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Nels C. Pearson

The Moment of Modernism: Schopenhauer's  
"Unstable Phantom" in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*  
and Stevenson's *The Master of Ballantrae*

Except for the different historical importance that our collective scholarship will likely assign to each novel, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889) have many basic similarities that might entice us to look deeper at the connection between them: both are late-Victorian romance-adventure tales, both are framework narratives, and both give us a good deal of psychological conflict for our adventure-novel dollar. When we place these texts against the backdrop of such important transitional thinkers as Kant, Schopenhauer, Eliot and Derrida, however, they become significantly transformed, and a deeper philosophical connection between the two works—one that may reveal much to us about the nature of modernism—is dramatically revealed. Thematically and structurally, both novels are accurate artistic representations of the philosophical "moment" during which a Romantic understanding of ourselves must give way to a modern one. Primarily in terms of the strained relationship between narrative and the "Truth" of subjective experience, both texts capture what we might call the horrifying moment along the continuum of critical theory at which the Romantic belief in the supremacy of the philosophical subject and the individual imagination is shattered by modernism's dark contention with the lack of utility, and linguistic or psychological substantiation, regarding subjective truth.

It can certainly be argued that this same set of dilemmas is central to the problems of postmodernism. However, as the nature of this essay implies, I am mostly concerned here with the lineage, or, more importantly, with the irredeemable destabilization in—though not yet the complete disavowal of—the

concept of a lineage of philosophical and critical thought in the West. "Modernism" and "modernity," as I will employ the terms, are thus primarily references to the staggering challenge to centrality and identity felt by those writers and thinkers who necessarily operated within and ascribed to, and then saw crumbling and tried to replace, the dominant history or necessary fiction of an aesthetic and philosophical discourse centered on the subject/object distinction and certain logocentric or teleological notions of individual and cultural identity. In this sense of an initial historical rupture within a sign-system, many of the problems of modernism are in fact the same as, or proleptic of, the crisis of subjective and historical/cultural identity we often ascribe to the postmodern condition. The difference between the two terms that is most important to my use of the term "modern" in this essay, then lies mostly in the *reactions* to this rupture. While the modern reaction to the crisis of identity tends toward an angry lament or attempted retrieval of lost essentialisms, the postmodern reaction is generally to accept the loss or deconstruction of those essentialism as a given and perhaps necessary, part of the human condition.<sup>1</sup>

The historical position of the beginning of literary and philosophical modernism is a matter of much debate. In this discussion, however, I am less concerned with *when* such a moment occurs than I am with how it has occurred, at different stages in critical theory, and what effect this change in ideology and belief can be said to have on the practice of narration, or the translation of essential experience into text, as a means of self-knowledge. My conclusion is that these novels have a rightful place in the tradition of modernism and its problems in that they deal significantly with the human emotions and sensations—dislocation, fear, and even physical deterioration—that we must face when we are forced by our own intellect to consider the possibility that there is no purposeful or verifiable truth in the objects we perceive, or in the tales we tell about human experience.

Certainly part of "becoming modern" lies in confronting the damage done to cultural morality when technology and the irrationality of modern events erode our will to believe in absolutes; when the "acids of modernity," as Walter Lippman lamented in 1924, dissolve "the usages and the sanctions to which men once habitually conformed."<sup>2</sup> But perhaps more haunting are the psychological consequences of modernity—problems of individual identity that follow from the realization that the semiotic relationship between the "subcon-

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<sup>1</sup>For a full discussion of the problematic nature of opposing the conditions of modernism to postmodernism, the degree to which each is implicated in the other, and the problem of trying to maintain a chronology relative to a "shift" from modernism to postmodernism, see Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London, 1991). See also Astradur Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca, NY, 1990), in particular ch. 3, entitled "Reading Modernism through Postmodernism."

<sup>2</sup>Walter Lippman, *A Preface to Morals* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1989), p. 318.

scious" and "conscious" mind, between the id and the ego, is indeterminable because of the tremendous slippage between the language of dreams and desires and the language of consciousness. Once we question the rationality of the subconscious mind and its motives, as much of modern literature does, then we must also surrender our ability to identify any ultimate cause or meaning for human behavior. Further, we must seriously question the ability of narrative to capture any enlightenment we believe derives from behavior and experience.

Many of modernism's problems with the artistic autonomy and authority of the subjective mind stem not only from the nascent solipsism in Freud's theories of the subconscious, but also from a similar central irony embedded deep in the foundation of Romantic epistemology and the Romantic aesthetic. In *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Immanuel Kant describes the ideal aesthetic response to an object of perception as a "moment" of "disinterestedness" during which we are free from any consideration of objective moral or subjective physical need regarding the object. No longer bound or governed by material considerations or moral judgements based on some extrinsic standard of good or intrinsic desire for gratification, the inspired individual mind becomes, for Kant, a realm of potential transcendence in which we can experience, with unfettered awe, the central "truth" or "beauty" of an object or experience that is as yet unspoiled by any consideration of its purpose. Kant finally concludes "Beauty is the form of the purposiveness of an object, so far as this is perceived in it without any representation of a purpose."<sup>3</sup> The "modern problem" with Kant's aesthetic is that it is based on a destructive irony: to realize our presence *within* beauty, to verify that the Kantian experience is indeed taking place, or even to verify its existence in general, we must bring in some consideration of the external world (the realm of purpose) to do so. To define, certainly to critique or describe, the beautiful, we must exit the silent center of our own mind where subject and object have coalesced and try to name it with words—words that are units of a language whose purpose *derives from* the separation of subject and object. We might describe this phenomenon as a Derridean problem of *presence*, for to inhabit the "center" of disinterestedness we must essentially be present and absent at once, or absent to define our presence.

Thus with modernism, we can no longer "sink Lethe-wards" into a melancholy dream state in which we hear Keats's nightingale singing to (and with) our inner voice (a voice that "flees" as we awake), but rather, like Eliot's Prufrock, we must *awake* from being "patient[s] etherised upon a table" to hear the voices of "mermaids singing, each to each." And these voices, as Prufrock laments, are of an objective world we can not internalize—"they will not sing"

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<sup>3</sup>Immanuel Kant, "Analytic of the Beautiful," in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (New York, 1992), p. 386.

to us. The true and the beautiful, if there are such things, exist indifferently among the objects of the external world. Eliot's proposal for a new modern tradition is essentially a direct rejection of the notion of subjective truth that the Romantics had linked to the importance of self-expression and experience. "Poetry," Eliot contends, "is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality."<sup>4</sup> Instead of looking for the essence of poetic verisimilitude within the self, Eliot's poet acts as a catalyst observing the flux of momentary truths inherent in the arbitrary relationships between objects of the external world, and "working them up into poetry" (p. 764).

Nearly a century before Eliot wrote those words, however, Arthur Schopenhauer had already begun to encounter deep psychological problems with Kant's ultimate defense of the subject. In *The World as Will and Representation* (1819), Schopenhauer begins an early polemic of modernity by saying that

pure contemplation [is] absorption in perception, being lost in the object, forgetting all individuality, abolishing the kind of knowledge which follows the principle of sufficient reason, and comprehends only relations. It is the state by means of which at once and inseparably the perceived particular thing is raised to the Idea of its species, and the knowing individual to the pure subject of will-less knowing, and now the two, as such, no longer stand in the stream of time and all other relations.<sup>5</sup>

This far in his thinking, Schopenhauer clearly agrees with Kant on the delight of recognizing our individual capability for experiencing transcendence, but it is exactly this concept of recognition—and the question of the utility and ultimate value of the transcendental experience which inevitably follows our recognition of it—that becomes, for Schopenhauer, an irremediable snag in the fabric of the Romantic ideal. Schopenhauer's concern for the fact that we can neither live in nor communicate the disinterested state of the individual mind begins to unravel his, or any, claim for the supremacy of the imagination:

There always lies so near to us a realm in which we have escaped entirely from all our affliction; but who has the strength to remain in it for long? As soon as any single relation to our will, to our person, even of these objects of pure contemplation, again enters consciousness, the magic is at an end. We fall back into knowledge governed by the principle of sufficient reason; we know no longer the idea, but the individual thing, the link of a chain to which we also belong, and we are again abandoned to all our woe (*World as Will*, p. 198).

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<sup>4</sup>T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in Adams, p. 762.

<sup>5</sup>Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York, 1969), I, 196-7. Henceforth *World as Will*.

Schopenhauer arrives at the paradox of subjective and objective truth by identifying the two halves of the world as the “will” (or subjective desire) and the “idea” (or approximation of the ultimately unknowable patterns that govern the natural world). The inherent human paradox is that we have free will, but we are also always governed by the unknowable design of the objective universe. Hence the need, especially in the wake of increasingly valid scholarly critiques of old and stable religious orthodoxy, for the individual mind to achieve the transcendental experience of its own accord—to find truth by directing our knowledge inward instead of outward. But once we find truth within the self, Schopenhauer realizes, we must objectify it in language (in some form that signifies) to make it mean anything, or at least to be certain of its meaning.

Thus, long before Freudian psychoanalysis could become problematic, the predicament had already arisen in critical theory that subjective truths or essences become self-referential and solipsistic when we try to share them, quantify them, or verify them by description. For Schopenhauer, the highest state of consciousness and self-knowledge to which the subject or will can aspire—free aesthetic disinterest—is ultimately as knowable as, and finally nothing but a copy of, the indeterminable idea. Modernism and its psychological difficulties loom large on the horizon the very second we contemplate this paradox, and Schopenhauer must have sensed that he had reached such a critical point in his thinking, for only in a footnote does he deal with it directly.<sup>6</sup> His concern is that

to know ourselves fully by directing our knowledge inwards, we lose ourselves in a bottomless void; we find ourselves like a hollow glass globe, from the emptiness of which a voice speaks. But the cause of this voice is not to be found in the globe, and since we want to comprehend ourselves, we grasp with a shudder nothing but a wavering and unstable phantom (*World as Will*, p. 278n).

With these words, Schopenhauer has essentially defined the problematic position of a mind that has stretched Romanticism as far as it can go, and finds itself on the verge of philosophical modernism; a mind frozen between the belief in the inner voice of truth and identity and the inability to believe that that voice has both presence and purpose. The key here is that the *cause* of the voice, or sustaining essence of individual identity, is not within the subject—not within the self. And if the cause is not in the will, then it can only be in the idea, or external, unknowable world. Therefore, there is ultimately no identifiable central cause around which to construct our surroundings or ourselves.

Schopenhauer’s phantom analogy thus reveals the fatal flaw of transcendental ideology, which is its failure to consider the possibility that we cannot actually know or think of something outside of language. Perhaps we can

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<sup>6</sup>Vincent Pecora, “Heart of Darkness and the Phenomenology of Voice,” in *ELH*, 52 (1985), 995. Henceforth Pecora.

claim to experience it, but we can not describe it. The subjective mind is the only entity that can attest to transcendence, but because there is no such thing as purely subjective language—which is what we would need to say that the coalescence of subject and object is—then we must conclude that there is no such thing as transcendence, and no such thing as the single essence of the self, to be discerned from our contemplation of the cause or purpose of any object of perception.<sup>7</sup> We finally unveil the voice, the center of our subjectivity, only to discover an infinite further series of veils. If there is a Derridean moment, this is it. From this moment on, to quote Yeats and Eliot, “the centre cannot hold” because, while it may have an identifiable location, that location is completely arbitrary. Now all we hear are the will and idea “singing each to each,” and, what is worse, they are singing in a language we can’t understand. Once we so much as consider this paradox, we can do nothing to explain it away.

We might postulate, then, that a work anticipating modernism is one that is caught between the Romantic notion of the truth in subjective experience and the modernist obsession with the impossibility of that notion. *Heart of Darkness*, perhaps more than any other popular nineteenth-century novel, exemplifies this type of work. Marlow makes what might be considered a romantic claim that his narrative will unveil some truth from his experience, but because Conrad goes to great lengths to construct Marlow as an unreliable narrator, the reader is obliged to mature from the position of a disinterested receiver of information to an active participant in the search for truth, if there is any such thing to be found. But we can never entirely dismiss the possibility that *Heart of Darkness* can be read as an adventure tale with some paraphrasable core of action or event that is significant or compelling enough to deserve its own telling. While it would be difficult to make this claim for the plot of modern classics like Joyce’s *Ulysses* or Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, such is

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<sup>7</sup>See “Criticism of the Kantian Philosophy,” in *World as Will*, I, 413-534 (Appendix). Schopenhauer is adamant about stressing this point of contention with Kant. He argues that

although organized bodies necessarily seem to us as though they were constructed according to a conception of purpose which preceded them, this still does not justify us in assuming it to be objectively the case. For our intellect, to which things are given form without and indirectly, which therefore never knows their inner nature whereby they arise and exist, but merely their exterior, cannot comprehend a certain quality peculiar to the organized productions of nature otherwise than by analogy, since it compares this quality with the works intentionally made by man, whose quality is determined by a purpose and by the conception thereof. This analogy is sufficient to enable us to comprehend the agreement of all their parts with the whole, and thus to serve even as a guide to their investigation. But it cannot by any means be made on this account the actual ground for explaining the origin and existence of such bodies. For the necessity of so conceiving them is of subjective origin. (p. 532).

not the case with *Heart of Darkness*. Thus Marlow's tale is on one level an adventure story about the gruesome "reality" of colonialism—a story driven by its audience's desire to know "the truth." But it is also a narrative whose gaps and ambiguities frustrate and deny the realization of those desires.

But perhaps the reason we can never say what *Heart of Darkness* is, is that Marlow himself does not know. We might say that his narrative, and, more importantly, the central experience that it tries to capture, are not disturbing because they are rendered ambiguously, but horrifying because they occur arbitrarily, without cause or definite purpose. For an early hint that this is the case, look at Conrad's complicated introduction of Marlow's tale:

The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical...and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze...[like the] misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.<sup>8</sup>

On the surface, this symbolic introduction of Marlow serves to celebrate his unusual style of narration, but on a deeper level it reveals the patterns of uncertainty and arbitrary meaning that ultimately dislodge Marlow's tale from any central purpose or presence. Because a glow "brings out a haze" indefinitely, and because the "haze" in this case is the "meaning" brought out by the "glow" of the tale, there is really no outside to Marlow's oration. Similarly, because a haze can only be seen, can only be said to exist, when a glow appears (which suggests that while the story functions as a center that "illuminates" everything around it, the location of that center in relation to the meaning—the cause of the story—is completely arbitrary), there is essentially no real center, in fact no meaningful "heart," to Marlow's narrative, or to the text itself. While both the plot and the narrative structure of *Heart of Darkness* seem to represent a constant moving inward toward the "heart" or center of some dark truth of human nature, the "horrifying" truth that Marlow's narration is designed to capture or verify—the mystery guarded by Kurtz—is ultimately one that can not be completely signified.

In "Heart of Darkness Revisited," J. Hillis Miller claims that the novel "fits, in its own way, the definitions of both parable and apocalypse," and that, like parabolic or apocalyptic modes of discourse, it appears to be (or clings to the purpose of being) "a narrative that sheds light, that penetrates darkness, that clarifies and illuminates."<sup>9</sup> Miller collectively deconstructs all parabolic or apocalyptic narratives, including *Heart of Darkness*, by saying that because

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<sup>8</sup>Quoted in "*Heart of Darkness*": A Case Study in Contemporary Criticism, ed. Ross C. Murphin (New York, 1989), p. 20. Henceforth *Heart*.

<sup>9</sup>J. Hillis Miller, "Heart of Darkness Revisited," in *Heart*, p. 213.



both types of stories employ irony as their main vehicle for "unveiling" truth, they, like the ironies themselves, are explanations that "both illuminate [their] own workings and at the same time obscure or undermine" them (p. 213). In other words, in seeming to locate, illuminate and explain some essential truth of human experience, the text undermines its own apparent design. According to Miller, "no reader of Conrad can doubt that he means to make the reader see not only...the facts, out there in the sunlight, [but] also the dark truth that lies behind them" (p. 214). Like a parable promising enlightenment, Conrad's famous declaration that the purpose of fiction is "above all, to make you *see*" is undermined by an inherent paradox that Miller calls "the paradox of seeing the darkness in terms of the light" (p. 214). That is to say, what light illuminates *is* darkness. By casting light, by bringing out a "haze" with a "glow," we only "see" darkness. Thus Miller concludes that "the goal of tearing the veil of familiarity from the world and making us *see* cannot be accomplished. If we see the darkness already, we do not need *Heart of Darkness*. If we do not see it, reading *Heart of Darkness*, or even hearing Marlow tell it, will not help us" (p. 214).

What Miller helps us to see is that *Heart of Darkness* is almost perfectly balanced, or trapped, between the Romantic notion of unveiling the inner truth and the modernist rejection of the ability of language to unveil, locate, and illuminate an inner core of meaning for human experience. In fact the "horror" at the heart of the novel is an excellent metaphor for the novel itself, or for any work that has one foot in Romanticism and one in modernism. The heart of darkness is exactly that—the center, the voice, that is and is not there. Kurtz's "horror" is to the text and to Marlow what Schopenhauer's "unstable phantom" is to our subjective identity, and the text itself, dominated with images of centering and unveiling, seems at once to cling to the Romantic view that truth is within the self (and the text), and postulate that what ultimately lies at the center is as unknowable as the universe of idea; that in fact it *is* the idea.

Conrad seems to echo Schopenhauer in saying that when we explore the depths of our mind or our experience in search of truth, we do so at the risk of discovering that there is no cause for what we find, and of forcing ourselves to live in spite of that knowledge. We are repulsed (the literal meaning of "horried") back into the mode of understanding ourselves through narration, even though we now carry with us the knowledge that we must construct arbitrary meaning in language to hide the fact that there can be no absolute meaning. As Vincent Pecora argues, "the absence at the heart of [Marlow's] actual experience...[is] precisely [the] absence that we ought to see within Kurtz's magnificent voice, [and] within Marlow's 'inconclusive' but seemingly significant account of his experiences."<sup>10</sup> As Marlow himself says, "the inner truth is

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<sup>10</sup>Pecora, p. 998. Also see Pecora, pp. 995-1002, on the relationship between Schopenhauer's aesthetic, Derrida's arguments concerning voice and presence, and the narrative insta-

hidden—luckily, luckily,” (*Heart*, p. 46). This line of reasoning then leads us to conclude that after an encounter with the heart of darkness we must continue to tell tales even though we can never be certain of their meaning (a certain harbinger of modernity), which may explain Marlow’s obsession and difficulties with constructing narratives. Further, it may explain his fascination with Kurtz. “I made the strange discovery,” says Marlow,

That I had never imagined [Kurtz] as doing, you know, but as *discoursing*.... The man presented himself as a *voice*....of all his gifts the one that stood out preeminently, that carried with it a sense of real *presence*, with his ability to talk, his words—the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating...the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness (*Heart*, p. 62; my italics).

In a sense, Kurtz is the central narrator in *Heart of Darkness* because his final words represent the novel’s deepest mystery. But Marlow needs Kurtz to function as a narrator with “real presence,” and arguably constructs him that way, because the success of his own tale (in terms of both audience and self-knowledge) largely depends on drawing attention inwards toward what Kurtz knows or represents. What dismantles the whole idea of voice, presence and authoritative discourse, however, is the fact that Kurtz’s final narration is itself a sort of “unstable phantom.” Surely “The horror! The horror!” means something to Kurtz. Surely it represents, for Kurtz as Romantic subject, some sort of deep, if not transcendental, understanding of self and other, life and death. But to us, and to Marlow, it means only what we, in our own subjectivity, can conceive “the horror” to mean, and thus, as a candidate for a transcendental signifier, it means nothing.

Since there is no explainable center of meaning in his personal experience, Marlow can not return from that experience to weave a seamless narrative around a paraphrasable core. In many places, Marlow’s voice devolves into trembling utterances fractured by dashes and ellipses of silence as he nears the memory of his encounter with Kurtz:

[Kurtz] was very little more than a voice. And I heard — him it — this voice — other voices — all of them were so little more than voices — and the memory of that time itself lingers around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense. Voices, voices — even the girl herself — now ——” (*Heart*, p. 63).

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bility of *Heart of Darkness*. One of my main objectives in this essay is to extend Pecora’s thesis to include Stevenson’s text, since what Pecora says here concerning the relationship between the “absence at the heart of Marlow’s experience” and the inconclusiveness of his narrative can also be said about Ephraim Mackellar’s experiences with Ballantrae and the consequential inconclusiveness of his narrative.

Like the propagandized savagery of colonialism, the text has no explainable center; no absolute truth to cling to in defense of itself. But this is exactly the point. Marlow cannot explain himself because he has seen the meaninglessness and futility that lies in the darkest realms of both the individual soul and the conventions of his society. Thus his narrative is not only full of gaps, but it is also built around the admission that mere conventional language can not tell the "facts" of the story. As he admits to his auditors on board the *Nellie*, "I've been telling you what we said—repeating the phrases we pronounced—but what's the good? They were common everyday words—the familiar, vague sounds exchanged on every waking day of life" (*Heart*, p. 82). Symbols of uncertain meaning such as the natives' "roaring chorus of rapid, articulated, breathless utterance" (p. 83) are not ambiguous veils standing between the reader and truth, rather they are arbitrary veils that Marlow must erect to hide the lack of truth—the truly unspeakable non-presence, or hollow core, that is the heart of darkness. The fact that Marlow feels he must project this sense of the irrational and unspeakable onto the figure of the African native can thus be seen as his response to the confrontation with the "unstable phantom" he has found at the core of his own being. By extension the "heart of darkness" is not something unknowable in the depths of Africa. It is something absent at the center of the Western mind.

*Heart of Darkness* so perfectly captures the "horrifying" moment between Romanticism and modernism that one wonders whether it is simply a unique text in that capacity. Before we come to that conclusion, however, we ought to re-investigate the often observed connection between Conrad and Robert Louis Stevenson. Robert Kiely introduces his 1964 study of Stevenson's "fiction of adventure" with the comment that "it was admiration for Joseph Conrad that led me into this study [of Stevenson]." He says that "Stevenson foreshadowed Conrad in all kinds of curious ways," and suggests that both authors use the "conventions of the adventure yarn to suggest moral and psychological conflicts."<sup>11</sup> While Kiely obviously looks at the two writers in the light of the late-Victorian romance-adventure novel, he does leave us one clue about the theoretical position of Stevenson's *The Master of Ballantrae* when he says that it has "traces of the Romantic nostalgia of Scott and hints of the mythical reformulation and mock-heroics of Joyce" (p. 199). Indeed, it may be time to examine Stevenson's connection to Conrad (and Stevenson himself) not as the study of Victorian romance-adventure might dictate, but in light of the highly volatile balance between Romanticism and modernism.

For Stevenson, the notion that the center of the self is an arbitrary construct seems to have been a mere matter of course. In other words, his Jekyll and Hyde concept is more than a simple device of Romantic-Gothic horror.

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<sup>11</sup>Robert Kiely, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Fiction of Adventure* (Cambridge, MA, 1965), p. vii.

The objective world is divided into good and evil, as is the inner soul. Indeed, this is simple enough. But the horrifying thing about Jekyll and Hyde is that we don't know when one will overtake the other. More frightening is the fact that Jekyll himself does not know. Even as he narrates his experience to us, he does not know when Hyde will resume control of his "self," and he occasionally explains how he must write down his story at a furious pace so as to finish a section of the story before Hyde appears and destroys it. The relationship between good and evil is completely arbitrary and entirely without cause, not only in the external world of idea, but also, most horrifyingly, at the center of the self. Stevenson tackles the problem head on. Like the external universe of idea, the center of the self is governed by the separation of subject and object, and, what is worse, we ultimately can't predict or capture the essence or cause of the relationship between the two. We may be able to postulate nothing more horrifying than Jekyll and Hyde singing "each to each" for all eternity. Pure evil, in this sense, is pure chance, and pure chance, in turn, is pure reality—at least for the modernist.

But it is in his final novel, *The Master of Ballantrae*, that Stevenson, much like if not more so than Conrad, demonstrates the deconstructive relationship between an arbitrary essence and a narrative that desperately tries to unveil it, or pin it down to a single cause. While often overlooked, or looked at somewhat askance, in the critical study of the late Victorian novel, there is perhaps no work of this period as obsessed with both what it tells and how it tells it than *The Master of Ballantrae*. With a setting that in Stevenson's words, "jumps like a flea" between the Jacobite rebellion in eighteenth-century Scotland, the French Indies, and the American wilderness of New York State, the story chronicles the bizarre rivalry between the two sons of the Scottish Lord Durrissdeer, Henry and James Durie. When it becomes clear that one of the brothers must go off to battle, the elder son, James Durie, Master of Ballantrae, turns the deeply troubling family decision into a mere matter of chance by flipping a coin. When the coin falls in favor of James's departure, he nonchalantly accepts his fate and leaves for war. News of James's supposed death on the battlefield at Culloden reaches home and fuels an already growing romance, and ultimate marriage, between his brother Henry and James's former bride-to-be, Alison. But James, the Master, turns up alive, returns to Scotland, cunningly victimizes his family, and initiates a slow, psychological torture of his younger brother Henry. The Master's evil motives, however, remain indeterminable throughout the story. The midnight duel between the brothers after the Master's return to Durrissdeer is a seeming climax that slips into further and darker mystery as the Master, apparently killed a second time, turns up alive again in India and tracks down his younger brother, now in New York State, to execute his most cerebral and most bizarre revenge.

Much like *Heart of Darkness*, *The Master of Ballantrae* ironically juxtaposes unreliable narrators, ambiguities, uncertainties and mysteries with strong images and motifs of unsealing, unveiling, and illuminating. A further simi-

larity between the texts is the manner in which the initial construction of the narrative framework is also the beginning of its destruction. The story of James Durie, Master of Ballantrae is introduced by an "editor" who (in typically Gothic fashion) explains to us, in the novel's Preface, how he has come into possession of the long-lost manuscript that follows. In the Preface, "the editor of the following pages" explains that, after returning to Scotland he met his "executor," who cordially served him "enough wine" and then brought up the subject of the century-old manuscript he had in his possession:

"Fate has put it in my power to honor your arrival with something really original by way of dessert. A mystery."

"A mystery?" I repeated.

"Yes," said *his* friend, "a mystery....it ought to be melodramatic, for (according to the superscription) it is concerned with death."

"I think I rarely heard a more obscure or a more promising annunciation," the *other* remarked. "But what is it?"<sup>12</sup> (my italics)

The problem here is that we do not really know who this "editor of the following" pages is. The editor appears to be Stevenson himself, but the problem is that he refers to himself alternatively in the first and third person, and later in the Preface claims to have a distant family relationship with the fictional Durrisdeers of the story. The Preface also concludes with a footnote, presumably Stevenson's, that "clarifies" for the reader that the two men in the Preface are "Mr. C. Baxter" (a close friend of Stevenson's) and "Stevenson." As we know from reading any of Stevenson's correspondence, however, Stevenson never signed anything, or referred to himself in print, with anything other than the initials "R. L. S."

Essentially, then, the editor is at once fictional and non-fictional—not unlike Stevenson himself, about whom we probably know more fiction and legend than fact. This is also an important bit of foreshadowing in that the editor, as "I" and as "the other," is an individual self rendered unknowable by virtue of the fact that he is arbitrarily subject and object. The executor's attempt to define the "essence" of the story—"a mystery" that "is concerned with death"—by way of its "superscription" is also the first attempt to define what the story, and its mysterious main character, are about—to name what lies at the core of both *The Master* and Master. The problem of having to define the story as "a mystery concerned with death," instead of simply "a murder," is that "a murder" implies a known (or knowable) motive and a retraceable sequence of causes (two things that we can never be certain of in this text).

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<sup>12</sup>Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, ed. Emma Letley (New York, 1983), p. 6. Subsequent references will appear in the text.

There are indeed several would-be murders, three (or perhaps four) of which involve the two brothers. The Master is supposed to be murdered three times, but each time he returns. At one point in the story, the Master tells Burke about a murder he plotted and possibly performed for a Count; however, due to the logical intricacies of the plotting and the lack of any real motive on the Master's part, what begins as a simple murder tale becomes, as does the entire novel, a puzzle that seems to have more "solutions" than it has pieces. As Emma Letley writes, the "dualities and ambiguities" of the entire novel leave us asking "as does the master at the end of *his* tale of the Count and Baron: '...And now, was that a murder?'" (p. xxv).

The manuscript that the editor has been given is written by Ephraim Mackellar, long-time servant of the house of Durrisdeer, who in turn incorporates into his narrative (editing them as he goes) the occasionally flawed accounts of an Irishman named Burke, who travels abroad with the Master and corresponds with Mackellar who remains in Scotland. At the climax of the story, Mackellar forms his account of the central action out of the "first hand" reports of three other men. Whenever the narrative gets closer to an account of the Master's evil motives, the narrative structure gets more complicated, and its relationship to any central truth regarding the mysterious Master becomes more incongruous. Thus, in seemingly moving inward towards an understanding of this evil character, we are actually getting further from the truth.

Mackellar's narrative, a series of attempted unveilings concerning the Master, is itself unveiled from "a packet, fastened with many seals and enclosed in a single sheet of strong paper" (*Master*, p. 8). After the two men in the Preface read it, the executor Thomson (or Baxter if the Preface is at all genuine) tells the "editor" that the narrative "is a novel ready for your hand...all you have to do is to work up the scenery, develop the characters, and improve the style" (p. 8). The editor claims, however, that he will not alter the document and will simply publish it "as it stands." The problem is that Stevenson himself (perhaps acting as the original editor from the Preface and perhaps not) *does* intrude on Mackellar's narrative when he tells the reader, in an "editor's note," that he has "omitted" five pages of Mackellar's account with which "we have no concern" (p. 143). This time the note is not signed with "Stevenson," as the Preface is, but with the familiar initials Stevenson used to sign all of his own personal correspondence. Thus "Mr. Thomson's" response to "Stevenson's" decision not to alter the manuscript, "we shall *see*," is at once the last phrase in the preface and the first irony of unveiling. Truly, *we* do not see.

As for the central narrative itself, Mackellar, who arrives at the house of Durrisdeer after the Master has already left for battle, begins his tale with a strong bias toward the younger brother Henry, and a passionate, if silent, hatred for the Master. He tries desperately to sustain both biases throughout his story, and often reminds his audience of his desire to reveal "that impudent grossness which I knew to underlie the veneer of [the Master's] fine manners"

(p. 90). Mackellar begins by writing that "the full truth of this odd matter is what the world has long been looking for, and public curiosity is sure to welcome...and there does not live one man so able as myself to narrate [it] faithfully" (p. 9). Mackellar, of course, turns out to be anything but a faithful narrator. His attempt to prove that the Master of Ballantrae is the sole source of evil in the tale of Durrissdeer is undermined not only by his obvious bias for the rest of the family, but also by his admission that the "black mark" on "[the Master's] name...was so defaced by legends before I came into these parts that I scruple to set it down" (p. 11). As Robert Kiely notes,

The reader's own vision of Ballantrae is so distorted by Mackellar's puritanical prejudices, which themselves are obscured by gossip and legend, that he seems large partly by virtue of the variety of incongruous things which may be said of him.... The most damning evidence against the master is hearsay that is never fully explained (p. 201).

But what ultimately confounds Mackellar, and what finally makes the novel such a fascinating study of narrative, is that the "center" around which Mackellar tries to stitch his tale—objective proof of the Master's evil nature based on his experiences with the man—is at best an arbitrary and unstable one, because the Master, who operates completely without cause, can only be characterized as the embodiment of pure ambivalence. He is not only Mackellar's, but also the novel's, "wavering unstable phantom." Thus while we sense the increasing frustration in Mackellar's voice as he claims, in reference to the master and his motives, "I saw it all at once, like the rending of a veil" (p. 119), we also hear J. Hillis Miller's retrospective admonition to Marlow echoing nearby: "unveiling," says Miller, only "unveils unveiling" (*Heart*, p. 213).

As in *Heart of Darkness*, the irony of seeing what can't be seen is repeated throughout the novel, especially in the form of illumination, or seeing in the dark. The climactic duel between the brothers in which the Master is supposedly murdered takes place at midnight and by candlelight. Appropriately enough, it is Mackellar, the narrative truth-seeker, who holds the candelabra. The symbolism intensifies with the scene as Mackellar returns to the site of the murder, and finds the body gone:

One of the candlesticks was overthrown, and that taper quenched. The other burned steadily by itself, and made a broad space of light upon the frosted ground. All *within* that *circle* seemed, by the force of contrast and the over-hanging blackness, brighter than by day. And there was the blood stain in the midst...but of the body, not a trace (p. 119; my italics).

The manifold images in this passage suggest the illumination of things within the circle of light. But what the light illuminates, as Mackellar says, is darkness. Indeed, Mackellar illuminates nothing of central importance concerning the Master's supposed death. We never find out if the Master was even killed.

The irony of “seeing darkness” is also a perfect metaphor for Mackellar’s entire sustained attempt to illuminate the “black dissimulation” of the Master by way of his faithful narration. Just as he does in this scene, the Master always slips away and out of the light. His is not a truth that can be unveiled. In fact, slippage is something of a rule for the Master, a man whose indifference to the good and evil dichotomy of moral decision making torments Henry and the truth-seeking Mackellar. Stevenson explains his design for the Master by saying that

We desire more or less identity between the essence and the seeming...and the secret of the Master is principally this, that he is indifferent to this problem. A live man, a full man, in every other part a human man, he has this one element of inhumanity.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, the Master strikes a perfectly indifferent balance between the inner self or will (the essence) and the external realm of chance and uncertainty, the idea or seeming. Thus when we try, like Mackellar, to unveil the essence of the Master, he simply turns his seeming side to us, and that is all we can grasp. Not amoral, but defiantly and elusively non-moral, the Master reduces some of the most difficult human decisions (such as the choice of whether to leave home and go off to battle, and the decision between befriending or killing his Irish cohort Burke) to the mere flip of a coin. Because he operates purely according to chance, he is with action but without motive. Like Marlow’s “heart of darkness” or Schopenhauer’s “unstable phantom,” the Master may function as a center, but he himself has no center. His cause, as Stevenson goes to great lengths to tell us, is rooted only in the causelessness of the world outside of his own will—the world of idea and chance. As Stevenson explains in letters to his friends on several occasions during his completion of the novel, the real source of the Master’s evil is his “causeless duplicity.”<sup>14</sup>

In an 1888 letter to Henry James, Stevenson further explains the nature of the novel and its mysterious main character:

The older brother goes out in the '45, the younger brother stays; the younger, of course, gets title and estate and marries the bride of the elder—a family match, but he (the younger) has always loved her, and she had really loved the elder. Do you see the situation?... I wonder if I have not gone too far with the fantastic? The elder brother is an INCUBUS; supposed to be killed at Culloden, he turns up again and bleeds the family money; on that stopping he comes and lives with them, whence flows the real tragedy, the nocturnal duel of the brothers (very naturally, and, I

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<sup>13</sup>Quoted in Kiely, p. 204.

<sup>14</sup>Letter to E. L. Burlingame, in *Letters and Miscellanies of Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Sidney Colvin. 4 vols. (New York, 1909), II, 173. Henceforth Colvin.



think, inevitably arising), and second supposed death of the elder. Husband and wife now really make up, and then the cloven hoof appears. For the third supposed death and the manner of the third reappearance is steep; steep, sir. It is even very steep, and I fear it shames the honest stuff so far; but then it is highly pictorial [*sic*], and it leads up to the death of the elder brother at the hands of the younger in a perfect cold-blooded murder of which I wish (and mean) the reader to approve. You see how daring is the design (Colvin, II, 116).

One of the many important things Stevenson brings up in this letter is the concept of the incubus. His energetic capitalization of the word shows his attachment to it as a *mot juste* to describe the Master. Stevenson is clearly using the term in its mythological sense, because the Master is indeed an incubus. He returns twice from supposed death to torment his younger brother and Mackellar, becoming the source of their nightmares. More important to the relationship between the Master and the narrative that tries to capture him, however, is the fact that the incubus, while tormenting the dreamer, is not actually part of, nor does it exist within, the dream itself. That is, the dreamer is affected by the incubus, but can't grasp it. The incubus exists outside the dream world, yet it controls the dream. The person whom the incubus torments can sense, or feel the effects of, the spirit, but cannot confront the reality of it. Thus the Master, the incubus that is simultaneously within and outside of Mackellar's tale, is also the unavoidable agent of its deconstruction.

In fact, one of the novels' repeated themes is the way in which the Master constantly deconstructs Mackellar's attempts to pin him down to a single cause or evil motive. Journeying with the Master to the fateful destination of the Adirondack wilderness, Mackellar tries to fight off his growing inclination towards compassion and respect for the evil man. He wants desperately to maintain his initial belief in the binary opposition between the two brothers. As he tells Ballantrae, "you weary me with claiming my respect. Your brother is a good man, and you are a bad one—neither more nor less" (*Master*, p. 191). But the easy distinction of good and bad is one that the Master constantly subverts. He further frustrates Mackellar's attempt to unveil his true nature by bringing up the simple fact of his ambivalence to such moral binarism. "Ah! Mackellar," say the Master,

You might live a thousand years and never understand my nature...it began between [Henry and me] we span a coin in the hall of Durrisdeer, now twenty years ago...and as for me, when my glove is cast, life and honor go with it...there is the bottom of your contention (p. 190).

When Mackellar concludes that the one word to describe the Master's "great force of evil" is "vanity," the Master deconstructs the false hierarchy of terms in Mackellar's argument. "There are double words for everything," replies the Master,

The word that swells, the word that belittles; you cannot fight me with a word! .... It is your pretension to be *un homme de parole*; 'tis mine not to accept defeat. Call it vanity, call it virtue, call it greatness of soul—what signifies the expression? But recognize in each of us a common strain: that we both live for an idea (p. 192).

The key word is “idea,” which the Master uses to mean something like Schopenhauer’s “idea.” The Master clearly operates according to the unknowable and unalterable patterns of chance or idea. Mackellar’s idea is really that he is constantly concerned with wills (especially the one that he believes lies at the heart of the Master). But, as the Master says, trying to know him is as futile a thing as trying to know the world of idea. In fact, the act itself *is* an idea.

Mackellar’s error is that he is trying to give us a sort of parabolic reading of the Master (just as Marlow attempts to do with Kurtz’s final utterance) when it is evident that he, in his own experience, could never confirm such a reading. The manner in which Mackellar’s narrative begins with, and attempts to sustain, a particular definition of the Master—the manner in which he claims to know the Master as a text—is exactly what Deconstruction objects to in structuralist literary criticism and exactly what the Master himself disallows. As Jonathan Culler explains,

When one speaks of the structure of a literary work, one does so from a certain vantage point: one starts with a notion of the meaning or effects of a [text] and tries to identify the structures responsible for those effects. Possible configurations or patterns that make no contribution are rejected as irrelevant. That is to say, an intuitive understanding of the [text] functions as the ‘centre’... it is both a starting point and a limiting principle.<sup>15</sup>

Mackellar tries to pinpoint the Master’s evil will with a single word. He tries to find the central core of the Master, but the Master quickly and easily reminds Mackellar that he is not a text that can be so easily read. His duplicity is his duality, and both are causeless or arbitrary. Therefore, as the Master says, the expression of his central self can not be signified. And, as a result, neither can the essence of the text that bears his name.

The interesting thing is that after hearing the Master’s Derridean arguments, Mackellar completely changes his tone, and slips to the other side of his own argument. Mackellar is touched by the Master’s quick repartee and now explains to us that he saw a new side of the Master. Still reporting with the air of truth, he explains that

Such was again the *fact*...that we now lived together upon excellent terms.... I am, perhaps, the more a dupe of his dissimulation, but I believed (and I still believe) that

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<sup>15</sup>Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, NY, 1975), p. 244.

he regarded me with genuine kindness. *Singular and sad fact!* So soon as this change began, my animosity abated, and these haunting visions of my master passed utterly away (p. 193; my italics)

In less than a page, Mackellar has changed from believing in the truth of the Master's evil vanity, to the "singular and sad fact" that the Master had treated him with "genuine kindness." Mackellar believes that perhaps behind the veil of black dissimulation is a center of some good, when all he has really unveiled is the Master's ambivalence, and his lack of concern for outcomes or inquests. In searching for the cause of the will he has only rediscovered the idea, and the idea, as with Schopenhauer, doesn't give a damn. Unveiling unveils unveiling.

But the Master's causelessness does not merely torment Mackellar's narrative, it also begins to erode the physical health and psychological stability of Mackellar and the entire Durrisdeer family. In fact, the manner in which Henry, Alison, Mackellar and Lord Durrisdeer lose their health and their sanity trying to understand Ballantrae's inexplicable evil is a frightening representation of the psychological and physical deterioration that results when we must confront, and attempt to live in spite of, the pure ambivalence of an entity or cause that we need to be purposeful to sustain or substantiate our own sense of the rational. When the Master first returns to Durrisdeer, he constantly and casually alters his attitude depending on present company. At first, he displays respect and seeming honesty towards his father and Henry's wife, Alison, convincing them of his generosity and good intent. But whenever Alison and Lord Durrisdeer are out of the room, Ballantrae torments Henry and Mackellar by calling them names and nonchalantly explaining to them both how he plans to drain the family of money and steal back the favor of Alison. Alison and Lord Durrisdeer are won over by the Master's seeming generosity, while Henry and Mackellar become enraged to the point of insanity by his duplicity. Ironically, everyone in the house changes as a result of the Master's ambivalence to change, or changing. For the Master, good and evil, kindness and hatred, or any other moral dichotomies, are simple matters of chance and easy manipulation—the one will serve as well as the other. Like Eliot's emotionless poet, the Master is an artist completely detached from his mysterious work. For every character change, the Master acts purely as catalyst. At the center of the family, and the novel, he is pure idea. Everyone else is pure will, and their constant need for identification of his will, his center, causes them (literally) to deteriorate.

After the midnight duel in which Henry supposedly kills James, Henry begins to drift from his own identity and eventually deteriorates to a shell of his former self. As Mackellar notes:

The whole thing marked a change, very slight yet perceptible; and though no man could say my master [Henry] had gone at all out of his mind, no man could deny that he had drifted from his character (*Master*, p. 134).

After it is confirmed that the Master is still alive, and planning his second return to Durrisdeer, the reticent, submissive Henry undergoes another complete change in character—he becomes a man possessed. Now unhealthily obsessed with revenge, he sacrifices all other human concerns in favor of plotting a way to murder his brother. Again, the catalyst of this change is the Master's charming ambivalence. Everything and everyone changes as a pure factor of his presence or absence. Thus it is not just Mackellar, but every character in the book including the character of the narration and the text itself, that are "dupes of his dissimulation."

By the time Stevenson finally decided on a way to the end *The Master of Ballantrae*, he himself had become enslaved by the paradox of forming some kind of conclusion about the Master. As he wrote to E. L. Burlingame in April, 1889,

I am quite worked out, and this cursed end of *The Master* hangs over me like the arm of the gallows; but it is always darkest before dawn, and no doubt the clouds will soon rise; but it is a difficult thing to write, above all in Mackellarese; and I cannot yet see my way clear. If I pull this off, *The Master* will be a pretty good novel or I am the more deceived; and even if I don't pull it off, it'll still have some stuff in it (Colvin, II, 116).

The Master, ever elusive to the characters in the story, had become elusive to Stevenson himself, and the irony is that this was largely due, as Stevenson explains, to his own narrator. By entrusting the narrative to a man of questionable bias, and by employing several narrators and editors whose degree of influence on the story is ultimately unknowable, he had written himself into a corner as to how to end his novel with a "murder that I hope (and mean) the reader to approve" (Colvin, II, 116). But the approval Stevenson wants us to give is not much different than the assumption Mackellar makes from the beginning that the Master (ultimately killed by his brother Henry) is the personification of evil. The final murder scene does show some anxiety on Stevenson's part, for he ends up having Mackellar tell the bizarre story of the Native American Secundra Dass's live burial of the Master in New York State by piecing together the accounts of three other men. Ultimately, then, the climactic ending is perhaps even more steeped in confusion than the rest of the novel. The interesting thing is that Mackellar does reclaim narrative control when he dictates to one of the men in the expedition party what to engrave on the tombstones of the two brothers. The inscriptions serve as the final words of the novel, and Mackellar literally gets the last word. But because the end concerns the fourth death of the Master, there can be no denouement, nor can there be tragedy. The final attempt to put a superscription and a seal on the Master's life is no more successful than any previous attempt to frame him because death, in *The Master of Ballantrae*, is the farthest thing from certainty.

Irving Saposnik calls *The Master of Ballantrae* "an intricately developed narrative" that stands alone as "the fullest achievement of Stevenson's narrative art." However, he concludes that the "failure" of the novel is the manner in which its "multiple ambivalences" and "paradoxical attitudes" ultimately rendered the novel "dramatically inconclusive."<sup>16</sup> What I find interesting is that there are no better words to describe the evil James Durie than ambivalent, paradoxical, and inconclusive. The brilliant connection in this text between the tale and the telling is not simply the Master himself, but the mystifying inconclusiveness that he represents. Just as his elusive, unflappable ambivalence to authority and human sentimentality is an odd brand of psychological evil that infects his family, his brother, and the narrator himself, so too is the entire tale infected by the inexplicable inconclusiveness that he represents. Since this problem anticipates a decidedly modern concern over the relationship between experience and truth, and since it looks forward to the haunting psychodynamics of subjective uncertainty that characterize *Heart of Darkness*, I think it is time to reevaluate what the novel's dramatic inconclusiveness might mean to us and to Stevenson studies.

We ought to celebrate the fact that, like the Master himself, this essentially Romantic tale is an entity that at once justifies and defies its own telling—it simultaneously can and can't be told. As Stevenson writes in "A Gossip on Romance,"

There is a vast deal in life and letters both which is not immoral, but simply non-moral; which either does not regard the human *will* at all, or deals with it in obvious and healthy relations; where the interest turns not on what a man shall choose to do, but on how he manages to do it; not on the passionate *slips* and hesitations of conscience, but on the problems...of the practical intelligence<sup>17</sup> (my italics).

Embedded in this letter is the very reason Stevenson would later have trouble finishing *The Master*. In James Durie, Master of Ballantrae, he had created the perfect non-moral character—an entity, or concept, that the conventions and borders of his own text would not allow. In fact, the Master reveals much about the problems that follow hard upon the celebrated non-morality of Kant's moment of disinterestedness. The only thing Ballantrae finally stands for is the very impossibility of representing disinterest. Perhaps even more decisively than Conrad's horrifying heart of darkness, he is the unstable phantom, the irrational center, that is at once within and outside of the self and the text. Both character and text of *The Master* (for they are ultimately unseverable) represent the central desire that simultaneously informs and undermines

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<sup>16</sup>Irving Saposnik, *Robert Louis Stevenson* (New York, 1974), p. 119.

<sup>17</sup>Stevenson, Robert Louis, "A Gossip on Romance" in *Selected Poetry and Prose of Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Bradford Booth (Boston, 1968), p. 56.

the attempt to create, capture and sustain the character or essence of non-morality or disinterestedness.

The Master of Ballantrae is a perfect metaphor for the text that bears his name, and in fact the selection of his name for the title is the final (or initial) irony of the book. The title actually subverts the Victorian practice of naming a text after the central character whose life (whose self) is to be the focus of the text, and the inner truth about whom is assumed to be the center of the text itself. But as we have seen with *The Master*, such knowledge is unobtainable, not because the text obscures the self that it professes to be about, or even the author's self, but because it is that self—the unknowable self. Thus we might hold up Stevenson's text even higher than Conrad's as a textual paradigm of Schopenhauer's ungraspable phantom, and the irreversible stride into the epistemological abyss of modernism that it represents. Of greater importance than deciding which text to nominate, however, is the fact that both a canonical and a marginal novel from the late nineteenth century can serve to advance the same thesis concerning the psychological problems of the modern novel and the waning authority of its narrators. While the Great War and the explosion of technology in early twentieth-century Europe had a tremendous effect on narrative poetics, so too did the psychological crisis of self-knowledge through representation. In the latter case, one realizes the implausibility of absolutes and stable orthodoxy not by seeing them destroyed (or witnessing their self-destruction), but by trying to sustain them, and to speak in their language, after a personal confrontation with the unverifiable self. While this experience is no doubt also socially and historically motivated, it speaks more directly to a profoundly human moment of doubt, among whose many manifestations is the fundamental anxiety of presence embedded deep within the Western philosophical and literary tradition. A "moment" of pure uncertainty that occurs and recurs more randomly than things that come to be known as historical events; a moment in spite of which we can tell stories.

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