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Tom Hubbard

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Édimbourg-La-Morte The Fantastic in Charles Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson

That Charles Dickens – most English of writers – should feature in *Études écossaises* will seem bizarre to those unacquainted with (or unsympathetic to) comparative literary studies. However, Dickens's first major journalistic assignment, in 1834, centred on Edinburgh where he covered Scotland's reception of Earl Grey, the prime minister who had nurtured the 1832 Reform Bill through Parliament. Seven years later, Dickens himself was honoured in the Scottish capital. These facts in themselves may mean little in the present context, but between the two visits Dickens had delivered himself of a curious short story with an Edinburgh setting, «The Story of the Bagman's Uncle», one of the tales interspersed throughout the picaresque narrative of *Pickwick Papers* (1837).

Post-Walter Scott, who died in 1832, Edinburgh attracted the attention of two of the most celebrated Victorian writers, Dickens and Stevenson, in the early and late years of the century. Taken together, their contributions to the genre of the fantastic (not least in their tales set in this particular urban locus) are indicative of changes in the art of fiction during the period. It is important, though, also to draw attention to continuities.

An initial comparison of their Edinburgh fictions might surprise the reader who, naturally, would expect the native Stevenson to offer the more topographically detailed evocation of the city. In fact it is Dickens's bagman's uncle, who, replete with the hospitality of a prominent Edinburgher, takes his boozy but recognisable way on a dark night from the Canon-gate across North Bridge, then down Leith Walk. Along this route, character (and narrator) share in touristic raptures occasioned by the view of Calton Hill and Arthur's Seat. Down Leith Walk, he encounters a stretch of waste ground occupied by a huddle of superannuated mail-coaches. With his custom-

TOM HUBBARD
University of Edinburgh.

TZVETAN TODOROV, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (Paris, 1970).

ary naïve curiosity, he makes his way over the palings to get a closer look, and may – or may not – become meditative over the fate of these vehicles which once carried good and bad news to all manner of people over the years. We approach the point of *hesitation* so crucial to Tzvetan Todorov's analysis of the fantastic: is what follows a supernatural occurrence, or has the bagman's uncle fallen into that state of alcoholic hallucination traditional to the true literary native, from Burns's Tam O'Shanter to MacDiarmid's drunk man and his metamorphosing thistle? Dismissing his uncle's account of his supposedly poignant thoughts at this juncture, the bagman is «decidedly of the opinion, gentlemen, that my uncle fell into the kind of doze, without having thought about anything at all. Be this, a sit may, a church bell struck two. My uncle woke, rubbed his eyes, and jumped up in astonishment»¹. «Be this, as it may» and «decidedly» somewhat undercut each other. Is this an awakening, or a deeper level of dozing?

What follows is entertaining, middlebrow melodrama, not entirely out of place in the (admittedly less fantastic) mainstream narrative that is *Pickwick Papers*. The mail-coaches come alive again; the bagman's uncle rescues one of their passengers, a damsel in distress, they flee together, then suddenly our unlikely gallant finds himself back in the original scrapyard.

That same corner of Edinburgh is also represented by Robert Louis Stevenson, early in *Catriona* (1893), *Kidnapped*'s sequel, which deepens the earlier novel's politically sinister undertones. Instead of Dickens's bumptious extrovert who extricates himself from danger with gung-ho swordsmanship, we have as hero one David Balfour, a dour Presbyterian youth who knows too much that would be discomfiting to the paranoid, spy-ridden Hanoverian state. Although this particular locus could be pin-pointed – it's within a near radius, today, of Eduardo Paolozzi's bizarre sculpture son Picardy Place – David isn't stopping to admire the view. Who could blame him:

My way lay over Mouter's Hill, and through an end of a clachan on the braeside among fields. [...] Here I got a fresh direction for Pilrig, my destination; and a little beyond, on the wayside, came by a gibbet and two men hanged in chains. They were dipped in tar, as the manner is; the wind span them, the chains clattered, and the birds hung about the uncanny jumping-jacks and cried. The sight coming on me suddenly, like an illustration of my fears, I could scarce be done with examining it and drinking in discomfort. And as I thus turned and turned about the gibbet, what should I strike

1. Charles Dickens, *Pickwick Papers*, ed. Malcolm Andrews (London, 1998), p. 667-668.

on, but a weird old wife, that sat behind a leg of it, and nodded, and talked aloud to herself with becks and courtesies.

«Who are these two, mother?» I asked and pointed to the corpses.

«A blessing on your precious face!» she cried. «Twa joes o'mine: just twa o' my old joes, my hinny dear.»

«What did they suffer for?» I asked.

«Ou, just for the guid cause,» said she. «Aften I spaed to them the way that it would end. Twa' shillin' Scots: no pickle mair; and there are twa bonny callants hingin' for 't! They took it frae a wean belanged to Brouchton.»

«Ay!» said I to myself, and not to the daft limmer, «and did they come to such a figure for so poor a business? This is to lose all indeed.»

«Gie's your loof, hinny,» says she, «and let me spae your weird to ye.»

«No, mother,» said I, «I see far enough the way I am. It's an unco thing to see too far in front.»

«I read it in your bree,» she said. «There's a bonnie lassie that has bricht een, and there's a wee man in a braw coat, and a big man in a pouthered wig, and there's the shadow of the wuddy [gallows], joe, that lies braid across your path. Gie's your loof, hinny, and let Auld Merren spae it ti ye bonny.»

The two chance shots that seemed to point at Alan and the daughter of James More, struck me hard; and I fled from the eldritch creature, casting her a bawbee, which she continued to sit and play with under the moving shadows of the hanged².

This is one of the most unsettling passages ever written by Stevenson, and that is saying much. Narrator (David) and reader are at one in their apprehension of possible danger to come, but the episode works more subtly than that. Vernon Lee considered David's encounter with the spae-wife something of a microcosm, an objective correlative as it were, of the whole novel³. The unity of *Pickwick Papers*, insofar as it has any, would not suffer from the omission of «The Story of the Bagman's Uncle», but Robert Louis Stevenson, almost sixty years later, constructs his fictions much more tightly. Moreover, while Todorov rightly points to the use of language as a factor in the overall effect of the fantastic, he does not consider the role of non-standard dialects (or languages that have been «demoted» to dialects). Equally rightly, Todorov deems the fantastic to be potentially subversive in its predilection for taboo themes. The deployment of Scots in this passage and elsewhere in *Catriona* gives voice to the ruled, who are liable to be not only repressed, but also silenced, by their jittery rulers⁴.

2. Robert Louis Stevenson, *Catriona* (London, Tusitala ed., 1924), p. 23-24.

3. Vernon Lee, *Contemporary Review* (September 1895), reprinted in part in Paul Maixner, ed., *Robert Louis Stevenson: the Critical Heritage* (London, 1981), p. 444-448.

4. I acknowledge a debt to Emma Letley's discussion of the novel in her *From Galt to Douglas Brown: Nineteenth Century Fiction and Scots Language* (Edinburgh, 1988), p. 170-187.

Turn more closely to the above passage, and there is a Scots word with a particular resonance. In the hands of Scottish writers the fantastic becomes the *eldritch*, defined in *The Concise Scots Dictionary* as «weird, ghostly, strange, unearthly» – though that is a feeble summary: the reader would be better advised to submit to its context in the passage, as well as to the sheer sound of the word, in order for its sense to communicate. «Spae your weird» means «tell your fortune», and the spae-wife is something of an archetype in Scottish literature. She's the subject of one of Stevenson's best poems in Scots, and is an ominous presence in that most eldritch of novels from the next generation, John MacDougall Hay's *Gillespie* (1914). In Glasgow, south of the Clyde, there is a district called Crossmyloof («cross my palm») which suggests that it was not unacquainted with those weird old *wifes* (I use the Scots form of the plural). Here again, we may add to Todorov's characteristics of the fantastic by invoking the Scottish obsession with the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. Much of the dynamic (and sheer suspense) of Stevenson's fiction derives from the contradictory forces of existential freewill, chance (*The Master of Ballantrae*) and *la forza scozzese del destino*. That is the pivot on which the short story «Markheim» so tantalisingly turns – will the murderer submit to the seemingly inevitable downward course predicted by his mysterious visitor, or will he choose to confess to the police and achieve a certain redemption at his hanging? (Shades of Dickens here, perhaps – the Ghosts or seeming Ghosts of Christmas who warn Scrooge that certain tableaux will indeed materialise, if he continues in his old ways; Sydney Carton doing his far, far better thing as he ascends to the guillotine. Stevenson, however, displays a more Scottish – and modernist – concern for philosophical subtleties).

«The Tale of Tod Lapraik» is *Catriona's* interpolated story, more organically linked with its larger fiction than anything comparable in *Pickwick Papers*. It is told to David by his kindly gaoler, Black Andie Dale, and is in Scots – not inappropriate for a man who has more affection for the youth in his keeping than for the politico-legal establishment which employs him, and which he obeys for the sake of pragmatism rather more than from his staunch Whig-Presbyterian convictions. Emma Letley has analysed in some detail the tale's relationship with the novel proper, but there remains a curious leitmotif common to the tale and to the episode with the spae-wife. In the story,

Tam's life is threatened by a solan-geese – it pecks at the rope from which he is suspended on a cliff of the Bass Rock, while engaged in trapping these same birds: «there was something-unco in the creature's ee». That «something unco» is quintessential Scots, and quintessential fantastic – is there a presence here of that metamorphosing warlock Tod Lapraik? It's not, of course, spelt out. But we've been here before, if we recall – albeit (and especially) at a subconscious level – those birds, solans or seagulls, which «hung» and «cried» around the tarred corpses of the spae-wife's former fancy-men. The birds are both prey and predator, symbol of the menace-or-be-menaced atmosphere pervading the novel.

The word «atmosphere» is apt for the Stevenson œuvre. Stevenson will not describe a scene in exhaustive detail. It must at least be authentic, and as a son of the Forth estuary he had grown up with the screech of the sea-birds in his ears, but for him the fictive picture must «stand or fall by its significant simplicity»⁵. His Edinburgh (including its hinterland such as the Bass Rock) is not evoked in the way that Dickens evokes his London. The opening several pages of *Bleak House*, with their unrelentingly brooding, epic, poem of the London fog: there we have, famously, Dickens's unique power, which Stevenson neither would – nor could – achieve. The fog provides an atmosphere which, in Dickens, curiously reveals more than it conceals, for here is the earlier writer at his most imaginatively visual: «Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all around them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds». Stevenson's visualisations, through determinedly half-shut eyes, are of a different order. We can read *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* equally as an explicitly London or implicitly Edinburgh story. Soho and Regent's Park are indicated, not elaborated; certainly, the gaslit gloom is conveyed by images of some particularity, but we can envisage twisting closes and wynds off the Grassmarket and the Cowgate as much as – if not more than – points east of Piccadilly Circus. Even «The Body-Snatcher», that microcosm of *Jekyll and Hyde* with a declared Edinburgh Old Town ambience, is more specific on the rural kirkyard than on the city where, for the most part, the anatomists and resurrectionists ply their trades. There is mention of the Castle Rock but not, say, the West Port which was the operational centre (so to speak) of the lugubrious Burke and Hare – the latter

5. Robert Louis Stevenson, «A Humble Remonstrance», *Memories and Portraits* (London, Tusitala ed., 1924), p. 142.

happening to be the ancestor of a sometime contributor to *Études écossaises* (the art historian Bill Hare). Dickens's Thames-scouring body-snatchers, in *Our Mutual Friend*, can be more easily tracked down: it's possible to locate precisely the pub («of dropsical appearance») to which they resort. Its counterpart in «The Body Snatcher» is not quite so foregrounded and celebrated.

In an earlier issue of the present journal, I argued that his early French translator and commentator, Marcel Schwob, presents Stevenson as – in effect – a proto-*Symboliste*. Schwob dwells on Stevenson's power of suggestiveness, that refusal to spell out, that blurs the distinction between the real and the unreal⁶. «*Suggérer, c'est le rêve*», was that famous invocation of Stéphane Mallarmé; the poet's Belgian confrère, Georges Rodenbach, created a network of part-spoken, but even more unspoken, analogies in his Symbolist novel *Bruges-La-Morte* (1892). Again, though specific loci are cited, and the book could take you so far on a walking-tour of Bruges, it's where you'd get lost that matters. The labyrinth of mediaeval lanes and canals, stagnant as the veins of a corpse; the confusion of identity through doubles and mirror images, including reflections in these same canals; the somewhat camp bizarrerie of the prose style – in all that, we have affinities (at the very least) with Robert Louis Stevenson, who shares with Rodenbach a literary pedigree going back to Edgar Poe: «There are trap-doors and spring-guns in [Poe's fiction], there are gins and pitfalls; and the precipitate reader may stumble unawares upon some nightmare not easily to be forgotten»⁷.

The labyrinth: a key word in several Stevenson texts, including *Jekyll and Hyde*, and the perfect image for all that Todorov has to say about the fantastic. Character and reader don't know what's round the next turning, what's behind the Sire de Malétroit's door. A promising road is in fact a cul-de-sac; the obscure vennel leads, dramatically, to an amphitheatre of horrors. Such is the nature of Gothic, in the architectural, Ruskinian sense, especially that quality of «changefulness» appropriate to fictions of metamorphosis and multiple personality. «Changefulness» sums up how Gothic can «shrink into a turret, expand into a hall, coil into a staircase, or spring into aspire»⁸. Such dark energies appealed to neurotic Victorians in England and Scotland as well as to their continental counterparts: remember that the Symbolists are also heirs to the

6. Tom Hubbard, «Ordeal by Neoballadry: Narrative Poetry by Robert Louis Stevenson and John Davidson», *Études écossaises*, n° 4 (Grenoble, 1997), p. 65-70.

7. Robert Louis Stevenson, «The Works of Edgar Allan Poe», *Essays Literary and Critical* (London, Tusitala ed., n.d.), p. 184.

8. John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, ed. and introduced by Jan Morris (London, 1981), p. 123.

mediaevalising Pre-Raphaelites. Dickens is also part of this, for all his occasionally hearty philistinism, whose flipside is his Englishly empirical artistry. Not the least of the fantastic «uncertainties» of both writers are, of course, their unfinished novels, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* and *Weir of Hermiston*. Stevenson's last working days, in Samoa, witnessed a return, in imagination, to the execution sites of old Edinburgh. Dickens, for his part, recalled that maze of staircases, corridors and deserted spaces that was Satis House : it was where Pip, in *Great Expectations*, would encounter Miss Havisham – most terrifyingly as an apparition, hanging by the neck, from a wooden beam, her face moving as if she were trying to call him. In June 1870, Dickens was seen in front of the house, gazing ahead. He died two days later.