; in fact, it helped her to feel useful, proud and thus to derive some benefit from the situation. The truth is that, with the exception of Henry James, who always treated her with great respect, Stevenson's other friends all heartily detested her, because Fanny, on the excuse that everything was bad for Louis's health, devoted herself to organizing every aspect of his life and to keeping him away from those friends whose companions—wine, tobacco, songs, and talk—she considered dangerous.

Although Stevenson was very loyal to her and stoutly defended her when she embarked on her own literary exercises and was accused of plagiarism by one of his friends, it cannot have been easy for him to accept these impositions, certainly to judge by a letter to Henry James which he wrote at the end of his life, when he was already living in the South Seas, and in which he complained about being denied wine and tobacco (faced by a life without them, he said, all one could do was "to howl, and kick, and flee"). And despite his loyalty, he did once allow himself to comment on a photograph of his wife, admitting that Fanny had left the "bonny" category and entered that of "pale, penetratin', and interestin'." To be honest, looking at that photograph and others a century on, one cannot help but notice that Fanny van de Grift seemed always to be clothed in some kind of sack-like garment and had a face whose natural expression tended to the unpleasant, authoritarian, hostile, and even sour.

But perhaps harder still to give up than the tobacco and the wine were his friends, if we bear in mind that before his marriage he had led a frankly bohemian, even reprobate life. Quite apart from his various travels, most of which were undertaken vagabond-style, and apart, too, from his appearance and attire, so scruffy that, in America, passers-by fled from him, assuming he

was a beggar, Stevenson also had many friendships which his strict, wealthy parents would have thought equally ill-advised. If one thinks of Long John Silver and Mr. Hyde, of the Master of Ballantrae and the body snatcher, it comes as no surprise that their creator should be possessed of an ambiguous morality, if not as regards his own actions, at least as an observer and listener. He was always fascinated by Evil and did not shy away from certain people simply because of what they had done.

As a child, as well as harboring strong religious feelings, feelings that drove him to hold forth, alone in his bed at night, on the Fall of Man and the Fury of Satan, he had thrown himself with great enthusiasm into committing ingenuously "sinful" acts, an enthusiasm which, he confessed, he never again felt about anything in his adult life. When he was nearing adulthood, he took to frequenting prostitutes, of whom he was very fond and whom he vigorously defended, and to participating in blasphemy contests from which he would emerge victorious, and he also engaged in a practice that he christened *Jink*, which consisted in "doing the most absurd acts for the sake of their own absurdity and the consequent laughter." But all of this was nothing compared with the misdeeds of some of his friends: for a time he kept company with a satirist who had the most vitriolic tongue ever heard in his native Edinburgh and who helped Stevenson to see the negative side of every person, every idea, every thing; this inexhaustible satirist, it seems, even condescended to God, whom he despised because of the abysmal way in which one or two of the commandments had been formulated; he could dismiss St. Paul with an epigram and bury Shakespeare with an antithesis. Far more serious, however, were the crimes of his friend, Chantrelle, who was only happy when he was drunk. He was a Frenchman who had fled France because of a murder he had committed, then England for the same reason, and during his time in Edinburgh, at least four or five people had fallen victim to "his little supper parties and his favourite dish of toasted cheese and opium." The murderer Chantrelle was also a man with literary leanings, able to rattle off a translation of Molière extempore. According to Stevenson, he could have made a great success of that profession or of any other, honest or dishonest. It seems, however, that he always abandoned such plans and returned to "the simpler plan" of killing people. Eventually he was tried and sentenced, and apparently only then did Stevenson learn of his deeds. Presumably one has to believe him and to accept that, had he known all the facts, he would not have spent so much time with Chantrelle, but, whatever the truth, the experience appears to have left Stevenson with a certain tolerance for even the most heinous of crimes; how else can one explain his remark in a letter about Chief Ko-o-amua, with whom he got on very well during his Polynesian exile: "...a great cannibal in his day, who ate his enemies even as he walked home from killing 'em, and he is a perfect gentleman and exceedingly amiable and simple-minded; no fool, though."



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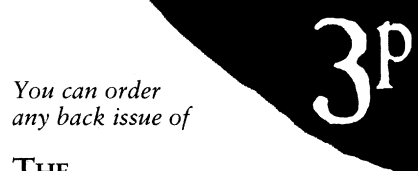
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The last years of his life, spent in the South Seas, provoked the irritation of Henry James, one of his best—that is, most sensible and least criminal—friends, who wrote numerous letters begging him both to come back to Europe to keep him company and to stop playing the fool. After Stevenson had reneged on his promise to return in 1890, James accused him of behavior whose only parallel in history could be found amongst “the most famous coquettes and courtesans. You are indeed the male Cleopatra or the buccaneering Pompadour of the Deep, the wandering Wanton of the Pacific.” The fact is that, apart from feeling in better health because of the climate, putting up with his wife, his mother, his stepchildren, and the rest of the entourage with which he always traveled, that and being given idiotic names by the natives, names like Ona, Teriitera and Tusitala, there is little more to be said about his stay in the islands, the most anodyne part of his existence. He missed Edinburgh greatly towards the end of his life, when he knew he would never return.

Stevenson is such an elusive figure, as if his personality had never become fully defined or was as contradictory as that of those characters of his I mentioned earlier. He was very generous and, especially after the success of *Treasure Island*, he himself often went without in order to send money to his needier friends, who sometimes turned out to be not quite so needy after all, but failed to tell him so. One of his most famous proverbs was: “Greatheart was deceived. ‘Very well,’ said Greatheart.” He had a highly developed sense of dignity, but he could also be boastful and impertinent. On one occasion, he wrote to Henry James on the subject of Kipling’s emerging talent: “Kipling is by far the most promising young man who has appeared since —ahem—I appeared.” And in another letter to James, written at the beginning of their friendship, he demanded that in

the next edition of *Roderick Hudson*, James, who was seven years his senior, should remove from two particular pages the adjectives “immense” and “tremendous.” The two men admired each other enormously, and James considered Stevenson to be one of the few people with whom he could discuss literary theory. Nowadays, almost no one takes the trouble to read Stevenson’s essays, which are among the liveliest and most perceptive of the past century. When he was still living in Bourne-mouth, he had an armchair in which no one else ever sat because it was “Henry James’s chair,” and James missed him terribly when Stevenson left for good. In 1888, James wrote to him: “You have become a beautiful myth—a kind of unnatural uncomfortable unburied *mort*.”

Robert Louis Stevenson became a natural, comfortable, buried *mort* on December 3, 1894, on his island of Samoa. As evening fell, he stopped work and had a game of cards with his wife. Then he went down to the cellar to fetch a bottle of burgundy for supper. He went out onto the porch to rejoin Fanny and there, suddenly, he put both hands to his head and cried: “What’s that?” Then he asked quickly: “Do I look strange?” Even as he did so, he fell on his knees beside Fanny, the victim of a brain hemorrhage. He was carried unconscious to his bed and never regained consciousness. He was forty-four years old.

When writing about Stevenson, one should end with “Requiem,” a poem he had composed many years before and which is inscribed on his tomb high up on Mount Vaea, in Samoa, four thousand meters above sea level:

Under the wide and starry sky,
Dig the grave and let me lie;
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.
This be the verse you grave for me:
“Here he lies, where he longed to be;
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.” □

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)

Eclogue, with Turtles

The train passes between Grubb and the funeral.
The spaces between its cars open up and close quickly,
A noisy succession very much like his days
Have become, faces appearing and then disappearing

Simply because he looks at them. The sun stops
Just above a copse of birch trees, curious to see,
No doubt, what Grubb is going to do. The train is long,
Stretching like mercury back into town and over the river

That cuts it in two. Grubb is no longer welcome there
For reasons that have something to do with a piano
And the word “albeit,” a misunderstanding, he’s sure,
With origins in their schools. He imagines a teacher

With a book on her lap and chalk dust on her fingers,
A woman full of false information. A turtle, she says,
Supports the world. No one pays attention to her.
Not a single student bothers to ask the woman what

Holds up the tireless reptile. Grubb knows. It is the train,
Or something very like a train, moving and standing still
All at the same time. He wonders who is being lowered
Over there, who can summon these strangers in black

From their jobs at the dairy and their homes with birds
In the cages by the windows simply by ceasing to be.
It is a talent unlike any other, and Grubb despairs of ever
Knowing how it’s done. He wants to go over there and talk

And take notes, learn the secrets of the talented man,
But the train is in the way, and besides, these people
Have undoubtedly heard of his performance at the piano,
The disputations concerning the proper use of words

And the bloodshed that ensued. The sun grows weary
Of the festivities on the plain and directs its undivided
Attention to Grubb. The sweat walks down his forehead
Like bugs. Is there no end to this living, to this meandering

From one place to another like trains? Grubb finds the river,
Washes his face and kicks off his shoes in the shade.
He studies the turtles that bask on the half-submerged logs.
He wonders if they are aware of their obligations.

—Charles Freeland



Green Sea Turtle, Hawaii