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*THE WIZARDS AND THE MAN-EATERS: THE WHITE MAN'S  
DARK LIES IN STEVENSON'S SOUTH SEA FICTION*

The article analyses the imbalanced power-relations between the native inhabitants and the British colonizers in the South Pacific Isles as portrayed in Robert Louis Stevenson's South Sea Fiction. It is argued that parallel to Stevenson's detailed historical descriptions of the isles, the South Sea Fiction engages critically with the British colonial discourse as well as with the ideologically-informed accounts of the isles that had been circulating in Europe following James Cook's expedition. In the resulting fabulous entanglement of the white man's narratives and the native stories, the disproportion in powers gives advantage to the white man's sinister tales.

Keywords: R.L. Stevenson, South Sea Fiction, *The Bottle Imp*, *The Beach of Falesá*, colonialism

When in 1888 Robert Louis Stevenson undertook the job of reporting from his voyage to the South Seas, he was conscious of plunging into the sea of multifarious, often contradictory narratives which, during over a century following James Cook's exploration, had been accumulating in the travellers' depictions of the isles.<sup>1</sup> In some of the most fantastic early reports from the islands, the reality gave way to the explorers' expectations of the exotic, inspired by Rousseau's concept of the noble savage. What is more, these reports were only a shaky basis for a most formidable production of literary fiction which indefatigably re-used the explorers' accounts and incorporated them into a chain of fiction mass-supplied to the insatiable public, hungry for news from the exotic isles. This tremendous literary production also played the important role of incorporating the new contradictory data within a changing scope of explaining ideologies, by dint of which the original Eden purportedly found in the South Seas soon was re-imagined as an Earthly Inferno, when the depictions of sexual and social freedom were replaced by the imagery of debauchery and depravity, prompting the writer Robert Southey to exclaim in horror: 'human nature never has been exhibited in such utter depravity as by the inhabitants of these terrestrial Paradises!' (Bolton 2007: 123).

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<sup>1</sup> Compare for example Stevenson's ironic comments on the popular descriptions of the Pacific Isles as Paradise on Earth (Stevenson 1996: 103–109).

Driven by his passion for historical studies,<sup>2</sup> Stevenson was determined to find the true image of the islands beneath the crust of ideological misrepresentations. He challenged his own reputation of a fiction writer by assuming the new 'scientific' approach to the study of history (contrasted with the old 'romantic' school of historical narrative) in gathering data for a history of the isle of Samoa, *A Footnote to History*, and a realistic description of his voyages, *In the South Seas*. The dedication and serious critical examination with which he set about his task of comparing various sources and testimonies before forming his conclusions is confirmed in his letter addressed to Henry James: 'I am continually extending my information, revising my opinions, and seeing the most finely finished portions of my work come part by part in pieces. Very soon I shall have no opinions left.' (Stevenson 1996: 23).

It may appear paradoxical that next to Stevenson's historical research, the South Sea period witnesses also the appearance of some of Stevenson's most fantastic fiction, which, instead of offering a clear vision of the Pacific Isles, seems to add to the confusion by not only plunging into the mass of the circulating narratives but also saturating them with native Polynesian myths and stories. To the reader's further puzzlement, Stevenson often proposes a narration focussed through the lenses of local tradition, instead of applying the perspective of the European colonisers. His pastiche of a Polynesian legend, 'The Bottle Imp', had Stevenson not associated it with an old Germanic story in a footnote to the text, could pass for a narrative inspired by similar Polynesian legends – the fact that prompted Arthur Johnstone to conclude that at the time of writing, Stevenson must have been unaware of the existence of such Polynesian fables. Is this truly the case? Or did Stevenson have other reasons for throwing his narrative into the Polynesian sea in a bottle of professedly European provenance? Let us look closer into the matter.

The eponymous bottle from Stevenson's story is of an unmistakably European (as well as devilish) shape and origin. It is reported to have been sold in the old days by the devil 'for many millions of dollars' to Prester John, a Christian patriarch and king, traditionally seen as a descendent of the Three Magi. Napoleon and Capitan Cook are also mentioned among its many possessors, who in the course of the centuries imprudently discarded it. This is accounted by the magical influence of the bottle (or, rather, of the mysterious imp residing inside) which protects its possessor and grants him unlimited power. However, as we learn, 'there is a drawback to the bottle; for if a man die before he sells it, he must burn in hell for ever' (Stevenson 1996: 115). Another devilish complication which requires that the bottle be sold always at a loss, ultimately makes the characters in the story calculate their chances in the devilish poker at the international foreign exchange markets, and drives them to San Francisco in a desperate search for the lowest denominated coin among the European currencies: the French centime. When all hope of disposing of the hated bottle seems gone, in a final lucky stroke, it is acquired at the price of two French centimes by a drunk boatswain, who uses the power of the bottle to sustain a full supply of rum.

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<sup>2</sup> Stevenson's interest in history made him apply for the Chair of History and Constitutional Law at the University of Edinburgh in 1881, while also planning a three-volume historical analysis of the history of Scotland from seventeenth to nineteenth century.

The sheer richness of Stevenson's tale of double cultural origin and its impossible tangle of European and native threads, invite discussion about the modes of artistic representation. Those who laud Stevenson's 'scientific' engagement with the Polynesian reality in *A Footnote to History* and his realistic approach to the subject see Stevenson's fantastic fable as a setback in his efforts aiming at a true understanding of Polynesia.<sup>3</sup> Stevenson's own comments on the truth of the narrative as crucially different from the 'factual truth' sound, according to Jeremy Treglown, 'cheap' in the face of Stevenson's 'recent wrestlings with truth' (Treglown 1986: 132). And yet, it is precisely Stevenson's enthusiastic research in the history of Samoa which leads him to the conclusion that 'on a more careful examination truth will seem a word of very debatable propriety, not only for the labours of the novelist, but for those of the historian' (Jolly 2009: 71).

Ironically, in the South Sea Fiction Stevenson seems to find the best mode of depiction of the complex colonial situation: a mighty entanglement of European and native myths, in which to discern the truth is both a tricky and a risky business.<sup>4</sup> Curious to discover the mystery of the dark bottle, the inquisitive protagonist of 'The Bottle Imp' and his friend request the genie to present himself to their eyes, upon which their wish is granted causing a momentary pause in the smooth flow of the narrative:

Now as soon as that was said the imp looked out of the bottle, and in again, swift as a lizard; and there sat Keawe and Lopaka turned to stone. The night had quite come, before either found a thought to say or voice to say it with; and then Lopaka pushed the money over and took the bottle. (Stevenson 1996: 122).

While the succinct description offers an innocent and almost comical effect – the imp being compared to a swift lizard – the following lack of comment strikes an ominous discord. In contrast to the outer appearance of the bottle which attracts the viewer's attention and encourages speculation – the strikingly 'milky white' cask giving way to a play of flickering colours – the inside, even when exposed, remains a dark mystery: 'the glass of it was white like milk, with changing rainbow colours in the grain. Within-sides something obscurely moved, like a shadow and a fire.' (Stevenson 1996: 114). The white bottle with its indescribable shadowy inhabitant focuses Stevenson's interests in the white man as the dark 'other' of his tale, thereby reversing the colonial language (which operated on a strong white-dark contrast, dark colours being associated with the native culture).

Stevenson reverses the imperial discourse on many occasions. In his letter to King Laupepa he famously denigrates the patriarchal family language of the colonial propaganda by presenting himself as the head of a delegation of white people who have come to Samoa as 'wives to a husband' (Colley 2004: 149). He also challenges the treatment of the natives as

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<sup>3</sup> However, compare William J. Scheick, who reads 'The Isle of Voices' as 'a reflexive statement about the "fantastic" nature of both art and life' (Scheick 1992: 144); and Roslyn Jolly who considers *The Beach of Falesá* as a 'generic hybrid' which offers a realistic analysis of the Victorian reality (Jolly 1999: 463–482).

<sup>4</sup> The best example of this bizarre colonial condition is perhaps the fact that after publishing his tale, Stevenson received many visits from the locals who were looking for the source of Stevenson's power, the bottle.

children in the big imperial family by comparing the antics of the white men to children's play thereby placing the natives and the incomers 'on an equal foot' (the anti-hero of *The Beach of Falesá*, a white trader remarkably called Case – another case-like or even bottle-like white figure hiding an ugly inside – is compared to a naughty boy playing magical tricks<sup>5</sup>). However, Stevenson is more than poignantly aware of the power relations and the resulting inequalities between the natives and the colonisers. After the white man's arrival in the islands, the natives are only allowed to pursue their myths within the framework of the European narrative. Thus, a native Polynesian myth in 'The Bottle Imp' is reclaimed by the European tradition which populates it with its own quasi-mythical heroes: historical (Napoleon), religious (Prester John), and imperialist (Captain Cook).

Within this European narrative driven by the quest of power, the magical bottle is passed to the native man when its value has already dropped from the dazzling heights of 'millions of dollars' to the point where its price verges precariously on null (which inevitably leads to the possessor's 'ultimate damnation'). In the end, its power is reduced to a bottle of rum. The story touches dark cords in the history of the colonisers' settlement in the islands, and Stevenson was an eyewitness to the terrible scourge of European contagious illnesses decimating the local population. He was outraged by the European propaganda which blamed the native population for their own decay charging them with debauchery and immorality (Cf. Stevenson 1996: 47–54). Some of the most hypocritical propaganda of the nineteenth century imperialism against which Stevenson, along with other intellectuals, protested from the 1880s on,<sup>6</sup> strikes truly devilish undertones defending the European enterprise by arguing that 'a state of *innocence* is necessarily insecure. The Tree of Knowledge must be tasted [...] before mankind can obtain a state of wisdom'; or again by claiming that the only 'atonement' for the evil done to the native people by the colonisers is to convert them to European culture and religion: 'This', the author concludes, 'must be done by colonization and by force.' (Bolton 2007: 125).

Such suspect double-speak is reflected in the talk a devil-like character of Stevenson's *The Beach of Falesá*, the white trader Case, who, depending on the situation, shifts his discourse from mocking the natives to professing himself the defender of their rights. When the former line of argumentation fails to placate his chief rival on the island, Wiltshire, Case switches to his second line of attack through using a deceptively angelic voice:

We traders have a lot of gall, I must say; we make these poor kanakas take back their laws, and take up their taboos, and that, whenever it happens to suit us. But you don't mean to say you expect a law obliging people to deal in your store whether they want or not? You don't mean to tell me you've got the gall for that! (Stevenson 1996: 187).

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<sup>5</sup> Compare: Stevenson 1996: 216: 'I remember a boy I was at school with at home, who played the Case business.' etc.; and Stevenson 1996: 152: 'But Keola knew white men are like children and only believe their own stories'.

<sup>6</sup> By 1900 it was more common to advance such critique publicly (cf. Marks 1900: 417–439); however, it should be stressed that British imperialist propaganda survived till well after the Second World War and even till after the failed British military attack in Egypt in 1956 (cf. Burns 1957; Hupé and Hazard 1958).

The grim irony is that it is Case's manipulations and not the native laws which prevent the natives from buying from other white traders. The 'sacred laws' of the island (Falesá meaning 'the sacred house') are profaned and distorted by the arrival of Case. Under the power of Case, the beach of Falesá becomes the arena of white man's tales, among which the natives are not trusted to have their say because, as Case would have it, 'it's a bad idea to set natives up with any notion of consulting them' (Stevenson 1996: 183). Faced with Case's schemes and manipulations, they struggle to avoid drinking from his bottle, both metaphorically and literally, as Case is widely known to have poisoned his rival white trader, and is still in the possession of venom. Wiltshire's native wife, Uma, who will ultimately save him from Case's machinations, warns her husband: 'He got the bottle still. Suppose he give you gin, you no take him.' (Stevenson 1996: 179). In the beginning, Wiltshire is naive enough to trust Case's stories rather than consulting his wife, and so he falls prey to Case's rhetoric. What perhaps symbolically saves Wiltshire from sharing Case's fate is that, under Uma's inspiration, he finally disposes of the gin bottles brought from Europe. On the other hand, Nanu, a black missionary who falls victim to Case's propaganda, adopts and promulgates his evil rhetoric, thereby supporting Case's sinister scheming. Characteristically, he illustrates his demonic defence of Case's blasphemous teachings by giving the example of a bottle, which, he argues, is bad only as far as it is filled with gin, and since Case's blasphemous behaviour is morally neutral, i.e. has no substance to it, it remains innocent (Nanu fittingly dies in the jaws of hungry cannibals by the end of the story).

Stevenson's use of the bottle and gin imagery serves as yet another hint of the greed of the South Sea traders. Stevenson himself witnessed the consequences of the immoderate consumption of gin among the natives unaccustomed to the drink. Inner rivalry and greed among the traders prompted them to distribute alcohol in the isles, and then hide for their lives and wait till the drunken revelry ended.<sup>7</sup> Another disturbing hybrid outgrowth of this theme is Uma's story of the six young lads from Falesá who meet a group of 'devil women' on the beach as a result of which all who come into contact with the women begin to rave 'like drunken men' and ultimately die. The tale is a curious parody of the accounts based on the European sailors' descriptions of the sexually liberated native women who seductively tempted them into the island (in truth, it was the sailors who brought the venereal diseases to the islands).<sup>8</sup>

'The Bottle Imp' culminates with an absurd image in which the colonisers' myths impregnate the native narrative to the point of becoming reality. In *The Isle of Voices* Keola, native of Hawaii, finds himself on a mysterious island far from home. His adventures on the isle turn out to confirm the most preposterous tales he has heard from the white travellers of cannibal tribes in the South who pretend to accept man into their community and fatten him until he is to their taste, upon which they kill and devour him. Faced with the man-eaters on

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Stevenson 1996: 97. In this Chapter Stevenson also describes how the spread gossip of him as the son of Queen Victoria put an end to the debauchery.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Bolton 2007. In chapter 3 Bolton describes for example how a mutiny on a ship in 1787 was accounted by its captain in an official report as the result of the dangerous and irresistible sexuality of the Tahiti women, thus removing all public attention from the captain's own actions which might have led to the mutiny.

one side of the isle and the invisible wizards (who come to the island from all over the world in search of white shells which they turn into dollars – another unmistakable image of the white traders) on the other, Keola finds himself in a desperate position. While the wizards and the man-eaters engage in a bloody battle, Keola, helped by his wife, quietly leaves the island and returns to his native homeland. In reality, as Stevenson was too painfully aware, no such option of escaping from the white wizards who carelessly took possession of the Southern world, was available to the Polynesians. Locked ‘between the devil and the deep see’ or, indeed, in a company that even ‘the devil would have been afraid’ to share, they were left to muse with Stevenson on the ‘sad change’ which caused their laws and civilisation to be dying out.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Stevenson, 1996: 32–46 – where Stevenson is deeply moved by his conversation with a native woman during which she describes the perishing of her nation. He quotes her: ‘Tenez – a little baby like this; then dead. All Kanaques die. Then no more’ (Stevenson 1996: 46).

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CZAROWNICY I LUDOŻERCY. MROczne KLAMSTWA BIAŁEGO CZŁOWIEKA  
UKAZANE W OPOWIADANIACH WYSP POŁUDNIOWEGO PACYFIKU (SOUTH SEA FICTION)  
ROBERTA LOUISA STEVENSONA

Artykuł stanowi próbę analizy nierównych relacji pomiędzy tubylcami a kolonizatorami brytyjskimi na wyspach Południowego Pacyfiku, przedstawionych w prozie Roberta Louisa Stevensona. Autorka argumentuje, iż podobnie jak szczegółowe opisy historyczne wysp sporządzone przez Stevensona, opowiadania *Wysp Południowego Pacyfiku* podejmują polemikę z brytyjskim dyskursem kolonialnym, jak również z licznymi zabarwionymi ideologicznie opisami tego obszaru, które krążyły po Europie od czasów ekspedycji Jamesa Cooka. Wynikiem jest fantastyczne przemieszanie narracji białego człowieka oraz opowieści z wysp, gdzie dysproporcja władzy daje przewagę złowrogim opowieściom kolonizatorów.

Słowa kluczowe: R.L. Stevenson, *South Sea Fiction*, *The Bottle Imp*, *The Beach of Falesá*, kolonializm