

Frontier Creatures: The Imaginary Characters of *Weir of Hermiston*^[1]

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Stevenson's last novel *Weir of Hermiston*, left unfinished on the day of his death, begins with a gesture of suspended reference. A landscape is evoked - 'the wild end of a moorland parish,' where 'there stands a cairn among the heather, and a little by east of it ... a monument with some verses half defaced.'^[2] The stone marks an atrocity of the Killing Time ('here ... Claverhouse shot with his own hand the Praying Weaver of Balweary') and its memorialization, both by the wandering engraver Robert Paterson ('the chisel of Old Mortality has clinked on that lonely gravestone') and, perhaps, his own recording angel, Scott's Peter Patteson. But the place, according to our informant, is now called Francie's Cairn, in memory of the more recent – and largely fictional - events Stevenson's novel is about to describe. In *Weir*'s palimpsestic opening, the historical Old Mortality's time-worn and vanishing inscriptions, and Scott's meticulously engineered and highly ambivalent epistemological break with the past, cede to history under erasure – facts 'naked and imperfect' (5), raised to visibility by their very cancellation.

Weir is set, we should here recall, around the canonical date of the historical novel's inception. Duncan Jopp is hanged in 1813, the year before the publication of *Waverley*, and Stevenson's novel, with its many allusions to Scott and his contemporaries Hogg and Galt, offers a modernist retrospect over a national genre, estranging its *topoi* at the very outset. The Weaver's Stone is the terminus – both origin and end – of the Scottish historical novel in other ways too. Recent criticism of Scott has observed both a cultural masculinization of the genre he instituted,^[3] and the conventionally 'feminine' hesitations which attend Edward Waverley's passage into full-blown post-historical subjecthood.^[4] As Stevenson folds that genre back into its beginnings, however, they become a cluster of synchronous dislocations. The Weaver's Stone 'quilts' several substitute Names-of-the-Father – Balweary, Weaver, Weir ('a worthy family of weavers somewhere,' Frank Innes guesses flippantly, [95]), Scott, Old Mortality, the judge-as-executioner Claverhouse.^[5] Meanwhile, it is also a site of female oral storytelling, where Archie's dead

mother and the living ‘soother’ young Kirstie are ‘enshrined together in his memory’ (87). *Weir* both disassembles a revered narrative typology and suggests that its associative and libidinal mobility may be impossible to bind. Where Scott’s gendered emplotment signifies a rich and stable circulation of meaning between past and present, Stevenson’s becomes unsettlingly volatile, not least where it catches up some of the Scottish novel’s most familiar antagonisms – between writing and orality, English and Scots, fiction and history. The opening of *Weir* accordingly evokes origin not as the beginning of a stadal, post-Enlightenment narrative of historical progress, but as a moment both temporally and ontologically undecidable, entangled in multiple, simultaneous and contradictory meanings, and only intermittently accountable to difference of sex.^[6]

My aim here is to look at the psychosexual paths the novel traces across its highly reflexive literary terrain. To be sure, psychoanalyzing *Weir* hardly of itself breaks new ground, given that the novel does the job so well without help; and analytic metaphors are themselves, one might say, richly Stevensonian. We may recall that in *The Ego and the Id*, Freud described the ego itself as a ‘frontier-creature,’ charged with the task of policing the borderlands of identity by means of the mechanisms of identification.^[7] His topographies of consciousness have lately been read against the charting of other territories: Diana Fuss reminds us that the historical moments of psychoanalysis and colonialism are intimately linked, so that ‘Freud’s theory of self-other relations takes shape historically within a colonialist context.’^[8] A superb recent account by Penny Fielding has linked the emergence of an unconscious with *Weir*’s unsettling exploration of the interplay among traditional oral registers and nineteenth-century realism. For Fielding, Archie Weir is caught in an embattled struggle with novelistic discourse *per se*: ‘the relationship between character and author’ she writes ‘comes to re-enact Archie’s Oedipal experience with his father, as Archie is never given the opportunity to express himself, but is always written by the narrator.’^[9]

The novel’s marked Oedipal pattern does invite readings which assign the parental Weirs to two different orders: Adam Weir is the stern, unbending man of law constantly at his books, Jean Weir, seconded after her death by both Kirsties, is one of many Scottish literary mothers who serve to transmit national culture through oral tradition. I want to suggest here that Stevenson’s text does not quite sustain this division: on the contrary, *Weir*’s peculiar reflexivity, alert to its own belatedness, generates a symbolic order where such contrasts are less straightforward. The law, at the outset the novel’s dominant figure, is codified text, sustaining an order at once paternal, institutional and literary. When Archie passes from Edinburgh to the Borders, we don’t leave this order of writing but enter its extension, a colonized territory thick with the tropes of the historical novel post-Scott. At this genre’s commencement it is evidently already written, and there is no exit. Within this dispensation, however – and as if under the pressure of its very

violence – unexpected identifications spring up, as the borderlines between Stevenson's 'frontier creatures' shift, dissolve and blur. *Weir* also shows a fascination with the uncanny remainders that elude the symbolic, and that disturb even as they offer it support. In what follows I draw on the work of Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Zizek to consider the role such elements play. My point is that the very intensity of *Weir*'s national and familial allegorizations lends special force to the novel's overdetermined properties and objects, residues which fulfil their function in sustaining a symbolic of law and allusion, but which also come perilously close to exposing its artifice. And Stevenson's prose – exquisite, sinuous, answerable less to an 'unreliable narrator' than to unreliable occasion – aids and abets such revelations.

If Archie Weir is on the face of it caught between his 'tender' mother and the legalistic brutality of the Lord Justice-Clerk, both are marked by a surplus enjoyment that inheres in the very material grain of the voice as object. Adam Weir, in fact, could serve as the textbook instance of Zizek's imaginary 'obscene father' of enjoyment. The authorial discourse styles him a scrupulous observer of the law he upholds, barely tainted by vanity, his 'sterling industry' 'unobserved like the ticking of a clock' (20). 'I'm a man that gets through with my day's business,' he admonishes Archie (35); he proceeds 'with a mechanical movement, as of the unconscious, that was almost august' (19). The spectacle of Jopp's trial, however, reveals the grotesque support to the law's supposed formal neutrality. Weir's 'bloomless nobility' (37) does 'not affect the virtue of impartiality' (25); as he offends even the 'aesthetics . . . of the slaughter-house' (27) with 'the savage pleasure of the speaker in his task' (26), his Scots vernacular becomes the very measure of Zizekian obscenity ('I have been the means, under God, of haanging a great number, but never just such a disjaskit rascal as yourself,' 26).[\[10\]](#)

If Lord Hermiston's stern lawfulness conceals 'recondite pleasures' (20), the same might be said of Archie's mother. Fielding diagnoses a contrast between Weir the stereotypical Oedipal father, mainstay of the symbolic order, and Jean Weir, the mother who uses words with a pre-symbolic 'glamour.' We may note, however, that she rehearses, if with a difference, her spouse's incarnation of a law whose unsettling surplus resides in the voice. Her own lineage is made up of the insistent signifiers of transgenerational trauma;[\[11\]](#) it derives from the warlike Border ancestry of the male Rutherfords and the 'white-faced . . . succession of martyrs' (7) their wives, and in her tearful and 'tender' tales of Covenanting martyrs this descendant of the persecutors ('Her great-great-grandfather had drawn the sword against the Lord's anointed on the field of Rullion Green') identifies with the pathos of the victims. Her Biblical language is rooted in a symbolic more ancient than (if ultimately inseparable from) Adam Weir's, and we glimpse authentic enjoyment in the 'voice for that name of persecutor that thrilled in the child's marrow.' Archie's bids to locate his father (and of course himself) in relation to this speech through metaphoric extension of her words are doomed to strike against constant and arbitrary prohibition. Asking why the mob

brands the elder Weir persecutor, he is met with her horrified ‘Ye must never ask me anything poleetical’ (12). In short, Jean Weir’s ‘tenderness,’ born of several contradictory historical identifications, is based in the terminological violence of a Calvinist rhetoric that does not counter the law so much as produce what Fuss calls its ‘hystericization.’^[12]

Small wonder Archie denounces Jopp’s ‘God-defying murder’ (28) with the fervour of a 1670s Presbyterian watching a captive from the Pentland Rising strung up in the Grassmarket; small wonder, too, that he does so before ‘a cloud of witnesses’ (30) – the allusion, of course, not just to *Hebrews* 12.1, but also to one of the best-known collections of Presbyterian martyrology.^[13] Here, we see Archie, the vacillating descendant of the Waverley-hero, clinging to the irreducible ‘thrill’ in the maternal voice, until Dr. Gregory’s portrait of a loving if gruff father creates in him ‘a new image of Lord Hermiston,’ ‘all iron without and all sensibility within’ and leaves this suggestible hero ‘impatient to throw himself on the mercy of this imaginary character’ (32). Ready to embrace the imaginary father of sensibility, he encounters instead the pillar (or letter – Stevenson’s pun is clear) of the law, and what ensues is his Border exile.

From legal Edinburgh, then, Archie moves to a land itself overwritten, and the connection between law-writing, novelistic fiction and paternity is entirely explicit. In this border country imaginatively colonized – as, Ian Duncan reminds us, it once was for Hogg – by a *British* author,^[14] Archie’s father has been ‘led by the influence of Mr. Sheriff Scott into a considerable design of planting.’ The prospect is everywhere fictive (‘the little feathery besoms gave a false scale and lent a strange air of a toy-shop to the moors,’ 48). Scott is present as local magnate and patron; Frank Innes, who so unprofitably condescends to the peasantry, ‘could have turned a neater compliment’ to Mr. Sheriff Scott, ‘because Mr. Scott would have been a friend worth making’ (94). Scott’s presence crucially frames the Four Black Brothers, who ironically link a world of unreconstructed Border violence with a ‘society gagged and swaddled with civilization.’ These figures themselves, of course, embody multiple aspects of the Scottish fiction of the nineteenth century’s early decades.^[15] In Hob Elliott, we see the revenger of blood turned into a personification of Scott’s enterprise of transfiguring magic; after his act of ballad-vengeance against his father’s slayers, ‘The figure he had shown on that eventful night disappeared as if swallowed by a trap,’ and he becomes ‘a stiff and rather graceless model of the rustic proprieties’ (58), having transformed history’s violence into profit. Clem, the Glasgow merchant, condenses a number of features from John Galt’s authorial profile. Dand, a manifest combination of Burns and Hogg, brawls with the Ettrick Shepherd while supplying Scott with ‘the text of the “Raid of Wearie”’ (62) in the *Minstrelsy*. Now that ‘dreadful feuds’ have been displaced on to the ‘battle of the India shawls’ (66) between the elder Kirstie and Mrs. Elliott during Sunday churchgoing, even the Elliotts’ grand act of reprisal has already been caught within a novelistic fabric:

Some century earlier the last of the minstrels might have fashioned the last of the ballads out of that Homeric fight and chase; but the spirit was dead, or had been reincarnated already in Mr. Sheriff Scott, and the degenerate moorsmen must be content to tell the tale in prose, and to make of the 'Four Black Brothers' a unit after the fashion of the 'Twelve Apostles' or the 'Three Musketeers.' (58)

So much textuality, however, cannot but call up its own disquieting remainder. A powerful instance comes as Archie and the younger Kirstie first catch sight of one another in church. Stevenson's sly pun – 'that deadly instrument, the maiden, was suddenly unmasked in profile' (71) – shadows this scene of 'a pair of children at the old game of falling in love' (73) with reminders of paternal Edinburgh and its penalties for transgressors. The episode accordingly oscillates between a fairly explicit fetishism – the lure for Archie's look – and something akin to Lacan's version of the gaze as *objet petit a*, an enigmatic, all-enviroring perspective that leaves a stable subject-position untenable, a field of vision in which the observer is observed. Thus, the foreseeable appeal of Kirstie's *décolletage* ('He saw the breasts heave, and the flowers shake with the heaving,' 72) alternates with that 'ambiguity of the jewel' in which, for Lacan, 'the point of the gaze always participates.'^[16] The brooch 'that caught the daylight and returned it in a fiery flash, and the threads of bronze and gold [that] made her hair precious,' metonymically turns Kirstie into 'a bright thing.' Archie's look - 'a battery of cannon,' that 'uplift[s] her as on a pillory' and 'drink[s] her in with his eyes' (72) - plays over her with a bewildering metaphoric variety that itself suggests the object's brilliant opacity, the resistance to full disclosure that enacts the spectator's own lack. The fullest shock is reserved for the sequence's closing gesture of an uncanny enfolding. In the minister Torrance's sermon the narrative reposes on 'a deep layer of texts' (71), but the strangely impersonal intersection of two lines of sight ('two stealthy glances were sent out like antennae ... and drew timidly nearer to the straight line between Archie and Christina') disrupts a text ('the leaf of her psalm-book was torn across,' 74). And the torn leaf is implicated in Stevenson's game of presence and absence; 'A Leaf from Christina's Psalm-Book' is the name of the chapter itself. The reader doubles Archie, caught in a textual gaze that goes far beyond the eye.

My final observations move from gaze back to voice. Here Stevenson's revisionary impulse is at its most scandalous. Romantic culture had cast the mother and nurse as the bearer, for good or ill, of oral tradition and historical continuity.^[17] Its antiquarian practices had also instantiated a split between the ballad's form – associated with the child as innocent receptor of cultural transmission – and its often disturbing content. This is replicated in the distinction between the 'little formalist' (70) young Kirstie, whose mixture of song and Glasgow finery embodies the published ballad anthology's perceived artifice, and the elder Kirstie, cast as 'matter' – the surrogate mother whose quasi-incestuous inclinations toward Archie, it goes without saying, bear

a particular transgressive charge.[\[18\]](#) In Stevenson's complex replaying of cultural crisis as erotic mythography, she at once opposes and furthers paternal interdiction. The obvious intimations are just that; Stevenson is unsparing in his depiction of her 'passion' and 'rich, physical pleasure' (51), and in her nightly trysts with Archie, encounters where oral tradition, domesticity and maternal eroticism meet. The tales of this 'brave narrator' (52) become Scheherazade-like provocation, at once deferring and arousing desire:

'Mercy, Mr. Archie!' she would say, 'whatten a time o' night is this of it! God forgive me for a daft wife!' So it befell, by good management, that she was not only the first to begin these nocturnal conversations, but invariably the first to break them off ... (53)

In the midst of her own yearnings for Archie, however, she evokes the prohibitive 'Hanging Face' of his father ('the flinty countenance of Hermiston,' 109) in order to hinder access to her young namesake and rival. Her voice, 'the single outlet of the soul' (104), here takes us more than halfway to Zizek's association between voice and the incestuous maternal superego that blocks 'normal' sexual relationship.[\[19\]](#)

Such moments, where objects sustaining the text's symbolic also tease incessantly at its borders, are entirely characteristic of *Weir*, and return us finally to the recalcitrant presence of the Weaver's Stone. At first sight it appears possessed of geographical and symbolic fixity – the mortifying effect which links the Hanging Judge Hermiston with Kirstie's legendary Border genealogy from whose every ramification 'there dangled a halter' (53). In truth, though, this monument to renaming and difference marks a novel whose supple progress corrodes meaning even as it reinforces it, discomposing 'proper' relations – referential or sexual – or troubling opposites. The objects that bestow a dubious consistency on historical fantasy can only do so by worrying at it. Stevenson's acute responsiveness to desire posits an imagined beginning to the historical novel in which the creation of historical discourse proves inseparable from its fictional fading.

NOTES

[\[1\]](#) I am grateful to Elizabeth Human for her careful comments on earlier versions of this essay.

[\[2\]](#) All references to the novel are to Robert Louis Stevenson, *Weir of Hermiston*, ed. Catherine Kerrigan (Edinburgh, 1995).

[\[3\]](#) Ina Ferris, *The Achievement of Literary Authority: Gender, History and the Waverley Novels* (Ithaca and London, 1991), pp.79-104.

[4] See Judith Wilt, *Secret Leaves: The Novels of Walter Scott* (Chicago, 1985), p.117; Ferris, *Achievement*, pp.99-104; Ian Duncan, *Modern Romance and Transformations of the Novel: The Gothic, Scott, Dickens* (Cambridge, 1992), pp.65-73.

[5] For Lacan's fullest explication of the psychoanalytic role of the 'quilting point' (*point de capiton*, or upholstery button) see *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. Russell Grigg (New York and London, 1993). The quilting point between signifier and signified is the 'point of convergence that enables everything that happens in ... discourse to be situated retroactively and prospectively'; for Freud its 'most palpable experience' is 'the notion of father' (p.268). A limited number of such points ensures the unified discourse of the 'normal' subject, while their absence engenders psychosis. Zizek gives the term ideological reach: 'the multitude of 'floating signifiers,' or proto-ideological elements, is structured into a unified field through the intervention of a certain 'nodal point' (the Lacanian *point de capiton*) which 'quilts' them, stops their sliding and fixes their meaning.' See Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York, 1989), p.87. The senior Weir occupies such a place, an 'adamantine Adam' (32) not only because of his petrification, but because he is a loadstone for the text's conditions of meaning.

[6] I am indebted here to Ned Lukacher's revision of Freud's notion of the 'primal scene.' 'Rather than signifying the child's observation of sexual intercourse,' Lukacher writes, 'the primal scene comes to signify an ontologically undecidable intertextual event that is situated in the differential space between historical memory and imaginative construction, between archival verification and interpretive free play.' See Lukacher's *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca and London, 1986), p.24.

[7] Freud's own term is *Grenzwesen*: see Sigmund Freud, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Anna Freud et al., 18 vols. (London, 1940-52 [vols. I-XVII] and Frankfurt-am-Main, 1968 [Vol. XVIII]), XIII, p.286. For the English translation see Freud, 'The Ego and the Id,' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey, 24 vols. (London, 1953-74), XIX, p.56.

[8] Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York and London, 1995), p.35.

[9] Penny Fielding, *Writing and Orality: Nationality, Culture and Nineteenth-Century Scottish Fiction* (Oxford, 1996), p.188.

[10] On the obscene father's '*knowledge of enjoyment*, i.e., the knowledge which is by definition excluded from the Law in its universal-neutral guise,' see Zizek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York and London, 1992), p.159. The infraction of this 'neutral guise' interestingly mirrors Archie's reading of his father's cruelty as an aesthetic problem first and an ethical or juridical one second, in a retrospective comment on the Scottish Enlightenment's categories of abstraction and sympathy: see Ian Duncan, 'The Pathos of Abstraction: Adam Smith, Ossian and Samuel Johnson,' in *Scotland and the Borders of*

Romanticism, ed. Leith Davis, Ian Duncan and Janet Sorensen (Cambridge, 2004), pp.38-56 (pp.44-45). For an account of Hermiston's vernacular as the sublime vessel of 'grandeur, expansiveness and the natural,' see Emma Letley, *From Galt to Douglas Brown: Nineteenth-Century Fiction and Scots Language* (Edinburgh, 1988), p.209.

[11] See Nicolas Abraham, 'Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology,' in Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Vol. I*, ed, and trans. Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago and London, 1994), pp.171-76. Jean Weir also responds to a tradition of sentimental representations of the Killing Time: see e.g. 'The Covenanter's Marriage Day' in John Wilson, *Lights and Shadows of Scottish Life: A Selection From the Papers of the Late Arthur Austin* (Edinburgh, 1822).

[12] Fuss, 129-33. I should note that my intention here is not to reiterate critical assertions that a hysterical mother is in some sense the novel's, and Archie Weir's, 'problem.' I am reminded rather of Fuss's telling reflection on analyses of hysteria: 'what might it mean to say that there is no law outside of hysteria? ... To pose this question is to entertain the possibility that the Symbolic itself is ill' (p.131). Archie's predicament with regard to Jean Weir is, quite precisely, that of the Lacanian subject confronted with the lack in the Other: see Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton, 1995), p.54.

[13] First published in 1714.

[14] Ian Duncan, 'Shadows of the Potentate: Scott in Hogg's Fiction,' *Studies in Hogg and His World* 4 (1993), 12-25.

[15] I am grateful to 'Can the Subaltern Speak?: Stevenson, Hogg and Samoa,' a paper given by Douglas Mack during 'Stevenson, Scotland and Samoa: An International Literary Conference,' University of Stirling, 10-14 July 2000, and to a conversation afterwards with Janette Currie, for encouraging my thinking here.

[16] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. Alan Sheridan (London, 1977), p.96. Lacan observes that 'the gaze, *qua objet a*, may come to symbolize [the] central lack expressed in the phenomenon of castration' (p.77).

[17] Ann Wierda Rowland, "The fauce nourice sang": Childhood, Child Murder and the Formalism of the Scottish Ballad Revival,' in *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism*, pp.225-44.

[18] Stevenson's 1892 MS of *Weir*, as Kerrigan notes, courts outrage especially keenly, and does so in part because of its multiple identifications and positionalities:

At times, by a <base> forlorn transmigration of memory, she could have believed he [Archie] was her son, born out of her body, suckled at her breasts; by another, she could almost have believed she was her own niece and saw Archie kneel <before> ^to^ her. (p.176)

[19] Slavoj Zizek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge MA and London, 1991), p.99.