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Earth of Dark Names. Adventure and adventurers, narration and narrators in Stevenson and Conrad

Giuseppe Sofo

Résumé

Cet article est une étude de l'aventure de la narration dans la narration d'aventure, à travers l'analyse du rôle de noms et voix ambiguës dans *The Master of Ballantrae* et *The Ebb-Tide* de Robert Louis Stevenson, et dans *Heart of Darkness* et les récits de Joseph Conrad. Les ombres qui couvrent les noms et les voix des personnages et des narrateurs dans ces œuvres, en effet, contribuent au mystère à la fois de l'aventure et de la narration, et voilent non seulement les identités de ces personnages, mais aussi leurs histoires. À travers une lecture approfondie de ces œuvres, nous verrons comment dans ces « histoires impossibles » d'îles et de terres « douteuses » dont les noms sont aussi perdus, l'impossibilité de raconter devient elle-même un conte.

Mots-clés

Stevenson (Robert Louis), Conrad (Joseph)

The article intends to investigate the adventure of narration in the narration of adventure, through the analysis of the role of ambiguous names and voices in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Master of Ballantrae* and *The Ebb-Tide*, and Joseph Conrad's short stories and *Heart of Darkness*. The shadows covering the names and voices of characters and narrators in these works, in fact, contribute both to the mystery of adventure and the mysteries of narration, veiling not only the identities of these characters but also their whole tales. Through a close readings of these works, we will see how these "impossible tales" on "doubtful" islands and lands whose names are also lost, so that the impossibility of telling tales becomes itself a tale.

Stevenson (Robert Louis), Conrad (Joseph), narration, names, voices

XIX^e siècle, XX^e siècle

Royaume-Uni, Afrique, Îles du Pacifique

Artistic observation can attain an almost mystical depth.

The objects on which it falls lose their names.

Paul Valéry

This article intends to investigate the adventure of narration in the narration of adventure, through the analysis of the role of ambiguous names and voices in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Master of Ballantrae* and *The Ebb-Tide*, and Joseph Conrad's short stories and *Heart of Darkness*. The shadows covering the names and voices of characters and narrators in these works, in fact, contribute both to the mystery of adventure and the mysteries of narration, veiling not only the identities of these characters but also their whole tales.

1. Earth of Dark Names

In Stevenson's *The Ebb-Tide: A Trio and a Quartette*, the reader finds out very early that the three men who form the trio of the subtitle, know next to nothing of each other. They do not even know each other's names, because their shameful adventures have brought all of them to the need of an alias:

Common calamity had brought them acquainted, as the three most miserable English-speaking creatures in Tahiti; and beyond their misery, they knew next to nothing of each other, not even their true names. For each had made a long apprenticeship in going downward; and each, at some stage of the descent, had been shamed into the adoption of an *alias*¹.

Of Herrick, the most educated of the three, the reader knows that « about a year before this tale begins [...] he had broken the last bonds of self-respect, and upon a sudden Impulse, changed his name and invested his last dollar in a passage on the mail brigantine, the *City of Papeete*² » and although the reason of this choice is unknown, the narrator informs that « if Herrick had gone there with any manful purpose, he would have kept his father's name; the alias betrayed his moral bankruptcy³ » and that, however, « under the new name, he suffered no less sharply than before⁴ ». Of his company, one is an « American who called himself Brown, and was known to be a master mariner in some disgrace⁵ » and the other one, a « dwarfish person, the pale eyes and toothless smile of a vulgar and bad-hearted cockney [...] who called himself sometimes Hay and sometimes Tomkins, and laughed at the discrepancy⁶ ».

When the three try to write letters home, Herrick initially writes to his father, but then decides to write to his sweetheart, Emma, and he tells her: « I pass under a false name; you will have to tell my father that with all your kindness⁷ », before telling the others his real name, bringing to quite a peculiar bazaar of false names:

“My real name is Herrick. No more Hay” – they had both used the same alias – “no more Hay than yours, I dare say.”
“Clean bowled in the middle stump!” laughed the clerk. “My name’s ‘Uish, if you want to know. Everybody has a false nyme in the Pacific. Lay you five to three the captain ‘as.”
“So I have too,” replied the captain; “and I’ve never told my own since the day I tore the title page out of my Bowditch and flung the damned thing into the sea. But I’ll tell it to you, boys. John Davis is my name. I’m Davis of the *Sea Ranger*⁸.”

¹ Robert Louis Stevenson, Lloyd Osbourne, *The Ebb-Tide. A Trio & Quartette* [1894], Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1995, p. 4.

² Robert Louis Stevenson, Lloyd Osbourne, *The Ebb-Tide. A Trio & Quartette*, p. 6.

³ Robert Louis Stevenson, Lloyd Osbourne, *The Ebb-Tide. A Trio & Quartette*, p. 6.

⁴ Robert Louis Stevenson, Lloyd Osbourne, *The Ebb-Tide. A Trio & Quartette*, p. 6.

⁵ Robert Louis Stevenson, Lloyd Osbourne, *The Ebb-Tide. A Trio & Quartette*, p. 7.

⁶ Robert Louis Stevenson, Lloyd Osbourne, *The Ebb-Tide. A Trio & Quartette*, p. 7.

⁷ Robert Louis Stevenson, Lloyd Osbourne, *The Ebb-Tide. A Trio & Quartette*, p. 19.

⁸ Robert Louis Stevenson, Lloyd Osbourne, *The Ebb-Tide. A Trio & Quartette*, p. 21.

Naming is not an innocent practice in the colonial world, but rather one of the fundamental weapons used by the colonizer to acquire and demonstrate its control over the colonized. By naming, and especially renaming what already existed, the colonizer shows his power to refashion a new world, all subdued to his word. This can be seen on two different occasions in *The Ebb-Tide*: first, when the captain “welcomes” the natives aboard, changing names as if he was correcting a mistake:

“What’s your name?” said the captain. “What’s that you say? Oh, that’s no English; I’ll have none of your highway gibberish on my ship. We’ll call you old Uncle Ned, because you’ve got no wool on the top of your head, just the place where the wool ought to grow⁹.”

To this plain colonizing behavior, the man named « Uncle Ned » objects, later in the story, reacquiring his original name, at least to himself: « “Ah, no call me Uncle Ned no mo’!” cried the old man. “No my name! My name Taveeta, all-e-same Taveeta King of Israel. Wat for he call that Hawaii? I think no savvy nothing – all-e-same Wise-a-mana¹⁰” ». As Sandison notes, the irony in this resides in the fact that even Taveeta is clearly not his original name, but a « missionary-conferred name », ¹¹ therefore « what is paradoxically clear is that in neither case is his name exclusively his “own” ». Attwater also changes Huish’s name to his liking:

“So glad you like it,” said Attwater. “Help yourself, Mr Whish, and keep the bottle by you.” “My friend’s name is Huish and not Whish, sir,” said the captain with a flush. “I beg your pardon, I am sure. Huish and not Whish, certainly,” said Attwater¹².

This clarification, however, will not change anything in Attwater’s behaviour, since he will continue to mispronounce Huish’s name.

Names themselves cause the tragic relationship between the two brothers of Stevenson’s *The Master of Ballantrae*, the story of « Lord Durisdeer, and his elder brother James, commonly called Master of Ballantrae¹³ ». In order to save the family from the dangers of the Jacobite war, one of the two brothers has to join the Jacobite rebels, and the other has to stay at home and support the loyalists; Henry, the younger of the two, should be the one to join the rebels, but James wants this adventurous role for himself; he calls his brother « Jacob [...] and dwell[s] upon the name maliciously¹⁴ », when the latter tries to refuse to stay home.

There is here a clear reference to Jacob and Esau, the twin brothers in Genesis. Esau, first of birth and of right, is betrayed by his brother, who takes his place. The

⁹ Robert Louis Stevenson, Lloyd Osbourne, *The Ebb-Tide. A Trio & Quartette*, p. 36.

¹⁰ Robert Louis Stevenson, Lloyd Osbourne, *The Ebb-Tide. A Trio & Quartette*, p. 48.

¹¹ Alan Sandison, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Appearance of Modernism : A Future Feeling*, Houndmills, Palgrave MacMillan, 1996, p. 334.

¹² Robert Louis Stevenson, Lloyd Osbourne, *The Ebb-Tide. A Trio & Quartette*, p. 93.

¹³ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae* [1889] in Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae & Weir of Hermiston*, Edinburgh, Polygon, 2008, p. 7.

¹⁴ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, p. 12.

Master of Ballantrae, away from home for years, accuses his brother of doing the same, although he was actually the one to put both himself and Henry in that situation. The reference to the twin sons of Isaac is even made explicit when the two meet again after years: « “Ah! Jacob,” says the Master. “So here is Esau back.” “James,” says Mr Henry, “for God’s sake, call me by my name¹⁵.” ».

These two characters also take on different names, especially James, who is referred to as « his laddie¹⁶ », « Master o’ Ball’ntrae¹⁷ », « the bonny lad¹⁸ », « Master of B.¹⁹ », « the Sahib²⁰ », « M——r of B——e²¹ ». He eventually changes his name himself: « You may call me Mr Bally: it is the name I have assumed; or rather (since I am addressing so great a precisian) it is so I have curtailed my own²² », says James to Mackellar, and Henry does call him by this name, to mark James’ distance from the House of Ballantrae.

In an excess of rage, the older brother blames the younger, saying « he bears my name²³ », but the only time Henry is actually called James, it is by James’ good friend, and Henry refuses to accept it, saying « I have never taken that name²⁴ ». This, indeed, is his tragedy; to have to bear a name that is not his own, and that he has never wanted; furthermore, the same man who owns that name, and who has assigned it to him, blames him for having stolen it.

Nothing is mine, nothing. [...] I have only the name and the shadow of things – only the shadow; there is no substance in my rights. [...] “My dear Jacob, I once called you so, you may remember; and you have now done the business, and flung my heels as high as Criffel²⁵”.

The only case in which James calls his brother « Henry²⁶ » is when everything is apparently lost for him, and he begs him for help, trying to erase at last the distance he had caused by using the name Jacob to address him.

The main narrator in this novel is Ephraim Mackellar, Land Steward on the estates of the family, and very often his name is mispronounced or forgotten, especially by the second narrator and James’ good friend, the Chevalier de Burke: « Mr —, I forget your name, which is a very good one²⁷ », « Mr What’s-your-name²⁸ », « Mr Whatever-your-name-is²⁹ », « I took occasion to inquire your name

¹⁵ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, p. 74.

¹⁶ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, p. 21.

¹⁷ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, p. 22.

¹⁸ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, p. 24.

¹⁹ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, p. 69.

²⁰ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, p. 130.

²¹ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, p. 183.

²² Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, p. 73.

²³ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, p. 58.

²⁴ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, p. 30.

²⁵ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, p. 62.

²⁶ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, p. 177.

²⁷ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, p. 29.

²⁸ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, p. 30.

(which I profess I had forgot)³⁰ ». The Chevalier de Burke tells us that the same Mackellar, who edits his words, « is sometimes very weak on names³¹ ».

Both narrators in this novel have problems with names: while the name of one is continuously forgotten, the other one forgets all names, and especially the other narrator's name. Both of these narrators also see their work edited by somebody else; Mackellar often edits the words by de Burke, and in one case Mackellar also suffers the editing of R.L.S., Stevenson himself³². But other characters also bear names that are not their own, like the pirate Teach (whose name is transformed into « Learn³³ » by James).

The matter of names is central to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as well, as to many of his stories. The novel starts with a name, but it is the name of a ship, « *The Nellie*³⁴ », followed by several common names, referring to the roles of the men on the ship: « the Director of Companies », « the Lawyer », « the Accountant³⁵ », until the narrator, Marlow, steps in. His name is the only one spelled out before Kurtz's name, which only gets mentioned for the first time around the half of the first chapter³⁶. Marlow has a peculiar relationship with names, he does not tell us any names of people, not even his aunt's³⁷. Even when a book is found by Marlow, the name of his author is incomprehensible: « Its title was, *An Inquiry into Some Points of Seamanship*, by a man Towser, Towson – some such name – Master in his Majesty's Navy³⁸ ». Reading his boyhood dreams, it is impossible not to think about the colonizer's function of renaming once more, as it was pointed out for *The Ebb-Tide*:

“Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. [...] At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth [...]. But there was one yet – the biggest, the most blank, so to speak – that I had a hankering after. True, by this time it was not a blank space anymore. It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery – a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness³⁹.”

The reader does not know the name of this « place of darkness », of this « blank space »; Charlie Marlow often avoids to give the names of the cities and lands he crosses, and when he does it, it is « names like Gran' Bassam, Little Popo; names

²⁹ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, p. 63.

³⁰ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, p. 69.

³¹ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, p. 33.

³² Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, p. 124.

³³ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, p. 46.

³⁴ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* [1902] in Samuel Hynes (ed.), *The Complete Short Fiction of Joseph Conrad Volume 3, Heart of Darkness and Other Stories*, London, Pickering & Chatto, 1992, p. 1.

³⁵ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 1.

³⁶ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 19.

³⁷ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 11.

³⁸ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 40.

³⁹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 6.

that seemed to belong to some sordid farce acted in front of a sinister black-cloth⁴⁰ »; nonetheless, his boyhood dreams were to fill that blank space with names, as others had done before him. And if *The Ebb-Tide*'s captain renames the natives, Marlow does not even do this, preferring to just call them « these creatures⁴¹ ».

The importance of Kurtz's name is made quite clear by Marlow. First, he introduces us to a character just because he is the one who told him this name for the first time: « I wouldn't have mentioned the fellow to you at all, only it was from his lips that I first heard the name of the man who is so indissolubly connected with the memories of that time⁴² ». And then, the first time the reader sees it spelled out, after a complete abstinence from names in the first part of the book, his name is written twice in a row, and twenty-two times more before the end of the chapter.

The contrast between the absent names in the first half of the first chapter, and the overwhelming presence of Kurtz's name in the second half, is clearly used by Conrad to show us the centrality of this character in the novel. Only the two men plotting against Kurtz do not mention him, as Marlow tells us, « his name, you understand had not been pronounced once. He was "that man⁴³" ». Everybody else does, and very often, especially Marlow: the absence of other names is a clear suggestion that Kurtz's is the only name, and consequently the only person, the reader has to focus on; the words of Stevenson's Mackellar unavoidably echo in my mind: « I will name no unnecessary names⁴⁴ ».

The character of Marlow had already been introduced by Conrad in his story "Youth: A Narrative". Here too, as in *Heart of Darkness*, he is introduced in between people who have no names: « there was a director of companies, an accountant, a lawyer, Marlow, and myself⁴⁵ », the narrator tells his readers – just as the narrator of "The Tale" talks about « a Commanding Officer and a Northman. Put in the capitals, please, because they had no other names⁴⁶ ». Marlow also tells of a man whose « name was Mahon, but he insisted that it should be pronounced Mann⁴⁷ », and of another whose name does not even matter: « Wilmer, Wilcox – some name like that; but he has been bankrupt and dead these twenty years or more, and his name don't matter⁴⁸ ». And finally, far into the novel, Marlow's name, the only one the reader was sure of beside Kurtz's, is also questioned: « Marlow (at least I think that is how he spelt his name)⁴⁹ ».

⁴⁰ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 13.

⁴¹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 17.

⁴² Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 18.

⁴³ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 34.

⁴⁴ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, p. 87.

⁴⁵ Joseph Conrad, "Youth : A Narrative" [1898] in Samuel Hynes (ed.), *The Complete Short Fiction of Joseph Conrad Volume 1, The Stories*, London, Pickering & Chatto, 1992, p. 151.

⁴⁶ Joseph Conrad, "The Tale" [1917] in Joseph Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay*, London, Fisher Unwin, 1925, p. 160.

⁴⁷ Joseph Conrad, "Youth : A Narrative", p. 152.

⁴⁸ Joseph Conrad, "Youth : A Narrative", p. 153.

⁴⁹ Joseph Conrad, "Youth : A Narrative", p. 151.

Not only names themselves, but also their meanings seem unreliable. If « Ransome's name is suggestive of Christian forgiveness⁵⁰ », the meaning of Kurtz's name also seems ambiguous, and ironic: « Kutz – Kurtz – that means short in German – don't it? Well, the name was as true as everything else in his life – and death. He looked at least seven feet long⁵¹ ». Unreliable names also portray the characters of “An Outpost of Progress”, where « the third man on the staff was a Sierra Leone nigger, who maintained that his name was Henry Price. However, for some reason or other, the natives down the river had given him the name of Makola⁵² ». And Kayert and Carlier themselves, the two main characters, wish to become one day, nothing more than characters of a novel: « in a hundred years, there will be perhaps a town here. [...] And then, chaps will read that two good fellows, Kayerts and Carlier, were the first civilized men to live in this very spot⁵³! »

2. Earth of Dark Voices

If enough was said about the ambiguity of the names of the narrators and of the characters their tales are about, their voices also need to be investigated, since they seem to be intricately connected with their power to attract people, or to keep them at distance. Mr. Kurtz, the Master of Ballantrae and Attwater gain a similar amount of power from their speeches, and in particular because of their voices.

Kurtz is nothing but a word to Marlow, when he starts hearing his name: « He was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything⁵⁴? », but he later becomes a voice, just as Marlow « had been no more [...] than a voice⁵⁵ » to the people he is telling the tale to:

I had travelled all this way for the sole purpose of talking with Mr. Kurtz... Talking with... I flung one shoe overboard, and became aware that that was exactly what I had been looking forward to – a talk with Kurtz. I made the strange discovery that I had never imagined him as doing, you know, but as discoursing. I didn't say to myself, “Now I will never see him,” or “Now I will never shake him by the hand,” but “Now I will never hear him.” The man presented himself as a voice⁵⁶.

This feeling is confirmed and increased by the meeting with Kurtz, as it is clear that it is in his voice that resides most of his power, and his ability of attracting men to himself and of commanding them. It is not by chance, in fact, that in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, Kurtz is nothing but a voice to the spectators for a long

⁵⁰ Jeremy Hawthorn, “Introduction” in Joseph Conrad, *The Shadow-Line : A Confession* [1916], Oxford University Press, 1992, p. XIII.

⁵¹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 66.

⁵² Joseph Conrad, “An Outpost of Progress” [1896] in Samuel Hynes (ed.), *The Complete Short Fiction of Joseph Conrad Volume 1, The Stories*, p. 38.

⁵³ Joseph Conrad, “An Outpost of Progress”, p. 44.

⁵⁴ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 28.

⁵⁵ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 29.

⁵⁶ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 51.

time, and that it takes several minutes before they are confronted with the sight of him. When Kurtz finally appears, his face is also always half hidden by the light contrast technique, playing with light and shadow.

Oh, yes, I heard more than enough. And I was right, too. A voice. He was very little more than a voice. And I heard – him – it – this voice – other voices – all of them were so little more than voices – and the memory of that time itself lingers around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense. Voices – voices –⁵⁷

The importance of Kurtz's words is made clear once again when Marlow meets a Russian man, who warns him that if Kurtz does not say the right thing to the people protecting him, they will be lost. But the most impressive encounter is the one with the voice itself, with Kurtz's first and last words to Marlow. Although the man is almost dead, his voice is still there, as if his voice had more power than himself:

The volume of tone he emitted without effort, almost without the trouble of moving his lips, amazed me. A voice! a voice! it was grave, profound, vibrating, while the man did not seem capable of a whisper⁵⁸. Kurtz discoursed. A voice! a voice! It rang deep to the very last. It survived his strength to hide in the magnificent tools of eloquence the barren darkness of his heart⁵⁹.

And when he dies, what dies is a voice, « the voice was gone⁶⁰ », but it is also the only thing which remains, since « “his words, at least, have not died.” “His words will remain.”⁶¹ ».

When Attwater invites the trio to visit him (inviting Herrick, a university man just like him before the others), his speech becomes once more an instrument of control. His quote sounds already like a demonstration of the menace his voice can represent: « *For my voice has been tuned to the note of the gun, That startles the deep when the combat's begun*⁶² ». Attwater's power is strong on Herrick, who does not seem to be able to fully understand the man in front of him through his words. The new colonial owner of the island plays on this, and he plays with Herrick's name as well, forcing him to beg him to stop:

“One thing I know at least: I never gave a cry like yours. Hay! it came from a bad conscience! Ah, man, that poor diving dress of self-conceit is sadly tattered! Today, now, while the sun sets, and here in this burying place of brown innocents, fall on your knees and cast your sins and sorrows on the Redeemer. Hay –”

“Not Hay!” interrupted the other, strangling. “Don't call me that! I mean... For God's sake, can't you see I'm on the rack?”

⁵⁷ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 52.

⁵⁸ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, pp. 66-67.

⁵⁹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 76.

⁶⁰ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 78.

⁶¹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 85.

⁶² Robert Louis Stevenson, Lloyd Osbourne, *The Ebb-Tide. A Trio & Quartette*, p. 74.

“I see it, I know it, I put and keep you there, my fingers are on the screws!” said Attwater⁶³.

But the moment in which Attwater’s control is clearly spoken out and understood by the rest of the trio as well, is the dinner party, where – pretending to be a good and gentle host – Attwater slowly shows his influence on the other men, and starts winning their favours, one by one, through his “verbal play”:

On the surface, Attwater conducts the meal with a gentlemanly hospitality, but the dialogue reveals that this is really an exercise in control. From the opening where Attwater deliberately mispronounces Huish’s name, through to the captain’s growing unease at the story of the two natives, and Herrick’s hysterical outburst, the verbal play is completely in Attwater’s hands⁶⁴.

What I have said about Kurtz and Attwater applies to the Master of Ballantrae as well. When Mackellar first sees James, it is his voice that makes him instinctively do what he asks, although he would never have done it under any other circumstances:

“Come now, pick up that, and that” – indicating two of the portmanteaus. “That will be as much as you are fit to bear, and the rest can very well wait. Come, lose no more time, if you please.” His tone was so cutting that I managed to do as he bid by a sort of instinct, my mind being all the time quite lost⁶⁵.

And not much later, Mackellar, who always seems able to face everybody with very strong words, including his Lord, James and Henry’s father, seems quite lost and unable to speak when James asks him to simply call him a servant:

Had a kingdom depended on the act, I could not have trusted myself in words; even to call a servant was beyond me; I had rather serve the man myself than speak; and I turned away in silence and went into the long shrubbery, with a heart full of anger and despair⁶⁶.

The power James exercises through his words is quite clear to himself as well, as he tells Mackellar: « O! there are double words for everything: the word that swells, the word that belittles; you cannot fight me with a word⁶⁷! ». Mackellar says instead: « Let one speak long enough, he will get believers⁶⁸ ». Indeed, all these men, Kurtz, Attwater and Ballantrae, have long enough, and they have got their share of believers, including those who have decided to tell their tales, and including their readers (or their listeners).

⁶³ Robert Louis Stevenson, Lloyd Osbourne, *The Ebb-Tide. A Trio & Quartette*, p. 86.

⁶⁴ Peter Hinchcliffe, Catherine Kerrigan, “Introduction”, in Robert Louis Stevenson, Lloyd Osbourne, *The Ebb-Tide. A Trio & Quartette*, p. XXIV.

⁶⁵ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, p. 73.

⁶⁶ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, p. 75.

⁶⁷ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, p. 167.

⁶⁸ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, p. 16.

Marlow tells us that the wilderness had spoken to Kurtz, « it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know [...] and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core⁶⁹ ». And who of these men is not « hollow at the core »? Attwater, Kurtz and Ballantrae have all heard the wilderness whisper to them, and they have learned to whisper back.

3. Earth of Dead Tales: A Conclusion

The novels and stories analysed in this article are the « impossible tales⁷⁰ » on « doubtful⁷¹ » islands and lands of men whose names are lost. Its death, though, is a very vital one. The impossibility of telling tales, in these works, is reflected in the impossibility of telling a life. For these characters, this corresponds to the impossibility of *living* a life, symbolized by their lack of a name, or at least of a stable name. This impossibility, though, becomes itself a tale, as it can be seen in a passage quoted and commented by Hynes:

In such a world of mystery, how can one tell a tale? Marlow, in the midst of trying to tell his listeners about the mysterious Kurtz, bursts out that one can't:

No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence – that which makes its truth, its meaning – its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live as we dream – alone...

If Marlow is right, then these are impossible tales; for they do what he says can't be done – they convey life-sensations, and such truths and meanings as life offers⁷².

These are indeed impossible tales, in which the narrators share the faith of most of their main characters, having no name, or having obscure unreliable ones, and shadow(ed) voices. By doing this, the writers give us both characters and narrators whose existences and identities are in doubt. This clearly puts in doubt their whole adventure, both the adventures at sea and the adventure of narration. Benjamin tells us of two groups of storytellers:

“When someone goes on a trip, he has something to tell about,” goes the German saying, and people imagine the storyteller as someone who has come from afar. But they enjoy no less listening to the man who has stayed at home, making an honest living, and who knows the local tales and traditions. If one wants to picture these two groups through their archaic representatives, one is embodied in the resident tiller of the soil, and the other in the trading seaman. Indeed, each sphere of life has, as it were, produced its own tribe of storytellers⁷³.

⁶⁹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 64.

⁷⁰ Samuel Hynes, “The Art of Telling : An Introduction to Conrad’s Tales” in Samuel Hynes (ed.), *The Complete Short Fiction of Joseph Conrad Volume 3, Heart of Darkness and Other Stories*, London, Pickering & Chatto, 1992, p. XVI.

⁷¹ Robert Louis Stevenson, Lloyd Osbourne, *The Ebb-Tide. A Trio & Quartette*, p. 64.

⁷² Samuel Hynes, “The Art of Telling : An Introduction to Conrad’s Tales”, p. XVI.

⁷³ Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller : Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov”, p. 363.

In these works, both of these groups are well represented; Mackellar is the one who repeatedly identifies himself with the land of his Lord, while Marlow is the seaman storyteller other people are « fated⁷⁴ » to listen to.

The nature of these names, rather than signalling the death of storytellers, probably reveals to us the very truth of both adventure and narration: just like no man can ever be the same after coming back from an adventure, no narration leaves a man as it found him. Both adventure and narration (and the adventure of narration) change us, they give us new identities, a new life, and new names.

As Paul Valéry says, in the passage quoted by Benjamin:

Artistic observation can attain an almost mystical depth. The objects on which it falls lose their names. Light and shade form very particular systems, present very individual questions which depend upon no knowledge and are derived from no practice, but get their existence and value exclusively from a certain accord of the soul, the eye, and the hand of someone who was born to perceive them and evoke them in his own inner self⁷⁵.

Looking at Stevenson's and Conrad's characters as the objects of this artistic observation, the reader can perceive the light and shades of their names, of their lives, and of their stories presenting the « very individual questions » that bring to question not only their stories, but the very possibility of their stories – or of any story – of being told.

In analysing these characters and their narrators, though, the two writers who gave birth to these novels and stories have been left on the side. And they allow me to conclude by coming full circle, on a journey that has brought us around what might be called a “Heart of Dark Names”. When Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski changed his name to Joseph Conrad, he also changed from the life of a seaman to the life of a « sedentary », once again embodying the two kinds of narrators Benjamin referred to:

He married, found a house in the English countryside, and settled into the sedentary life of a professional novelist. Everything in his life changed: not only his occupation and his marital status, but his name, his nationality, and his language. No other writer in English – indeed no writer in any language that I know of – began his career so late and with such a transformation of self: in a strange country, with a strange name, in a language that was not his native tongue, or even his second language, but his third. In the middle of his life, Józef Korzeniowski had re-invented himself, and become Joseph Conrad⁷⁶.

⁷⁴ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 5.

⁷⁵ Paul Valéry, quoted in Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller : Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov”, p. 377.

⁷⁶ Samuel Hynes, “The Art of Unrest : An Introduction to Conrad's Stories” in *The Complete Short Fiction of Joseph Conrad Volume 1, The Stories*, Pickering & Chatto, London, 1992, p. XII.

Hynes is right about the fact that no other writer began his career with such a drastic transformation of his own identity, but Stevenson ended his career with an equally drastic change. If Conrad has been called a « born story-teller⁷⁷ », in fact, Stevenson not only lived, but also died as one. The last years of his life, spent in the Samoas, did not only take him to one of the furthest possible places from his own country, but also to a new name and identity: Tusitala, the storyteller.

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⁷⁷ Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham, "Preface" in Joseph Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay*, p. 11.

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