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In the South Seas: Robert L. Stevenson's Anglo-Southern Relations, or Orientalisms denied

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In the history of British culture, few authors have distanced themselves from the otherising discourse that has informed its imperial master narrative. Thanks to his Polynesian works, he has been appropriately considered a sort of *avant-la-lettre* postcolonial author. If at that time there was an exoticism reminiscent of colonialism (Pierre Loti, Rudyard Kipling), there also was an exoticism which tried to distance itself from the colonial project and endeavoured to come to terms with *alterity* rather than *identity*. The aim of this essay is to survey his *In the South Seas* and see in what ways he resisted the deculturing British action, as far as sex/gender and race are concerned.

Dans l'histoire de la culture anglaise, peu d'auteurs ont pris leurs distances vis-à-vis du discours sur l'autre qui a caractérisé les romans de l'empire britannique. Grâce à ses œuvres polynésiennes, il a été considéré comme une sorte d'auteur postcolonial avant la lettre. Si à cette époque-là existait un exotisme qui rappelait le colonialisme (Pierre Loti, Rudyard Kipling), il y avait aussi un exotisme qui tentait de se distancier du projet colonial et tentait de parvenir à un accord avec l'*altérité* plutôt qu'avec l'*identité*. Le but de cet article est d'examiner son *In the South Seas* et de voir comment il a résisté à l'action britannique en vue de déculturer l'autre en ce qui concerne le sexe/genre et la race.

Stevenson (Robert Louis), South Seas, Anglo-Southern Relations, orientalism, meridionism

Stevenson (Robert Louis), Mers du Sud, empire britannique, orientalisme, méridionalisme

XIX^e siècle

Polynésie

Within the borders of what I term “Anglo-Southern relations¹¹”, Robert L. Stevenson is one of those few authors who distanced themselves from the otherising discourse that has dominated those relations. It is thanks to them that, starting from

¹¹ Luigi Cazzato, *Anglo-Southern Relations: From Deculturation to Transculturation*, Salento Books, 2011.

the 18th century, Englishness could rise and thrive to the detriment of those peoples (European and non-European) located in Southern latitudes. Stevenson, apparently, was not haunted by the epistemic racism rising from what the decolonialist sociologist Anibal Quijano calls “the coloniality of power”.

One of the fundamental axes of this model of power is the social classification of the world’s population around the idea of race, a mental construction that expresses the basic experience of colonial domination ... Therefore, the model of power that is globally hegemonic today presupposes an element of coloniality²”.

Indeed, thanks to his Polynesian works, he has been considered a sort of *avant-la-lettre* postcolonial author³. Perhaps, appropriately so.

Famously, in search of an ideal place for his ill lungs, he sailed South in 1888, deciding to cut loose from the Victorian regime and from the West as a whole. It is a cut through which he tried, as he wrote, to evade the orbit of the Roman Empire and its conditioning cultural heritage. To do so, he had to travel so far as where men did not speak sister languages and never read Caesar or Virgil. If, at that time, there was an exoticism reminiscent of colonialism (Pierre Loti, Rudyard Kipling), there was also an exoticism which tried to distance itself from colonialism and endeavoured to come to terms with *alterity* rather than *identity*. Stevenson, indeed, strived to tell rather than to judge the reality he saw and lived, even when this reality had to do with a matter as awkward as cannibalism.

His choice brought about some issues among his readership, which treated his anti-romance Polynesian turn “with indifference, if not with aversion⁴”. Not only had Stevenson abandoned *l’art pour l’art* (anti-victorian) stance, he also veered towards the realistic mode and anthropology. Reporting the South became, as his wife sarcastically wrote, “a stern duty”⁵, that is to say, the duty of representing colonial reality from an impersonal and scientific perspective, rather than getting “carried away by the romance, and ended in a kind of sugar candy sham epic”, as he wrote to his friend Sidney Colvin⁶. This artistic turn corresponded to an existential turn. To Rosylin Jolly, “his sense of vocation was thrown into crisis by a complex of conflicted ideas about work, family, masculinity and service⁷”.

My attempt, here, is to examine how Stevenson in *In the South Seas* (1890) interrogates the colonialist project and its “sugar candy” representations, by tackling key issues like *race* and *sex/gender*. If, *à propos* of miscegenation, Robert Young reminds us that “for the Victorians race and sex became history, and history spoke of

² Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America”, *Nepantla*, 1, 3, 2000, p. 533.

³ Julia Reid, “Robert Louis Stevenson and the ‘Romance of Anthropology’”, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 10, 1, 2005, pp. 46–71 ; Roslyn Jolly, “The Ebb-Tide and the Coral Island”, *Scottish Studies Review* 7, 2, pp. 79-91, 2006 ; Sylvie Largeaud-Ortégua, “A Scotsman’s Pacific : Shifting Identities in R. L. Stevenson’s Postcolonial Fiction”, *International Journal of Scottish Literature* 9, 2013, pp. 85-98.

⁴ Robert L. Stevenson, “My First Book Treasure Island”, *McClure’s Magazine* 3, 4, 1894, p. 283.

⁵ Robert L. Stevenson, *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, vol. III-IV, edited by Sidney Colvin, Greenwood Press, 1969, vol. III, p. 145.

⁶ Robert L. Stevenson, *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, vol. III-IV, edited by Sidney Colvin, Greenwood Press, 1969, vol. III, p. 342.

⁷ Rosylin Jolly, *Robert Louis Stevenson in the Pacific : Travel, Empire, and the Author’s Profession*, Ashgate, 2009, p. vii.

race and sex⁸”, it is this history that Stevenson attempted to question from the antipodean southern world.

Stevenson’s Non-Deculturing Anthropology

His initial optimism made him say to his friend Charles Baxter that he would have written a travel book much finer and revealing “than any other writer has done – except Herman Melville perhaps⁹”. Very soon, though, the Scottish author realised how difficult the task was. On the one hand, he would have to learn to communicate to his “fireside travellers” in the UK and the US the exotic seduction those places exercised upon the traveller ; on the other, he would have to learn to describe “the life, at sea and ashore, of many hundred thousand persons, some of our own blood and language, all our contemporaries, and yet as remote in thought and habit as Rob Roy or Barbarossa, the Apostles or the Cæsars¹⁰”. In short, Stevenson had to fulfil his national readers’ expectations about the South Seas people and, at the same time, had to keep his initial promise of portraying those people as accurately and impersonally as he could.

The incipit of *In the South Seas*, corresponding to the author’s first landing on the Marquesas Islands, includes in a nutshell what will be said in the whole work. The premise, almost erotic, is that no world region is so fascinating to the visitor as the Pacific islands and that the memories of them “touched a virginity of sense¹¹”. Nevertheless, soon after he added :

Before yet the anchor plunged a canoe was already paddling from the hamlet. It contained two men : one white, one brown and tattooed across the face with bands of blue, both in immaculate white European clothes : the resident trader, Mr. Regler, and the native chief, Taipi-Kikino. ‘Captain, is it permitted to come on board ?’ were the first words we heard among the islands. Canoe followed canoe till the ship swarmed with stalwart, six-foot men in every stage of undress; ... some, and these the more considerable, tattooed from head to foot in awful patterns; some barbarous and knived; one, who sticks in my memory as something bestial, squatting on his hams in a canoe, sucking an orange and spitting it out again to alternate sides with ape-like vivacity — all talking, and we could not understand one word; all trying to trade with us who had no thought of trading, or offering us island curios at prices palpably absurd. ... I own I was inspired with sensible repugnance ; even with alarm. The ship was manifestly in their power ; we had women on board ; I knew nothing of my guests beyond the fact that they were cannibals ; the Directory (my only guide) was full of timid cautions ; and as for the trader, whose presence might else have reassured me, were not whites in the Pacific the usual instigators and accomplices of native outrage ? ... Later in the day, as I sat writing up my journal, the cabin was filled from end to end with Marquesans : three brown-skinned generations, squatted cross-legged upon the floor, and regarding me in silence with embarrassing eyes. The eyes of all Polynesians are large, luminous, and melting ; they are like the eyes of animals and some Italians. A kind of despair came over me, to sit there helpless under all these staring orbs,

⁸ Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire : Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, Routledge, 2005, p. 169.

⁹ Robert L. Stevenson, *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

¹⁰ Robert L. Stevenson, *In The South Seas* [1896], Routledge, 2013, p. 2.

¹¹ Robert L. Stevenson, *In The South Seas*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

and be thus blocked in a corner of my cabin by this speechless crowd : and a kind of rage to think they were beyond the reach of articulate communication, like furred animals, or folk born deaf, or the dwellers of some alien planet¹².

With this paragraph we pass from the paradisiac to the quasi-infernal exotic. The point of view cannot be anything but the colonial British traveller's who, arriving in a region so different with respect to familiar surroundings, sees the natives as beasts, barbarians or, at their best, as naïve and absurd. The definite information was that they were cannibals and, as a result, very dangerous, especially for the women on board, here touching the trope of the white men defending white women from ferocious black men.

And yet, this perfect colonial frame is marred by the suspicion-question : were not the whites the instigators of native outrage ? It is a question that casts a shadow on his companions' candour ; a key question that differentiates Stevenson from any other earlier writer. With the Scottish author, the West is pictured as it is : a destructive power, which "cannot change ancestral feelings of right and wrong without what is practically soul-murder". On the contrary, to him, all that can be done "is to civilise the man in the line of his own civilisation, such as it is"¹³.

Orientalism, Meridionism, Celticism

The above passage also recounts the encounter between the writer and the natives inside his lodge, where big animal "Italian" eyes were scrutinising him. Here, the coloniality of power hits both the "proper" Indians and the European "Indians", or those Western people not 'real Westerners'. Indeed, the Italians and the Scots are usually chosen to compare the Polynesians. As a consequence, we cannot speak so much of Orientalism as of intra-European Orientalism. If Orientalism was born as a cultural tool for the implementation of European colonialism, intra-European Orientalism was born as a cultural tool for the foundation of modern European identity. Therefore, modern Europe has constituted itself not only against the Orient but also against a sort of inner Orient which has been the constitutive outside, even though it was and is *inside* Europe. This inner Orient might be either the South (Meridionism)¹⁴ or the Celtic fringe (Celticism)¹⁵. If so, then, Italian eyes have to be similar to the Polynesians', both of them sharing the same animal qualities. In other words, at the start, Stevenson's account is the typical account of the average Western traveller who meets the non-Western other. His initial viewpoint is the 19th-century English readers' viewpoint, according to which in the South Seas one could not expect anything other than barbarians unable to utter something sensible for the civilised ear. In the French mission of the man-eating isle of Hiva-oa, while visiting the Catholic church and seeing its sacred vessels, he has to admit that "to the Protestant there is always something embarrassing in the eagerness with which grown and holy men regard these trifles". Nevertheless, he adds that "it was

¹² Robert L. Stevenson, *In The South Seas*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

¹³ Robert L. Stevenson, *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, *op. cit.*, p. 323.

¹⁴ Luigi Cazzato, 2012, "Oriente within, Nord without : il meridionismo e i romantici inglesi" *Altre Modernità* 8, 2015, pp. 188-206, <http://dx.doi.org/10.13130/2035-7680/2561> (22/2/2106).

¹⁵ William J. McCormack, *Ascendancy and Tradition in Anglo-Irish Literary History from 1789-1939*, Clarendon Press, 1985.

touching and pretty to see Orens [an octogenarian friar], his aged eyes shining in his head, display his sacred treasures¹⁶”. His Protestant framework did not prevent him from being moved by the so-called papist or semi-pagan superstitious practices of the Catholic faith.

As far as the southern superstitions are concerned, take, for instance, the passage in *The Beach of Falesá* (1892), where the protagonist Whiltshire says :

We laugh at the natives and their superstitions; but see how many traders take them up, splendidly educated white men ... It’s my belief a superstition grows up in a place like the different kind of weeds¹⁷”.

And the weeds of superstition grow both in the East and in the West, if “in a country of Europe called Italy,... men were often struck dead by that kind of devil, and ... the sign of the cross was a charm against its power¹⁸”. As a British subject, connecting the European pagan-papists to the pagan-pagans of the South Seas, Stevenson finds a way to relativize the relationship between the supposed civilisation and the supposed barbarism through the meridianist contrast. In *the South Seas*, he also temporally relativizes the relationship between South and North in Europe :

A polite Englishman comes today to the Marquesans and is amazed to find the men tattooed; polite Italians came not long ago to England and found our fathers stained with woad; and when I paid the return visit as a little boy, I was highly diverted with the backwardness of Italy: so insecure, so much a matter of the day and hour, is the pre-eminence of race¹⁹.

In short, the Scottish author seems to suggest that it is not that easy to establish hierarchies among peoples and civilisations because of history’s whims through the centuries.

The comparison between the South Seas and Scotland is made as far as the deculturing colonial process is concerned :

Not much beyond a century has passed since these [the Scots] were in the same convulsive and transitionary state as the Marquesans of today. In both cases an alien authority enforced, the clans disarmed, the chiefs deposed, new customs introduced, and chiefly that fashion of regarding money as the means and object of existence²⁰.

This historical-comparative workings help Stevenson relativize the concept of barbarism. He states :

When I desired any detail of savage custom, or of superstitious belief, I cast back in the story of my fathers, and fished for what I wanted with some trait of equal barbarism: Michael Scott, Lord Derwentwater’s head...²¹

In other words, these workings of intercultural comparison help him avoid the trap of the “denial of coevalness²²” – in which, however, he sometimes falls when he

¹⁶ Robert L. Stevenson, *In The South Seas*, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

¹⁷ Robert L. Stevenson, “The Beach of Falesá”, *In Island Nights’ Entertainments*, Routledge, 2014, p. 105.

¹⁸ Robert L. Stevenson, “The Beach of Falesá”, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

¹⁹ Robert L. Stevenson, *In The South Seas*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

²⁰ Robert L. Stevenson, *In The South Seas*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

²¹ Robert L. Stevenson, *In The South Seas*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

²² Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other : How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, Columbia UP, 1983.

says that the 19th century exists only in tracts in the Pacific. It is the trap that typifies anthropological colonial discourse, according to which anything that does not overlap with the present of Western modernity belongs to the past, failing to recognise the *contemporaneity* of times.

Race and (non) Colonial Dominance

Daringly, through the awkward theme of cannibalism, Stevenson tries to defy the assumption according to which the “West” is civilised and the “Orient” primitive. Again, the first moment corresponds to the identification with Western readership :

Nothing more strongly arouses our disgust than cannibalism, nothing so surely unmortars a society; nothing, we might plausibly argue, will so harden and degrade the minds of those that practice it²³.

However, trying to see himself as a Westerner from outside, he adds:

we ourselves make much the same appearance in the eyes of the Buddhist and the vegetarian. We consume the carcasses of creatures of like appetites, passions, and organs with ourselves ... and ladies will faint at the recital of one tithe of what they daily expect of their butchers²⁴.

Following the purpose of portraying the native culture with a detached scientific attitude, he attempts, echoing Montaigne, to explain that perhaps “to cut a man’s flesh after he is dead is far less hateful than to oppress him whilst he lives²⁵”. His conclusion is that one should be as indulgent towards the man-eating men, who live on islands where animal food is scarce, as towards the appalling customs on which European life rests. Similarly, the Polynesian institution of *tapu* (taboo) “is much misunderstood in Europe²⁶”. It is true that some taboos forbid many things to men and even more things to women (“They must not eat pork ; they must not approach a boat ; they must not cook at a fire which any male had kindled²⁷”). However, “the *tapu* is more often the instrument of wise and needful restrictions”, when it is considered that South Seas people have not inherited Roman law and, as a result, “the idea of law has not been disengaged from that of morals or propriety²⁸”.

To the natives, the Scottish writer became *Tusitala* - Samoan for story teller – and he signed documents by that name in his Polynesian years. Indeed, he tried to set up a “reciprocal dialogue” with the Polynesians, as A.C. Colley puts it : “an inclination to look beyond the self, if not to import what he discovers there, to find parallels with his own experience and in that way to make a companion of it, not an alien²⁹”. In short, Stevenson strives to overcome European prejudices and to see reality from the “alien” perspective.

When he meets Mapiao, a great *tahuku* (someone between a priest, a wizard and a tattooer), he pays him as much respect as *tahuku*’s people. Likewise, Mapiao, a man well-known for his eloquence and witty talk, does the same towards Stevenson. Notwithstanding the white man’s bizarre art, which for the native meant drawing

²³ Robert L. Stevenson, *In The South Seas*, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

²⁴ Robert L. Stevenson, *In The South Seas*, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

²⁵ Robert L. Stevenson, *In The South Seas*, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

²⁶ Robert L. Stevenson, *In The South Seas*, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

²⁷ Robert L. Stevenson, *In The South Seas*, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

²⁸ Robert L. Stevenson, *In The South Seas*, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

²⁹ Ann C. Colley, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Colonial Imagination*, Ashgate, 2004, p. 192-93.

mysterious hieroglyphics on a piece of paper, Mapiao manifested a measure of respect. Surely, “a silly trade, he doubtless considered it ; but a man must make allowance for barbarians – *chaque pays a ses coutumes...*”³⁰. Here, Stevenson ironically portrays the *tahuku*’s respectful behaviour as the behaviour of any tolerant Westerner who is indulgent towards savages’ absurdities. The role reversal is so estranging in as much as the viewpoint on the barbarians is Western in disguise. Therefore, the reciprocal dialogue is performed in a very symmetrical way : both Mapiao’s art of making men’s beards into a garland and Stevenson’s one of doodling strange signs on paper are equally unintelligible and, as a consequence, equally “stupid”. Yet, neither of them are deplorable.

Gender and (non) Colonial Desire

Said talks, albeit in passing, of latent orientalism, juxtaposing it to manifest orientalism. The latter regards the Orient less as an object of knowledge than as an object of desire and “encouraged a peculiarly (not to say invidiously) male conception of the world”³¹. R. Young reminds us that during the 19th century questions of racial miscegenation were “fuelled by the multifarious forms of colonial desire ... constituted by a dialectic of attraction and repulsion”³². With Stevenson, the interesting point is to see to what extent he succeeded in evading, on the one hand, the obsession for the Oriental woman, on the other, the white and male deculturing gaze, i.e. the patriarchal stereotype according to which native culture was effeminate and, as a consequence, irrational.

In his anthropological study, the Scottish writer reported that the Gilbert Islands were regarded as the ‘Paradise of naked women’, where, in Said’s words, “one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe”³³. Stevenson tells us that the white traders dramatically misunderstood the Polynesians’ custom that allowed women to walk around naked until they got married. Indeed, considering how many whites were killed for having compromised women’s virtue, “in place of a Paradise the trader found an archipelago of fierce husbands and of virtuous women”³⁴. When native women did not go around naked, they wore “‘The perilous, hairbreadth ridi”, that is to say, a petticoat made of fibre of cocoa-nut leaf, so small and short, that “a sneeze, you think, and the lady must surely be left destitute”³⁵. And yet, “if a pretty Gilbertine would look her best, that must be her costume... Bundle her in a gown, the charm is fled, and she wriggles like an Englishwoman”³⁶.

The Scottish writer was not shocked even at discovering that a native lady lived with two husbands, or, better, “two consorts”. The first was a proper husband, the second, called “pikio”, a sort of official lover, who had a subaltern position with respect to the husband. Here, Stevenson could have meridionistically profited on the comparison with the Italian ambiguous institution of *cicisbeism* (*Cicisbeo* was a sort of 18th-century ladies’ man or lover), but does not do so. He only records Brother

³⁰ Robert L. Stevenson, *In The South Seas*, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

³¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Penguin, 1978, p. 207.

³² Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire : Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, *op. cit.*, p. 65-66.

³³ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

³⁴ Robert L. Stevenson, *In The South Seas*, *op. cit.*, p. 267.

³⁵ Robert L. Stevenson, *In The South Seas*, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

³⁶ Robert L. Stevenson, *In The South Seas*, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

Michel's disgust, who was compelled to live in that lady's house. In the chapter "Husband and Wife", Stevenson tries to describe the man/woman relationship in the Gilbert Islands very closely. He talks about polygamy, female adultery punished by death, about "ridi" as an emblem and yoke of married women's status (however, not an emblem of their gender), about high rank husbands' (or whites') power of life and death over women. In short, everything foreshadowed "a Mohammedan society and the opinion of the soullessness of woman"³⁷. In reality, Stevenson asserts that this monolithic reality is only appearance :

After you have studied these extremes in one house, you may go to the next and find all reversed, the woman the mistress, the man only the first of her thralls. The authority is not with the husband as such, nor the wife as such. It resides in the chief or the chief-woman ; in him or her who has inherited the lands of the clan ... There is but the one source of power and the one ground of dignity — rank³⁸.

According to Stevenson, the power relations between the sexes was not regulated by gender but, so to speak, by class. A chief-woman married to a king becomes his servant. The same woman divorced and remarried to a sailor becomes the boss and can punish her husband in any moment, thanks to her superior rank. As a matter of fact, we can talk of a reversal of the typical power relations within patriarchal society. Indeed, the Scottish writer talks about a "topsy-turvy couple"³⁹, the Stevensons used to meet, whose husband was the angel in the household while the wife behaved like any typical tactless male. It was an eccentric example of masculinity so distant from the Victorian polarised *Weltanschauung*, which assigned the aggressive role to men and the submissive position to women. Stevenson's achievement in creating, as Sylvie Largeaud-Ortége puts it, "female Pacific characters in a way no one had dared attempt before him" is surprising since he was "notoriously reluctant to create full-fledged female characters while writing from Europe"⁴⁰.

Finally, the topsy-turvy reality that he had the chance to observe was the equivalent of the reversal, as Anne C. Colley writes, of the "usual stereotype of the patriarchal foreigner who comes to exert his authority or his masculinity over the weaker, 'female' native culture"⁴¹. It is a reversal performed, though, by a scientific observation aware of its own limits. Stevenson reminds us after Darwin that you cannot observe reality without a theory. Yet, his theories, he writes to Henry James, "melt, melt, melt, and as they melt the thaw-waters wash down my writing, and leave unidea'd tracts – wastes of cultivated farms"⁴². Consequently, in order to reach his initial goal of representing reality objectively and neutrally, without being influenced by prejudices of his culture, Stevenson decided to adopt a provisional epistemology, that is to say, as Kevin Swafford states, an "emerging epistemology"

rooted in an implicit narrative theory that conceives of a dialogic and dynamic relationship between subject(s) and object(s), where truth and narrative, knowledge and communication are always socially,

³⁷ Robert L. Stevenson, *In The South Seas*, op. cit., p. 260.

³⁸ Robert L. Stevenson, *In The South Seas*, op. cit., p. 271.

³⁹ Robert L. Stevenson, *In The South Seas*, op. cit., p. 273.

⁴⁰ Sylvie Largeaud-Ortége, "A Scotsman's Pacific : Shifting Identities in R. L. Stevenson's Postcolonial Fiction", *International Journal of Scottish Literature*, 9, 2013, p. 94.

⁴¹ Ann C. Colley, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Colonial Imagination*, op. cit., p. 137.

⁴² Robert L. Stevenson, *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, op. cit., p. 270.

historically, and culturally contingent and requires an ongoing inter-subjective exchange⁴³.

That is why the Scottish writer would prefer the statement of an intelligent native to the report of the most honest traveller.

Beyond Race and Gender Boundaries: Stevenson's Epistemology of Approximation

Through reciprocal exchange, role reversal and the like, Stevenson reaches the awareness that one can get to the truth only by approximation and by being proximate. After all, he was already conscious of this during his romance season, when in "A Note on Realism" (1883) he denounced the realist writer's "insane pursuit of completion". The same judgment is implicitly given to his artistic enterprise in the South Seas.

That is why it is hardly correct to speak about Stevenson's ambiguities and contradictions *tout-court*, as some critics have done⁴⁴. I would rather speak of narrative-critical strategy subsuming ambiguities and contradictions. Therefore, the answer we can give to the question as to where the true value of his Polynesian works dwells (which were significantly excluded by Henry James' critical study on Stevenson's works after his death) is that it dwells in his intention of giving us a non-stereotyped image of the South Seas. It dwells in his uncommon, out-of-the-way gaze that exceeded the borders of race and gender, within which the *barbarism* of the civilisation he belonged to confined him. Before dying, he wrote to his friend Colvin :

It is the proof of intelligence, the proof of not being a barbarian, to be able to enter into something outside oneself. Something that does not touch one's next neighbour in the city omnibus. Good-bye, my lord. May your race continue and you flourish – Yours ever, TUSITALA⁴⁵".

Therefore, we can hardly agree with Sia Figiel, the Samoan writer who, with reference to the Tusitala Hotel in Apia (material evidence of the colonial past), states:

Tusitala was the name nineteenth century Samoans gave the tuberculosis stricken Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson, who once lived in the biggest house in the whole of Samoa and had servants to cook for him, and to sing to him, and to make him and Fanny 'paradise happy', and wiped his sick arse, too ... whenever it was needed⁴⁶.

Surely, Stevenson had servants but it is also true that he did not go to the South Seas to look for a happy paradise and in search of sexual, economic (as a trader) or spiritual (as a missionary) power.

⁴³ Kevin Swafford, "Claiming Contact : Narrative Discourse and the Epistemology of Travel in R. L. Stevenson's In the South Seas", *Pacific Coast Philology*, 45, 2010, p. 35.

⁴⁴ See Ann C. Colley, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Colonial Imagination*, *op. cit.* ; Julia Reid, "Robert Louis Stevenson and the 'Romance of Anthropology'", *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 10, 1, 2005 ; Cinzia Giglioni, "Un viaggio incompiuto : Stevenson nei Mari del Sud" *ACME*, *Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell'Università degli Studi di Milano*, 65, 2, 2012 ; Sylvie Largeaud-Ortégua, "A Scotsman's Pacific : Shifting Identities in R. L. Stevenson's Postcolonial Fiction", *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ Robert L. Stevenson, *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, *op. cit.*, p. 365.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Michelle Keown, *Postcolonial Pacific Writing : Representations of the Body*, Routledge, 2004, p. 43.

Some years after Stevenson's death, although Conrad laid bare the European imperialist misdeeds. Nevertheless, he could not see any alternative to them, because imperialism embodied, as Said has famously stated, an "aesthetic, politics, and even epistemology inevitable and unavoidable"⁴⁷. In the same way as his life, Stevenson feared that Polynesian civilization was quickly doomed to perish. However, in the light of the negative experience lived by the Irish and the Scots, he suggested to the Samoan chiefs a way out. They could fight as much as they were able to, but there was only one way to defend Samoa : "it is to make roads, and gardens, and care for your trees, and sell their produce wisely, and, in one word, to occupy and use your country. If you do not, others will...⁴⁸".

In conclusion, his non-deculturating anthropology and his ap-proximating epistemology, as Said would put it, gave some "full view of what is *outside* the world-conquering attitudes"⁴⁹.

⁴⁷ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage, 1994, p. 26.

⁴⁸ Robert L. Stevenson, *Robert Louis Stevenson : His Best Pacific Writings*, UQP 2004, p. 147.

⁴⁹ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, *op. cit.*, p. 26.