

1993

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### Recommended Citation

Clunas, Alexander B. (1993) "'A Double Word': Writing and Justice in The Master of Ballantrae," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 28: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol28/iss1/6>

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Alexander B. Clunas

"A Double Word": Writing and  
Justice in *The Master of Ballantrae*

*The Master of Ballantrae* (1889) is Robert Louis Stevenson's most remarkable attempt to ally the genre of adventure fiction with a deft unraveling and retwining of the "most secret and heartfelt inclinations"<sup>1</sup> of the self. As a precise ordering, *seriatim*, of heterogeneous documents, voices, and fictional kinds, *Master* is a notably unstable text. It confounds generic unity,<sup>2</sup> placing some of the definitive elements of Stevenson's earlier, "naive" adventure stories within the main, by and large non-adventurous, narrative of Ephraim Mackellar. It requires readers to read across conventional boundaries between exotic romantic adventure and domestic drama, between desire and "reality," between *I* and *he*. I hope to show this in the following discussion.

These instabilities of genre and voice have made the novel somewhat of a puzzle for critics. André Gide's comment is often quoted and, as it summarizes a good deal of the uncomfortable critical reaction, it may be cited again:

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<sup>1</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York, 1966), p. 145.

<sup>2</sup>For the most direct and comprehensive discussion of the novel's generic hybridity, see Carol Mills, "The Master of Ballantrae: An Experiment with Genre," in *Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Andrew Noble (London and Totowa, NJ, 1983).

I have great trouble finishing *The Master of Ballantrae*. Odd book in which everything is excellent, but heterogeneous to such a degree that it seems the sample card of everything in which Stevenson excels.<sup>3</sup>

The heterogeneity referred by Gide is only one of the elements which has made the novel a problem. The other—on which there seems to be some critical consensus that it constitutes a blemish—is the supernatural ending, in which James Durie comes back to life long enough to bring about the simultaneous death of his brother.<sup>4</sup>

Carol Mills, in particular, stresses the supernaturalism of the ending as a hopeless attempt to bring closure to a hybrid novel.<sup>5</sup> Such readings emphasize that scene's difference from the rest of the text, thus precluding a comprehensive account of the novel which might help us to understand the resurrection at the end. So, in approaching the question of the ending, I will offer a general analysis of what is going on in *Master*, to provide a context in which the conclusion might make sense. Indeed, the problematic ending cannot be separated from the problematic of *Master* as a whole and the novel's representation of an epistemological and moral crisis in a multivocal text.

Furthermore, the temporary resuscitation of James is not, strictly speaking, the end of *Master*. Mackellar's inscription of the two brothers' epitaphs is. It is pertinent that the novel ends not with a fantastic event but with an act of writing, an inscription over two lives in an attempt to do justice to them, to represent them summarily. Here is my pathway into this complex fiction: the actual conclusion's concern with doing justice and the issues it raises about writing provide an oblique means of describing the heterogeneity of *Master* and so contextually accounting for the "steep" scene at the end of the novel.<sup>6</sup> My method, then, will be to approach the "supernatural" episode

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<sup>3</sup>*The Journals of André Gide*, trans. and ed. Justin O'Brien (London, 1947), III, 393.

<sup>4</sup>One study which is not discomfited by the "supernaturalism" of the ending is Douglas Gifford, "Stevenson and Scottish Fiction," in *Stevenson and Victorian Scotland*, ed. Jenni Calder (Edinburgh, 1981), pp. 62-87. My essay owes a general debt to Gifford's careful discussion of the novel.

<sup>5</sup>"*The Master of Ballantrae: An Experiment with Genre*," pp. 130-31.

<sup>6</sup>The term "steep," implying implausibility, is Stevenson's own. However, his comment that "the third reappearance [of the Master] is steep . . . very steep" clearly refers either to an earlier version of the story or to an earlier part of the text we have, not to the resurrection scene. See Stevenson's letter to Henry James, March 1888, *Letters*, ed. Sidney Colvin (London, 1900), II, 98-9.

at the end by describing the theme of justice and the role of writing in *Master*.

From the start, the reader is conscious of *Master* as a written document. In the Preface, Stevenson reports that he has been summoned by a lawyer friend to look at some interesting old papers purporting to detail the secret history of the Duries of Durrisdeer and Ballantrae. He is aware that the family is "faintly terrible from some deformed traditions" and therefore takes up the manuscript with enthusiasm.<sup>7</sup> When Stevenson has read them, his friend the solicitor suggests that they might form the basis for a novel: "All you have to do is work up the scenery, develop the characters, and improve the style" (p. 8). The novelist replies that "they are just the three things I'd die rather than set my hand to. It shall be published as it stands" (p. 8). To the objection that the narrative is "so bald," he retorts, "I believe there is nothing so noble as baldness . . . and I am sure that there is nothing so interesting" (p. 8).

This documentary masquerade paradoxically heightens our awareness that we are attending to a fiction, albeit a fiction that mimics, at least in part, the scruples of historical writing, of truth-telling.

Ephraim Mackellar, steward to the Duries, has compiled the account as a means of smuggling the truth to posterity. He has written the greater part of the secret history, basing it on oral reports, family correspondence, and financial records, as well as on his own direct experience. He is, furthermore, editor of and commentator on the narrative of the Chevalier de Burke; he records two extracts from the rambling memoir of this Irish soldier of fortune because Burke knew the elder Durie brother during the '45 uprising and then afterwards on his global wanderings, and Mackellar was not privy to these adventures.

Mackellar begins his story by announcing his credentials as a reliable witness:

It so befell that I was intimately mingled with the last years and history of the house; there does not live one man so able as myself to make these matters plain, or so desirous to narrate them faithfully.

And he adds a note of his apologetic, justificatory intentions:

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<sup>7</sup>Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae: A Winter's Tale*, ed. and with an intro. by Emma Letley (New York, 1983), p. 7. All subsequent references to *Master* are to this edition. Page numbers are given in my text.

The truth is I owe a debt to my lord's memory; and I think my old years will flow more smoothly, and my white hair lie quieter on the pillow, when the debt is paid (p. 9).

Throughout, he tries to remain true to these intentions: to defend the memory of Henry and to tell the unvarnished truth. In pursuit of these aims, he reports actions which are not flattering to himself or to Henry. So, there is a dogged Puritan sincerity to his narrative, caught here in a discourse of faith, plainness, truth, and in the metaphor of debt, which implies an equivalence and exchange between world and text. Above all, his conception of doing justice to Henry depends on an epistemological/*moral* faith in empirical realism: he will tell the truth and justify Henry, because that is the virtuous thing to do.

He also claims to be a reliable reader and interpreter. He carefully distinguishes between "common report," balladic legend (the "deformed traditions" his "editor" Stevenson mentioned), and "authentic history" (pp. 9-10). For example, the reminiscences of the Chevalier de Burke he calls "an authentic memoir" of the "secret steps" of the Master's career (p. 9), not because he trusts that loquacious Barry Lyndon, but because he thinks he can use his knowledge of the teller to discount the tale's embellishments and get at the bedrock of truth. Sure in his authority, he substitutes Burke's later written memoir for the verbal report the soldier makes to the Durie family, even though this disrupts the flow of his own narration:

I put in my first extract here, so that it may stand in the place of what the Chevalier told us over our wine in the hall of Durrisdeer; but you are to suppose it was not the brutal fact, but a very varnished version that he offered my lord (p. 87).

This circumspect, "bald" voice has its own hesitations and confesses some of its own fallibilities; but, it insists throughout on its ability to tell the truth and to read the truth, and this power entails a doctrine of the virtuous and stable correspondence of text and reality. Stevenson's novel interrogates this correspondence and, thereby, the empirical veridicality of all story-telling, and it problematizes truth-telling through the difficulties which Mackellar encounters in his effort to achieve justice for, to do justice to, Henry.

Mackellar's careful definition of the scope and empirical validity of his papers opens the first section of the novel. Prior to his arrival at Durrisdeer occurred the split between the two brothers, James and Henry. James, the elder brother and hence the Master of Ballantrae, is a vibrant dandy, attended by whispers of wickedness, and popular with the lower orders. The other brother, Henry, is a moral exemplar, filial, dull, unpopular because of a reputation for meanness. In 1745 the family has adopted a course of duplicitous caution (decided by the toss of a coin) by sending the older brother out with

Prince Charles, while keeping Henry at home, against his will, and announcing his allegiance to the Hanoverian regime. Word reaches Durriseer that James has been killed at Culloden, the first of his several "deaths."

Mackellar enters as a protagonist in his own story at this point. His judgments come more confidently before the reader than hitherto, when he had to rely on the word of others. He notes Henry's estrangement from his wife and father. He remarks, in the one case, that the "fault, to be very blunt, lay all in Mrs. Henry" (p. 30), and, in the other, he reproves Lord Durriseer for his lukewarm appreciation of his surviving son, his obvious love for the "dead" boy, James. Lord Durriseer says of Henry that his are "dangerous virtues: virtues that tempt the encroacher" (p. 117). Henry's wife also respects him, but remains in love with the more dashing James. Both preferences offend Mackellar's common sense and his idea of justice: here is the one brother, dull, but level-headed, a task-master, a close keeper of Accounts, a decent man; and the other—wild, reportedly foul-tempered, black, a bad man to cross. So, it is natural that Mackellar describes himself in several places as a "partisan" of Henry (pp. 22-26). He identifies with and approves Henry's "dangerous" virtues.

Mackellar's identification with Henry grows stronger as a threat to the family's reputation emerges. James has, in fact, survived Culloden and is living in the Jacobite community in Paris. His existence, if known to the Government, could lead to the sequestration of the estate and this danger allows him to demand—with malice and relish, according to the steward—that Henry direct much-needed funds from the estate to his account in return for his continued silence. (Mackellar later learns that James was being paid by the London government to spy on his fellow Jacobites and this becomes further evidence of the Master's diabolical faithlessness.) The beloved black sheep, then, is blackmailing the family and the blackmail works, in part, because Henry is unwilling to expose his brother. When Mackellar suggests that they reveal James's machinations, Henry confesses his weakness:

I can carry no such base thoughts to anyone—to my father least of all; that would be to fall into the bottom of his scorn. The weakness of my ground . . . lies in myself, that I am not one who engages love. I have their gratitude, they all tell me that; I have a rich estate of it! But I am not present in their minds; they are moved neither to think with me nor think for me. There is my loss! (p. 104).

However, Mackellar does think with and for Henry. James's unscrupulous dealing confirms Mackellar's Manichaean division of the brothers and so he allies himself with Henry to protect the reputation and interests of the House from the wild brother, keeping receipts of the blackmail money, authoring the correspondence with Paris, frequently mediating between the various members of the household.

After James's covert return home, Mackellar becomes indispensable to Henry in trying to keep this skeleton locked securely in the family closet. The culmination of the Master's secret visit to Durrisdeer is a duel between the two brothers, in which Henry appears to kill James. It is then Mackellar who is intimidated into holding the light for them to fight by. It is Mackellar who takes charge of the "cover-up" of the duel. Noting the vulnerability of the family, he reveals his own involvement: "True, we still lay at the discretion of the traders; but that was the incurable weakness of *our* guilt" (p. 124; italics mine). The servant is complicit.

Mackellar is enmeshed in a strange triangle, since he is more than a witness—he is a participant. He reads himself into Henry, sharing Henry's fears and desires, particularly Henry's hatred of and guilt over the Master. They are doubled, mutually defining, in their relationship with each other and in their reactions to James. Their unusual bond is intensified following the Master's second "death" because Henry falls ill with a fever which erases his memory of the duel, leaving Mackellar to bear the burden of their guilt, as I noted above. Henry's amnesia is not absolute. Later, in the New York section of the novel, he recollects the suppressed material constituted by the episode of the duel, although his version of what happened that night is very different from Mackellar's narrative. However, the extraordinary thing about this part of the narrative is the transference of memory and guilt to Mackellar. Henry's need for witness forms the other dynamic strand of this doubling. He articulates this need when he insists on paying the blackmail to James: "Well, you shall see, and he shall see, and God shall see" (p. 72). Here is his sense of having been imprisoned by false witness, by a perversion of language, which will eventually be overthrown by others—"you," "he," "God." "Jacob," the Master has called him, as though he had consciously betrayed James, and he feels trapped by this inauthentic name, not least because the fraternal betrayal it evokes has some currency in the gossip of the country. Later, his Edenic aspiration to have the name and the truth providentially authorized breaks out again: "Defend us from the evil man," he prays. "Smite him, O Lord, upon the lying mouth!" (p. 140). He is pleading with God for the coincidence of sign and signified, appearance and reality, self and identity—which is to say, for justice. He turns outward, in his prayer, for confirmation of his identity as a virtuous man and this forms his weakness, because the desired providential God never answers his prayer and his earthly father never quite manages to love him. Of course, he does find a justifying witness in Mackellar; but, the steward's apologia, despite its claims to be a true history, is problematic precisely because of Mackellar's identification with Henry.

The intersubjectivity of Henry and Mackellar is represented in two zeugmatic figures which, combined with other turns which I shall address in

due course, stimulate the reader to keep an ironic distance from Mackellar's version of the "truth," without entirely discounting it. The first figure originates in a dream in which Henry cries out while Mackellar sits by his bed: "'O! Jamie will be drowned—O, save Jamie!' which he came over and over with a great deal of passion" (p. 128). The steward assumes that Henry is recalling some incident from the brothers' childhood; if so it is meaningless, since no such incident is mentioned elsewhere. However, the dream does make sense as a prefiguration of Mackellar's attempt to drown James on their voyage to America, an act stimulated by an hallucinatory image of Henry. Furthermore, both scenes—the dream and the later murder attempt—parallel each other in creating a dialectical movement in which a mind recoils from itself: Henry's dream, with its solicitude for his brother, occurs when he is at the height of his resentment of James; Mackellar tries to kill James just when he seems most the match for, and most reconciled to, the Master. Mackellar's language of naive realism cannot contain or understand such irruptions of dream and fantasy; it can only report them faithfully.

The second prolepsis also involves a dream. As James and Mackellar pursue Henry and his family to America, Mackellar suffers a waking illusion:

I beheld the same black perspective of approaching ruin; and the same pictures rose in my view, only they were now painted on the hillside mist. One, I remember, stood before me with the colours of a true illusion. It showed me my lord seated at a table in a small room; his head, which was at first buried in his hands, he slowly raised, and turned upon me a countenance from which hope had fled. I saw it first in the black window-panes, my last night in Durrisdeer; it haunted and returned upon me half the voyage through (p. 176).

If we look back at Mackellar's "last night in Durrisdeer," we find this:

When I got to my chamber, I sat there under a painful excitation, hearkening to the turmoil of the gale, which struck full upon that gable of the house. What with the pressure on my spirits, the eldritch cries of the wind among the turret-tops, and the perpetual trepidation of the masoned house, sleep fled my eyelids utterly. I sat by my taper, looking on the black panes of my window . . . and upon that empty field I beheld a perspective of consequences that made the hair to rise upon my scalp. The child corrupted, the home broken up, my master dead, my mistress plunged in desolation—all these I saw before me painted brightly on the darkness (p. 174).

On window panes from a lit room and on a dark night, you see a reflexive picture. Mackellar's fantasy recalls him looking at his own reflection and identifying his own despair in the countenance of Henry. The storm also prefigures the storm on the trans-Atlantic voyage, a journey on which the



actors are James and a desperate Mackellar. We do not see an "empty field," but the space in which Mackellar sees Henry and writes himself, the inevitable return to the subject of the reflexive and opaque medium of language itself.

The middle passage of the novel—narrating the journey to America—advances the shift in the dynamics of the triangle I have specified above by placing Mackellar, the grammatical subject of this part of the novel, in a more intimate relation to James. As a consequence of his identification with the "good" brother, Henry's absence alters Mackellar's sense of self. A part of his identity has fled with the Durie family:

I had never before felt my own dependency upon the countenance of others. The sense of isolation burned in my bowels like a fire. It seemed that we who remained at home were the true exiles; and that Durrissdeer . . . and all that made my country native, its air good to me, and its language welcome had gone forth and was . . . over the sea with my old masters (p. 167).

With the loss of the customary influence on his life, the loss of *his* witnesses, Mackellar has been defamiliarized. His manner changes: he sits up late, plays at cards, banter with the Master in quite un-Mackellar-like fashion. As his decorum and the self-restraint he calls virtue ease, as wit and play and a certain vanity sneak up on him, his hostility to James lessens. Thus, the journey out of himself begins before the voyage and the voyage then deepens his ambivalent condition by inaugurating a new, unstable order which will challenge his myth of moral autonomy. Mackellar will be introduced to the disorienting world of adventure and of deeds. This is James's world.

As I pointed out above, James does not come before the reader unmediated. In the beginning of the novel, he exists for Mackellar as a sheaf of unreliable rumors belonging to the past; then, and at greater length, he appears as a character in Burke's memoirs. Only well into the novel does he appear as a character in Mackellar's own narrative. I wish to examine first Burke's narrative and then the episode of the voyage.

Burke fought with James in the Stuart army and escaped Scotland with him after the defeat at Culloden, after which their paths cross from time to time. Mackellar inserts two extracts from Burke's voluminous reminiscences. The first is the Culloden episode; the second provides a glimpse of the Master in India. These are fragments of a whole, since in response to Mackellar's request for information about James's wanderings Burke sends his autobiography, inviting Mackellar to help him find a publisher for it. Unlike Stevenson, the "fictional" editor of the whole text who has let Mackellar's history stand as it was, Mackellar quarries Burke's text for matter narrating James's adventures. Thus, splintered, edited, framed by Mackellar's admonitory prefaces and footnotes, another voice enters—a

voice and a discourse which is discontinuous with Mackellar's "bald" and summary style and yet is framed by it. If the steward's narrative claims to be a domestic history, then the soldier's tale is a romantic adventure and a mock-epic.

Burke's narrative has stagey pirates, an illicit treasure, sword fights, affairs of the heart in walled and perfumed gardens. His comic grandiosity emphasizes the element of fantasy in his text and his repeated allusions to non-realistic genre models reinforce the difficulty of receiving his story as empirical report. The origin of their adventure, he says, was "as romantic as any fable of King Arthur" (p. 38). Later he writes: "A more romantic circumstance can rarely have occurred; and it is one of those points in my memoirs, by which we may see the old tales of Homer and the poets are equally true today—at least of the noble and genteel" (p. 40). In India, Burke finds himself adrift again after Lally's defeat at either Wandiwash or Pondicherry, and he again turns to the exotic literary comparison—this time with the "elegant tales" of Mr. Galland, whose characters "were forever falling in with extraordinary incidents" (p. 147). The episodic nature of Burke's yarns is as important as the romance and "epic" models which Burke claims. Each turn of the action is a matter of chance, each new peril arbitrary, as in the *Arabian Nights*, of which Antoine Galland was the first European translator.

In Burke's narrative, the anti-design of chance is explicit. The Master tosses a coin to inaugurate their adventures and at other junctures he uses the coin to decide his course of action. The coin tossing does two things: it conflates the narrative principle of Burke's tale and an ideology, in a gesture of contempt for Providence and for the teleology of lives and narratives; and it alludes to the origin of the brothers' quarrel, since they decided who was to go out with Prince Charles and who was to stay at home by tossing a coin. The chance-governed adventure, thus, through this allusion reaches back to quiz the ostensibly providential-historical narrative of Mackellar. James does the business with the coin, he says, to show his contempt for reason (p. 68), a contempt which bears on Henry and Mackellar, whose virtues are so bound with their reasonableness. The genre shift from Mackellar's framing discourse to Burke's inset romance/adventure story enables the Master to come into being (to enter Mackellar's discourse) as a genre figure. Insofar as he is a function of genre, the Master challenges the civil, orderly, providential, "real" world which Mackellar attempts to provide for Henry and which is underwritten by an epistemological appeal to the identity of signifier and signified. James, on the other hand, speaks within a narrative which is all adjacency, chance, and force, creating a model of the world which disallows the stable correspondence of the text and the world.

The extracts made by Mackellar from Burke's narrative show us his audacity, his charm, his violence, his amorality—in short, his power. In his wanderings, he proves to be at home wherever he finds himself, comfortably established in a realm of self-sufficient gestures, a realm which exhibits many of the properties of fantasy. Teach, the pirate—an histrionic shape from a dream tale, abristle with cutlasses and pistols, face blackened, chewing on broken glass—is easily disarmed at a word from James. The Master then takes command of the pirate ship, duping the stage buccaneers, betraying Teach, and escaping into Albany with the booty. He takes along Burke and two of the pirates. One of these sailors dies; James kills the other, stabbing him in the back with the sudden, lucid violence of Long John Silver murdering Tom in *Treasure Island*. There is no formal justice here, only force unhindered by plausibility. We learn that after a miraculous escape from the "wilderness" of New York, James achieves immense wealth and power in India, before being forced out by Clive. He next shows up in the salons of Paris, gaining advancement by unscrupulous use of his lovers, and working as a spy.

These adventures, resembling wish-fulfillment dreams as they do, have a special interest because they are selectively adopted by Mackellar as plausible versions of the truth about the secret steps of the Master's life and as stories which he thinks will contribute to his argument against James by showing his wickedness. But, the generic shift problematizes his intention here. Their referential authority is called in doubt by their "artificiality," as well as by Burke's evident jealousy of the Master. They are doubly compromised, then, by their failure to achieve an effect of Mackellaresque reality and by the possibility that their narrator, Burke, is unreliable (and in commenting on Burke's interest in showing events in a light favorable to himself, Mackellar reminds us that he, too, is a "partisan"). Yet, they contribute a significant facet of our crystalline text because they give form to a metaphysical desire for freedom from others which can only come into being in dreams and in fictions. Mackellar cannot abolish or control this narrative of desire because he has authorized it by using it as evidence within his own empirically bound report or true history.

James's epical existence is not rendered entirely absurd by the comic aspects of Burke's literary efforts. He is serious business. Although the Master uses appearances for his own ends, he remains indifferent to the figure he cuts before God or others. He aims to avoid being an object and he is indifferent to the need to be transparent to others and to God which Henry and Mackellar exhibit. His desire for power critically shows the adventure genre itself as a fantasy of a world without the resistance of others to the subject's desire. We certainly observe in his ruthlessness, and in his charming authority, a need to master others and make them his own instruments. He does

this with Teach, Burke, the exiled Jacobites, his own family, Secundra Dass (his Indian "Friday"). To James the weakness of the virtuous, and the main instrument of his power, is that they care what others think of them. His sense of self differs in that he opposes force to justice, including the justice of the true word, a scruple to which he is indifferent. "Let us dare to be ourselves like savages," he challenges Burke (p. 39). In this respect, he is the complementary double of Henry (and of Mackellar); they need transparency and witness to be real to themselves and he does not, yet they are bound to each other in alterity.

It may be that Rousseau's distinction between *amour propre* and *amour de soi* helps us here (to take a hint from James's desire to be "savage"). The possibly imaginary condition of *amour de soi* typifies men in the state of nature, according to Rousseau. The term signifies an uncontaminated self-love because it is bred in the bone; because it originates in the self and takes no account of the desires of others, it is free from the modern vices of vanity and pride and resentment (precisely the flaws James identifies as Mackellar's). *Amour propre*, the other of Rousseau's binary terms, disposes the individual to take the other into himself, to interpose the other between consciousness and act. So this individual is always watching himself, even if he calls this witness God, and he is capable of resentment and the desire for revenge and all the bitter hurts of injustice, because he has placed within himself the intentions of others.<sup>8</sup> The state of *amour propre* creates the hunger for justice because it enables the injustice of misrepresentation, of a split in self-consciousness between how one wants to be and how one appears to oneself through the eyes of others. This conception allows us to describe Henry's internalization of his brother's offenses, continually reminding him of his own weakness, until they flower in a torrent of resentment. James would be a type of the man who loves himself, infinitely subjective and indifferent to others. In Rousseau's account of our divided consciousness, *amour de soi* and *amour propre* are bound together in an endless struggle for domination. This specifies quite well the mutual dependence of Henry and James and allows us to see how Stevenson has created a complexity in their relationship which is bound to escape Mackellar's naive discourse of the good man and the wicked one.

Indeed, Mackellar is forced to concede some of these complexities when he encounters the Master in the flesh, so to speak. James carries his force over from Burke's narrative (and his incarnation in rumor and report) to Mackellar's dry discourse. He brings with him many of the genre signals that make him a conventional "romance" figure, thus entangling two kinds of

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<sup>8</sup>Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality*, trans. with intro. by Maurice Cranston (Harmondsworth, 1984), especially pp. 167-8.

writing and making us conscious of the power of text to create worlds. For example, he first appears before Mackellar as a dandified adventurer:

I was now near enough to see him, a very handsome figure and countenance, swarthy, lean, long, with a quick, alert, black look, as of one who was a fighter, and accustomed to command; upon one cheek he had a mole, not unbecoming; a large diamond sparkled on his hand; his clothes, though of the one hue, were of a French and foppish design; his ruffles, which he wore longer than common, of exquisite lace; and I wondered the more to see him in such guise when he was but newly landed from a dirty smuggling lugger. At the same time he had a better look at me, toised me a second time sharply, and then smiled.

"I wager, my friend . . . that I know both your name and your nickname. I divined these very clothes upon your hand of writing, Mr. Mackellar" (pp. 82-3).

Here we get intimations of the two discursive orders. James's blackness, the mole, the dandified gear, tag him generically and allow us to "read" him as he has "read" Mackellar. The detail about his disembarking unsoiled from the smugglers' dirty boat adds to our sense of his entry from another order. The Master retains his glamorous, Luciferian aura until the last section of the novel and on his second visit to Durrisdeer can still provoke the usually dry Mackellar to literary tropes:

The Master still bore himself erect, although perhaps with effort; his brow barred about the centre with imperious lines, his mouth set as for command. He had all the gravity and something of the splendour of Satan in the "Paradise Lost" (p. 159).

Beside him, Mackellar acknowledges, Henry appears a sad, weak, and bitter figure. This version of the brothers' opposition complicates Mackellar's good brother-bad brother dualism and it is significant that this complication becomes more obvious at the junction of the discursive orders, a generic border in our heterogeneous text. Mackellar's mixed fear, loathing, and admiration for the Master bring us back again to the voyage to New York and to the steward's deepening ambivalence toward the brothers.

As I have observed, the flight of the Durie family disorients Mackellar by making him a stranger to himself. When he says that a part of himself has gone to America with the family, I am tempted to understand his words as no casual metaphor, but as an existentially exact description of his fall out of everydayness and out of the transparency to others which is part of what it means to be familiar. His loss forces him to confront the Master as the other, in such a way as to pose a troublesome question about, first, his own identity and, second, as a consequence of this, about his moral autonomy.

The voyage is narrated as an adventure yarn filtered through a Puritan consciousness—Burke's memoirs as told by Young Goodman Brown.

Throughout this section, Mackellar sees the Master dimly, attributing to him a quality of unreality, a fictiveness which blurs the sharp outline of the genre figure he observed earlier:

Sometimes my gorge rose against him as though he were deformed—and sometimes I would draw away as though from something partly spectral. I had moments when I thought of him as a man of pasteboard—as though, if one should strike smartly through the buckram of his countenance, there would be found a mere vacuity within (p. 179).

The curious imagery here intimates that he sees James as a book, a cheap and perhaps fantastic adventure tale, crimped between buckram boards. Yet, hatred and fear of this empty figure burn inside him, toiled with shamed. Thus, the "fantastic" Master is enclosed in and mixed with the careful and sincere narrative of Mackellar, and so, if we find Mackellar credible, we are compelled to consider the unreal reality of the Master, the kind of space he occupies in writing.

MacKellar's spells of toleration of the Master seem to him a betrayal of his other masters and provoke him to a "fever of . . . resentment" (p. 170). (This fever parallels Henry's fever and his dream of James's death.) I think we must understand that resentment in the Nietzschean sense.<sup>9</sup> It is the resentment—the poison in bowel and soul—the weak reactive man experiences in the presence of the actor, the object in the face of the subject. This sickness intensifies as his sympathy with James grows and as it becomes harder for him to see the Master as the evil one, as Satan. Correspondingly, his own sense of virtue comes into question as his desire to eliminate the Master from the world moves from wish to action.

To Mackellar the storm becomes an opportunity to get rid of the Master, whom he calls "my enemy" (p. 181).

If the *Nonesuch* foundered, she would carry with her into the deeps of that unsounded sea the creature whom we all so feared and hated; there would be no more Master of Ballantrae (p. 180).

He maintains the textual figure noted above by speaking of his enemy's "*deletion* from the world" (p. 180; italics mine). When the storm seems to be abating, he prays for the ship's destruction, a direct appeal to God to send

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<sup>9</sup>*On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York, 1969), pp. 36-9 and throughout. Nietzsche's discussion of master and slave morality and of the way in which the weak nature demonizes its own worst impulses in order to protect its own sense of virtue offers a plausible description of the psychological dynamic of the triangular relationship between James and Henry and Mackellar.

them all down into nothingness. Once the storm has ended, the ship's captain—who has overheard but misunderstood Mackellar's prayers—congratulates him for having saved the company through his intercession with Providence. The disparity between the black dream and the appearance is wide and, pertinently enough for our present concern, founded on a gross "misreading." However, there is a further turn. Mackellar's prayer has been overheard by Secundra Dass, whom Mackellar has supposed not to speak or understand English; but, he does and reports the true text of the prayer to James, who then conceives a fresh admiration for the steward and compliment him: "'Ah! Mackellar,' said he, 'not every man is so great a coward as he thinks he is—nor yet so good a Christian'" (p. 182). This is a sharp challenge to the righteousness evinced by Mackellar and by Henry and the multiple ironic turns in the passage effectively deconstruct virtue and wickedness as absolutely differentiated categories.

Mackellar's prayer has not exhausted his resentment and he rises even higher in the Master's esteem when he endeavors to kill him, pushed into that action by "the vision of my lord at the table, with his head upon his hands; only now, when he showed me his countenance, it was heavy with reproach" (p. 188). At the point of full communion with Henry, he reactively moves closest to James, sinking his righteousness in force. The differential interdependence of the three figures achieves its maximum ternary fluidity in this episode of Mackellar's temptation. The self's discontinuity is expressed in multiple doublings within Mackellar: Henry and James; Henry and Mackellar; James and Mackellar. These doublings are not symmetrical along any of their potential axes, since of the three only Mackellar is author and player, subject and object, *I* and *he*. To clarify the key role of Mackellar as a protagonist as well as a narrator, we must look more closely at the murder attempt, the core of *Master*.

The immediate context for this is a story, an ambiguous parable James tells him amid the dizzying perspectives of the rolling ship. Mackellar's reception of the Master's tale cannot be separated entirely from his vertiginous experience of the storm, because that is his derangement finding itself outside him. Both James and Mackellar have come on deck:

It was here we were sitting: our feet hanging down, the Master betwixt me and the side, and I holding on with both hands to the grating of the cabin skylight; for it struck me it was a dangerous position, the more so as I had continually before my eyes a measure of our evolutions in the person of the Master, which stood out in the break of the bulwarks against the sun. Now his head would be in the zenith and his shadow fall quite beyond the *Nonesuch* on the farther side and now he would swing down till he was underneath my feet, and the line of the sea leaped high above him like the ceiling of a room. I looked upon this with a growing satisfaction, as birds are said to look on snakes (p. 183).

James, so perched, demonstrates to Mackellar his close fit with the physical world and his indifference to witness: "He was quite capable of choosing out a graceful posture, even with no one to behold him but myself" (p. 187). They talk about the threatened mutiny on the *Nonesuch*, and also about murder in general, and, says Mackellar, "that offered a temptation to the Master more strong than he was able to resist. He must tell me a tale, and show me at the same time how clever he was, and how wicked" (p. 183). As Douglas Gifford notes,<sup>10</sup> we must question who is being tempted here and who is wicked?

James's tale is cast as a parable, ambiguously allegorizing the dependence of the hater and the one he hates. It tells how a man destroys his enemy by relating a story, a dream story which tempts the listener into danger and death. The plotting dreamer, Gifford observes, could be James or Henry. But, its argument, as an allegory, fastens together actor and acted on, *I* and *he*. The energy from their mutual hatred stretches across the boundary between the outer tale and the inset dream. The dream is feigned; it is a fiction. Yet this does not dilute its power to seduce the other to enter it as a subject, to share in the dream. Thus, the fable refers uncertainly to the characters in the narrative in which it is framed and to one possible version of their hatred. It also allegorizes the power of fiction to solicit the desire of the subject.

Mackellar, though, offers no interpretation of the fable. Instead, he attempts to murder James:

I called my energies together and (the ship then heeling downward toward my enemy) thrust at him swiftly with my foot. *It was written* I should have the guilt of this attempt without the profit. (p. 188; italics mine)

The suave voice of James's oral "text" calls to Mackellar to cross the boundary from one order of discourse to the other, to enter the dream-world of pure action by making his desire actual. However, he cannot turn that desire into a competent and sufficient deed, because that generic boundary is also an ontological one. As Schiller has it, "The physical man is actual, and the moral man only problematical."<sup>11</sup> This is Mackellar's double bind: to delete James, he would need to cross the boundary, to become the physical man in the condition of *amour de soi*; but, were he to do so, if we may

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<sup>10</sup>"Stevenson and Scottish Fiction," p. 83.

<sup>11</sup>Friedrich von Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. and with an intro. by Reginald Snell (New York, 1965), p. 29.



imagine it, he would then have no need to, because James would be no threat to his *amour propre*.

Mackellar remains the problematical moral man, who could only make his dreams actual by abandoning his virtue. Furthermore, James observes that the steward's notion of virtue depends on language, which is also problematical:

"O! there are double words for everything: the word that swells, the word that belittles; you cannot fight me with a word!" said he. "You said the other day that I relied on your conscience: were I in your humor of detraction, I might say I built upon your vanity. It is your pretension to be un *homme de parole*; 'tis mine not to accept defeat" (p. 192).

Mackellar is a man of his word, but also a man of words, of language. (Not only a user of language; also, as the reader will remember, a creature whose only existence is in the text we are reading, a fiction which has temporarily seduced us into forgetting his unreality.) James's accusation respects Mackellar's sincerity; but it condenses the complementary challenge to Mackellar's "true history," namely that his sincere voice is capable only of declaratory truth and is disabled by the limitations of language from entering a possible pure world of action, where things are themselves and without names.

Subsequently, Mackellar and James reach a rapprochement and spend the rest of the journey to New York "upon excellent terms" (p. 192). James accurately predicts to Mackellar that "all your old prejudices will revive" (p. 193). Although he does retain some of his sympathy for the Master, he returns to a faith in the noematic stability of his narrative and stays doggedly behind his intention to protect Henry, even though Henry in New York is a creature he cannot bring himself to admire. In justifying Henry (that is, later, when he is writing his history), he applies the logic of temptation and corruption which he used to excuse his own foray into assassination: that of the essentially good man corrupted by the wicked tempter. This logic of cause and effect posits a temporal sequence: first, there was a good man, who, in the case of Henry, was persecuted by his evil brother; then, and because of this persecution, he became a bad man, although behind the appearance he is still *essentially* good. James has accused Mackellar of creating in this sequence an apologetic myth. Good and bad, the Master suggests, are just fictions created by the free play of language over actuality and designed to disguise weakness as virtue. Neither good nor evil came first; no self is essential; no one is virtuous in their dreams. God has absconded and all is adjacency, accident, chance. The paradox is that this questioning of Mackellar's narrative objectivity (and therefore of his whole world) is carried in the Mackellar narrative, as well as in the genre narrative of Burke. With-

out this dialectic, the novel would require our unqualified belief or it would destroy itself. Instead, it does both.

In the last section of *Master*, Mackellar helplessly witnesses the last stage of the fraternal struggle. Having travelled out of himself into exile, Henry is now immune to James's threats to shame him and indifferent to the skeleton's emerging from the family cupboard, a possibility he was previously so anxious to suppress. Henry has changed utterly. Indeed, he has prepared his revenge in such a way as to reverse the roles of James and himself, in a fashion quite natural to a man hitherto so mindful of how others saw him: "O! . . . this is not Durriseer, and I have taken many precautions. His reputation awaits him" (p. 194). Before the assembled "society" of colonial New York, he rejects and accuses his brother.

Spurned, the Master becomes a suppliant and a seeker of justice, hoping to shame Henry by squatting in town and earning his bread by tailoring. (I say that he is a seeker of justice because the circumstances here recall the ancient Celtic and Brahmin practice of fasting before the door of a person who has failed to satisfy some lawful demand.) But shaming will not now work on Henry, as it did in Durriseer, since he has undergone so radical a change in his identity. Mackellar is left to worship what *he* was, not the vengeful alcoholic he has become. Nonetheless, this new version of Henry does not diminish Mackellar's loyalty. He remains twinned with Henry in a righteous and apologetic myth of essential selfhood, even though the autonomy of that essential self has been problematized by Henry's dire change and his own experience on the *Nonesuch*.

James's last days are pieced together by Mackellar, carefully and with scrupulous concern for what "actually" happened. A party consisting of Henry, the Governor of New York, and Mackellar is in the ice-bound Adirondacks, camped for the night, when out of the woods comes a man named Mountain, one of the group gone with the master to seek the treasure which was planted many years before as recounted in Burke's memoirs. Mountain was covertly charged by Henry to murder his brother. Earlier, Mackellar noted that when he prayed for the destruction of the *Nonesuch*, he had sought to "hire God to be my bravo" (p. 215). Mountain is one of the bravos Henry employs to be his God, the instrument of his revenge. Mountain is haunted and crazy because Secundra Dass has buried his master, after these men killed him, but has returned to the wilderness. There are two versions of Mountain's tale: first, the story he relays to the company at large; second, the full story he tells to Mackellar, whom he regards "as an accomplice" (p. 223). Although Mountain is denied the first person privileges of Burke, Mackellar applies the same editorial methods he used with Burke's memoir, discounting the varnished version designed to show the narrator in the best light and paraphrasing/extracting the more "sincere" one, and com-

binning it with the later testimony of Secundra Dass. Mackellar, in this last section, is less a protagonist than he is an observer, compiler, editor. In dealing with the testimony of others, he puts the referential authority of their words on probation, discounting the passionate interests of those who are complicit. How, then, are we to take his own partisan history? A jotting Stevenson made in his notebook may suggest an answer to this question:

It is only out of memoirs written by violent and sincere partisans, that we can ever learn how deeds appeared to the actors themselves, what moral obliquities led them open-eyed into mistakes and crimes and what sort of strength supplanted [*sic*] them through great, heroic undertakings; every self-deception, every dishonesty even, possesses for the critic a sort of hidden sincerity.<sup>12</sup>

Applied to *Master*, this observation invites us to see Mackellar as a sincere, but limited, narrator. His limitations, I have argued, are not only a result of his partisanship, but also of the possibly unstable nature of language itself—if there is, as James argued, a double word for everything, then no word can have a final authority. Are we, then, prohibited from preferring any one of the multiple versions of the "truth" represented in the novel? To propose an answer to that more specific question, we must turn to the conclusion and the action leading up to it.

Informed of his brother's death, Henry requests to see James's burial place with his own eyes, to be convinced that he really has died this time. When his suggestion is treated skeptically by the others in his party, his resentment comes bursting forth in a flood of words:

"He's not of this world," whispered my lord, "neither him nor the black deil that serves him. I have struck my sword throughout his vitals," he cried; "I have felt the hilt dirl on his breastbone, and the hot blood spirt in my very face, time and again, time and again. . . . But he was never dead for that," said he, and sighed aloud. "Why should I think he was dead now? No, not till I see him rotting" (p. 241).

Henry's passionate version differs starkly from Mackellar's account of the duel, which is the incident we would expect him to be referring to. According to Mackellar, James impaled himself on Henry's sword when he attempted to grab the blade and stumbled. Henry's "time and again" suggests a recurring fantasy since he only stabbed James once. His words appear to be delirious,; a narrative of desire. Of course, the outburst does not reveal

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<sup>12</sup>"Selections from His Notebook," in *Works*, Tusitala Edition (London, 1924), XXIX, 190.

whether his fantasy originated before or after the duel, one of the uncertainties with which readers of *Master* have to live.

Henry then expands his account of the past, including an appeal to Mackellar as verifying witness that he is telling the truth:

"Mackellar . . . kens all, and has seen him buried before now. This is a very good servant to me, Sir William, this man Mackellar; he buried him with his own hands—he and my father—by the light of two siller candlesticks. The other man [Secundra Dass] is a familiar spirit; he brought him from Coromandel. I would have told ye this long syne, Sir William, only it was in the family" (p. 241).

This speech and the previous one fuse fantasy and Mackellar's historical "truth." The silver candlesticks are right; Mackellar and Lord Durrisdeer going out to cover up the killing is right. But neither buries James. Lord Durrisdeer certainly rouses himself to authorize Mackellar to conceal the "death"; but we also know that he is passive and persists in preferring James even after he has acknowledged his injustice in his treatment of the brothers. Henry's readjustment of the past may compensate for his failure to win his father's love, by making Lord Durrisdeer a more active agent, with Mackellar, than he actually was. This plausible reading depends on the differential authority of Mackellar, since his is the only "actuality" with which we can compare Henry's version. Our preference for Mackellar's account is supported by the internally convincing psychological destruction of Henry. He has surrendered his earlier faith that virtue will speak for itself before God and others; he now experiences his father and the Father as absences, since they have absconded and with them the providential reassurance of their authority, the possibility that somewhere the truth is written and that justice can be rendered to him. Now, he can find no justice, no alliance of word and essence. His appeal to omniscience is directed at Mackellar (who "kens all"); but Mackellar, too, can only remain silent before his master's distortions. With the fiction of essential and transparent virtue toppled by his demonic projections and his murderous intent, Henry has nothing that is infeasibly his own, except the desperate and unstable distance between his goodness and the evil one, his refusal of the dialectic of self and incubus.

We see here, as elsewhere in the novel's heterogeneous mixture of narratives of desire and narratives of representation, a continual construction and collapse of the possibility of doing justice to, of reporting the reality of, the "secret history" of the House of Durrisdeer.

The scene of the Master's resuscitation participates in this dialectic. When the party gets to the grave, Secundra Dass works to reanimate the Master, with brief success, as Mackellar reports:

I beheld his eyelids flutter; the next moment they rose entirely, and the week-old corpse looked at me for a moment in the face. So much display of life I can myself swear to. I have heard from others that he visibly strove to speak, that his teeth showed in his beard, and that his brow was contorted as with an agony of pain and effort. And this may have been; I know not, I was otherwise engaged. For at that disclosure of the dead man's eyes, my Lord Durrisdeer fell to the ground, and when I raised him up, he was a corpse (p. 251).

In this passage, as in most of the rest of his history, Mackellar testifies as if in a court of law, carefully distinguishing between what he can claim to have witnessed and what he cannot. The revival and these simultaneous deaths are quite improbable within the realm of verifiable historical record; they cannot be contained by a discourse of the real, only reported by it. This is a consistent extension of the dialectic I have been speaking of above, in which *Master* solicits our belief, but does not assure it.

The deaths are not the end of the novel, however. It concludes with Mackellar's double epitaph (there is a double word for everything) and these epitaphs act as emblems of the ambivalence of Mackellar's attempt to do justice to the memory of Henry, and, indeed, of the novel's ambivalent relation to truth and historical record. On James's stone, Mackellar writes that the Master "lies here forgotten" (p. 252). Yet, the epitaph itself memorializes James and, in fact, is more fulsome a summary of James's life than it is of Henry's, whose inscription speaks modestly in the intransitive verbs "died," "sleeps." These epitaphs are "bald narratives," as we were promised in the Preface, and in commenting on them and on his history as a whole, Mackellar loyally hopes that Henry's merits and virtues will speak for themselves, will be their own justification, beyond and behind the lapidary inscriptions. But they do not. Like the several discourses which constitute *Master*, even in their sincere effort to do justice, they speak also of what they do not intend to speak. In modestly presenting Mackellar's memoir "as it stands" Stevenson has constructed an astute fable on the nature of fiction itself.

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