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Stevenson in the Pacific: A Problematic View of Cultures and Imperialisms

Abstract I: In *Culture and Imperialism* Said examines the relationship between the European cultural production and the growth and maintenance of colonial empires. The fictional sub-genre that probably most promoted imperial ideology is the adventure romance, with its triumphant view of the deeds of European pioneers. R. L. Stevenson was celebrated as one of its undisputed masters but, surprisingly, his late writings set in the South Pacific show a very critical attitude towards Western imperialism. My article will offer a postcolonial reading of some of these works, whose value has often been underestimated and which need to be seen from a new perspective.

Abstract II: In *Cultura e imperialismo* Said analizza lo stretto rapporto tra le espressioni culturali europee e l'espansione degli imperi coloniali. Il sotto-genere narrativo che probabilmente più di ogni altro promosse l'impresa coloniale è il romanzo d'avventura, con la sua trionfante rappresentazione delle gesta dei pionieri. R. L. Stevenson è tra i suoi indiscussi maestri, eppure negli ultimi lavori ambientati nel Sud Pacifico egli appare molto critico nei confronti dell'imperialismo occidentale. Il presente articolo si propone di offrire una lettura postcoloniale di alcune di queste opere, che sono state spesso sottostimate e necessitano di una nuova visione prospettica.

Said's *Culture and Imperialism* stresses a notion of culture that, far from being an aseptic and enclosed area outside the realm of politics, is rather a powerful force participating in the imperial project. He suggests that travelogues, ethnographic works and narrative fiction are all made of 'stories' alike, which contributed to representing strange regions of the world to Western readers, informing their knowledge (Said 1994: xii-xiii). Stories actually articulated and modelled the public's view of these faraway countries, justifying the European presence and rule there. The 'realist novel', in particular, as a cultural artefact of bourgeois society, seems to be strictly connected to the rise of the Empire, as contended by Said:

> Of all the major literary forms, the novel is the most recent, its emergence the most datable, its occurrence the most Western, its normative pattern of social authority the most structured; imperialism and the novel fortified each other to such a degree that is impossible, I would argue, to read one without in some way dealing with the other (Said 1994: 70-1).

Robert Louis Stevenson has been considered as one of the undisputed masters of the adventure novel or adventure romance, one of the sub-genres that most contributed to the construction of the triumphant identity of Western pioneers and celebrated their deeds, but from his very beginnings with *Treasure Island* he did not follow the traditional pattern problematizing the notion of adventure itself. He also questioned Western man's superiority by unleashing Dr Jekyll's 'primitive' self and showing how Mr Hyde was as much part of his identity as his 'respectable' side. It is Stevenson's Pacific production, however, which shows his vocal criticism of the colonial enterprise. In this article I will demonstrate that Stevenson can be numbered among the first European writers who subverted the myth of Western imperialism. Not only did he dismantle colonial literary clichés, but he also acknowledged the viewpoint of the indigenous 'other' and the legitimacy of resistance to imperial power. A postcolonial reading of these works will therefore shed light on an unprecedented Stevenson: a perceptive and committed author who was able to envisage issues of great relevance to the present global world.

In the winter between 1887 and 1888 Stevenson was living at Saranac in the Adirondack mountains (in the far north of New York State) with his American wife Fanny (Hammond 1984: 11). He was the well-known author of *Treasure Island* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde,* which had brought him fame in Europe and America. For this reason he was contacted by the newspaper magnate Samuel McClure, who offered him 10,000 dollars for a series of letters from the Caribbean or the South Seas he would then syndicate for publication in the British and American press (Hillier 1989: 15). Stevenson chose the South Seas for the fascination those regions had always exerted on him since his childhood, but also because of their mild climate, which could help his lung condition. He sailed from San Francisco with his family in May 1888. This was the beginning of a nomadic life in the Pacific, which included three cruises on different ships and several long stays on numerous islands, among which the Marquesas, Tahiti, the Paumotu (or Tuamotu), the Hawaii, and the Gilberts. The Stevensons finally settled down in Samoa, where the writer died in 1894.

Stevenson's South Sea correspondence raised the public's expectations. In a missive to the writer, his friend Edmund Gosse wrote that since the times of Byron in Greece "nothing had appealed to the ordinary man as so picturesque as that you [Stevenson] should be in the South Seas" (Rennie 1998: xxvi). The letters appeared throughout 1991 in the London *Black and White* and in the *New York Sun*, but their publication was suddenly interrupted for they resulted too impersonal and even tedious. This was not what the public wanted and they wanted *Treasure Island* again. Everybody, including his usually supportive wife and his mentor Sidney Colvin had tried to bring him back to the comfortable path of romance and even sabotaged his writing, but to no avail. While travelling, Stevenson kept a journal with the passion of a professional researcher. It was filled with information, comments, reports from his local sources and Polynesian stories. Since he was writing on the spot, the letters were continuously amended by new observations, parallels and details. Then, Stevenson began considering them as chapters of a longer text: the most comprehensive book on the South Seas ever written. The seriousness of Stevenson's purpose accounts for his continuous revisions and search for analogies or contrasts between different populations, and even between his Scottish background and the Polynesian one. However, he will never succeed in completing his project. What remains today is the essay *In the South Seas*, published posthumously in 1896: basically, a chronological collection of most of his South Sea letters edited by a sceptical Sidney Colvin.

Despite its fragmentariness, probably due to the lack of the author's final supervision, the book is very different from the usual travelogues from the South Pacific. Stevenson's approach does not conform to the so-called 'panoptic gaze' of the Western explorer, in David Spurr's words, who wants to classify and control everything, often on the basis of a short visit, and "who looks upon the colonized but denies the colonized the privilege of 'looking back'" (Keown 2007: 34). Rather than controlling his material, Stevenson seems to be controlled and ruled by it. Realizing the demanding nature of his subject matter – a multi-faceted and complex 'other' – Stevenson turns into a pupil, attending a new school in a foreign country. His attitude is one of openness to listening and learning.

First of all Stevenson doesn't talk about the indigenous 'other' as an indistinct crowd, but he gets to know people personally, visits them in their houses, listens to and communicates with them trying every possible language. Said affirmed that the colonizer describes the imperial possessions "as usefully *there*, anonymous and collective", that is, "as people without History" (Said 1994: 63-64). This does not apply to Stevenson, who presents a gallery of figures, from chiefs and kings to ordinary people, as individuals, characterised and named. In *In the South Seas* he criticizes the easy generalizations and homogenisations of explorers and travellers, who write a book on the base of very brief contacts with foreign cultures:

> A ship of war comes to a haven, anchors, lands a party, receives and returns a visit, and the captain writes a chapter on the manners of the island. It is not considered what class is mostly seen. Yet we should not be pleased if a Lascar foremast hand were to judge England by the ladies who parade Ratcliffe Highway, and the gentlemen who share with them their hire (Stevenson 2009: 34).

Herman Melville himself, considered as a connoisseur of the South Seas, spent only one month in the Marquesas where he set his first novel *Typee* (although he extends the period to 4 months in the book). He didn't keep a journal and couldn't speak the local language. His story, written after his return, relies widely on memory and imagination. Furthermore, all the material on indigenous politics and culture that he inserts in the book is taken from second-hand sources: people that, as Stevenson suggests, probably wrote a book on the customs of a population after receiving and returning just one visit.

Stevenson explores many issues ranging from the proverbial generosity of Polynesians (a legend widely romanticised in novels, which he brought down to reality) to the dissolute sexual customs of Polynesian women (which he sees not as a natural trait of that culture but induced by the arrival of male Europeans), from the reasons for the increasing death-rate of the indigenous population in post-contact times to their obsessive fear of darkness and spirits. The best example of Stevenson's attitude in approaching the 'other' is his treatment of a subject which constitutes an ultimate border between 'civilization' and 'savagery': cannibalism. The widespread presence of anthropophagy in the Pacific (from the Marquesas to New Guinea, from New Zealand to Hawaii, all over Melanesia and, episodically, in Tahiti and the Gilberts) triggers his search for the possible causes of this phenomenon, which he attributes to the need of integrating a diet poor of animal proteins in times of famine or over-population:

> How shall we account for the universality of the practice over so vast an area, among people of such varying civilisation, and, with whatever intermixture, of such different blood? What circumstance is common to them all, but that they lived on islands destitute, or very nearly so, of animal food? I can never find it in my appetite that man was meant to live on vegetables only. When our stores ran low among the islands, I grew to weary for the recurrent day when economy allowed us to open another tin of miserable mutton. And in at least one ocean language, a particular word denotes that a man is "hungry for fish" having reached that stage when vegetables can no longer satisfy, and his soul, like those of the Hebrews in the desert, begins to lust after flesh-pots. Add to this the evidences of over-population and imminent famine already adduced, and I think we see some ground of indulgence for the island cannibal (Stevenson 2009: 63-64).

From a practical survival need, they passed to ritual anthropophagy, whose traces are found everywhere in the lives of those peoples: religious festivals, celebrations for victories over enemies, retributions of wrongs, punishments for crimes. If the lack of animal protein in luxuriant islands such as the Hawaii and the Marquesas applies to times of over-population or famine, it is physiological on atolls such as the Gilberts or the Paumotu. Stevenson dismantles the Western tourist myth of the atoll as the earthly Eden, demonstrating what an inhospitable, uncomfortable and dangerous home is for man a ring of broken coral and sand in the middle of the ocean. Not a blade of grass appears, nor a grain of humus. You basically cannot grow vegetables if you don't import earth. Vegetation is scarce, apart from some local bush, the pandanus and the coco-palm (Stevenson 2009: 101). The only animals inhabiting atolls, apart from men, are the land crab, the rat and huge swarms of insects. Fish may abound in the lagoon, but it is also true that a lot of them are highly toxic for men or bear poisonous spines. Moreover, a certain fish in the lagoon may be poisonous but the same fish in the ocean may be edible. In the next atoll it may be the other way around. Atolls lie on sophisticated eco-balances that even locals cannot entirely understand.

Stevenson does not want to make an apology of cannibalism but he simply tries to understand the origin of a phenomenon without cultural preconception. In this sense he applies the lesson of Montaigne, one of Stevenson's favourite readings and father of modern relativism. Like Montaigne, Stevenson makes an effort to see from the point of view of the 'other'. Taking a stance that would be called 'animalist relativism' today, he underlines how minimal the difference is between eating a human being and eating a living being of another species, especially in its infancy. A vegetarian or a Buddhist, he says, would be horrified at our consumption of meat. In Western culture (a point already made by Montaigne) we reject the idea of eating what is close to us: men or pets. But the distance from man and a certain animal varies from culture to culture. Many Pacific islanders, for example, live with their pigs as we do with our dogs. Like Montaigne, Stevenson adopts an approach to another culture which is not a rejection of his own culture. He cannot but be European and Scottish, as Montaigne was French. However, he accepts the possibility of other points of view, as legitimate as his. This makes him continuously question and reconsider his own positions. The final message seems to be that there is not only one way to be human. Our way is just one of the many possible ways (1).

Stevenson also wrote some fictional works in this period. In the two South Sea yarns *The Wrecker* (1891, written with his stepson Lloyd) and *The Ebb-Tide* (1894) he does not fall into easy *clichés*. Rather than following the usual idyll of the white sailor and the Polynesian nymph (see Loti or Melville) or the hackneyed adventures among the cannibals, he describes the traffic of white men in the South Pacific. In the prologue of *The Wrecker*, this region is defined as "a wide ocean, indeed, but a narrow world", where a stranger will soon become used to "a certain laxity of moral tone which prevails, as in memory of Mr Hayes, on smuggling, ship-scuttling, barratry, piracy, the labour trade, and other kindred fields of human activity" (2) and find Polynesia "no less instructive than Pall Mall or Paris" (Stevenson 2011a: 15). Stevenson ironically underlines some of the Western evils that Europeans spread in the South Seas, together with physical diseases such as small-pox and tuberculosis, so much so that in the epilogue of *The Wrecker* the internal narrator Havens calls his story "a tale of a caste so modern; – full of details of our *barbaric* manners and unstable morals; – full of the need and the lust of money, so that there is scarce a page in which the dollars do not jingle; – full of the unrest and movement of our century, so that the reader is hurried from place to place and sea to sea, and the book is less a romance than a panorama" (Stevenson 2011a: 588). His reversal of perspective in attributing the term "barbaric" to the "civilised" colonisers instead of former cannibals is another example of relativism and a vocal criticism of the Western capitalist system. Stevenson offers a "panorama" of Polynesia as a world inhabited by Western adventurers (dealing in illegal traffic like opium-smuggling or the wreck-racket), unscrupulous "captains-usurers" (who rob the survivors of a shipwreck of all their goods in exchange for a passage) and "beachcombers", the name given to the scum of Western society (petty criminals and rich good-for-nothing exiled from their families) cast away onto Polynesian shores by the surf, like the protagonists of *The Ebb-Tide*. The grim atmosphere of these novels doesn't leave space to romance any longer. Stevenson's compromised heroes are worse than pirates, since the latter respected a code of honour (the famous "black spot" of *Treasure Island*) while now the only law regulating one's actions is that of mere profit. As Linda Dryden suggests, Stevenson creates the type of "degenerate self-seeking outcast subverting the myth of the imperial adventurer" (Dryden 2009: 3), anticipating Joseph Conrad's fiction. Stevenson's and Conrad's critical attitudes towards imperialism question the 'civilising' mission of white man. But, as pinpointed by Richard Ambrosini, "Conrad's subversion would have been impossible if Stevenson had not opened a space critical of adventure by making the rejection of the glamour associated with this idea a constant theme in both his fiction and nonfiction" (Ambrosini 2009: 23).

In *Culture and Imperialism*, however, Said is critical of Conrad, too, accusing him of "eurocentrism", that is, of being unable to conceive of other narratives but the European one. If on the one hand Conrad is anti-imperialist because he denounces the corruption and inefficiency of the colonial enterprise, which is self-deluding and self-justifying, on the other he ends up affirming the imperial system by his rejection of any viable alternative. In refusing the possibility of indigenous resistance, Said says, Conrad acts as an imperialist.

Stevenson's last works not only anticipate the 'anti-imperialist' themes expounded by Conrad but also acknowledge the presence of the 'other' and of a different narrative. That Stevenson believed in the possibility of indigenous resistance is testified by his study on Samoan contemporary history *A Footnote to History: Eight Years of Trouble in Samoa* (1892), in which he denounces the fight for supremacy of the three European powers in the archipelago (Germany, Britain and the USA) and sides with the Samoan rebels led by local chief Mataafa, opposing the puppet king chosen by the Germans, Tamasese. This essay caused great embarrassment in the Foreign Office and prompted an official document aimed at stopping further interferences of the writer, which would have otherwise cost him deportation (Jolly 1996: xliii). Moreover, in this work Stevenson applies a 'scientific' method of historical research by cross-examining different sources in order to record the voices of those who were not allowed to express their view or write their own history, unlike the Europeans who could easily avail themselves of reports, military despatches, letters and written documents (Jolly 2009: 78-79). First he interviews the indigenous protagonists of the upheavals: the rebels' leader Mataafa and the legitimate king Laupepa, deposed by the Germans and replaced with compliant Tamasese. Then Stevenson takes into accounts the cultural reasons for the Samoans' conduct, largely misinterpreted by the Germans. King Laupepa's deposition, for example, was due to his (allegedly) inefficient policies in persecuting theft, a crime which was undermining the German plantations in the archipelago. Providing direct and indirect evidence (interviews and the analysis of the notions of 'king' and 'theft' in the local language), Stevenson argues that the role of the king equates him to a divinity in theory, but in fact allows him limited decisional power. Furthermore, he demonstrates that the practice of sharing goods was quite common in Samoan culture, not only within the same group but also between different clans. What was considered 'theft' and persecuted in European culture was legitimised by custom in another. So, the King's lack of intervention was not due to negligence but to etiquette and customary habit. As previously in *In the South Seas*, Stevenson's openness to another perspective is quite clear and absolutely rare for the time being.

A further example of Stevenson's innovative approach to colonial reality is his representation of the indigenous woman in "The Beach of Falesà" (1892), which offers one of the few love stories of his fiction: that between trader Wiltshire and island girl Uma. Unlike most South Sea idylls, the affair does not end up tragically either with the girl's death or her abandonment by the white man and does not imply her reconversion into a European. In her research of 19th century fiction on Maori written by Europeans or white New Zealanders, Lani Kavika Hunter draws up a balance of over 40 novels she consulted. Twelve of them belong to the genre of "Maori romance" – quite similar to the "South Sea idyll", since Maori are of Polynesian origin and were subjected to the same exotic/erotic imagery as Pacific islanders – and include depictions of "pure" and "half-caste" Maori female figures as principal characters. Eight of these figures are killed off, two are obliged to return to their tribes, while the remaining two marry their European lovers but are "exported", that is, removed from their sociocultural settings to be anglicised (like the Native American Pocahontas). On the contrary, in "The Beach of Falesà" Wiltshire, one of the many uncouth merchants in search of fortune in the Pacific, rejects the widespread custom of the false marriage with an indigenous girl (with a fake wedding and a fake certificate, and lasting until the man's departure) and decides to be legally united in holy matrimony by a priest. The couple will have three children and live happily on the island. Wiltshire will also bring to an end the reign of terror imposed by another trader, Case, an unscrupulous Englishman who takes advantage of the natives thanks to his ingenious contraptions, which grant him a god-like status.

Wiltshire is not an idealised character. He is rough, uneducated and prejudiced against indigenous people. Through him, Stevenson portrays the typical assumption of superiority of the white merchant in the Pacific, as his speech to the chiefs of the village demonstrates when he wants to know why he has been tabooed:

> You tell them who I am. I'm a white man, and a British Subject, and no end of a big chief at home; and I've come here to do them good and bring them civilisation; and no sooner have I got my trade sorted out, than they go and taboo me and no one dare come near my place! Tell them I don't mean to fly in the face of anything legal; and if what they want's a present, I'll do what's fair. [...] [B]ut if they think they're going to come any of their native ideas over me, they'll find themselves mistaken. And tell them plain, that I demand the reason of this treatment as a White Man and a British Subject (Stevenson 2011b: 102-104).

Wiltshire is so uncouth that a critic denied he could be British and called him "the 'Yankee narrator'" (Menikoff 1984: 96). Nevertheless, he dismantles wicked Case's manipulations (which also caused him to be tabooed), falls in love with and marries Uma, and stays on the island renouncing his dream of opening up a pub in England. This ending is a real rarity at the time. So is the portrait of an indigenous woman not as a stereotype but as a real human being. Uma is depicted as having virtues and defects. She is so courageous as to face the night spirits of the forest and rescue her husband, but she is also wily and not exempt from manipulative skills, as shown by her behaviour when she realises that Wiltshire loves her and soon uses her advantage position.

> "Farewell chief!"
> "Hold on," I cried. "Don't be in such a blamed hurry."
> She looked at me sidelong with a smile. "You see, you get copra," (3) says she, the same as you might offer candies to a child (Stevenson 2011b: 114).

Uma's presence in the story makes him a better man, so much so that he decides to throw all liqueur away because he does not want to become a brutish drunkard like most of the other whites on the island. Furthermore, by marrying an indigenous woman he shows he is not afraid of miscegenation, a 'crime' that was punished with imprisonment in some states of the USA until the late 1970s (Ambrosini 2011: 31). The novelty of "The Beach of Falesà" is considerable, despite the closing lines of the novella. While talking about the future of his children, a boy and two girls, he says he has sent the boy to Auckland, to receive a good education. But he has a problem with the girls: "They're only half castes of course; I know that as well as you do, and there's nobody thinks [*sic*] less of half castes than I do; but they're mine, and about all I've got; I can't reconcile my mind to their taking up with kanakas [Polynesians], and I'd like to know where I'm to find them whites?" (Stevenson 2011b: 228).

Though Case's tricks have proved how unreliable and corrupt white man can be, Wiltshire is still bound to steadfast prejudice. A racist statement from one of the best whites in the Pacific may be read either pessimistically or just ironically in tune with the rough fibre of the character, who is unable to re-elaborate his experience. Yet, his acts are better than his words. Stevenson's message seems to be: "This is the best you can get from a white trader in the South Seas".

Stevenson also wrote a few works featuring Polynesian main characters, among which the short stories "The Bottle Imp" and "The Isle of Voices". They were published in the volume *Island Nights Entertainments* (1893) together with "The Beach of Falesà", despite the author's fierce opposition. Their fairy-tale structure and supernatural elements make them quite different from the realistic tone of "The Beach of Falesà". For this reason he would have liked them to be included in another volume of *Märchen* (supernatural tales) and folk-stories, but had to accept Colvin's and the publisher's conditions. Stevenson identifies with Polynesian characters, all from the Hawaii, avoiding easy stereotypes and idyllic *clichés*. He depicts them not as people outside history but rooted in their time, that is, affected by the contact with the Europeans and therefore hybrid. The couple Keawe and Kokua in "The Bottle Imp" are literate and catechized. They fear the flames of hell and are willing to get rid as soon as possible of the magical bottle that can make their wishes come true but also leads its last possessor to eternal damnation. The plot alludes to a well-known fairy-tale belonging to Stevenson's childhood (the story of the genie in the bottle who can fulfil one's desires). In the introduction he explicitly says he wants to adapt it for a Polynesian public and the story will be the first Western tale translated into Samoan and published in the missionary magazine *O Le Sulu Samoa*. "The Bottle Imp", however, does not stress the obvious moral but rather seems to be a further satire of Western materialism, since the man who first sells the bottle to Keawe and the one who finally buys it (consciously accepting his eternal damnation) are both white. In "The Isle of Voices" Stevenson includes many references to episodes, traditions, issues and places that we find in his essay *In the South Seas*. For example, the atoll where sorcerer Kalamake transforms shells into coins recalls one of the Paumotu and there are references to cannibal practices, too. Kalamake, who is "more white to look upon than any foreigner" and whose hair is "the colour of dry grass" (Stevenson 1996: 103) is the ultimate symbol of hybridity, keeping the picture of Queen Victoria in his house next to that of King Kamehameha the Fifth, displaying the Bible on a shelf but utilizing charms, amulets and special herbs to make his spells and, most of all, using ancestral magic to coin jingling dollars. He isn't the only initiate to this practice, because the Isle of Voices resonates with all tongues of the earth, spoken by other sorcerers: "the French, the Dutch, the Russian, the Tamil, the Chinese" (Stevenson 1996: 119). The Isle of Voices epitomises all the Pacific and its exploitation by traders from all over the world, who have come here to transform local resources into solid Western money.

Stevenson also includes references to Polynesian legends and traditions, such as the cult of the ancestors in "The Bottle Imp" and the allusion to the creation myth of the Pacific islands (and New Zealand) in "The Isle of Voices", according to which they were fished out of the ocean by demi-god Maui. The mix of present and past, of direct experience and myth makes these allegorical stories original and exempt from that projection of Western desires that is found in much South Sea literature. Most importantly, Stevenson never pretended them to be truly Polynesian legends or tried to enact an essentialist return to an ideal pre-contact past. Here, as in all his Pacific writings, he portraits the region as a hybrid place of encounters and contamination, of abuses and exchanges, showing the complexity of an impending global world rather than a simplified, uncontaminated and idealized Eden. His openness to listen to the reasons of the 'other', the seriousness of his scope, his acute observation and, finally, his political commitment in *A Footnote to History* show how far Stevenson had gone from romance and *Treasure Island*.

NOTES

1. See Sergio Benvenuto's appendix to Montaigne's essay *Dei Cannibali*, entitled "Lo spettro di Montaigne si aggira per l'Europa".
2. Bully Hayes (William Henry Hayes, 1827-1877) was an American captain who engaged in blackbirding in the 1860s and the 1870s and whose arrival on any

Pacific island would cause islanders to hide in fear of being kidnapped and shipped off to be a labourer on some distant plantation. He has often been described as a South Sea pirate and 'the last of the Buccaneers'.

3. Copra is the dried meat of the coconut and the main commercial interest of the South Seas in the late 19th century.

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