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# Laboratory Islands: Renaissance(s), Regression and Re-creation in H. G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* and R. L. Stevenson's *The Ebb-Tide*

*Laboratoires insulaires : Renaissances, régression et re-création dans The Island of Doctor Moreau de H. G. Wells et The Ebb-Tide de R. L. Stevenson*

Julie Gay

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- 1 If they are sometimes associated with death and shipwreck, desert islands have also traditionally been considered as places of rebirth, their essential separateness and desertness making them a sort of *tabula rasa* where one can start anew or create a new society from scratch. One only has to think of Robinson Crusoe, who is cast away on a desert island after the wreck of his ship. He thus undergoes a forced ablution in the ocean which according to Jean-Paul Engélibert could be understood as a new baptism and a second birth, the more so as it happens on a rather significant date, that of his birthday: 'Son arrivée dans l'île est une régression vers l'origine [. . .]. Engendré par un océan qui équivaut symboliquement à sa mère, Robinson gagne un Éden paradoxal, neuf et pur, certes, mais qui vient après la transgression' (Engélibert 49). The island's gestational symbolism hence links its discovery with a regression to the innocence of childhood and to the (rather paradoxical) idea of a post-lapsarian Eden in which Robinson Crusoe appears as a new, more mature Adam, who would be able to found a new society on the desert island. Besides Robinson's personal rebirth, this space indeed offers the possibility of a political renaissance which is reminiscent of Thomas More's *Utopia*, where the remote island becomes a sort of political laboratory allowing to re-create and observe the origins of humanity and society *in vitro*.

- 2 The passage quoted before, however, highlights both the regressive aspect of this re-creation, and its ambivalence, the possibility of starting anew being associated with a form of transgression linked to the fact that this is not the original genesis but a second genesis, not a birth but a re-birth. This potential for re-creation is key to understanding the desert island motif according to Gilles Deleuze, who also underlines, in his famous essay on 'desert islands', the fact that insular travels are temporal as well as spatial, allowing island visitors to somehow regress to a more original time and place: '*À partir de l'île déserte ne s'opère pas la création elle-même mais la re-création, non pas le commencement mais le re-commencement. Elle est l'origine, mais l'origine seconde. À partir d'elle tout recommence. L'île est le minimum nécessaire à ce recommencement, le matériel survivant de la première origine, le noyau ou l'œuf irradiant qui doit suffire à tout re-produire*' (Deleuze 16). Just like the desert island represents another, microcosmic version of the continent, the second origin it embodies necessarily echoes back to the initial one, which might explain the island's ability to constantly reinvent and rewrite itself in the mythical and literary traditions: although it appears infinitely malleable due to its essential bareness, it is yet necessarily predetermined by the 'surviving material' or the fund of motifs and tropes inherited from a rich literary tradition that is consistently being re-produced and renewed.
- 3 Literal and literary regressions therefore paradoxically lead to re-creation, which is precisely what takes place at the turn of the 19th century in the insular writings of authors such as R. L. Stevenson and H. G. Wells, who use the insular space as a way to go back to more timeless ways of writing, reviving numerous mythological and romance tropes by resorting to the insular adventure genre as an alternative to Realism. If by that time, starting anew and being reborn on a desert island had become increasingly difficult, the earth having been almost entirely mapped out and occupied, the island still offered the possibility of a form of literary re-birth or 'renaissance', by regressing to more ancient forms of storytelling while simultaneously innovating in terms of literary form and genre. The evolution and renewal of the insular space therefore allowed these authors to revive insular romance, in particular in Stevenson's *The Ebb-Tide* (1894) and Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), which share a number of features and are particularly innovative in their renewal of this trope and its typical motifs. In these two works, the island indeed acts not only as a political or scientific laboratory but also as a literary one, yielding literary offspring as hybrid as Moreau's 'Beast Folk' in the latter novella. Although some critics have underlined the debt Wells owes to Stevenson (Derry 437; James 70;<sup>1</sup> Dryden 2015, 40), it seems that no detailed comparison of these two insular novellas has yet been drawn, despite their evident closeness both in terms of themes and in their treatment.
- 4 In this paper, I thus aim to analyse the ambivalence of insular 'renaissance' in these two works, and the way they rely on pre-existing tropes and motifs while adapting to spatial and cultural changes in the insular context, in order to renew the adventure genre and offer an alternative to literary Realism at the turn of the 19th century. I wish to focus more specifically on the motif of the island as laboratory for rebirth, be it a scientific, a political or a literary one, and on the various forms of revivals it leads to in the two novellas.
- 5 First of all, like Robinson Crusoe, the characters in both *The Ebb-Tide* and in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* seem to undergo a form of paradoxical rebirth on the island, yet these appear much darker and more disquieting than Robinson's. In *The Island of Doctor*

*Moreau*, the main character, Prendick, is first shipwrecked in the middle of the ocean and manages to survive by getting into a dinghy with another passenger and one of the ship's sailors. As they run out of water and become increasingly tormented by thirst and hunger, Prendick eventually agrees to the suggestion of cannibalism, thus transgressing from the onset the moral values which were at the core of more traditional adventure narratives. Luckily for him, his two companions end up fighting each other, falling off the boat and sinking to the bottom of the ocean, which Prendick comments on as follows: 'I remember laughing at that and wondering why I laughed. The laugh caught me suddenly like a thing from without' (Wells 2005, 9). The shipwreck is therefore associated with another form of regression, not towards innocence but towards a form of savagery and madness. Prendick then falls into a transitory state between life and death, before fainting as he is finally picked up by a boat providentially passing by:

And even as I lay there I saw, with no more interest than if it had been a picture, a sail come up towards me over the skyline. My mind must have been wandering, and yet I remember all that happened quite distinctly. I remember how my head swayed with the seas, and the horizon with the sail above it danced up and down. But I also remember as distinctly that I had a persuasion that I was dead, and that I thought what a jest it was they should come too late by such a little to catch me in my body. (Wells 2005, 9)

- 6 Prendick is hence first reborn on the schooner after lying unconscious for thirty hours, and has barely recovered from this first shock when the ship's drunken captain refuses to let him stay on board and decides to cast him adrift again in his dinghy, near the island where another of the ship's passengers, Montgomery, is alighting. This leads to a second crisis, and another near-death experience for Prendick:

Then I realized I was in that little hell of mine again, now half-swamped. . . . I was still weak, you must remember, from my exposure in the boat; I was empty and very faint, or I should have had more heart. But as it was I suddenly began to sob and weep as I had never done since I was a little child. The tears ran down my face. In a passion of despair I struck with my fists at the water in the bottom of the boat, and kicked savagely at the gunwale. I prayed aloud to God that he would let me die. (Wells 2005, 25)

- 7 This second crisis moreover causes Prendick to undergo another form of regression, this time to the state of childhood: yet this return to childhood is not associated with innocence, paradise, and purity but with 'savagery', 'hell', and a suicidal tendency. The expression 'little hell' identifies this experience with a euphemistic form of death, followed again by a rebirth or at least a renewal of hope when the islanders eventually take pity on him and tow him to the island.
- 8 The island itself appears to initially conform to the maternal symbolism of a protective womb or nest, as its first description suggests: 'It was low, and covered with thick vegetation, chiefly of the inevitable palm-trees. From one point a thin white thread of vapour rose slantingly to an immense height, and then frayed out like a down feather. We were now within the embrace of a broad bay flanked on either hand by a low promontory' (Wells 2005, 27). The down feather simile, associated with the metaphorical use of the term 'embrace', highlight the island's protective aspect, although the softness of the feather and the beauty of this Edenic landscape are immediately counteracted by the mention of 'dull grey sand' and of 'lava' a few lines later (Wells 2005, 27-28), which underline the island's threateningly volcanic nature, and endow it with a much more disquieting feel. Rather than a heaven, Montgomery

later describes it as ‘an infernally rum place’ (Wells 2005, 29), where Prendick’s apparent rebirth is complexified by his progressive regression to a more ‘savage’ state, while his paradoxical initiation appears to lie in his ability to eventually blend in with the Beast Folk: ‘I became one among the Beast People in the Island of Doctor Moreau’ (Wells 2005, 118). This complexification of the motif of rebirth might therefore be due to the fact that the island is not indeed a ‘*tabula rasa*’, since it has already been discovered and peopled by a rather mad scientist and his hybrid creatures. The introduction of the very modern scientific concept of atavistic regression hence leads to the paradoxical renewal of this typical romance motif, through the generic hybridization of romance with science.<sup>2</sup>

- 9 In *The Ebb-Tide*, the main characters seem to undergo a similar form of rebirth on the island, which initially appears as a picture of heaven:

Never in his dreams had he beheld anything more strange and delicate. The beach was excellently white, the barrier of trees inimitably green . . . Here a multitude of sea-birds soared and twinkled, and fished in the blue waters; and there, and for miles together, the fringe of cocoa-palm and pandanus extended desolate, and made desirable green bowers for nobody to visit. . . (Stevenson 2008, 87–88)

- 10 The use of the intensifying adverbs (‘excellently’; ‘inimitably’; ‘never . . . more’) and the stress on colours hyperbolically emphasise the Edenic and picturesque aspect of what appears like the typical desert island topos. If the transition from the ocean to the island is not dramatized by a shipwreck, it is however likened to the passage into another world, separated from the rest by a ‘wall’ with only a ‘narrow entrance’ that the adventurers cross thanks to the flood of the tide:

The schooner looked up close-hauled, and was caught and carried away like a toy. She skimmed; she flew; a momentary shadow touched her decks from the shoreside trees; the bottom of the channel showed up for a moment and was in a moment gone; the next, she floated on the bosom of the lagoon. . . Herrick stood transported. In the gratified lust of his eyes, he forgot the past and the present; forgot that he was menaced by prison on the one hand and starvation on the other; forgot that he was come to that island, desperately foraging, clutching at expedients. (Stevenson 2008, 189)

- 11 The swiftness of this transition, highlighted by the accumulation of active verbs and temporal adverbs, seems to carry Herrick into a sort of trance, which leads him to a superlative form of forgetfulness reflected by the anaphoric repetition of the verb ‘forgot’, as if he had crossed the river Lethe and could be reborn in this blissful island. The island thus awakens the hope of starting anew and forgetting about the past by being reborn in the ‘bosom of the lagoon’ and within the ‘haven, snugly elbowed there’ (Stevenson 2008, 189), with again the corporeal metaphor of the protective and comfortable womb. Yet the trio soon discover that not only is the island not desert, but it is actually a place of death rather than of rebirth, as its population has been decimated by smallpox: ‘[T]he house is empty and the graveyard full’ (194). The ‘excellent’ whiteness thus becomes ‘leprous’ (190), while the initially ‘heavenly’ (202) island progressively becomes ‘dreadful’ (222): the motif of Edenic rebirth is both re-created and given a much darker turn as it now evokes the passage into an infernal space, which is precisely what Sylvie Largeaud-Ortega highlights when she analyses this passage as a rewriting of Aeneas’s catabasis along the Styx (96). What is more, Herrick had indeed announced his death to his wife before going on this sea voyage, using the metaphor of boundary-crossing to attenuate the violence of the announcement: ‘Turn the key in the door; let no thought of me return; be done with

the poor ghost that pretended he was a man and stole your love. . . . I have no more to say; only linger, going out, like an unwilling guest. . . . And yet I am dying' (Stevenson 2008, 140). However, the crossing of the island's threshold and the immersion in the lagoon's water fails to enact either his rebirth or his death, leading him to experience a form of existential crisis. Indeed, if his transgressive jump into the lagoon is initially meant as an attempt to cross 'the open door of suicide' (227), he turns out to be unable to take this ultimate step: 'the open door was shut in his recreant face' (228). He then joins the island's occupant, Attwater, and undergoes a form of regression not only into 'cowardice' (239) and betrayal, but also into childhood and even animality as he puts himself in Attwater's hands and calls himself 'a puppy with a broken leg' (230). Yet Attwater himself fails to convert Herrick to his religious faith,<sup>3</sup> and his impossible conversion is hammered in through his repeated negations and peremptory conclusion, which rules out any possibility for further discussion:

You push me beyond my bearing. What am I to do? I do not believe. It is living truth to you; to me, upon my conscience, only folk-lore. I do not believe there is any form of words under heaven, by which I can lift the burthen from my shoulders. I must stagger on to the end with the pack of my responsibility; I cannot shift it; do you suppose I would not, if I thought I could? I cannot—cannot—cannot—and let that suffice. (Stevenson 2008, 207)

- 12 The spatial metaphor in the first sentence highlights the loss of spiritual bearings that Herrick is the paragon of, on an island that allows the author to echo contemporary debates around religion and stage them on a smaller scale. These subversions of Robinson Crusoe's rebirth and religious initiation therefore illustrate how at the turn of the 19th century, some central romance motifs of the robinsonade were being complexified and given a more realistic and dysphoric turn by the two authors, who could not but echo the crisis of faith as well as the growing scepticism and sense of disenchantment that seemed to be pervasive at the time.
- 13 If the island fails to appear as a place of existential or at least heroic rebirth, its potential as a political and scientific laboratory is also questioned in these novellas. Indeed, a parallel can be drawn between Attwater and Moreau, who are both trying to create (or re-create) a new society on their island: Attwater, who presents himself as a missionary, elected this island for its desert nature and claims that he 'was making a new people here' (Stevenson 2008, 204), yet his political and religious utopia soon turns into a dystopia as his despotic behaviour leads him to face a 'mutiny' (211) on the island, and he finally sees the population of his colony decimated by smallpox. Moreover, he acts as a demiurge on the island, asserting his own omnipotence ('I can do anything' (209)) while Herrick is convinced of the despot's omniscience ('but you know all', 231), which highlights the transgressive and disquieting nature of such an attempt at 'playing god' and re-creating a small world, since this 'holy terror' (216) establishes a direct link between his faith and his deadly violence: 'It is faith; I believe my balls will go true' (209).
- 14 The same violence characterises the way Moreau rules his island, where he is also (more literally) trying to make a 'new people', a 'beast people': more than a political laboratory, the island has indeed become a scientific one where Moreau attempts to turn animals into humans through vivisection. Just like Attwater, he then attempts to educate them—'[my] part . . . was educational' (Stevenson 2008, 215)/ 'I spent many days educating the brute' (Wells 2005, 76)—while his 'Law' (Wells 2005, 79) is reminiscent of Attwater's 'justice' (Stevenson 2008, 218): the way they gather their

flock to wield justice is oddly similar, as 'Moreau sounded the horn' (Wells 2005, 89) echoes the way '[Attwater] had the conch sounded' (Stevenson 2008, 218). In addition, Moreau seems to embody an equally demiurgic figure to the 'Beast Folk', creating them in his own image and making them repeat the endless 'litany' (Wells 2005, 39) of the Law like a religious 'hymn' (Wells 2005, 79) to remind them that, just like on Attwater's island, 'None escape' (Wells 2005, 90). Indeed, religion ('worshipping' (Wells 2005, 90)) is similarly associated with coercion, violence and torture in both novellas: 'Moreau stopped, facing this creature, who cringed towards him with the memory and dread of infinite torment. 'Who is he?' repeated Moreau, in a voice of thunder' (Wells 2005, 91). This passage might echo the scene in which Attwater violently converts Davis to his religious faith, with the same biblical emphasis on voice using another striking simile: "'Davis", he cried, his voice like a trumpet, "I give you sixty seconds to make your peace with God!"' (Stevenson 2008, 247). The Beast Folk's submissive behaviour is moreover strangely reminiscent of the natives' in *The Ebb-Tide*: 'all the Beast People writhed and grovelled in the dust' (Wells 2005, 90), while in Stevenson's novella 'there they all crouched upon the ground, with bulging eyes' (Stevenson 2008, 218), which shows how both Attwater's and Moreau's little colonies might be understood as grotesque, highly satirical versions of utopic missionary communities as featured for instance in Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*. The two despots might indeed appear as caricatures of the 'muscular Christian'<sup>4</sup> ideal developed by Ballantyne or Kingsley in the 19th century, and often embodied by the strong missionary striving to convert local populations and bring them the light of 'civilisation' through an often violent form of coercion: 'The South Sea Islanders are such incarnate fiends that they are the better of being tamed, and the missionaries are the only men who can do it' (Ballantyne 215).

- 15 Moreau, too, eventually faces a mutiny, which will actually lead to his own demise, as the Beast Folk first start regressing to their former state: '[S]omehow the things drift back again, the stubborn beast flesh grows, day by day, back again' (Wells 2005, 77), and end up rebelling against his Law, destroying his little colony and killing their master: 'They're mad. They're all rushing about mad. What can have happened? I don't know' (Wells 2005, 100). Montgomery's comment underlines the unpredictability of this phenomenon, which might echo the late-Victorian fear of an uprising in the British Empire especially following the first Boer war, making this novella both a scientific and a political dystopia—it has indeed been interpreted by some critics as a satirical allegory of colonialism (Youngs 121). This dystopic or at least dysphoric dimension highlights the fact that at the turn of the 19th century, the desert island increasingly fails to offer the possibility of a successful rebirth, be it a personal, a scientific or a political one, as it is often already occupied, contaminated from the outside or contains in itself the seeds of its own destruction.
- 16 However, it might still offer the possibility of a literary 'renaissance', as the creation of such hybrid monsters essentially appears as a way to renew some typical insular romance motifs, such as that of the wild beast which is often found on the island: Wells thus seems to regress to much earlier hypotexts<sup>5</sup> than *Robinson Crusoe*, all the way to the mythological hybrid, Moreau's creatures being reminiscent of the 'satyr' (Wells 2005, 86) and of other monsters of the 'Comus route' (52), in Prendick's words. Comus was a sorcerer in Greek mythology, the son of the enchantress Circe: he was the leader of a band of creatures, men whom he had turned into hybrid monsters. Yet Moreau's hybrids are given a much more modern twist, as they are the result of a vivisectioning



enterprise, a practice that was highly controversial at the time, and raised questions about medicine and the plasticity of human nature.

- 17 Similarly, Stevenson revives some mythological tropes such as the catabasis I mentioned earlier, but also the mythical island from the *Aeneid*, Zacynthos:

Remember your first view of the island, and how it's only woods and woods and water; and suppose you had asked somebody for the name, and he had answered—*nemorosa Zacynthos*.'

'*Jam medio apparet fluctu!*' exclaimed Herrick. 'Ye gods, yes, how good!'

'If it gets upon the charts, the skippers will make nice work of it,' said Attwater. (Stevenson 2008, 203)

- 18 It is indeed its geographical indeterminacy that allows for the paradoxical survival of this mythical topos, which is however complexified by being hybridised with its very opposite, the infernal island of Saint Brendan (Benedeit), or Dante's Purgatory. As Deleuze argues in his famous essay: '*La littérature est l'essai d'interpréter très ingénieusement les mythes qu'on ne comprend plus, au moment où on ne les comprend plus parce qu'on ne sait plus les reproduire*' (Deleuze 15). Both Stevenson and Wells thus self-consciously introduce intertextual references to other mythical or literary texts, which allow them to dialogically interact with the literary tradition while toying with the reader's generic expectations.

- 19 Just like New Island's stock-house appears as a 'curiosity-shop' which 'seize[s] on the mind of Herrick with its multiplicity and disorder of romantic things' (Stevenson 2008, 201) and 'arouse[s] [his] imagination' (Stevenson 2008, 201), Stevenson and Wells seem to revel in exploring the reservoir of tropes and myths the desert island embodies, and which they use as a motor for their creation or rather re-creation. This is precisely what Richard Ambrosini suggests in an interesting collection of essays that explore Stevenson's ability to constantly cross generic boundaries: 'Stevenson's view of fiction—which would lead him, years later, to write romances of adventure rather than realistic novels—was based on an insight into the potentials of romance for revitalizing timeless forms of archetypal story-telling' (Ambrosini 27). Stevenson himself admitted to succumbing to this regressive tendency in his essay 'A Note on Realism', in which he highlights the ambivalence of his literary posture, between the 'old stock' and 'fresh solutions', epic romance and Realism:

The old stock of incidents and accessories, tricks of workmanship and schemes of composition . . . haunt and tempt our fancy, offer us ready-made but not perfectly appropriate solutions for any problem that arises, and wean us from the study of nature and the uncompromising practice of art. To struggle, to face nature, to find fresh solutions, and give expression to facts which have not yet been adequately or not yet elegantly expressed is to run a little upon the danger of self-love. (Stevenson 1919, 103–04)

- 20 The author moreover acknowledges the regressive aspect of this re-creative process, underlining the intemporal nature of ancient romance motifs and their ability to revive literary creation in another essay, entitled 'Pastoral':

A trade that touches nature, one that lies at the foundations of life, in which we have all had ancestors employed, so that on a hint of it ancestral memories revive, lends itself to literary use, vocal or written. Thus novels begin to touch not the fine dilettanti but the gross mass of mankind, when they leave off to speak of parlours and shades of manner and still-born niceties of motive, and begin to deal with fighting, sailing, adventure, death, or child-birth; and thus ancient out-door crafts and occupations, whether Mr. Hardy wields the shepherd's crook or Count Tolstoi swings the scythe, lift romance into a near neighbourhood with epic. These

aged things have on them the dew of man's morning; they lie near, not so much to us, the semi-artificial flowerets, as to the trunk and aboriginal taproot of the race. A thousand interests spring up in the process of the ages, and a thousand perish; that is now an eccentricity or a lost art which was once the fashion of an empire; and those only are perennial matters that rouse us to-day, and that roused men in all epochs of the past. (Stevenson 1905, 96)

- 21 Exploring the 'old stock' of romance and the elementary activities that are linked to it ('fighting, sailing, adventure') therefore offers the possibility to 'revive' 'ancestral memories' and to revitalise a modern world that is perceived as weak, sterile and lacking vigour ('the fine dilettanti'; 'still-born niceties'; 'semi-artificial flowerets'). Julia Reid notably explored Stevenson's interest in the primitive, which is repeatedly emphasised in this passage ('the foundations of life'; 'aboriginal taproot of the race'; 'the dew of man's morning'): she underlined the way Stevenson relied on contemporary scientific and psychological theories to counter the idea of linear evolution by appealing to a collective and intemporal 'organic' memory (Reid 19–22) that would allow him to reach a much larger audience: 'perennial matters that rouse us to-day, and that roused men in all epochs of the past'; 'to touch the gross mass of mankind'. Stevenson's quest for a universal and timeless form of writing can therefore only be achieved through a regression not only to more ancient tropes and motifs, but also to the ancient 'epic' mode which appears as the ideal towards which any author must strive ('lift romance into a near neighbourhood with the epic'). The vitality of Stevenson's romantic and near-epic writing is thus pitted against his contemporaries' sterile and dull interest for 'parlours and shades of manner and still-born niceties of motive', which is probably a hint at the realistic novel of manners. This generic dichotomy is even mirrored in the structure of the clause, where the paratactic sequence of increasingly long noun groups contrasts with the subsequently swift hypotactic enumeration of short active verbs and nouns: 'fighting, sailing, adventure, death, or child-birth'.
- 22 The island space thus seems to be the ideal place to reactivate such tropes and modes, due to its isolated and atemporal essence, but also to the fact that its wilderness is especially conducive to the reawakening of such elementary out-door activities as sailing, fighting and adventuring. These activities are also typical of the romance mode, which according to Northrop Frye relies on a succession of adventurous actions and events leading up to a major adventure or quest and taking place in an imaginary realm (Frye 186–87). Building on Frye's analysis, Matthieu Letourneux further examines the way this mode essentially borrows the structures and archetypes of myths whilst secularising them: '*Là où le mythe s'inscrit dans un système explicatif plus vaste, le conte ou le roman d'aventures perdent tout caractère rituel et peuvent être décrits comme des "versions profanes des mythes"*'<sup>6</sup> (Letourneux 229). He explains that the adventure novel pushes this mutation of mythical structures even further, as it transfers them from the abstract spatio-temporality of myth and romance to a more referential spatial and temporal setting: '*S'il renvoie parfois au monde atemporel des contes ou aux temps originels des mythes et de l'épopée, c'est pour les retranscrire dans une temporalité référentielle*' (Letourneux 189). All this makes insular adventure the perfect medium for Stevenson to both explore the limits of Realism and creatively revisit timeless forms of writing, in an attempt to reach his epic ideal.
- 23 Wells similarly elected the island as the literary laboratory for a 'new form' (Huntington 11) and managed to revive romance by hybridizing it with scientific

realism, as Simon James notes: ‘Wells’s romances are still made to engage with the real material conditions of existence by their adherence to not a naturalist, but a scientific realism, hence, “scientific romances”’ (James 12). In this new, hybrid genre of ‘scientific romance’, scientists have become the new explorers, in the line of Charles Darwin narrating his travels to the Galápagos or Alfred Russel Wallace recounting his in the Malay Archipelago. The *fin de siècle* indeed marked the end of the age of discoveries, so that romance authors had to find new routes to explore, be it by metaphorically investigating the mysteries of animal flesh, or by literally exploring the rare stretches of wilderness that were still left on the surface of the earth: ‘I will conquer yet’ (Wells 2005, 78) says Moreau about the beasts’ flesh, while the astronomer and botanist in the short-story ‘In the Avu Observatory’ observes the wild forest and thinks ‘of all the possibilities of discovery that still lay in the black tangle beneath him; for to the naturalist the virgin forests of Borneo are still a wonderland full of strange questions and half-suspected discoveries’ (Wells 1927, 241–42). The island indeed still appears as the reservoir of strange, endemic species, and even allows Wells to revive extinct species in his short story ‘Aepyornis Island’, a robinsonade in which the main character is stranded on an island with a strange archaic bird. Wells thus endeavours to breathe new life into classical romance by introducing a scientific twist into the plot, and offering a sort of crypto-zoological parody of the Friday and Robinson trope.

- 24 The island’s regressive potential therefore paradoxically leads to a form of literary ‘renaissance’ or re-creation, in which authors revive ancient myths, motifs and genres while adapting them to the *fin de siècle* cultural, scientific and literary context. The motif of insular rebirth hence becomes especially problematic, while any form of political or religious renaissance on the island seems to be bound to fail. Yet this new, dysphoric mood is precisely what allows insular romance to mutate and be reborn, through its hybridisation with realism or even through the adoption of a more satirical and sometimes burlesque tone, which enables authors to metatextually reflect on their own borrowings and rewritings. The reflexive distance that characterises these hypertexts indeed appears as the key to turning sterile repetition into fertile re-creation, as Gérard Genette underlines: ‘*L’hypertextualité a pour elle ce mérite spécifique de relancer constamment les oeuvres anciennes dans un nouveau circuit de sens*’ (Genette 558).

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## NOTES

1. The two critics notably underline the fact that the ships' captains in these works share almost the exact same name, John Davis in *The Ebb-Tide* and John Davies in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, and are endowed with similar features, being both rather violent drunkards and disgraced ship captains.
2. This aspect will be analysed in more detail in the third part of this essay.
3. Herrick's acolyte Davis, on the other hand, experiences a true rebirth on the island when he becomes one of Attwater's converts and finds a form of peace on the island. However, the

violence of his conversion, as he is held at gunpoint in a scene that borders on torture, seems to ultimately question the validity of such a forced and painful rebirth.

4. 'It was vital to English self-esteem that the colonised nations should be administered by men who exhibited that wholesome Christian manliness and physical strength and purity which it was assumed characterised the English race at home and abroad' (Dryden 2000, 29).

5. 'L'hypertextualité désigne toute relation unissant un texte B (que j'appellerai hypertexte) à un texte antérieur A (que j'appellerai, bien sûr, hypotexte) sur lequel il se greffe d'une manière qui n'est pas celle du commentaire' (Genette 13).

6. This phenomenon is also underlined by the master of romance Walter Scott himself in his preface to *The Lady of the Lake*: 'the mythology of one period would seem to pass into the romance of the next, and that into the nursery tales of subsequent ages' (quoted in Fraser 6).

## ABSTRACTS

This article aims to explore the way R. L. Stevenson and H. G. Wells use the insular space to go back to more timeless ways of writing and thus to revive insular romance in works such as *The Ebb-Tide* or *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. If by the turn of the 19th century, starting anew and being reborn on a desert island had become increasingly difficult, the island still offered the possibility of a form of literary re-birth or 'renaissance', by regressing to more ancient forms of story-telling while simultaneously innovating in terms of literary form and genre. This paper therefore aims to analyse the ambivalence of this insular 'renaissance', and the way it relies on pre-existing tropes and motifs while adapting to spatial and cultural changes in the insular context, in order to renew the adventure genre and offer an alternative to literary Realism at the turn of the 19th century. It moreover explores the motif of the island as laboratory, be it a scientific, a political or a literary one, and the various forms of revivals it leads to in the two authors' works.

Cet article se propose d'explorer la façon dont R. L. Stevenson et H. G. Wells se saisissent de l'espace insulaire afin de renouer avec des formes d'écriture plus intemporelles et de renouveler ainsi le romance insulaire, dans des œuvres telles que *The Ebb-Tide* ou *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. Si au tournant du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, repartir à zéro et renaître sur l'île s'avérait de plus en plus difficile, l'île offrait encore la possibilité d'une forme de renaissance littéraire, à travers une régression vers des formes plus anciennes de fiction, conjuguée à divers types d'innovations formelles et génériques. Cet article se propose donc d'analyser l'ambivalence de cette renaissance insulaire, et la façon dont elle s'appuie sur des tropes existants tout en les adaptant aux changements spatiaux et culturels sur l'île, afin de renouveler le genre de l'aventure et d'offrir une alternative au Réalisme au tournant du siècle. Il explore en particulier le motif de l'île en tant que laboratoire, qu'il soit scientifique, politique ou littéraire, ainsi que les diverses formes de renouveaux auxquels il conduit dans les œuvres des deux auteurs.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** île, aventure, romance, réalisme, Stevenson (Robert Louis), Wells (Herbert George), renaissance, régression, laboratoire, réécriture

**Keywords:** island, romance, realism, Stevenson (Robert Louis), Wells (Herbert George), renaissance, regression, adventure, laboratory, rewriting

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