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► To cite this version:

Thomas Constantinesco. Lessons of Duplicity in " The Lesson of the Master ". Dennis Tredy, An-nick Duperray and Adrian Harding. Henry James and the Poetics of Duplicity, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp.39-48, 2013, 978-144384417. hal-01378889

HAL Id: hal-01378889

<https://u-paris.hal.science/hal-01378889>

Submitted on 12 Oct 2016

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Lessons of Duplicity in “The Lesson of the Master”

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In “The Lesson of the Master,” first published in 1888, James stages one more time the unresolved conflict between life and art that underlies so many of his fictions. Pitting Henry St George against Paul Overt, the worldly Master against his seemingly naïve disciple, the story records Overt’s attempts to equal, if not outdo, his elder by following the “lesson” that the latter bestows upon him, namely, that the creation of a perfect work of art requires from the artist that he renounce life itself. Offering his own life as a counterexample, St George urges his young apprentice to “give up” the gratifications of the world in order to achieve artistic perfection – in particular, he advises him to abandon his prospect of marrying the attractive Marian Fancourt. But if the lesson effectively drives Overt away to the Continent, searching for inspiration, it also leaves St George free to win the young woman’s heart after the rather opportune death of his first wife, and the open ending of the text leaves it to the reader to determine whether the Master has voluntarily double-crossed his disciple. Suspicious of the Master’s duplicity, we are invited to read the story over again, looking for hidden clues and telltale signs that could help bring his true motives to light and for long, critics have debated whether his “lesson” was utterly genuine or completely disingenuous (Rimmon, 79-80; Chardin), thereby displacing on St George’s words and actions the “bottomless ambiguity” (James, “Lesson,” 152) that had attracted Overt to his works in the first place.

However, the emphasis on the Master’s doubtful honesty also serves to divert the reader’s attention from another series of deceptive manoeuvres: double-bottomed at least, if not “bottomless,” “The Lesson of the Master” simultaneously masks and unveils Overt’s own underhand efforts to take St George’s place. Progressively eliminating all his potential rivals, Overt strives to establish a privileged relationship with St George in order to become the Master’s one and only “*alter ego*” (120), the better to replace him ultimately. In Overt’s plot, then, duplicity is a tool devised to help him win this homoerotic power game, and in so doing achieve self-recognition, or rather self-unification. Positing that the person of Henry St George is identical to his work and that both are a mirror image of himself, Overt paradoxically plays double in the hope of being at one with the Master’s work, with the Master himself, and eventually with his own self.

The logic of identity that lies beneath the disciple’s scheme, or rather the delusion of identity under which he labours, largely accounts for his downfall and therein may lie the “lesson” of the text. There is no unity but only difference between the author and his work, or between the subject and his own self, and duplicity, taken this time in its literal sense of “doubleness,” is the condition of both life and literature which, though indissolubly linked, are bound never to coincide with one another or with themselves. This would perhaps account for the characters’ repeated attempts to live their lives by proxy, constantly imagining themselves living the lives and writing the works of others, always implying and projecting what the Preface to the New York Edition of the story, itself doubling the main text, calls “the possible other case” (1229).

“Was it a plan?”

Strangely enough, the passage from the *Notebooks* which is believed to contain the “germ” of the story makes almost no mention of the Master’s treachery, or of the disciple’s deception for

that matter. On the contrary, James presents it quite straightforwardly as being the Master's duty to "save" the young artist from life and reclaim him for art:

[...] it occurred to me that a very interesting situation would be that of an elder artist or writer, who had been ruined (in his own sight) by his marriage and its forcing him to produce promiscuously and cheaply—his position in regard to a younger *confrère* whom he sees on the brink of the same disaster and whom he endeavours to save, to rescue, by some act of bold interference—breaking off, annihilating the wife, making trouble between the parties. (43-44)

Yet even at that early stage, one may suspect that the "trouble" needed to ensure the Master's success and the disciple's redemption is likely to involve hatching a plan and covering one's tracks, for, after all, one cannot hope to "annihilat[e] the wife" easily in the open. From the Master's point of view, duplicity is part of the game, but his noble end justifies the means, however devious: the absolute superiority of art is the only measure of his endeavour. Following James's suggestion, it would seem that morality must be sacrificed in the name of literature, as duplicity proves to be the writer's greatest virtue.

Once the "germ" has developed into a full fiction, however, the previously clear, though paradoxical, logic of duplicity becomes murkier, while the reader starts probing into the Master's supposedly dishonest conduct for ulterior motives. The growing opacity surrounding St George is mainly due to a shift in narrative perspective: whereas the *Notebooks* focus on "the elder artist," the story privileges the vision of his "younger *confrère*," which is ironically obscured by his apparent obsession with literary genius. Failing to see through the Master's game and misreading his lesson, Overt leaves England and returns two years after his last interview with St George, his new book in hand, only to discover that, contrary to his expectations, Marian Fancourt is no longer waiting for him, if ever she was, and is about to marry the aged Master:

He didn't understand what had happened to him, what trick had been played him, what treachery practised. "None, none," he said to himself. "I've nothing to do with it. I'm out of it—it's none of my business." But that bewildered murmur was followed again and again by the incongruous ejaculation: "Was it a plan—was it a plan?" Sometimes he cried to himself, breathless, "Have I been duped, sold, swindled?" (181-182)

Paul Overt's helplessness is more comic than it is tragic. Questions suddenly pile up in his mind, making the terrible answer all the more indubitable, even as the many variations on the motif of treachery reveal how gullible the young writer has in fact been. In that rather immoral perspective, his failure as an artist can be ascribed to his very naivety, blinding him to the crude fact that artistic success is synonymous with manipulation, that perfection entails deception.

To add insult to injury, in the privacy of St George's room where Overt thought that he would at last discover the secret of aesthetic creation, the Master actually described himself quite openly, overtly as it were, as "a successful charlatan" (166), literally a con artist. Referring to his books as "brummagem" (166), a name recalling the counterfeit groats coined in Birmingham in the 17th century, he even suggested that they were but a set of falsified documents and that writing was akin to forgery. Overt himself finally came to recognize the Master's "genius for mystification" (174), as he called it, though he evidently failed to grasp the full import of his portrayal and became instead one of St George's mystified victims, much like the Dragon of the Golden Legend that the character's name so obviously evokes.

Slain and defeated, Overt is offered as the epitome of the inexperienced reader who has fallen prey to the machinations of a professional swindler. With the benefit of hindsight, we, readers, have a much easier time spotting "the mocking fiend" (187) behind "the measured mask" (127) that St George presents to the world, as we actively track the clues planted in the text, as if to our intention, and attesting the Master's duplicity. Rereading the story, we find ourselves enthusiastically picking up the signs that Overt ignored or chose to neglect and exult in realizing that we are by far a better "detective" (124) than he is. Gradually, we even

come to suspect that the Master's every word contains a double meaning, that his entire act is but an extended masquerade: for instance, when, in the climactic scene, he repeatedly mentions his being "practical" (161, 162, 163), we fancy hearing the echo of the "practical joke" that he is playing upon his disciple and that reverberates, a few pages later, when Paul begins to understand that St George's "inspired advice was a bad joke and renunciation was a mistake." (177)

If it is already too late when this revelation dawns upon Overt, it is certainly not lost on the reader who, after reading the story a second time, has supposedly benefited from the disciple's unintentional sacrifice and learnt to resist any form of literary manipulation. The lesson of the Master is thus primarily a lesson in duplicity that the reader is encouraged to "take to heart" (141) in order not to fall into the trap of literature. In that respect, the text of "The Lesson of the Master," which implies its own re-reading, its own doubling, would be a masterful staging of the dangers of literature as duplicity, and the sole aim of this *mise en scène* would be to ward off the threat it represents, as if James enrolled literature against itself, as if the writing of duplicity could conjure away the duplicity of writing.

"You humbug"

Such a reading, however, assumes that one may be exposed to duplicity and remain immune to it, even as it turns St George into a mouthpiece for the author, that is, into James's *doppelgänger*, thereby renewing the game of masks that the story was supposed to end. It also involves dismissing the disciple by trusting him implicitly, by being credulous enough to believe in his alleged "credulity" (182). Yet if one thing ought to be unambiguously clear at the end of the story, it is precisely that writers, whether good or bad, are not to be trusted. One may therefore doubt that Overt is the naïve apprentice he claims to be. From that alternative standpoint, Overt's ingenuous vision, which, on the surface, signals his obsession for artistic perfection, comes across as a screen for his obsessive desire for St George and his work as objects of homotextual and homoerotic fascination. But this desire is itself concealing a much more powerful drive, since its satisfaction, guaranteeing the disciple's recognition as a literary genius, would also enable him to "[occupy] the subject position of the Master, literally [to take] the Master's place" (Cooper, 75). Alongside St George's manipulation, then, the story records another series of secret displacements and covert transactions, revealing the disciple's will to power, as well as his own "genius for mystification."

In order to fulfil his fantasy of mastery, Overt must begin by securing an exclusive relationship with the Master, whose circularity will certify his identity as a writer of genius. During the week-end he spends as Lady Watermouth's guest at Summersoft, Overt, who has neither met nor ever seen St George before, devotes time and energy to identify him among the other members of the party, convinced that this recognition will, in turn, lead the Master to acknowledge him as the authentic artist he knows himself to be.

One of the gentlemen was unimaginable—he was too young; and the other scarcely looked clever enough, with such mild indiscriminating eyes. [...] Lastly Paul Overt had a vague sense that if the gentleman with the expressionless eyes bore the name that had set his heart beating faster [...] he would have given him a sign of recognition or of friendliness, would have heard of him a little, would know something about "Ginistrella," would have an impression of how that fresh fiction caught the eye of real criticism. (118-119)

The circuit of reciprocal recognition that Overt strives to establish relies on a set of implied correlations linking the person of St George to the figure of the author such as it emerges from his books, to the image that Overt has of himself as a man of letters. Preserving this series of correspondences, however, sometimes requires from Overt that he distort what he sees in order to bend reality to the logic of his obsession, thereby engaging in a scheme of his

own that parallels and rivals the Master's. Remarkably enough, he is the first victim of his own plot, and an eager one at that, for if Paul deludes himself into thinking that St George is indeed the genius he has imagined him to be, it is because it is a necessary step in his plan to substitute himself to him. And his self-deception starts as early as his first encounter with him, for the Master, as could be expected, does not correspond at all to his disciple's fantasy: St George initially looks like "a lucky stockbroker" rather than "the head of the profession" (124) and Overt will have to muster all his interpretive powers to bridge the gap between these two contradictory versions, so that the Master's face coincide exactly with the literary ideal he is meant to embody.

The disciple's obsession thus requires that he misread St George, his body and his work (his body *as* work), but it also implies a more deliberate level of plotting, which consists in getting rid of all the intermediaries standing in the way, starting with Mrs St George herself. Her first description, mediated by Overt's disapproving gaze, almost settles the case:

This lady struck Paul as altogether pretty, with a surprising juvenility and a high smartness that—he could scarcely have said why—served for mystification. St George certainly had every right to a charming wife, but he himself would never have imagined the important little woman in the aggressively Parisian dress the partner for life, the *alter ego*, of a man of letters. [...] Mrs St George might have been the wife of a gentleman who "kept" books rather than wrote them [...]. (120)

Envisioned as the greedy wife of a successful businessman, she is obviously no match for St George. But there is also about her a devious *je ne sais quoi* that foreshadows Overt's discovery of what he later presents as her greatest crime: she made her husband burn one of his books. If this disqualifies her definitively in Paul's eyes, it is also made to convince the reader of her own capacity for "mystification," for duplicity: parading as a socialite, she would be the dragon of the story, as Paul himself will suggest (134). His description primarily serves to exclude Mrs St George from the game he wants to be alone to play with her husband. For by doing so, he discreetly casts himself as the only possible replacement, the most suitable "partner for life, the *alter ego*, of a man of letters"¹ (120).

If "annihilating the wife," to quote the *Notebooks* again, proves relatively easy, eliminating Marian Fancourt, the other dragon (Tintner, 122-126), will turn out to involve a more elaborate scheme. Although she seems to pose no threat at first, she is surely a much more dangerous rival than Mrs St George: not only does she drive the Master away from Paul by focusing his attention on her rather than on himself, but she also contributes to awakening Paul's desire for life at the expense of his obsession for art. Halfway through the story, accidentally encountering the Master and Marian at an opening, he feels torn between two conflicting desires and as he watches them go together for a stroll in the park, he is suddenly filled with a jealous rage:

An indefinite envy rose in Paul Overt's heart as he took his way on foot alone; a feeling addressed alike, strangely enough, to each of the occupants of the hansom. How much he should like to rattle about London with such a girl! How much he should like to go and look at "types" with St George! (151)

The reader will then witness his attempts at reconciling his love for Marian with his fascination for St George, in order to erase the difference between life and art and preserve the integrity of his own self. His strategy will consist in no longer seeing in Marian the incarnation of life itself, but an aesthetic figure, a character in a novel to come, even a potential work of art as perfect as the Masters'. In the end, his desire for her will only reflect and amplify his desire for St George, his yearning for life being but another name for his passion for art.

¹ This is the version of the New York Edition, that the text of the Penguin edition referenced here follows. The Library of America follows the first English edition of the story and gives instead: "the domestic partner of a man of letters" (548).

Duplicity thus becomes the paradoxical instrumental chosen by Overt to guarantee the unity of his own consciousness. Double-crossing those he perceives as rivals, he finally succeeds in remaining alone with St George one night, where the ultimate *coup de théâtre*, the fantasized substitution between Master and disciple, takes place at last, or so he believes:

It struck [Paul] that the tremendous talk promised by [St George] at Summersoft had indeed come off, and with a promptitude, a fullness, with which the latter's young imagination had scarcely reckoned. His impression fairly shook him and he throbbed with the excitement of such deep soundings and such strange confidences. He throbbed indeed with the conflict of his feelings—bewilderment and recognition and alarm, enjoyment and protest and assent, all commingled with tenderness (and a kind of shame in the participation) for the sores and bruises exhibited by so fine a creature, and with a sense of the tragic secret nursed under his trappings. The idea of *his*, Paul Overt's, becoming the occasion of such an act of humility made him flush and pant, at the same time that his consciousness was in certain directions too much alive not to swallow—and not intensely to taste—every offered spoonful of the revelation. It had been his odd fortune to blow upon the deep waters, to make them surge and break in waves of strange eloquence. (170)

Under cover of acknowledging once more the superiority of the Master and meekly receiving his lesson, Overt overturns the relation of domination that had, up to this point, shaped their intercourse. In the course of this highly eroticized “talk,” “blowing upon” St George's mystery and “swallowing” his “secret,” he actually humiliates his elder as he forces him to confess that he is not the literary genius he has had the world believe, that he has been nothing but a fraud all along. Unmasking the “charlatan” by masquerading as his submissive apprentice, Overt out-masters the Master and proves the more duplicitous of the two, closing, at least temporarily, the circuit of recognition he dreamt of.

“You should do me”

Yet this scene of empowerment is far from yielding the benefit Overt is counting on, for in recognizing his disciple as a superior writer, St George simultaneously identifies him as a masterful con artist, an “awful humbug” (160, 162) and a “base imposter” (160), as he says, thus demonstrating that he still retains the upper hand. More importantly, exposing Overt's duplicity highlights the duality at the heart of his allegedly undivided self and reveals the fallacy underlying his quest for identity, whose perverse logic relies on a substitution between self and other whereby “I” could recognize “myself” under the mask of the other, whereas the projection of the self on the other implies that “I” must conceive of “myself” *as* other, which interrupts the movement of self-unification that this very projection was supposed to enable in the first place (Derail-Imbert, 27). At the level of the narrative, the fantasy of subjective self-sufficiency that drives Overt transpires in his decision to leave England and isolate himself to write, mistakenly thinking that, in doing so, he is indeed following St George's prescription. Recent criticism has suggested however that this is where his misreading lies, for the Master does not so much advocate an autonomous artistic self, nor urge his disciple to a life of seclusion, as he proposes, in his own words, to “turn [himself] inside out” (165), literally to invert himself, in order to offer Paul a homo-social, homo-aesthetic and homoerotic union as an alternative to heterosexuality and marriage, viewed as the real threats to artistic creation (Person, 132-139). Hence the promotion of a secret and subversive aesthetics, whose “queerness” (131) they alone would be able to recognize, since, as St George puts it, “not more than two or three people will notice you don't go straight.” (164). Equating artistic perfection with moral and social indecency, by way of a series of rather transparent double-entendres, St George then comes to the conclusion that art is necessarily the source of “an incurable corruption” in a world where “most assuredly the artist [is] in a false position!”

(173) In that perspective, the story itself speaks a double language, for the quadrangular and essentially heterosexual relationship between Paul, Marian, and Mr and Mrs St George shaping the surface opposition between art and life screens *de facto* the homoerotic and illicit relation between Henry St George and Paul Overt which “remains effectively closeted—subject to being disclosed through the immediate experience of individual reading practices but not subject, as it were, to publication” (Person, 133). And Paul’s failure will have consisted in reading improperly the Master’s invitation, leaving them both eventually in an unfulfilled state of suspense.

If we are bound to approach the question of duplicity in “The Lesson of the Master” from a social and moral angle, and inevitably link it to issues of secrecy and clandestinity, but also mastery, domination, and power, I would suggest that, in generalizing it to all the characters and every aspect of the plot, whichever one may choose to emphasize, the narrator indicates that duplicity is not simply the fate of male artists in a predominantly heterosexual society, but signals that it may well be an existential condition. That may be another way of understanding St George’s insight on his and Paul’s “false position,” as pointing this time not to their social in-betweenness, but to an ontological doubleness. Indeed, it is quite remarkable that almost all the characters in the story do stand in such a “false position,” either living their lives by proxy or inviting others to live and write their lives for them. For instance, St George keeps repeating that he has led his life, not on his own terms, but according to his wife’s prescriptions. Answering Paul’s condolences, he declares: “She carried on our life with the greatest art, the rarest devotion” (177), literally saying that theirs was a double life, but also that she too was an artist and that he had been her masterpiece. Similarly, talking about the book she made him burn and recalling that it had no other subject but himself, St George encourages Overt to pick up the task: ““Oh but *you* should write it—*you* should do me” (171), he says emphatically, intimating that the self is a fiction of the other, that the subject’s life is always someone else’s work. And since that logic works both ways, if St George can be Overt’s creation, he can also confidently tell Paul at the end of the story: “I shall be the making of you” (186). “*You* should do me,” “I shall be the making of you”: self and other keep changing places as subjective identity is configured relationally, transactionally, and life is led vicariously, always projected in or imagined by someone else. In the end, such constant doubling of life by art and vice-versa is perhaps what the Preface refers to as the “operative irony” (1229) of a tale in which nothing and no one is what they seem and duplicity is the law of both art and life.

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