

to transform our worlds or otherwise have been a more difficult yet ultimately more significant project to carry through? How does one go from motifs, from metaphorical and meaningful registers, from those icons which seem to float in an unquestioned social/discursive reality to a different form of reality? What are we to make of cyborg practices, appropriations and contextualized meanings? Who are the players in this new cyborg landscape, what are their strengths and what imprint do they (the players and/or cyborgs) effectively leave on our lives, our bodies and our worlds?

Thus, the investigative device put forward opens up and interrogates the issue, but it leaves in the dark and ungrasped (as not truly apprehended) numerous social phenomena (and indissociably scientific and technical ones) that deserve to be further (and no doubt differently) explored and characterized.

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## Notes

1. The reader will have realized that ‘/’ means (*forward*) slash and will have also recognized the significance of expressing it in *full word form*.
2. The original French of this phrase, *Ouvroir de philosophie potentielle*, echoes the appellation of the *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, or *Oulipo*, founded by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais to explore the use of constrained writing techniques [*Translator’s note*].
3. To facilitate reading, we will from now on replace slash with /.

## References

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Sylvie LARGEAUD-ORTEGA (2012) *Ainsi Soit-Ille. Littérature et anthropologie dans les Contes des mers du Sud de Robert Louis Stevenson*. [Isle: Let it Be. Literature and Anthropology in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *South Sea Tales*] Paris: Honoré Champion.

For the so-called general public, the name of Robert Louis Stevenson is associated with two novels which very swiftly assured that writer great success: *Treasure Island* (1882) and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). It is a Stevenson still poorly known, especially by the French reading public, that Sylvie Largeaud-Ortega has chosen to study: the author who would finish his short life in the South Pacific, the one who had been dubbed *Tusitala*, the ‘teller of tales’ by the Samoans among whom he lived.

An Anglicist by training and lecturer at the University of French Polynesia, Sylvie Largeaud-Ortega provides in this book a remarkable work derived from her consideration of a few ‘tales’ inspired by the ‘South Seas’. Without sacrificing anything to a properly literary analysis and by intentionally choosing fictional texts, she very convincingly brings to light a Stevenson who was

equally an ‘anthropologist of the Pacific’. It is this fertile combination of poetic analysis and anthropological approach that gives this work of scholarship, this thesis, its originality and utility.

The collection of stories entitled *South Sea Tales* had a curious destiny. A French reader will look in vain for any translation into French. The collection was published ‘for the first time’ (p. 15) in 1996 through Oxford World Classics, in an edition introduced and edited by Roslyn Jolly. Not only is the general title not Stevenson’s, but he had intended that the first story, completed in 1891, be published separately. The collection consists of six texts: *The Beach of Falesá*, *The Isle of Voices*, *The Bottle Imp*, *The Ebb Tide*, *The Cart-Horses and the Saddle-Horse* and *Something in It*. To what is presented, in the chapter of Largeaud-Ortega’s book which serves as an introduction, as a set of stories that are ‘colourful, multi-hued and surprising’ (p. 16) with the focus mainly on the first four tales, were added *The Wrecker* (1889–1892) together with other texts like *Laupepa’s Tears*, said to be an ‘anti-imperialist pamphlet’.

In a few pages the long Pacific journeyings of the Stevenson family are summarized, covering their successive brief stays in the Marquesas, the Tuamotu archipelago and in Tahiti, then the journey back north to the Hawai’ian Islands, then back down to the Gilbert Islands before finally reaching Samoa and the island of Upolu where the novelist spent the last five years of his life (1889–1894). But the chronological or biographical thread is downplayed in favour of readings undertaken like a series of investigations in which the texts, in all their poetic complexity, have replaced the geographic setting. Largeaud-Ortega’s working hypothesis is that ‘the *South Sea Tales* constitute a collection which marks a decisive turning in the history of the literature of the Pacific’ (p. 31). This is no doubt what explains the overall schema of the work, presented as a simple structure in three movements: ‘the past, the present and the future of Pacific literature’ (p. 32). If the study of the past is largely that of the ‘myth’ of the South Seas (chap. II), the present, that is to say the European presence in the Pacific, is addressed through a dual approach to allow for the consideration of imperialism ‘from two different perspectives’, the Western and the Oceanian (chaps III and IV). As for the future, it is approached under three aspects: the new man and woman of Oceania (chap. V), the new Westerner of the Pacific (chap. VI) and finally the new literature of the Pacific (chap. VII).

It is a strange and surprising ‘invitation to a journey’ that is proposed in these *Tales*. In *The Ebb Tide*, a ‘parabolic or allegorical reading’ shows how the novel reproduces the ‘track of the “discoverers” and the first Europeans who settled in the Pacific’ (p. 60). This ‘reading’ appears both as a sort of parallel voyage in phase with the text, and a strategy to bring out the principles of how the text functions. Here we see laid open the first example of the flexible yet firm approach adopted by Sylvie Largeaud-Ortega. Effectively, the strange cruise of the Farallone brings out, in a reversal of the process from ‘myth to mystification’ (p. 68), the ‘fraudulent’ character of any mythical construction. The way this process becomes revealed is not immediate, nor is it by any means unequivocal. The text becomes a palimpsest, blending Virgil with Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. The ‘epic’ of the Farallone re-enacts the *Aeneid* (p. 93), in which the hero Herrick emerges as a new (?) Aeneas. Virgil is equally present in one of the two names applied to the island reached: ‘*nemorosa Zacynthos*’, which is also the ‘New Island’ of all navigators who imagine themselves as discoverers (p. 63). But there are no more discoverers, there are simply ‘compilers’ (p. 59), the maritime expedition no longer returns to its point of departure, the linear becomes circular, the adventure story ‘closes back on itself’ (p. 117). There remains (and that is saying a lot) a palimpsest which is a ‘call for other writings in the future’ (p. 103). This, as should be noted, is one of the major directional threads of this study which finds here its first illustration. There remains also the observation that Stevenson has obliterated all the clichés and mirages of the Pacific to create a ‘bare beach’ (pp. 107, 118). By getting rid of all exoticism and its effects which represent the other face of imperialism, the charge against the latter becomes possible.

This perspective is also at the heart of *The Ebb Tide*, with the character of Attwater who exploits the local populations for his own enrichment, and we remain on the Farallone (*Far/Alone*) all the more because it is shown as a ‘microcosm of Empire’, a miniature version of the ‘New Island’ (pp. 133–140). The triumph of the White man also comes out in *The Bottle Imp* (Imp as in Imperialism ... p. 150), where a cunning spirit proceeds to pillage the resources, as in the *Island of Voices*. In *The Beach at Falesá*, the trader Case is the double of Huih (on the Farallone) who himself is an astonishing echo of Mr Hyde (p. 140). Eventually he will meet his comeuppance at the hands of Pele, goddess of volcanoes, just as, in the same story, captain Randall, alias ‘Papa’ will be the victim of Papa, the Earth-Mother goddess. These characters illustrate in themselves an imperialism that is in decline, an evolution that can be followed over the course of a very close reading in Chapter II of *The Beach at Falesá* (pp. 187–198), considered as a triptych (relations between Europeans and Pacific peoples, between Europeans themselves and finally between the European male and the Pacific Island female). One significant aspect stands out by its non-existence: the imperialist incursion engenders no offspring: Case, the ‘other dominant White’, ends up castrated and Attwater remains unmarried. If the ‘clairvoyance’ and the ‘coherence’ of the novelist (p. 207) are given strong emphasis (in the ‘restoration’ of the reality of the present after the debunking of the myths), the same assessment can also be applied to the author of the study.

Confirmation of this judgement can be found in the following chapter in which the indigenous side of the imperialist venture is examined through a very attentive and inventive reading of the two stories entitled *The Bottle Imp* and *The Isle of Voices* (pp. 209–302). These two tales are ‘remarkably similar’ in their argument and their underlying structure, where the male islander succumbs to the temptations of Western modernity while his female counterpart remains the guardian of tradition (p. 210), and which contain a denunciation of the perverse effects of colonization, or more precisely of acculturation, as in the example of the discontinuance of the custom of gift and counter-gift in favour of the establishment of exchange based on money (p. 252).

Because we are dealing with the narrative form typical of tales, we meet a three-fold pattern of structural development: there are three incidents of testing and a triple initiatory journey: first, the contact with the White man, then the descent to the underworld and finally the encounter with the founding ancestors of the people. The situation of the islander, caught in an alienating father-son relationship (a ‘patriarchal’ imperialism reflecting the Tahitian expression used to designate the French state: *hau metua*, literally ‘spirit of the elders’, p. 216), justifies the psychoanalytical approach taken, which is very intense and particularly illuminating. The tale, even more than the novel, shows up an ‘undeviatingly’ (p. 264) anti-imperialist dimension and an ‘irrevocable condemnation’ of European incursion into the Pacific (p. 270). But the novel force of these tales is to be sought in a ‘transposition’ of the point of view, announced at the outset as the basic hypothesis of the reading: Stevenson takes up the challenge laid down by Genette ‘to write a *Robinson Crusoe* in which Crusoe would be observed, described and judged by Friday’ (p. 209). And this novel reversal of the norm for such stories justifies perceiving Stevenson as a ‘post-colonial’ writer.

While chapter IV is centred on the present and on male characters, the subsequent chapter, devoted to the ‘new Pacific man and woman’, puts the emphasis on the future of the male-female couple and particularly on the female characters: Kokua, the companion of Keave in *The Bottle Imp*, and Lehua, that of Keola in *The Isle of Voices*. The woman becomes the ‘guide and saviour’ of the man (p. 304). A carefully documented onomastic analysis confers on the two female characters all their strength and ‘depth’ (p. 379). Kokua is ‘she who assists’ and the name Lehua evokes the tree of beginnings, symbol of genealogies and family descent (p. 315). As for Uma (which as a verb means ‘to dig’), who is Wiltshire’s companion in *The Beach at Falesá*, she is the ‘primordial woman’ (p. 339). Thus, three of the four stories grouped together in *South Sea Tales* grant to the

woman influence over the fate of the male hero. In this way she becomes the essential and dynamic element of a new couple, a 'new hybrid personality' (p. 379).

Two characters embody, though in quite different ways, the 'new Pacific European': Wiltshire, in *The Beach at Falesá*, and Herrick in *The Ebb Tide*. Whereas the former, judged to be an 'absolutely admirable' creation (p. 432) is the 'founder of an inter-cultural family' and as such the 'harbinger of an emerging spirituality in Polynesia' (p. 428), the latter represents the 'new Western existentialist', a figure close to the absurd, in which sense he 'announces the advent of modern man' according to the observation of the great Stevenson specialist, Jean-Pierre Naugrette (p. 460).

In the final chapter ('The New Pacific Literature'), the focus returns to and lingers upon Wiltshire to bring out all the complexity, ambiguity and ambivalence of the character. As a Janus 'between two seas', he forces the reader to adopt the attitude of a 'tight-rope walker' (p. 468), and for that he appears as a 'substitute for the reader' and an actor on a stage where the 'comic illusion' invented by Corneille and Shakespeare is acted out. But the fundamental contribution of these final pages is built around a Stevenson who, through the importance he accorded to oral story-telling, through his drawing on ancient sources like the *Kumulipo*, the song of creation (published in 1881), and through his promotion of a 'mixed-race literature', opened the way for and gave voice to the Pacific novelists of the present day: the New Zealander Keri Hulme, the Samoan woman writer Sia Figiel and her male contemporary Albert Wendt, the native Hawai'ian John Dominis Holt, the Maori Allan Duff, names which will no doubt be new for many European readers.

The Pacific has thus ceased to be merely an 'exotic setting' (p. 13), a 'scaffolding of fantasies' (p. 120). It has become 'the theatre of a battle for the ending of Western hegemony and for a harmonious blending of cultures in Polynesia' (p. 461). Stevenson comes across superficially as 'iconoclastic' but more deeply is revealed to be 'post-colonial'. He ceases to be simply 'marginal' and has become 'liminal', to adopt the fine designation of Richard Ambrosini and Richard Dury, who were the organizers of an important symposium on *Stevenson: Writer of Boundaries* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

The intercultural approach adopted by Sylvie Largeaud-Ortega brings out a Stevenson able to traverse the frontiers between cultures, and reveals through him 'the emergence of an anthropological fiction of the Pacific' (p. 31). A solid and fascinating work of documentation underpins a series of readings where finesse of expression rivals rigour of analysis and where throughout is affirmed the great lesson of anthropology: the construction of a demanding and original critical position called 'participatory observation'.

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