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Robert Louis Stevenson in the South Seas: a problematic view of cultures and imperialisms

In the first half of *Culture and Imperialism* Said examines the relationship between the grand narratives of the classic European novel of the 18th and 19th centuries and the growth and maintenance of the European colonial empires, showing how the realist novel indirectly supported colonialism. However, the fictional genre that probably most promoted imperial ideology is the adventure novel or *romance*, with its triumphant view of European pioneers and the epics of their deeds. Robert Louis Stevenson was celebrated as one of its undisputed masters and advocates. Actually, from his very beginnings with *Treasure Island*, he did not follow the traditional pattern of the romance but problematized 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. The most critical Stevenson is however to be found in his late South Seas fiction — set in the Pacific, where he lived for six years and died at forty-four — in which he anticipated the "subversive imperial fiction" that will be one of the main topics of Joseph Conrad's works. Stevenson's novella "The Beach of Falesà" and the novel *The Ebb-Tide* reject the glamour of the *romance* or the South Seas idyll, conveying the writer's skepticism on imperial ideology and undermining the myth of the rectitude of the imperial adventurer, who appears no better than the "savage" he seeks to subjugate. Stevenson's problematic attitude towards the imperial enterprise is also evidenced by his non-fictional works: his anthropological study *In the South Seas* and his essay *A Footnote to History*, on Samoan political events. My paper will offer a postcolonial reading of Stevenson's South Seas production, whose value has often been underestimated in the past and needs to be seen from a new perspective.

Paola Della Valle completed her doctorate in English at the University of Torino in 2008, specializing in New Zealand literature. Her articles appeared in *English Studies*, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *NZSA Bulletin of New Zealand Studies*, *Il Castello di Elsinore* and *Quaderni del '900*. She has published the monograph *From Silence to Voice: The Rise of Maori Literature* (Oratia Media, Auckland 2010) and an essay on the use of Italian melodrama in Witi Ihimaera's *The Matriarch* in the volume *Experiences of Freedom in Postcolonial Literatures and Cultures* (S. Bassi and A. Oboe eds, Routledge, London & New York 2011).