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Narrative Techniques in The Master of Ballantrae

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The Master of Ballantrae

Until recently, it has been unusual to speak of Robert Louis Stevenson as anything more than an eminent prose stylist, or a purveyor of adventure stories and children’s verses.¹ The Master of Ballantrae, generally regarded as his most polished and mature work, reveals Stevenson’s accomplishments in experimenting with narrative techniques. Henry James’ praise of the novel as “a pure, hard crystal . . . a work of ineffable and exquisite art”² was prompted by its elegant prose; but he could hardly have overlooked the complex point of view and the subtle effects it achieves.

Most of the novel is narrated by a meticulous and pedestrian Scottish bookkeeper who edits and corrects the account of one secondary narrator, paraphrases others, and is, in turn, subjected to the editing of Stevenson. Wayne C. Booth’s excellent analysis of the dangers of such complex narration contains a caution against over-eager hunting for ambiguities, such as has been directed at The Turn of the Screw.³ But Stevenson avoids confusion despite the complicated expository scheme, and even achieves effects impossible in more direct narration. Stevenson admitted that the narrative scheme was an after-thought to the tale as he had originally conceived it: a confidant was needed for Mr. Henry.⁴ But he further observed that Mackellar grew to a full character who provided unexpected advantages, particularly a trace of comedy in an otherwise somber atmosphere. Mackellar also enabled Stevenson to view Alison from the outside, thus covering his difficulty in creating be-


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believable women characters and enabling him discreetly to pass over the immoral courtship of Alison by her brother-in-law, the Master of Ballantraе.⁵

But such a limited narrator as Mackellar posed a formidable problem when the adventurous passages set in America had to be related, and Stevenson complained of the difficulty of deciding whether or not to continue third person narration. In choosing to continue with Mackellar, the author admitted the book had suffered in "fire, force, and . . . large dramatic rhythm." To that estimate most readers would subscribe. But we must not ignore the other half of Stevenson's statement: the book "gained in relief and verisimilitude." The author admitted his worry over the choice of narrative technique made the book "a burthen and a nightmare," but concluded that he had succeeded and that the public would recognize his achievement.⁶

Surely, verisimilitude is the most obvious result of maintaining a specific point of view. In the preface Stevenson claims to have found papers of Ephraim Mackellar, who had instructed they not be opened for one hundred years, until 1889. Mackellar's point of view is faithfully sustained: he has observed most of what he narrates, including all the crucial domestic scenes; and what he reports at second hand he clearly labels as such, with phrases like "as John Paul told me," and swears to the authenticity of all he reports. Without question Mackellar is a reliable and conscientious family retainer; his loyalty to Henry is undeniable. Although he defends his employer against charges of stinginess, his remarks are necessarily qualified by his own parsimonious nature. On his first arrival at Durrisdeer, noticing the garden and trees he comments: "The money sunk here unproductively would have quite restored the family; but as it was, it cost a revenue to keep it up."⁷ Strangers found Mackellar ridiculous or even offensive, as his humiliating encounter with the traders indicates. Twice he reveals and admits his cowardice: before the duel between the Durie brothers, and when he attempts to kill the Master on the voyage to America. And although he is honest enough to admit his failings, they must affect the reliability of his narration. He is so upset at the threat on his life before the duel that he thinks the Master is dead and cannot detect a heartbeat; nor

⁵Ibid., p. 252.

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is the unnatural, eerie atmosphere he records inexplicable: his fear and confused emotions make him color the scene in unreal tones. Most striking is his tendency to moralize, for by passing on a series of moral judgments, Mackellar hopes to make coherent the events he has witnessed. The final interpretation he derives from the suffering of the Duries is not optimistic; approaching the grave of the Master, he remarks: "I could not but think of him as somehow fortunate to be thus done with man's anxiety and weariness, the daily expense of spirit, and that daily river of circumstance to be swum through, at any hazard, under the penalty of shame or death." (p. 242.) He even wishes Henry would also be relieved of his obsession by death.  

At the very start Mackellar announces his intention in writing this tale: "the world has long been looking for... the full truth of this odd matter," and he hopes for peace and relief "when the debt is paid." He is fair in revealing his complicity in the action, even when it embarrasses him to describe his own cowardice or foolishness. But he is never unbiased. One representative statement reveals both the difficulty of his task and his failure to be objective: early in the book, describing Henry's unhappiness, he admits: "My pet is clear enough to tell a plain tale; but to render the effect of an infinity of small things, not one great enough in itself to be narrated; and to translate the story of looks, and the message of voices when they are saying no great matter; and to put in half a page the essence of nearly eighteen months—this is what I despair to accomplish. The fault, to be very blunt, lay all in Mrs. Henry." (p. 23.) Not all of Mackellar's contradictions are as unabashed as that; although her self-pity and continued love of James do contribute to the suffering of Henry, Alison cannot fairly be so accused.

Mackellar's bias accounts for the repeated slanted interpretations and aspersions on the characters of everyone other than Henry. James, the Master of Ballantrae, is most severely handled. Mackellar tries to recognize the obvious abilities of his admitted enemy: his charm, his skill in handling others, his intelligence and wit; but he checks every compliment with a disparagement. And when he runs out of real faults, he resorts to rumor. The first time he describes James, he maligns his character by mentioning (or is it not mentioning?), a slander: "One very black mark he had to his name; but the matter was hushed up at the time, and so defaced by legends before I came into those parts, that I scruple to set it down. If it was true, it was a horrid fact in one

*This sentiment is expressed elsewhere in Stevenson's works also. See Elgner, p. 48.
so young; and if false, it was a horrid calumny." (p. 5.) The judicious reader tends to disregard all such malicious attacks, not always an easy task due to the persuasive force of Mackellar’s innuendo. Stevenson’s technique here is quite complex: by employing undocumented rumor, he seems to force the reader’s skepticism; the very vagueness of his claim, and the smug tone of its utterance make us question Mackellar’s integrity. This occurs in the very first pages of the book; later, when Mackellar goes through the Master’s private papers, with much glee and little suspicion of guilt, our estimate of him is more emphatically lowered. In other words, it is made clear to the reader that the narrator is employing underhanded methods in presenting the characters. This narrator is not merely non-objective and involved; he is downright crafty. Recognizing this, the reader is forced from the very beginning to question and check all of Mackellar’s estimates of characters. Later in the novel, in the episode set in America, Mackellar is more reliable; but even then, the reader must constantly revise his own understanding of the characters as he succeeds in seeing through the narrator’s prejudices and shortsightedness.

Mackellar’s malice to James is not without motivation; the Master is revengeful, merciless, and perhaps even diabolical in his treatment of his brother. In his early dealings with the Master, Mackellar feels excluded from his usual intimate place in the Durie family, and he is jealous of the newcomer. James does not treat him with much consideration either: he makes the older man carry his luggage, a most degrading chore in the eyes of the professional family employee. But later, during their voyage to New York, the two men achieve better understanding of each other and Mackellar has to admit he has been won over by the Master. However, in this crucial scene, Mackellar neglects to record in any detail his changed attitude toward his enemy. The Master argues that he was not always the villain he now appears to be, and could have been better had he met a friend like Mackellar. Suspicious as that claim may be, it deserves some consideration as a clue to the Master’s character; but Mackellar merely dismisses it and other attempts at self-justification as having “wrestled” him throughout the voyage. The closest we come to an unfiltered insight into the Master reveals almost insurmountable complexity; when Mackellar diagnoses the Master’s passion as vanity, he is corrected: “Oh! there are double words for everything: 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?

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But recognize in each of us a common strain: that we both live for an idea." (p. 188.) Mackellar recognizes that the Master defies neat analysis; he proposes four possible motives for James’s actions: love of Alison, animosity to Henry, self-interest, and sheer malice; of course, he favors the last three as explanations. As a result of Mackellar’s overpowering antipathy to the Master we are never given sufficient information to understand this crucial character.

In spite of Mackellar’s admitted sympathy for Henry, our picture of him is not much more complete. We are told that although few people in the country knew Henry, he had the reputation of being a tyrant and miser. Mackellar insists the popular estimate is not just, and explains how even Alison and Lord Durrisdeer would misinterpret his quietness or his necessary attention to their finances. But again, it is always Mackellar telling us what to believe; rarely do we see Henry in action; rarely are we enabled to make our own interpretations. Ultimately Henry, like his brother, defies any simple analysis and even Mackellar has to conclude that his lord’s insistent revenge cannot be rationally explained. He admits Henry is not sane, “but there are degrees in madness.” (p. 238.)

Leslie Stephen cites Henry as evidence of Stevenson’s limitations in portraying characters: “I do not think, to speak frankly, that any novelist of power comparable to his has created so few living and attractive characters.” His difficulty in creating believable women characters was admitted by Stevenson. However, even though she is not vivacious, Alison does perform a valuable function in revealing Mackellar’s character. The narrator’s description of her is skeletal: “a near kinswoman, an orphan, . . . the heir to a considerable fortune . . . a comely girl . . . very spirited and self-willed.” (p. 5.) Mackellar is admittedly biased against her; he found her condescending, “so that, upon all accounts, I kept her in the third place of my esteem.” (p. 16.) Although he feels sorry for her when she is mistreated by her husband, he cannot conceal his prejudice against women: “I have never had much toleration for the female sex, possibly not much understanding”; “I think there is a devil in women”; “I had never much natural sympathy for the passion of love” (pp. 73-74).

The Durrisdeer brothers and Alison, then, are incomplete portraits; but there has emerged a single motivated and understandable character: the narrator, Mackellar. He, rather than the title character or Henry,

has been revealed by the record of events set down in the novel. The complexity of his character is revealed by his prejudices and his inability to achieve the task he has set for himself.

Mackellar does more than just interpret the characters and action for the reader; he even directs the plot. In a household pervaded by mistrust and misunderstanding, Mackellar assumes the task of informing members of the family what is happening, not without regular admonitions of their failures to each other. Although this is helpful in some cases, and appreciated by Henry, he is once admonished for doing so by Alison. She detects the cruelty implicit in Mackellar's advice to Henry against spoiling his son, and she is accurate in calling him an "old maid." He acts as a moral guide to Henry when he reproves him for hating his brother, although Mackellar admits forgiveness is beyond his own power. No matter what good intentions he has, he certainly exceeds propriety when he offers the Master a bribe to leave after his employer had asked him not to do so. This involvement in the plot, added to his assertive personality, prevents Mackellar from being an unbiased narrator.10

An unreliable narrator presents most of the plot; there are also secondary narrators to be considered. The most striking of these is the Chevalier Burke, who supplies additional and sometimes contradictory information. Burke characterizes himself as "just an Irish savage," but in his pride and attractiveness he is like Thackeray's Barry Lyndon. When Mackellar asked him for an account of his experiences with the Master, his reply was a complete memoir of his life. The reliability of the account is open to question: it is written years after the events he describes (as is Mackellar's tale), and it is highly colored by Burke. The Irishman romanticizes the narrative, likening it to Arthurian romance and even to Homer. More emphatically than Mackellar, he imposes a religious tone upon his subject; when he and the Master meet a dissolution pirate, Burke, with unconscious irony, remarks on the "Divine blessing" which guided them. Like Mackellar's moralizing, Burke's is transparent and excessive. When he claims that Henry and Alison were married at the very time he and the Master landed in New York and mentioned her name, he concludes, "the hand of Providence is here displayed too openly not to be remarked." (pp. 61-62.) But in this typical piece of exaggeration, Mackellar corrects Burke forcefully, calling the claim of coincidence "a complete blunder";

10Robert Kiely argues that Mackellar becomes less reliable as he leaves the security of home; he never succeeds in understanding the Master (p. 217). He is never, however, merely an "uninvolved narrator." c.f. Eiguer, p. 173.
the date was wrong by months. Here, and in other footnotes, Mackellar edits the narration of Burke so that an unreliable narrator is corrected by an equally suspect one. The most presumptuous deletion of Burke’s account by Mackellar reveals the extent of his bias. He breaks off the memoirs at the quarrel with the Master because “the Chevalier’s account of the quarrel seems to me (I must confess) quite incompatible with either of the men.” (pp. 63-64.) He cites his own knowledge of James as evidence that he was not as Burke pictures him. But what evidence is there to support Mackellar’s claim to superior insight? Biased and proud though Burke is, he did go through hardships with the Master and could just as well discern his real character as could Mackellar, the admitted enemy of James. An even more complicated scheme occurs later, when Burke deletes part of his own memoirs, apparently because it would offend Mackellar, his intended reader. Even though the material omitted may have been irrelevant, the rhetoric employed by Burke in directing his account at Mackellar would affect the account he presents.

When Stevenson reached the last episodes of the novel, it became clear that Mackellar could not easily narrate the adventures of the Master in searching for the buried treasure. A third narrator would have been cumbersome, he recognized, so he decided to continue with Mackellar, by having him summarize the account of one of the Master’s party, Mountain, supplemented by facts derived from conversations with Mountain and Secundra Dass. Here tertiary narratives are digested and interpreted by Mackellar. By this point, the chances of reliability dwindle severely; both Mountain and Dass were involved in what they tell; therefore, it is unlikely that they would speak objectively. Furthermore, Dass, at least, would tend to favor the Master because of their close relationship.

The multiplicity of narrators makes the task of deciding the truth about the plot and the characters extremely difficult. But there is added still another level of complexity: the intervention by Stevenson himself. Like Mackellar, he edits the reports at his disposal with the intention of producing a certain kind of story. He goes as far as omitting five pages of Mackellar’s narrative, and justifies it as consideration for the character of Alexander, Henry’s son. His only comment on their contents is: “I have gathered from their perusal an impression that Mr. Mackellar, in his old age, was rather an exacting servant.” (p. 138.) Stevenson’s intention here may have been to add details which would authenticate the whole narrative; however, in doing so, he opens to question the entire account of Mackellar and the subservient narrators.
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The chain of narration may now be traced: Stevenson edits the report of Mackellar, who, in turn, quotes and edits Burke’s account, which is already cut by its author; Mackellar also paraphrases and corrects the reports of Mountain and Secundra Dass, who, in turn, are not unbiased.

Employing such a complex narrative technique involves risks. The confusion of distance from which the various narrators relate their accounts is the greatest of the hazards. To overcome unnecessary confusion, Stevenson supplies checks on Mackellar’s account in his own admission of his failings and in Burke’s comments, which result in a more attractive picture of the title character. In addition, Mackellar admits his own indecision: although he ascribes malicious intentions to the Master, and finds fault with Alison, at other times he reveals sympathy for them both. The compensating advantages of Stevenson’s technique are greater than the risks. In a letter to Henry James, Stevenson expressed his fear that the novel, particularly in the last episode, would seem fantastic. By employing Mackellar as narrator, he hoped to make the whole plot more credible. In this task he succeeded, for Mackellar contributes a saving sanity to the highly emotional events he records. He imposes a moral tone upon all he relates which, even when he derives moral conclusions not shared by the reader or the author, does form and unify the series of incidents. The moral scheme is not simply imposed by Stevenson through authorial intrusions, but made viable because it is expressed by an active character in the novel. Furthermore, this narrator is sensible, even pedestrian, and tempers the violence of the main characters in the novel, a technique seen also in Wuthering Heights. A single observer makes the action more pictorial and dramatic, because he can record his own impressions and emotions as well as the bare facts. Such a narrative scheme avoids the risk of the reader sympathizing with the very attractive villain by reminding us of his immorality and even hinting at a diabolical nature.

But ultimately, the complex narrative technique has a greater effect: it conveys, quite realistically, the complexity of the author’s own task: the process of narrating. It is surely this which Stevenson refers to in

David Daiches objects that several narrators are not necessary, since Burke and Mountain both have styles similar to Mackellar’s (p. 83). However, Burke’s style is more romantic and adulterous, and far more decorated with similes than Mackellar’s simple prose. Mountain is not quoted directly. Furthermore, the various accounts do provide checks on Mackellar’s version, and are, therefore, useful.


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the note appended to the novel: "The realism I love is that of method; not only that all in a story may possibly have come to pass, but that all might naturally be recorded—a realism that justifies the book itself as well as the fable it commemorates." (p. 253.) Through Mackellar, the single rounded and challenging character, are revealed the difficulties of his own craft: the problems of organization, the friction between fact and the irrepressible force of bias, and even the subtle discrepancy between explicit moral theme and implicit attractions to disorder and evil.

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