



## *A born-translated fairy tale: transcultural readership and anti-exoticism in Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Bottle Imp"*

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In this article I focus on Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Bottle Imp", a short story that occupies a unique place in the cultural and political project undertaken by the Scottish writer while he was travelling and working in the Pacific Islands. This short story allows us to productively employ Rebecca Walkowitz's concept of 'born-translated' literature, meaning that Stevenson conceives the story, from the start, as a text to be received as a translation and addressed simultaneously at multiple readerships. This allows the story to serve a distinctively anti-colonial function, especially in tandem with a number of strategies that depend on its born-translated status. Such strategies include the use of realism within a fantastic narrative; an anti-exoticist concern for contextualization; and the registration of the very conditions of production and circulation of the story itself. In order to appreciate the importance of this story in Stevenson's production, however, it is first necessary to discuss the reception of Stevenson's work as a whole, as well as the last phase of his career.

Both during his lifetime and after his death, Robert Louis Stevenson's fame has mostly been linked to works like *Treasure Island* and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, especially with regard to the general public. His reputation has hence been inherently connected with popular sub-genres – children's literature, Gothic fiction –



and generally speaking with the broad category of romance, which, in fact, he did energetically support in essays such as *A Gossip on Romance* (1882) and *A Humble Remonstrance* (1884). Stevenson's work was impossible to assimilate within the realist Victorian novel, but was also a victim of the modernist backlash against the Victorians in general. As Clotilde De Stasio points out, Stevenson was brushed aside both by traditional and modernist critics in the decades after his death, a disregard that culminated in F.R. Leavis's harsh dismissal of Stevenson in his influential 1948 study *The Great Tradition* (De Stasio 1991: 141-143). Consequently, in spite of his strong presence in popular imagination and among international readerships, he suffered from a considerable critical neglect and was considered, with a few exceptions, a charming but minor literary figure until the end of the twentieth century. Only at this point a number of studies<sup>1</sup> allowed Stevenson to emerge as a multifarious literary personality – an experimental writer of considerable complexity, depth, range and subtlety, whose work was not only able to engage critically with (late) Victorian culture, but also to anticipate modernist, postcolonial and even postmodernist poetics (see Della Valle 2013: 25-33).

The rediscovery of Stevenson's Pacific writings – that is, the works he wrote while living in the Pacific region and also thematically focused on the area – has been crucial for this critical re-evaluation. The passage to the Pacific world was one of the defining experiences in Stevenson's (literary) life, and drastically changed the way he approached both fiction and non-fiction, in what Richard Ambrosini calls the "most dramatic" of the several boundary-crossings of his career (Ambrosini 2006: 33). Stevenson started travelling in the Pacific in 1888, eventually settled in Samoa in 1890, and remained there until his death in 1894. These six years offer a stark contrast with his received image as an uncommitted romancer (and hence, in the context of British colonialism, as a tacit supporter of imperialism). The Pacific writings are the work of a powerfully realist writer, with strong interests in ethnography and local history, and engaged in the political life of the region; a writer that was occasionally sympathetic with some aspects of the imperial project (Colley 2004: 6), but was more often an active supporter of the native populations in their opposition to imperial (mis)rule. This corpus of works is quite varied, even according to Stevenson's standards, and consists of a novel, *The Wrecker* (1892), a novella, *The Ebb-Tide* (1894), a travelogue/ethnography, *In the South Seas* (published posthumously in 1896), a historical monograph, *A Footnote to History* (1892), a number of poems and ballads inspired by local folklore, some journalism, and finally a volume of short stories, *Island*

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<sup>1</sup> The publication, in 1994, of the eight-volume Yale edition of Stevenson's letters, edited by Ernest Meheew, was arguably the major watershed in the history of Stevensonian scholarship. As for the critical studies and essay collections published in the following years, see, for instance, Sandison (1996), Jones (2003), Menikoff (2005), Ambrosini and Dury (2006), Reid (2006), Buckton (2007), Dryden, Arata, & Massie (2009), and Hill (2016; 2017). Scholarly works that are specifically concerned with the Pacific writings – which are the focus of this essay – are (Colley 2004) and (Jolly 2009). Another significant contribution to the field is the yearly publication, from 2005 onwards, of the *Journal of Stevenson Studies*.



*Nights' Entertainments* (1893), which includes "The Beach of Falesá", "The Bottle Imp" and "The Isle of Voices".

This phase of Stevenson's career greatly complicates the reception of Stevenson's work as a whole. Unsurprisingly, it was not particularly well received among his European and American readers, and was largely forgotten until fairly recently. As Roslyin Jolly documents extensively in *Robert Louis Stevenson in the Pacific* (2009), both Stevenson's literary advisors and his general readership were frequently unconvinced by the latest developments of his writing. The widespread expectation was that Stevenson's life in the Pacific would result in uncomplicated imperial romances, full of exoticism. When Stevenson started to send back not only gritty, realistic tales, but also a considerable number of 'dry' works of non-fiction, often patently sympathetic towards the local populations, the audiences were left craving for a supposedly more 'authentic' Stevensonian voice (see Jolly 2009).

Stevenson's Pacific writings, therefore, are to be read in the context of a tense, problematic relationship with his readers. For this reason a reader-oriented interpretation of a Pacific text like "The Bottle Imp" may offer some useful insight. "The Bottle Imp", at first sight, constitutes a less confrontational, more accommodating literary project than most of Stevenson's production on the Pacific. However, not only does this text encapsulate several elements of the poetics that characterize Stevenson's Pacific writing as a whole, but it is also the only work of Stevenson's career to be conceived, as Stevenson put it, for a Polynesian audience, which adds a significant layer of complexity to its analysis.

"The Bottle Imp" is a short story, more specifically a fairy tale. The plot revolves around a magic bottle, containing a fiendish creature – the titular imp – with the power to fulfil every wish his or her owner should make. There is a drawback, though: whoever dies with the bottle in his or her possession will burn in hell forever. Moreover, the owner cannot get rid of the bottle unless it is sold at loss. The tale's protagonist, Keawe, a Hawaiian sailor that is visiting San Francisco, is tricked into buying the bottle by its previous owner, a wealthy – but fatally ill – American. Determined to make the most of the situation, Keawe uses the bottle to become the master of a beautiful mansion in his homeland and then sells the accursed object to his friend Lopaka immediately afterwards. Later on, Keawe meets the love of his life, a clever and kind girl named Kokua. He proposes to her; she accepts; and the two are about to get married. At this point, however, Keawe finds out that he has caught leprosy. He therefore decides to track down the bottle's current owner in Honolulu, so that he can use its power to be clean again. He succeeds, only to discover that the price of the bottle has dropped to two cents. This means that Keawe can only buy the bottle for one cent and will not be able to sell it again.

Risking hellfire for his beloved, Keawe buys the bottle anyway, so he can be cured from leprosy and marry Kokua. However, as soon as Kokua finds out about his sacrifice, she elaborates a plan to save Keawe: they will go to Tahiti, in French territory, where there is a coin, the *centime*, which is less valuable than an American cent. In this way, the couple will be able to arrange another sale. Nevertheless, in spite of their efforts, Keawe and Kokua are unable to sell the bottle, so they end up buying it from



each other through the help of intermediaries. But the last of these intermediaries, a vile white boatswain, surprisingly refuses to sell the bottle back to Keawe – he believes that he will go to hell anyway, so he decides to keep the bottle for himself and enjoy its power while he still can. Keawe and Kokua, therefore, are finally saved.

The first interesting aspect of “The Bottle Imp” is its genesis. Stevenson called it the central piece of a collection of *Märchen* he was planning to write (*Letters* 7, 461). The fact that he used the German word for fairy tale (*Märchen*) is a nod to the story’s origins, which are to be found in German folklore. According to Carlo Ginzburg, the story goes back to two motifs of the German tradition: the magic bottle that can only be sold at a lower price; and the figure of the *Galgenmännlein*, a little creature born of the sperm of a hanged man, who lives in bottles and possesses wish-granting powers. Over the course of different versions, the tale also incorporated the quest for a less valuable coin in other lands. Ultimately, it reached England (Ginzburg 2000: 71).

When it first appeared in the *Sunday New York Herald* – between February and March 1891 – “The Bottle Imp” was accompanied by an authorial note:

Any student of that very unliterary product, the English drama of the early part of the century, will here recognize the name and the root idea of a piece once rendered popular by the redoubtable O. Smith. The root idea is there and identical, and yet I hope I have made it a new thing. *And the fact that the tale has been designed and written for a Polynesian audience may lend it some extraneous interest nearer home.* (“The Bottle Imp”: 72, emphasis mine)

The drama in question has been identified as *The Bottle Imp* by Richard Brinsley Peake, a melodrama first performed in Covent Garden in 1828, featuring the actor Richard John ‘Obi’ Smith as the imp – the O. Smith of Stevenson’s note. It is from this source that Stevenson decided to recreate the tale with a Polynesian audience in mind – and in fact there is no evidence that he had direct contact with any other version of the story (Swearingen 1980: 146). Most crucially, Stevenson enlisted the help of a missionary, Arthur E. Claxton, to produce a Samoan translation of the tale. Claxton eventually published the translated version as “O Le Fagu Aitu” in the magazine *O Le Sulu Samoa (The Samoan Torch)*, from May to December 1891. This, interestingly enough, was the first instance of a printed text in Samoan.

The fact that the story was translated into Samoan may shed some light on the exact meaning of Stevenson’s note, which turns out to be quite ambiguous as regards the dynamics of the tale’s composition. What we know is that it was “designed and written for a Polynesian audience” and that the translation was published almost immediately afterwards. As Roger Swearingen argues, this leaves us with two possibilities: either “Stevenson [wrote] the story in the manner of Polynesian tales, and with a Polynesian setting, without having any particular ‘Polynesian audience’ in mind – or foreseeing any need of translation” (Swearingen 1980: 146), only to embrace the prospect of a translation at a later point; or, alternatively, the tale “was conceived from the outset as a story for translation” (Swearingen 1980: 145), with the Polynesian audience being, from the start, a *Samoan* readership. The wording of Stevenson’s note



seems to suggest that the second hypothesis is not too far-fetched, although one may wonder why he decided to write a story set so prominently in Hawaii if he was thinking of a Samoan audience. “Polynesian audience”, besides, is a very vague term, which does not allow us to discuss in detail the exact characteristics of Stevenson’s intended audience. It does work, however, as an effective counterpoint to the Western audience that the tale nevertheless anticipates. In fact, the note explicitly acknowledges the existence of Western readers (namely, readers “nearer home”). The tale is hence conceived for at least two audiences, which are expected, however, to experience the tale in different ways.

The audience of “The Bottle Imp”, therefore, is meant to be multiple and transcultural; and there is a possibility that the tale was conceived with a translation in mind – as it were, that it was conceived *as a translation*. Both facts beg a number of questions: what are the political implications of thinking the “Bottle Imp” as a translation? What formal characteristics and narrative strategies within “The Bottle Imp” were determined by the unusual circumstances of its genesis? How is a Western audience supposed to approach the “The Bottle Imp”, considering that its ‘ownership’ of the tale is disputed or at the very least complicated by the ineludible presence of a “Polynesian audience”?

It is useful, at this point, to discuss the category of the ‘born-translated’. Rebecca Walkowitz – whose focus is on the contemporary novel – defines born-translated novels as works that “do not simply appear in translation”, but instead “have been written for translation from the start” (Walkowitz 2015: 3). For Walkowitz, however, being born-translated implies something more than purely seeking “to entice or accommodate translation” (Walkowitz 2015: 6) for commercial reasons, which is, arguably, the way of the global blockbuster. Instead, Walkowitz’s born-translated works are always meant to embrace a critical stance:

Born-translated works are notable because they highlight the effects of circulation on production. Not only are they quickly and widely translated, they are also engaged in thinking about that process. [...] Most of all, whether or not they manage to circulate globally, today’s born-translated works block readers from being ‘native readers’, those who assume that the book they are holding was written for them or that the language they are encountering is, in some proprietary or intrinsic way, theirs. Refusing to match language to geography, many contemporary works will seem to occupy more than one place, to be produced in more than one language, or to address multiple audiences at the same time. (Walkowitz 2015: 6)

The passage above – which covers only a part of Walkowitz’s definition – clearly implies the presence of a complex, critically engaged text, because it is aware of and registers the processes of cultural mediation that are implied in its diffusion; such text is also driven by a cosmopolitan spirit, because it is actively invested in blurring the boundaries between national traditions and opposing the idea of the ‘native reader’.



Conceiving the born-translated in these terms makes sense within the debate Walkowitz is contributing to – the vast and ramified discussion on world literature. This debate (inaugurated in the early 2000s) incorporates various, diversified attempts to tackle literature in a wider global context, employing transnational perspectives and broad comparative approaches to study literature outside the boundaries of individual national traditions. A recurring discussion within the field is specifically focused on the ethical and aesthetic value of those works that purposefully embrace global circulation. Walkowitz's conception of the born-translated, in this context, is intended to counter, for instance, Tim Parks' lament about the emergence of the "dull new global novel" – a work whose language is simple, whose content lacks local specificity and is easily digestible by international audiences (Parks 2010); or as a response to Emily Apter's concern for the "problem-based monocultural aesthetic agenda" (Apter 2001: 3) that artists seem eager to adopt to engage audiences transnationally. Walkowitz's point is that works that are conceived within a framework of translation, translatability and extensive circulation are not necessarily connected to "literary decline and political lassitude" (Walkowitz 2015: 32), but, on the contrary, can be employed to promote a progressive political agenda and complex aesthetics.

Provided that the idea of the 'born-translated' maintains its critical edge and is not conflated with standardized global writing, it seems to me a useful descriptive tool that allows us to tackle those works whose production and form are intertwined, from the start, with translation and circulation, and that are able to employ this condition to provide specific political and cultural insights. This is, I argue, the case of "The Bottle Imp". Although Walkowitz is talking of contemporary novels, I believe several of her insights are by no means less relevant for the (late) Victorian period, which in fact represented, at least from an Anglophone perspective, the phase in which "the idea of a properly 'worlded' English literature, often expressed in terms of imperial bonds and civilizational achievements, gathered steady force over a huge geographical expanse of the earth" (Mukherjee 2011: 1). Admittedly, compared to the contemporary examples of born-translated works that Walkowitz provides,<sup>2</sup> Stevenson's "The Bottle Imp" seems to sport a very limited (at least initially) circuit of transcultural circulation. However, this tale seems to me to embrace, on a smaller scale, the core issues, strategies and concerns implied by Walkowitz's category.

By thinking of "The Bottle Imp" as a born-translated fairy tale it is possible to appreciate the subtle and unique way in which this text carries out the anti-imperialist programme that characterizes Stevenson's Pacific writings. In the rest of this essay I will focus on how its born-translated status is reflected in a number of narrative choices and strategies. Most specifically, I will focus on the simultaneous existence of two audiences; and on the registration, within the tale itself, of the very conditions of its global circulation.

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<sup>2</sup> A prominent example that Walkowitz discusses is J. M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*, which was a major point of reference also in a previous publication (see Walkowitz 2009).



In "The Bottle Imp", both audiences are estranged from their role of 'native readers', but this estrangement works in crucially different ways for the Western and Polynesian audience. The Western audience, in particular, is forced to encounter a Polynesian story in a non-domesticated form. This is not achieved by substituting the original German folklore with a distinctively Polynesian one. What really puts the Western reader to the test is that Polynesian history, lore, geography and sociality, even within a fairy-tale frame, are evoked with precision, detail and realism, and, most importantly, with the assumption that the reader has already some familiarity with them. Robert Hillier compares "The Bottle Imp" with the other Polynesian *Märchen*, "The Isle of Voices", noting that in the latter "the extensive use of Polynesian setting and language forces careful and repeated reading – hardly what readers seek in a fairy tale" (Hillier 1987: 40). However, this comment seems to me perfectly valid also for "The Bottle Imp", which is not much more accommodating as far as the setting, the range of geographical references and the language are concerned. This does not necessarily imply that a Westerner is automatically unfamiliar with these aspects – especially considering the gradual annexation of Hawaii in the American sphere of influence in the late nineteenth century; nor that a Polynesian (especially a non-Hawaiian) is automatically familiar with them. Nevertheless, the text is rooted in a non-exotic Polynesian local knowledge, and tries to employ a non-Western perspective that resists assimilation.

As a case in point, let us take the story's first paragraph:

There was a man of the Island of Hawaii, whom I shall call Keawe; for the truth is, he still lives, and his name must be kept secret; but the place of his birth was not far from Honaunau, where the bones of Keawe the Great lie hidden in a cave. This man was poor, brave, and active; he could read and write like a schoolmaster; he was a first-rate mariner besides, sailed for some time in the island steamers, and steered a whaleboat on the Hamakua coast. ("The Bottle Imp", 73)

Right in the first passage of "the Bottle Imp" Stevenson already takes for granted some aspects of local knowledge. One is the history and the legends connected to the bay of Honaunau. This bay was the site of a royal mausoleum, Hale-o-Keawe, named after a legendary king, Keawe, whose bones, after the destruction of the mausoleum, were allegedly sheltered in a hidden cave. The other is connected to the geography of the Island of Hawaii. Stevenson mentions the Hamakua coast, located in the north-western part of the island, which was known for its huge surf – a detail that the reader is supposed to know in order to appreciate the extent of Keawe's skills as a sailor. The reader who lacks this knowledge is not excluded from the narrative, but has an intimation that behind the text there is a rich world of cultural interactions and a complex lore that he or she cannot fully grasp.



Locations and people are systematically taken from reality (often with references to places, houses and events that Stevenson visited or experienced). For instance, in Honolulu, right after he has recovered the bottle, Keawe listens to a concert by Henry Berger, a Prussian musician that was summoned to Hawaii to direct the Royal Hawaiian Band and became an important figure on the local musical scene:

There, among happy faces, [Keawe] walked to and fro, and heard the tunes go up and down, and saw Berger beat the measure, and all the while he heard the flames crackle, and saw the red fire burning in the bottomless pit. Of a sudden the band played *Hiki-ao-ao*; that was a song that he had sung with Kokua, and at the strain courage returned to him. ("The Bottle Imp", 90)

Notice how Stevenson manages to interweave extremely local details – Berger's presence, the song – with the supernatural aspect of the tale – the fire of damnation – in a way that smoothly advances the fairy-tale plot while establishing a believable setting. It is not a fully-fledged portrait of the society of Honolulu, but it is more than a mere taste of local colour. It is the construction of a basic – but convincing – sense of place.

The "extreme circumstantiality" (Jolly 1996: xxviii) of the setting, constantly feeding the reader with glimpses of the Polynesian social and economic world, is the main strategy through which realism works in the tale. Another good example is the description of the Keawe's fellow-travellers during his journey on the *Hall* – an inter-island steamer that takes Keawe to Honolulu, on which Stevenson himself had travelled:

Then the *Hall* came, and the whaleboat carried him on board. The after-part of the ship was full of Haoles who had been to visit the volcano, as their custom is; and the midst was crowded with Kanakas, and the forepart with wild bulls from Hilo and horses from Kaū; but Keawe sat apart from all in his sorrow, and watched for the house of Kiano [Kokua's father]. ("The Bottle Imp", 87)

In a few lines Stevenson sketches a believable social microcosm connected to the steamer – we discover that the ship functions as means of transportation for whites (*Haoles*), Polynesian natives (*Kanakas*), and for cattle coming from different parts of the island – provided, of course, that we know what *Kanakas* and *Haoles* mean in the first place. This is not a generic descriptive passage, it implies a certain knowledge of the economic and human traffic of the Pacific Islands. Notice that it is the *Haoles'* presence that needs to be justified, as if it is the curiosity of a Polynesian audience that deserve more attention, rather than the possible puzzlement of the average Western reader. In the same vein, the geography of the tale, set between the Hawaiian Islands, San Francisco and Tahiti, is remarkably accurate and specific, and the movements of the characters within this geography reflect convincingly the regional and international networks of the Pacific Ocean.





"The Bottle Imp", therefore, develops a supernatural story out of a perfectly realistic setting. A few specifications on realism, however, are in order. Realism is indeed a defining feature of Stevenson's Pacific fiction, but if we compare "The Bottle Imp", with, for instance, "The Beach of Falesá", the longer piece that was published together with "The Bottle Imp" and "The Island of Voices" in *Island Nights' Entertainments*, it is clear that it is not possible to talk of exactly the same kind of realism. Roslyn Jolly considers "The Beach of Falesá" inherently realistic for two main reasons: the believable rendition of physical sensations, and its successful "representation of the manners of various social groups in an outpost of empire at the end of the nineteenth century" (Jolly 1996: xxvii). Instead, "The Bottle Imp" relies mostly on an accurate topography and on *glimpses* of a believable social reality, which are able to stand out within a supernatural narrative. It is understandable, in this sense, that Stevenson was particularly annoyed by the grouping together of "The Beach of Falesá" and "The Bottle Imp" in a single volume (*Letters* 7: 350). However, he later admitted that both works possessed what he called "a queer realism" for "the manners are exact" (*Letters* 7, 436). Being able to connect the two stories through the category of "queer realism", however loosely, is crucial – not to conflate their stylistic specificities, but to frame the particular form of realism of "The Bottle Imp" within the context of Stevenson's anti-colonial project. Within this project, Stevenson's shift from (different kinds of) romance to (various forms of) realist aesthetics played an important function. It reflects Stevenson's new role as chronicler of colonial relations and abuses. Moreover, it systematically opposes the exoticist politics of representation promoted by colonial ideology.

In *The Post-Colonial Exotic* (2001), Graham Huggan argues that the exotic is not, as it is generally perceived, "an inherent quality to be found 'in' certain people, distinctive objects, or specific places" (Huggan 2001: 13), but is rather a mode of perception and consumption. As a mode of perception, exoticism "renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and [...] effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery" (Huggan 2001: 13). As a mode of consumption, on the other hand, exoticism works through the "trafficking of culturally 'othered' artifacts in the world's economic, not cultural, centres" (Huggan 2001: 15). Both modes are characterized by what Huggan calls, after Appadurai (Appadurai 1986: 28), the *aesthetics of decontextualisation*: whether exoticist discourse aims at creating a representation of the other that is easily understandable, or at transforming otherness into a marketable commodity, it is crucial to remove its object from its original context. This is necessary to reduce to a minimum the knowledge that is deemed necessary to understand – and possess – an artifact, a person, a culture.

Stevenson's use of realist aesthetics in "The Bottle Imp" and in the rest of his Pacific writing, on the contrary, aims at *providing* context, producing local specificity and sense of place that oppose a simplified perception of otherness and an easy consumption, in the metropolis, of its literary representation. In "The Bottle Imp" the denial of exoticism works especially well because it relies on the characteristics of the text as a born-translated fairy tale: arguably the easiest tactic for the Western reader to



remain a 'native reader' of a given text, when it delves in a non-Western context, is to employ exoticist paradigms to normalize the setting. By estranging this reader through its nonchalant sketching of a Polynesian world, the tale prevents him or her from becoming the 'native reader' of the text; consequently, it stops him or her from claiming the tale together with the world represented in it. Stevenson does not simply provide a context for its fairy tale: it describes the context with the assumption that the target reader is not (necessarily) Western. This is also connected with the presence of native protagonists, who move within the world of "The Bottle Imp" with absolute familiarity. If the reader lacks their same coordinates, he or she is prevented from classifying and domesticating the cultural items within the tale by means of an exoticist paradigm. The only option is to surrender simultaneously to the foreignness *and* to the normalcy of the setting.

Up until now, I have stressed the ways in which the text resists an easy appropriation from a Western readership. But does the estrangement work the other way? Walkowitz's point is that *no reader* should be granted the status of 'native reader' in relation to a born-translated work. Is this the case in "The Bottle Imp"? Is also a Polynesian reader prevented from claiming that status?

Referencing again the discussion on world literature can help to clarify this point. As Franco Moretti famously argues in "Conjectures on World Literature", the world-literary system in the age of modern capitalism is simultaneously one and unequal (Moretti 2000: 56) – that is, the relations between different literary cultures, however ramified, are profoundly uneven in terms of diffusion, prestige, political and cultural power, and this in turn determines the establishment of core, peripheral, and semi-peripheral zones of literary influence. If we accept this model of the world-literary system, it is easy to understand much of the criticism to those approaches to world literature that favour an easy rhetoric of hybridity, or even forms of carefree 'global thinking', based on the idea that the globalized world is borderless and we live now in a happy communion of cultures.<sup>3</sup> In this context, promoting an easy cosmopolitanism ends up reinforcing the power of those that can effectively exploit the advantages of modern globalization, such as well-connected urban elites and multinational corporations.

In a similar vein, if a born-translated text estranges all its perspective audiences in the same way, it runs the risk of embracing a depoliticized groundlessness, which is easily exploited within a global literary market. Admittedly, Walkowitz is not unaware of the problem and tries to protect the category of the born-translated from this possibility: as she argues in reference to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, her idea of the transnational "also remains local in an important sense", and "global disarticulation – belonging to nowhere – is not the only alternative to national simultaneity" (Walkowitz 2015: 28). My point is that Stevenson, back in 1891, provided a possible alternative to global disarticulation, national simultaneity and uncritical cosmopolitanism, as he promoted decentering but also took into consideration the need to redress inequalities within the world-literary system. Since his Western

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, (Mufti 2016: x) and (Deckard et al. 2015: 22).



audience was the one with more political and epistemological clout, normally expressed through the imposition of an exoticist gaze, Stevenson was primarily focused on disarming a mode of reading that empowered that readership at the expenses of a Polynesian one. Therefore, the estrangement of the Western reader is indeed the predominant strategy that the tale operates.

Still, a form of estrangement *is* at work also for the Polynesian audience to whom "The Bottle Imp" is dedicated. This seems particularly evident in the residual Faustian atmosphere of some passages of the fairy tale. Although the story, as Stevenson fashions it, is in no way a variation on a Faust narrative, some of the most effective passages of "The Bottle Imp" will certainly remind the Western audience of the most famous versions of the German legend. When, towards the end of the story, Kokua has the bottle in her possession, she surrenders to absolute desperation:

All roads were now the same to her, and led equally to hell. Sometimes she walked, and sometimes ran; sometimes she screamed out loud in the night, and sometimes lay by the wayside in the dust and wept. All that she had heard of hell came back to her; she saw the flames blaze, and she smelt the smoke, and her flesh withered on the coals. ("The Bottle Imp", 96)

In its deployment of this narrative trope – a character contemplating the perspective of certain damnation – the passage could be read as a different rendering of, for instance, the last scene of Marlowe's *Faustus*, where the protagonist, as the hour of his damnation approaches, tries to ease his terror by frantically fantasizing about the ways in which he could miraculously avoid his fate. Bodily movements and reactions replace elaborate Elizabethan rhetoric, but both passages convey utter hopelessness and, most importantly, a sense of violent restlessness. Faustian echoes, in short, may allow the Western reader to feel (quaintly) at home. This is, admittedly, a significant concession. But it is definitely not enough to reclaim the story *exclusively* within a European tradition, and certainly does not reinforce an exoticist strategy of appropriation. On the other hand, the Polynesian readers may accept it, even claim it as their own, but they must also acknowledge its foreign origin.

If anything, therefore, the European material at the heart of the story registers the dialogic environment in which Stevenson was able to conceive the story. In a passage from *In the South Seas*, Stevenson narrates the way in which he tried to establish a communication point with several Polynesian natives to learn about their culture:

When I desired any details of a 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: [...] the black bull's head of Stirling procured me the legend of Rahero; and what I knew of the Cluny Macphersons, or the Appin Stewarts, enabled me to learn, and helped me to understand, about the Tevas of Tahiti. The native was no longer ashamed, his sense of kinship grew warmer, and his lips were opened. It is this sense of kinship that the traveller must rouse and share. (*In the South Seas*, 13)



Telling the story of the bottle imp in Polynesia is an integral part of this narrative exchange, which Stevenson is arguably successful in carrying out in spite of his belief, in accordance with Victorian evolutionism, that Polynesians were living in a previous stage of cultural evolution. Being born-translated is, for "The Bottle Imp", not a way to disengage from a variety of contexts, but to critically engage with them. Indeed, Stevenson's interest in writing for Polynesians while living in the Pacific region (and not merely about them) stands in contrast with the other great *fin-de-siècle* colonial writer, Rudyard Kipling. Kipling's audience, while in India, was distinctively Anglo-Indian, and he would have been horrified at the thought that the Indians he represented in his stories may actually read his work (Trivedi 2011: 196). Stevenson cultivates the opposite trend: a desire for communication, in line with his actual interest and later engagement with Samoan society and politics. This is entirely at odds with Kipling's imperial gaze, which does not contemplate the possibility of a native response to his writing.

If the sharing of legends represents a constructive, creative form of trade between representatives of different cultures, it should be noted that Stevenson does not allow us to forget that such process is part of a broader series of exchanges, carried out in the context of the commercial and military penetration of Western colonialism in the Pacific Islands. My concluding point, therefore, is that "The Bottle Imp" registers the very *ambivalence* of transcultural exchanges within a context of colonial expansion. It does that precisely through the device of the magic bottle, which not only is inherently connected to the world of trade and business, but also embodies the complementary forces at work within a colonial context.<sup>4</sup> Entering into the cycle of exchanges connected to the magic bottle enables Stevenson's characters to shape their lives into new directions, but it also engenders sorrow and misery. On the one hand, the imp is able to cause harm even when he dispenses gifts – the most prominent example is the fact that Keawe inherits the land and money to build his house only because an uncle and a cousin suddenly die. On the other hand, the whole system is ultimately a losing game, or, as Keawe puts it as soon as he gets hold of the bottle, "a losing bargain" ("The Bottle Imp", 76) – which is a fairly accurate assessment of the overall effect of colonial expansion, at least from the perspective of the natives.

In this sense, "The Bottle Imp" may work as an allegory of colonial encounters, with the passage of the bottle from one hand to another standing for the unfolding of uneven and ambivalent social and economic relations in the colonial Pacific. Most notably, it is a white man that first brings the bottle to Keawe and it is a white man that takes it back at the end of the tale. Therefore, the commerce between *Haoles* and

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<sup>4</sup> Apart from the colonial allegory that I am suggesting here, the circulation of the bottle lends itself to a variety of readings, but interestingly many of them tend to see it as representative of some form of socio-economic transaction. See for instance (McLaughlin 1996), who suggests that the tale is a reflection on the mechanisms that regulate finance and credit. Carlo Ginzburg, on the other hand, suggestively proposes that "The Bottle Imp" might have inspired Bronislaw Malinowski, founding figure of modern ethnography, to conceive the Trobriandese ceremonial exchange system named *Kula* (Ginzburg 2000)



*Kanakas* – a transcultural as well as commercial transaction – is the essential frame in which the story is enclosed. It is not a chance that the kind of material wealth that the characters wish for is distinctively colonial: Keawe, inspired by what he sees in San Francisco, asks the imp for a house that looks almost exactly like the mansion of the American who sold him the bottle – the handbook definition of mimicry. His friend Lopaka, in a similar vein, uses the bottle to get himself a schooner. And yet, at the same time, the encounter between Westerners and Polynesians is also the reason why the story – a German legend re-written by a Scotsman in Samoa – exists in the first place. Consistently with the reflexive nature of the born-translated text as conceived by Walkowitz, this fairy tale finds a way to record the system of transactions, exchanges, production and circulation that enables its existence. It foregrounds its dependence on certain material and historical conditions, highlighting, at the same time, their fault lines and inherent contradictions.

“The Bottle Imp”, in conclusion, behind its deceptively charming facade, offers important insights on questions of transcultural readership, on the author’s awareness of the (global) context in which he or she writes, and on the negotiation of the aesthetics and politics of literature within that very context. If literary circulation continues to be a matter of interest and concern for scholars in the future, it might be worthwhile to take a closer look at Stevenson’s little experiment. In the same way Stevenson’s Pacific fiction as a whole bears witness to the early stages of contemporary globalization, “The Bottle Imp” represents a possible ancestor of contemporary born-translated literature.

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