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## AUTHORITY AND THE NARRATIVE VOICE IN STEVENSON'S *WEIR OF HERMISTON*

*Gillian Hughes*

The significance of Stevenson's *Weir of Hermiston* is out of all proportion to its length and its unfinished state, partly because it stands as a transitional work in the history of the British (and particularly of the Scottish) novel, forming a bridge between landmark Victorian texts and those of the early twentieth century such as D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913) and Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Sunset Song* (1932). A number of critics have commented on Stevenson's work as a bridge to modernism: Alan Sandison, for instance, describes *Weir of Hermiston* as "a text finely balanced on the brink of dissolution," one which displays instability and evanescence "even in the art of narrative," while Stuart Kelly claims that for Stevenson reality is "too complex to be transcribed," an understanding which he sees as at the root of Stevenson's dispute with Henry James in the essay "A Humble Remonstrance."<sup>1</sup> An aspect of this historic position that repays further attention is Stevenson's development of the narrative voice in *Weir of Hermiston*, especially appropriate for a

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Sandison, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Appearance of Modernism: A Future Feeling* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 369-70; Stuart Kelly, "Plot, narrative and artifice: Walter Scott to Thomas Pynchon via RLS," *Journal of Stevenson Studies*, 8 (2011), 43. Penny Fielding, in her *Writing and Orality: Nationality, Culture, and Nineteenth-Century Scottish Fiction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 190, describes the novel's narration as standing "between the outward confidence of the nineteenth-century realist narrator, and the uncertain narrative voices of the early twentieth century." I am grateful to Penny Fielding for reading and commenting on this article in draft, and to the editors of *Studies in Scottish Literature* for further helpful suggestions.

novel where a son rebels against his father, since the narrator's relationship to the reader is traditionally one of authority.

One of Stevenson's acknowledged fathers in the novel was obviously Walter Scott, whose Waverley Novels he had known from childhood or adolescence. In his essay "A Gossip on a Novel of Dumas's," Stevenson precedes his declaration that he has read *Vicomte de Bragelonne* five or six times, by stating "How often I have read *Guy Mannering*, *Rob Roy*, or *Redgauntlet*, I have no means of guessing, having begun young."<sup>2</sup> Although Stevenson was a fluent and attentive reader in French and the sophistication of his narrative voice obviously relates to developments in the French novel from Balzac to Flaubert and Maupassant, it is also Scott that he sees as the originating point for his complaint about the increasing focus on detail in narrative during the preceding half-century in "A Note on Realism," even though Zola is its most characteristic exponent:

After Scott we beheld the starveling story ... begin to be pampered upon facts. The introduction of these details developed a particular ability of hand; and that ability, childishly indulged, has led to the works that now amaze us on a railway journey. A man of the unquestionable force of M. Zola spends himself on technical success.<sup>3</sup>

Of the two novels left unfinished at Stevenson's death indeed Saverio Tomaiuolo sees *St Ives* as a tribute to Dumas, while in *Weir of Hermiston* Scott is both a fictional character and a literary model.<sup>4</sup> This essay explores Stevenson's varying acceptance of and relationship to the notion of narrative authority in *Weir of Hermiston* through comparison with Scott and some of the British novelists who followed him.

Scott often provides an omniscient and analytical narrator, a sort of guide and chorus who describes at a remove what the characters are thinking and feeling, and distinguishes between this and what they may be conscious of thinking and feeling, sometimes in a mood of Olympian detachment. When Nigel Olifaunt, Lord Glenvarloch in *The Fortunes of Nigel*, for instance, is left alone by Martha Trapbois to reflect upon the advice she has given him, Scott's narrator justifies his decision to

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<sup>2</sup> "A Gossip on a Novel of Dumas's," *Memories and Portraits* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1887), 230.

<sup>3</sup> "A Note on Realism," *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson* [Edinburgh Edition], 28 vols (London: Chatto & Windus, 1894-98), XI, 228.

<sup>4</sup> Saverio Tomaiuolo, "The Strange Case of *Weir of Hermiston* and *St. Ives*: R. L. Stevenson's Last Adventures in Narration," *Journal of Stevenson Studies*, 8 (2011), 50, 59.

represent these reflections as a soliloquy, “a more concise and spirited mode of communicating” the information that in a novel might more usually be conveyed in narrative, but without abrogating his narrator’s authority. He is not at all unsure what these thoughts consist of, and also makes it clear that

I myself chuse to present to my dearest reader the pictures of my hero’s mind, his reflections and resolutions, in the form of a speech, rather than in that of a narrative ... and therefore thus communed, or thus might have communed, the Lord of Glenvarloch with his own mind.<sup>5</sup>

Many critics have been bemused by Stevenson’s very different and distinctly uncertain narrator in *Weir of Hermiston*.<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Simpson, in a fine close analysis of the novel, argues that “for all his readiness to pronounce with what seems to be authority, Stevenson is able to demonstrate that his narrator is far from being infallible,” noting that the word “perhaps” is used with remarkable frequency. He also shows that Stevenson makes his narrator acknowledge his fallibility quite openly on occasion. Simpson argues that Stevenson has deliberately created in his narration a “tension between apparent omniscience and personalization” that invites the reader to ponder and weigh the identity of the narrative voice as another instance of the limitations of human judgement (in his view the controlling concern of the novel), but that this method of narration nevertheless “creates problems for Stevenson the further the narrative advances” in controlling so much fluctuation, both in the attitude of the narrator to his subject and in the relationship of Stevenson and his narrator.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Scott, *The Fortunes of Nigel*, ed. Frank Jordan [Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels 13] (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 246 (Vol. 2, Ch. 11).

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Kerrigan, for instance, in the Introduction to her Centenary Edition of *Weir of Hermiston* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), xxv-xxvii, summarises earlier discussion of the inconsistent and variable identities of Stevenson’s narrator and posits possible revelations that might come in later chapters had Stevenson lived to complete and revise the novel.

<sup>7</sup> K. G. Simpson, “Author and Narrator in *Weir of Hermiston*,” in *Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Andrew Noble (London: Vision; New York: Barnes and Noble, 1983), 211, 207.

While in some places Stevenson's narrator in *Weir of Hermiston* is the conventional guide who must "guard the reader" from misinterpretation,<sup>8</sup> at others he is engaged in a process of forming a hypothesis, testing and qualifying it, before giving a definite interpretation. He gives the impression that his judgements are often merely provisional and in the process of being thoroughly worked out. He proffers successive explanations, almost as if his account is being formulated only in the moment of pen moving over paper. Frank Innes's lack of an ally among the Hermiston folk, for instance, is initially attributed to his habitual attempts to form a league with one or another of them against Archie Weir, ignorant of their sensitive affection and respect for him. But after recounting Frank's encounter with Dandie Elliott the narrator changes his view with a conversational, "Come to think of it, we have here perhaps a truer explanation of Frank's failures," his condescension towards the Scots peasantry. Frank's social success with the local gentry is detailed next as "proof of this theory" (214-15).

The immediate impression that Stevenson himself is writing to the moment and working out the significance of events only in the process of composing successive sentences is, of course, radically mistaken. Stevenson was a meticulous and compulsive rewriter, and his correspondence shows that in composing *Weir of Hermiston* he made many strenuous attempts to arrange his ideas and materials to best effect. Writing to Sidney Colvin towards the close of 1892, for instance, he stated, "With incredible labour, I have rewritten the First Chapter ..., it took me about ten days, and requires another athletic dressing after all."<sup>9</sup> In witness of his efforts there is a mass of surviving draft material for the

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *Weir of Hermiston: An Unfinished Romance* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1896), 210. The present author's research for an edition of *Weir of Hermiston* in the New Edinburgh Edition of the Works of Robert Louis Stevenson has demonstrated how considerably Sidney Colvin altered Stevenson's work for its posthumous publication. For convenience, the first edition is generally cited throughout this article. Stevenson's final manuscript, which served as copy for the first edition, is now in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University: GEN MSS 664, Box 45, Folder 1011; where this differs significantly from the published text, it is referenced instead, by page number and using the abbreviation 'MS'.

<sup>9</sup> *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Mehew, 8 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994-5), VII, 461.

novel.<sup>10</sup> His published statements about the art of fiction show that his theory reinforced his natural impulse to revise and pare down. He advises a young author, for instance, in his essay "A Humble Remonstrance" to "allow neither himself in the narrative nor any character in the course of the dialogue, to utter one sentence that is not part and parcel of the business of the story or the discussion of the problem involved."<sup>11</sup> From this it must be assumed that it is the narrator whose view of Frank's failure with the Hermiston folk is provisional and only in the course of being thoroughly worked out and not Stevenson's.

In some respects Stevenson's narrative persona in *Weir of Hermiston* resembles that of some of his earlier essays. "In the absence of more magisterial teaching," he had written in *Virginibus Puerisque*, "let us talk it over between friends."<sup>12</sup> As Glenda Norquay indicates, Stevenson distinguished in his essays on the novel between a definite and powerful artistic impression and the difficulty, or sometimes even the impossibility, of embodying ideas in analytical words.<sup>13</sup> Stevenson's narrator is colloquial and conversational, asking "Has the reader caught the idea?" (MS, 167), and catching himself up quickly when about to use a conventional but inappropriate term to describe a monument, which "commemorated, I was about to say the virtues, but rather the existence of a former Rutherford of Hermiston" (155).

Although there are ample reminders that this is a historical novel, written in the early 1890s but describing a Scotland of roughly eighty years previously, the narrator also from time to time discusses an individual character almost as a contemporary acquaintance. Innes, he explains, "offered you an alliance against the some one else; he flattered you by slighting him; you were drawn into a small intrigue against him before you knew how" (212). In approaching Hermiston kirk up the sparsely-populated valley, the narrator supposes the reader to be virtually

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<sup>10</sup> The most substantial portion of this draft material is in the Morgan Library, New York (MA 1419, MA 993 with MA 1582), with smaller portions in six other institutions.

<sup>11</sup> "A Humble Remonstrance," in *Memories & Portraits* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1887), 296.

<sup>12</sup> "Virginibus Puerisque. Part I," in *Virginibus Puerisque and Other Papers* (London: C. Kegan Paul, 1881), 13.

<sup>13</sup> See the section "Realism and Romance," in her Introduction to *R. L. Stevenson on Fiction: An Anthology of Literary and Critical Essays* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 4-9.

present and sharing his experience when he states "by the time you came that length, you would scarce be surprised at the inimitable smallness of the kirk" (98-9).

This communal experience of reader and narrator is probably at its strongest when Archie appears at a meeting of Edinburgh's Speculative Society: experiencing its rooms is said to be an experience common to narrator and reader in the present and to Archie in the historical past:

He sat in the same room; only the portraits were not there—those now represented were then but beginning their career; the same lustre of many tapers shed its light over the meeting; the same chair perhaps supported him that so many of us have sat in since (MS, 46).

Here the narrator is marked as, like Archie and his associates, an educated member of Edinburgh's legally-inflected society and this perspective is reinforced by the occasional use of French terms ("*lever de rideau*," 112), Latin words ("*ipsissimus*," 141), and references to classical literature ("that Homeric fight and chase," 126), and also by his tendency to refer to characters such as the elder Kirstie as "people of her class" (112). If the narrator's and reader's perspective are that of Archie in terms of class, however, they differ in terms of age and experience. The narrator posits

If I buy ancestors by the gross from the benevolence of Lion King at Arms, my grandson (if he is Scottish) will feel a quickening emulation of their deeds (MS, 94).

On the difficulty of an experienced narrator and reader comprehending Archie Weir's adolescent attitude to his father, he comments "we are all grown up and have forgotten the days of our youth" (45). While the narrator assumes a partial identity of perspective between himself, his reader, and his middle-class protagonist, this identity can never be complete.

Having this awareness, Stevenson's narrator is far more tentative than the magisterial narrator of Scott. His interpretation of Frank Innes's motivation in predicting a scandal is formulated using the phrases "I doubt" and "I think" (57), and he struggles to expound his meaning, language itself seeming at certain points of the story to be about to fail him. In attempting to describe young Kirstie's reflections in her attic bedroom he describes his task as "painting chaos and describing the inarticulate. Every lineament that appears is too precise, almost every word used too strong." In the simile that follows of the signpost in the mist the narrator positions himself as only slightly less remote from the

“definite and famous cities far distant” than the perturbed adolescent girl he describes (177). He subsequently admits to an inability to determine the mixture of motives for Frank’s immediate rivalry with Archie over young Kirstie: to detail these at all he needs “every manageable attenuation of language,” and in the end he confesses “the devil may decide the proportions! I cannot, and it is very likely that Frank could not” (230). Comprehension in both cases is evanescent and not a great deal more accessible to the awareness of the narrator of the novel than to that of the characters.

The nineteenth-century English novel tends to focus on middle-class characters in a narrative that itself employs their standard English.<sup>14</sup> While Thomas Hardy, for instance, has protagonists from a lower social class, they tend to be alienated from that class by education (like Ethelberta Petherwin in *The Hand of Ethelberta* or Jude Fawley in *Jude the Obscure*) and speak a standard English not far removed from that of the narrator. Even Gabriel Oak in *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), who has no aspirations to more learning than would improve his skills as shepherd and practical farmer, has speech which is clearly differentiated from that of his confreres at Warren’s Malthouse. This is even partially true of the heroines of George Gissing’s *Thyrza* (1887) or George Moore’s *Esther Waters* (1894): the middle-class voice of the narrator pulls that of the protagonist towards his own, despite a valiant attempt to portray a lower social class from the inside. Esther Waters’s tendency to drop her aitches and make grammatical errors is intermittent: when she is deeply moved she often expresses herself according to middle-class English standards of speech, as she does here, for instance, in her remorse at hurting her little son’s feelings by breaking the boat with which his father has tried to bribe his affections:

“You shall have another boat, my darling,” she said, leaning across the table and looking at him affectionately; “and quite as good as the one I broke.”

“Will you, mummie? One with three sails, cutter-rigged, like that?”

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<sup>14</sup> Joseph Childers discusses how even Victorian novels centring on representation of the plight of the urban industrial working-class, as well as serving as a bridge across the class divide between reader and subject, also “acted as a sort of *cordon sanitaire* insulating the middle classes”: see “Social class and the Victorian Novel,” *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Deirdre David, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 150.



"Yes, dear, you shall have a boat with three sails."

"And when will you buy me the boat, mummie—tomorrow?"

"As soon as I can, Jackie."<sup>15</sup>

This linguistic drag is perhaps less emphatic in the case of the Scottish novel, where demotic language was not so easily or exclusively interpreted as an ill-educated departure from a national standard. Ever since the Treaty of Union of 1707, Scottish national identity had been felt to be secured by a handful of characteristic institutions, most notably Scots law, Presbyterianism in religion, and the Scots language. The colossus of the nineteenth-century Scottish novel was Sir Walter Scott, who for Stevenson was "out and away the king of the romantics," an author encountered so early and so often as to have become part of the furniture of his mind.<sup>16</sup> Scott himself is referred to in *Weir of Hermiston* as having encouraged Lord Hermiston to plant trees on his estate (100) and as the inheritor of the creative spirit that made the Border ballads (126), and Stevenson's novel about the difficult relations between an Edinburgh lawyer father and his son undoubtedly owes something to *Redgauntlet*. The Scots-speaking characters in that novel include the precise old Edinburgh lawyer Saunders Fairford and his colleagues as well as smugglers, broken tradesmen, and peasants. And yet the privileged language of narration in *Redgauntlet*, as in Scott's other novels, is largely standard English or a Scots-inflected version of it, even in the first volume that is shaped as an epistolary novel. As young and aspiring professional men, Alan Fairford and Darsie Latimer, although they report the Scots speech of other characters, associate politeness and modernity with English.

The exception is where Darsie in his letters retails verbatim a narrative as spoken by the blind fiddler Willie Stevenson under the title of "Wandering Willie's Tale," a coruscating supernatural tale in Scots told by a Stevenson and an obvious model for Stevenson's own narrative style in passages such as the pursuit by the Four Black Brothers of their father's murderer in *Weir of Hermiston*. Stevenson seems to have been relatively unaware of James Hogg as a potential model, for Hogg's reputation reached its nadir in Stevenson's lifetime. Besides the travesty of the Shepherd in the *Noctes Ambrosianae*, Stevenson may have been

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<sup>15</sup> George Moore, *Esther Waters A Novel* (London: Walter Scott, 1894), 217 (Chapter XXVI).

<sup>16</sup> See "A Gossip on Romance," *Memories & Portraits*, 269.

acquainted with very little of Hogg's own work, although he had read *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*.<sup>17</sup>

Where Scott marked off his use of a Scots folk narrative in *Redgauntlet* from the educated English narrative of Darsie Latimer's letter by a heading in Gothic type at the beginning and a rule at its conclusion, Stevenson allowed his folk narrative to flow seamlessly in and out of the main narrative perspective. *Weir of Hermiston* begins, for instance, with two scene-setting paragraphs about the Weaver's stone that hold these modes together. The first describes the Presbyterian martyr thus commemorated as giving his life "in a glorious folly, and without comprehension or regret" (1), surely the judgement of a more distanced narrator, while the second expresses local opinion. The haunting of the place by "Francie" is given on the testimony of two unreliable people, Aggie Hogg and Rob Todd, "(if anyone could have believed Robbie)" (2), a circumstance that has given rise to an explanatory legend, a winter evening's tale for both young and old in local farmhouses. Hints are given to the reader as to the chief actors in the tale and of the unfolding of the story, and a common judgement of Frank Innes as a "young fool advocate" is pronounced (3).

From the beginning this is a novel with a double perspective, that of the judicious, educated novelist and that of the common people of the Scottish Borders, nor are the two always neatly divided. The episode that accounts for the Elliotts being termed the Four Black Brothers flows constantly between the voice of the elder Kirstie Elliott and that of the novel's narrator. Sometimes the effect is similar to that of a fade-out in a soundtrack: Kirstie's voice ceases in mid-sentence with the words "But as I was sayin', my mither ..." (MS, 96), and the narrator intervenes with a summary account of the different members of the Elliott household, but then his own voice modulates into Kirstie's dramatic Scots idiom as he recounts the ambush at Broken Dykes ("and dear he paid for it!" 120), and a little later Kirstie herself resumes. The narrator describes Kirstie truthfully here as "my author [...] whom I but haltingly follow, for she told this tale like one inspired" (122). In such places he ceases to be a guide and becomes a disciple of his character.

George Douglas Brown struggles with similar difficulties of narrative distance a few years later in *The House with the Green Shutters* (1901), in

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<sup>17</sup> See Eric Massie, "Robert Louis Stevenson and *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*," *Studies in Hogg and his World*, 10 (1999), 73-77.

which he sets up the “bodies” of the small Scottish town of Barbie almost as a Greek chorus on events taking place in the Gourlay family of the eponymous house, effectively the community’s House of Atreus. The narrator compares the rivalry between John Gourlay and James Wilson, for instance, to that of gladiators “for whom the people of Barbie made a ring” adding that they “became not only the chorus to Gourlay’s tragedy, buzzing it abroad and discussing his downfall; they became also, merely by their maddening tattle, a villain of the piece and an active cause of the catastrophe.”<sup>18</sup> Brown’s narrator, however, alternates such a distant omniscient perspective with another in which he is overly dismissive and angry, sometimes seeming himself to exemplify the mean-mindedness he so relentlessly attacks in the bodies of Barbie or to impute it to his reader. The following description of Wilson’s veiled insult to Gourlay can be read almost as a set of instructions:

But there is always one way of evading punishment for a veiled insult, and of adding to its sting by your evasion. Repudiate the remotest thought of the protester. Thus you enjoy your previous gibe, with the additional pleasure of making your victim seem a fool, for thinking you referred to him. You not only insult him on the first count, but send him off with an additional hint, that he isn’t worth your notice (205).

Similarly the narrator prefaces the final murderous encounter of Gourlay with his son John with a grim, yet also relishing, “I saw him ‘down’ a man at the Cross once” (212). The effect is ultimately stifling, especially by comparison with the Stevenson narrator’s keen appreciation of Kirstie’s narrative powers.

This mixing in the narrative itself of the character’s idiom as well as perspective is also a feature of D. H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*, with its sentences that begin in impersonal narrative and end in the voice of an individual character, here that of the miner Walter Morel who has been making fuses. “Paul popped the fuse into the powder tin, ready for the morning, when Morel would take it down to the pit, and use it to fire a shot that would blast the coal down.” Like Stevenson with Kirstie, Lawrence remarks Morel’s “warm way of telling a story,” with a distinct trace of envy or rivalry.<sup>19</sup> Lawrence’s youthful reading had included

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<sup>18</sup> George Douglas Brown, *The House with the Green Shutters*, ed. Dorothy Porter (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 105 (Chapter XI).

<sup>19</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers, Part I*, ed. Helen Baron and Carl Baron [Cambridge Edition of the Works of D. H. Lawrence] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, repr. 2002), 89 (Chapter 4).

works by Stevenson, and when convalescing in Bournemouth early in 1912 before resuming work on *Sons and Lovers*, he “recalled that Robert Louis Stevenson had also gone thither as an invalid.”<sup>20</sup> Lawrence read Stevenson before a planned visit to the South Seas, referred to him in his letters, and named the Stevenson-like protagonist of his Australian novel *Kangaroo* R. L. Somers.<sup>21</sup>

Lawrence’s attention to mental process as flux rather than distinct emotion or concrete thought may also be part of his legacy from Stevenson, whose narrator in *Weir of Hermiston* describes the vacillating state of Mrs Weir without ever stating what precisely she is momentarily thinking or intending:

Tides in her mind ebbed and flowed, and carried her to and fro like seaweed. She tried a path, paused, returned, and tried another: questing, forgetting her quest; the spirit of choice extinct in her bosom, or devoid of sequency (29).

Mrs Morel, pregnant and in her garden at night among the scent of her flowers, is similarly described by Lawrence’s narrator as falling into a state made up of formless thoughts and vague emotions:

She did not know what she thought. Except for a slight feeling of sickness, and her consciousness in the child, her self melted out like scent into the shiny, pale air. After a time, the child, too, melted with her in the mixing-pot of moonlight, and she rested with the hills and lilies and houses.<sup>22</sup>

This facility in realising extra-conscious awareness is hard-won; and seems often to be outside the range of the more precise and explicit moral guidance of classic mid-Victorian narrators. It bears dividends for Stevenson in *Weir of Hermiston* in his treatment of the fallen woman, which contrasts markedly with that of various classic mid-Victorian novels. In Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1848-50) and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Ruth* (1853) an innocent young woman who has fallen victim to a sexual predator must then either lead the remainder of her life in expiation of her fault or die before her time. In *Adam Bede* (1859) Hetty

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<sup>20</sup> Lawrence to Stewart Robertson, [ante 3 February 1912], in *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence: Volume 1 September 1901-May 1913*, ed. James T. Boulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 361.

<sup>21</sup> Keith Sagar traces connections between the two writers, and similarities between Stevenson’s *Silverado Squatters* and Lawrence’s *Kangaroo* in “D. H. Lawrence and Robert Louis Stevenson,” *The D. H. Lawrence Review*, 24 no. 2 (1994), 161-65. I thank Richard Dury for drawing my attention to this article.

<sup>22</sup> Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*, 34 (chapter 1).

Sorrel's fate is the natural culmination of her moral deficiencies of vanity and egotism. Hardy, on the other hand, sought to create in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) the pure woman of his subtitle, the passive victim of a rapist who is subsequently driven by events beyond her powers of endurance.

Young Kirstie in *Weir of Hermiston* is unlike Tess in that, in becoming involved with Archie Weir, she has been dominated by her feelings, the prudential considerations that occur to her existing on another plane of reality. Writing to his cousin Bob in September 1894, Stevenson expressed his continued bewilderment at the contrast between the "prim obliterated polite face of life, and the broad, bawdy, and orgiastic—or maenadic—foundations."<sup>23</sup> Stevenson's narrative strategy in *Weir of Hermiston* lies in exploring this contrast, as indeed would Lawrence's. When young Kirstie's readiness to be admired by Archie meets with the desired response, she is described "dwelling intoxicated among clouds of happiness" (168). Her reflections in her attic bedroom are compared to the effects of mesmerism (178), she seeks him out that evening probably without real awareness that she is doing so, indirectly provides for future meetings by telling him "It's a habit of mines to come up here about the gloaming when it's quait and caller" (MS, 153), and through her song releases in herself the power of the "dramatic artist" that lay dormant within her but had now "sprung to his feet in a divine fury" (192). Sexual attraction becomes a kind of fate, Kirstie equally disregarding the cautions given to her by "Dandie's ill-omened words, and a hundred grisly and black tales out of the immediate neighbourhood" (175) and by her awareness as Archie approaches her that the "difference in their social station was trenchant; propriety, prudence, all that she had ever learned, all that she knew, bade her flee" (186). By focusing on her unformed emotions and vague mental processes, Stevenson demonstrates that, although in moral and rational terms she shares responsibility with Archie for the illicit relationship that develops between them, on that other level she is truly fated or beglamoured.

Sidney Colvin, who prepared Stevenson's unfinished manuscript of *Weir of Hermiston* for posthumous publication, probably failed to understand this narrative strategy, for he was clearly uncomfortable with Stevenson's sexualised depiction of the younger Kirstie Elliott and toned

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<sup>23</sup> Stevenson to R. A. M. Stevenson, [c. 9 September 1894], *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, VIII, 362.

it down for publication. Having put her church-going finery into her trunk in her room at Cauldstaneslap, Kirstie “flung herself in her shift prone” on her bed (MS, 142), but Colvin removed the words “in her shift” (174). The description of Kirstie’s posture, seated on the Weaver’s Stone to greet Archie later that Sunday afternoon, is also censored to remove a reference to her pink stockings being visible. Stevenson’s text reads:

She leaned on her bare arm, which showed out strong and round, tapered to a slim wrist, and shimmered in the fading light. Her feet were gathered under her on the one side, where they showed but a peep of the pink stocking, and repeated and continued the same note as the kerchief (MS, 152).

The published first edition reads:

Her feet were gathered under her on the one side, and she leaned on her bare arm, which showed out strong and round, tapered to a slim wrist, and shimmered in the fading light (189).

In his *Sunset Song* (1932) Lewis Grassie Gibbon varies Stevenson’s methods of attempting to combine the perspectives of a distanced middle-class narrator and that of a native folk voice. Like *Weir of Hermiston*, Gibbon’s novel opens with an introductory section or prelude that establishes this dual focus, the official discourse of history and a legendary history created by the folk imagination of Kinraddie. On the one hand there is the historical middle ages of William I of Scotland (1143-1214), when the “Norman childe, Cospatric de Gondeshil” became the owner of Kinraddie, and on the other Cospatric’s heraldic emblem is ascribed to his slaughter of one of the “gryphons and such-like beasts” that then roamed the Scottish countryside.<sup>24</sup> The account that follows establishes Kinraddie as both typical of Scotland and the vision of a parochial and reductively-humorous people. Of the kirk divided into two parts, for instance, the narrator recounts that “some called them the byre and the turnip-shed, and the pulpit stood midway” (19). Rather than correcting this reductive view of life through the narrator, who tends to share it, Gibbon alleviates it with the more generous perspectives of the socialist Chae Strachan and the atheist Long Rob. When his heroine, torn between her identification with the farming community and the self that yearns to escape from it into a middle-class existence, is inclined to despise Kinraddie folk she is brought up short with the reflection that the most generous defenders of the value of education to working people are

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<sup>24</sup> Lewis Grassie Gibbon, *Sunset Song*, in *A Scots Quair* (London: Hutchinson, 1946, repr. 1976), 15.

precisely these two, “the poorest folk in Kinraddie!” (74). Chris Guthrie’s reflections and the views of her two friends help to reduce the standing of the narrative voice in Gibbon’s novel, which often comes over as limited and mean-minded in the comparison rather than as Olympian and a director of the reader’s moral judgement. Gibbon has adopted Stevenson’s folk narration but, by transferring the alternative perspective from the narrator into the heroine’s reflections, has treated the problem of overcoming the middle-class bias of the nineteenth-century novel rather differently.

As Ian Duncan suggests, Stevenson’s fictions are experimental works involving “a critical refusal of the Victorian novel and its protocols, rather than a failure to master them.”<sup>25</sup> Stevenson’s narrative strategies in *Weir of Hermiston* respond ingeniously to the dominant and quasi-official formulae and assumptions of writers of classic Victorian novels, and in turn establish an important model from which subsequent British novelists such as D. H. Lawrence and Lewis Grassie Gibbon could learn.

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<sup>25</sup> Ian Duncan, “Stevenson and Fiction,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Penny Fielding (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 15.