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A Ship is Burning: Jack London's 'The Seed of McCoy' (*Tales of the Pacific*, 1911), or Sailing Away from Pitcairn

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A major writer never sails away alone, without any reference or book at hand. Even at the far end of the world, there is always a literary reminiscence, the trace of a volume, a library of sorts, in his cabin, guiding him on his way, like the wake of a ship. When sailing up the Congo River, André Gide had quite naturally Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) in mind, and Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *The Master of Ballantrae* in his luggage:¹ his *Voyage au Congo* (1926–27) is dedicated to 'the memory of Joseph Conrad' and includes, on the same page, a quotation from John Keats: 'Better be imprudent moveables than prudent fixtures', which may serve as a motto for adventure. This was also the case with Jack London when he left San Francisco and the devastation caused by earthquake (18 April 1906), sailing away on board his ketch the *Snark* on 23 April 1907: he was embarking on a cruise 'in the wake of' such famous literary predecessors as Herman Melville, Mark Twain and Robert

1 Gide's trip to the Congo is contemporary with Macmillan's publication of the Tusitala Edition of Stevenson's works (1924a, 1924b & 1924c).

Louis Stevenson,² with Charmian as his mate – both in the sentimental and sailing sense of the term. Later, between Hawai'i and the Marquesas, during a solitary, two-month crossing where the winds prove whimsical and the doldrums exhausting, he will read out loud, in the evening, the beloved authors of his youth, the very Melville, Stevenson or Conrad who had been, together with Rudyard Kipling, his literary models.³ In such a literary wake, his cruise turned out to be, quite naturally, a pilgrimage of sorts. At Nuku Hiva, in the Marquesas, he rented the very house in which Stevenson stayed a few years before, and rode on horseback to Hapaa valley, the paradise described by Melville in *Typee*. After having left Tahiti on 4 April 1908, when London reached the bay of Apia on the Samoan island of Upolu, he insisted on seeing the celebrated grave of Stevenson, tucked away in the jungle on top of Mount Vaea, the only grave in the world, according to him, that was worth visiting.⁴ Whereas Stevenson's literary correspondent, admirer and friend Marcel Schwob had failed, only six years before, in his attempt at visiting the grave – when reaching Apia, he was so sick and bedridden that he had to stay in his cabin – London and Charmian managed to hack their way up to the top of the place where Stevenson was carried in state, like a tribal chief, by the Samoan natives who had nicknamed him 'Tusitala', the teller of tales. Samoans indeed held Stevenson in high esteem for having 'crossed the beach', or been willing to be 'transformed' by contact with Polynesian culture, as Greg Dening puts it⁵ (see Introduction). Preceding Dening's calls to take a fresh look at 'the little people on the beach', Stevenson said – against the grain, in the colonial era – that Samoans were 'like other folk, lazy enough, not heroes, not saints, ordinary men, damnably misused'.⁶ During the Samoan civil war, he daringly supported Prince Mata'afa, a fierce opponent of Western hegemony. This, and his anticolonial articles, pamphlet and fiction, earned Stevenson *mea-alofa*, the Samoan gift of love.

2 Andrew Sinclair, *Jack: A Biography of Jack London*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1978, p 139.

3 Andrew Sinclair, 'Introduction to Jack London', in *Tales of the Pacific*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics, 1989, p 7.

4 Alex Kershaw, *Jack London: A Life*, London, Harper Collins, 1997, pp 197–98.

5 Greg Dening, 'Writing, Rewriting the Beach: An Essay', in Alun Munslow & Robert A Rosenstone (eds), *Experiments in Rethinking History*, New York & London, Routledge, 2004, pp 30–55.

6 Robert Louis Stevenson, letter to Vailima Colvin, 6 Sep 1891, in Ernest Mehew (ed), *Selected Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 1997, p 465.

London's South Pacific cruise proved to be catastrophic and disastrous from a personal point of view. When in Tahiti, he learned that his Californian ranch was a financial failure, and had to steam back in haste to California in order to sort out his affairs, then back to Tahiti to resume his trip. His health also began to deteriorate:

London was sick from many tropical illnesses including yaws and ulcers and a skin disease which seemed to be leprosy caught at Molokai. His elbows became silvery and his hands swelled to the size of boxing-gloves and their skin fell away, layer after layer.⁷

Moloka'i was a leper colony located on an islet off Honolulu that Stevenson had also visited: traces of this visit can be found in his story 'The Bottle Imp' (1893, in *Island Night's Entertainments*), where leprosy, called the 'Chinese Evil', is treated on the magic or fantastic mode, and related fears charmed away.⁸ London's more serious, embedded fear of his own contamination is echoed in several stories of his *Tales of the Pacific*,⁹ like 'Good-By, Jack', 'Koolau the Leper' or 'The Sheriff of Kona', which bear on 'the horror' attached to a disease taking seven years to incubate, and potentially undermining an apparently sound, beautiful body.¹⁰ The personal obsession is so overwhelming here that, according to London himself in a letter to Lorrin A Thurston dated 1 February 1910,¹¹ his Pacific tales about leprosy cannot match Stevenson's pamphlet *Father Damien, An Open Letter to Reverend Dr Hyde of Honolulu* (1890), in which Stevenson vigorously vindicated the memory of Father Damien, a Catholic priest who had nursed the lepers before dying of leprosy himself, and had been accused of consorting with his patients. In comparison, London's tales sound haunted by *memento mori*, by the frailty of appearances, by the debated issue of diagnosis, and by Kipling's horrifying story 'The Mark of the Beast' (1890), which also deals with leprosy. The image of 'the mark of the beast' is thus used about Lyte Gregory in 'The Sheriff of Kona' to

7 Sinclair, 1989, p 9.

8 Jean-Pierre Naugrette, 'La lèpre comme métaphore. Questions de diagnostic et détection traumatique dans des nouvelles de Rudyard Kipling, Jack London et Sir Arthur Conan Doyle', in Caroline Bertonèche (ed), *Bacilles, Phobies et Contagions. Les métaphores de la pathologie*, Paris, Michel Houdiard, 2012, pp 17–40.

9 All references to London's *Tales of the Pacific* are to Andrew Sinclair's Penguin edition (1989), and are abbreviated *TP*. Further references list page numbers only.

10 On Stevenson's and London's stories on leprosy, also see Sylvie Largeaud-Ortega, *Ainsi Soit-Île. Littérature et anthropologie dans les Contes des Mers du Sud de Robert Louis Stevenson* (Paris, Honoré Champion, 2012, pp 243–49).

11 Jack London, letter to Lorrin A Thurston, 1 Feb 1910, in vol 2, Earle Labor, Robert C Leitz & Milo Shepard (eds), *The Letters of Jack London* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1988, pp 870–71).

describe the sudden apparition of the disease in a man who, so far, had displayed all the signs of health and strength (*TP*, 127). In other words, following in the wake of predecessors may also prove dangerous and risky if inheritance has to do with promiscuity, atavism and contamination.

‘The McCoy of the *Bounty*’

‘The Seed of McCoy’ is written from a completely different, less personal perspective, because sailing in the wake, this time, is a means of achieving some sort of redemption. First published in April 1907 in the 77th issue of *Century* magazine, before being collected with London’s other *Tales of the Pacific*, it can be described as a ‘tale of humble certainty mastering brute terror and adversity’ in which ‘London set down his rare hope for his own future and for those who could still command their fate’.¹²

The first sentence of the story can be read as a good instance of Conradian reminiscence, a tribute to the famous incipit of *Heart of Darkness* (1899) where the *Nellie*, a ‘cruising yawl’, is described as swinging to her anchor before being ‘at rest’:

The *Pyrenees*, her iron sides pressed low in the water by her cargo of wheat, rolled sluggishly, and made it easy for the man who was climbing aboard from out a tiny outrigger canoe. As his eyes came level with the rail, so that he could see inboard, it seemed to him that he saw a dim, almost indiscernible haze. (*TP*, 80)

The visitor, described as a ‘ragged beach-comber, in dungaree trousers and a cotton shirt’ (*TP*, 81), wearing a ‘worn straw hat’ failing ‘to hide the ragged gray hair’ (*TP*, 82), soon realises what is the matter with this ship, which has ‘hoisted the signal of distress’ (*TP*, 80), prompting his climbing aboard. His bare feet, indeed, enable him to formulate a kind of diagnosis: the dull warmth pervading the deck is enough to signal that the *Pyrenees* is burning. When he asks Captain Davenport how long she has been afire, the captain, who obviously resents the ragged, shabby appearance of the newcomer, answers ‘Fifteen days’. When Davenport asks the stranger his name, he answers ‘McCoy’. When he asks him if he is the pilot, McCoy gives an evasive answer: ‘I am as much a pilot as anybody ... We are all pilots here, Captain, and I know every inch of these waters.’ When the

12 Sinclair, 1978, p 9.

diffident captain insists on talking to the proper authorities, McCoy replies, 'in a voice that was still the softest and gentlest imaginable' (*TP*, 81), that he is 'the chief magistrate' of the so far unnamed island he has paddled from.

A first literary wake appears here. McCoy's all-embracing, sweeping gaze across the deck as he climbs aboard, the kind of diagnosis he formulates about the ship's 'distress' – not a contagious disease, as opposed to his previous fears about the health of his 'happy islanders' (*TP*, 80) – is indeed reminiscent of Captain Delano's at the beginning of Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* (1855), as he boards the *San Dominick*, a ship he first views as 'in distress':¹³ the newcomer also embraces a mystery, from which he might well be excluded. The name of the ship chosen by London, the *Pyrenees*, may be derived from Melville's sea novella, in which the ship is compared to 'a whitewashed monastery after a thunderstorm, seen perched upon some dun cliff among the Pyrenees' (*BC*, 674), while the black slaves are viewed as Black Friars pacing cloisters.¹⁴ But, whereas Delano needs the whole length of the story to see through appearances and realise the kind of threat prevailing on board after the black slaves' mutiny against their Spanish commander, McCoy's perception of Davenport's predicament is not distorted or biased, since the latter's 'gaunt face and care-worn eyes made no secret of the trouble, whatever it was'. Instead of hiding a covert, treacherous purpose like the black sailors 'picking oakum' in Melville, the image of a sailor 'calking the deck' points to a rather successful control of the slow-burning fire: a 'faint spiral of haze' curls, twists, and is gone (*TP*, 80). The secret, which in *Benito Cereno* is materialised by a Gordian (sea) knot to be cut after a long, complicated, delayed decoding,¹⁵ is an open one here: it can, indeed, be easily deduced from the symptoms of a postponed, protracted combustion of the cargo, of which only faint, elusive exterior signs are to be perceived at this early stage. When Davenport thinks that the newcomer is the 'pilot' who will take him to Pitcairn Island where, after a fortnight's cruise, the exhausted,

13 Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno*, in *The Piazza Tales*, New York, The Library of America, 1984, p 674. Further references to this text are abbreviated *BC* and list page numbers only.

14 Melville may have been inspired by Prosper Mérimée's story *Tamango* (1829), which deals with black slaves rebelling on board the brig *L'Espérance*, an ironic name since the slaves prove unable to steer the ship they have taken over from Capitaine Ledoux, and are doomed to starve. 'Tamango', published just a few years after Byron's poem on Fletcher Christian, can be read as a severe critique of the slave trade, and the related reactions it induces: Tamango first sells his own wife, and his mutiny proves a disaster.

15 Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1980.

shattered crew wish to cast themselves, McCoy answers that he is its chief magistrate, or governor. When the captain asks him if he is 'Any relation to the McCoy of the *Bounty*', he answers that the said McCoy was, indeed, his great-grandfather (*TP*, 82) (on historical governor McCoy, see Young, Chapter 7).

McCoy's sweeping glance at the desperate crew is compared to a 'benediction, soothing them, wrapping them about as in a mantle of great peace' (*TP*, 80), a sharp contrast to the sailors' hysterical outbursts against the prospect of the sudden, unpredictable unleashing of fire on board. As a connoisseur of 'these waters', McCoy explains that Pitcairn is a bad choice: there is no place where the burning ship can be beached. The islanders do not keep any boats; they carry their canoes to the top of the cliff – an eerie image that can be traced down to Werner Herzog's film *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), where a steamboat is being slowly, but steadily carried on top of a hill. Pitcairn is, indeed, an inhospitable, forbidding island,¹⁶ which explains why the descendants of Fletcher Christian's crew could still be found there, at the beginning of the 20th century, more than a century after they had taken refuge on it. But whereas the mutineers of the *Bounty*, as years went by, had indulged in all kinds of excesses, and had killed each other off, McCoy, the 'bare-footed beachcomber', seems characterised by his 'high-sounding dignity' (*TP*, 80); he, indeed, looks like a composed, serene descendant, ready to help and rescue his fellow mariners, to bestow his 'benediction', and find the proper place where to beach their burning ship. The voice and face of this 'little' man from 'the beach'¹⁷ exude 'peace and content' (*TP*, 81), inner strength, knowledge of charts, currents and causes, self-command and spirituality. He will need those qualities when obliged to explain to the reluctant crew that, Pitcairn being excluded, their next and best choice lies nearly 500 kilometres away, at Mangareva: 'There is a beautiful beach there, in a lagoon where the water is like a mill-pond' (*TP*, 82).

16 This feeling is well conveyed by Jean-Yves Delitte's recent graphic version of the story. The volume opens on the image of a ship approaching Pitcairn and finding the island inhospitable in February 1790 – i.e. after Christian and his men have landed there. This is confirmed by Michel Pérez in his comprehensive article, stressing what to western eyes is the remoteness of Pitcairn – its isolation, inaccessibility, its lack of beaches, port and mooring, so that cruising ships, if any, have still to cast anchor off-shore. See Michel Pérez, 'Pitcairn. Au bout du monde, au bout des rêves', in Serge Dunis (ed), *D'Île en Île Pacifique* (Paris, Klincksieck, 1999, pp 235–77, 237–38).

17 Denning, 1980, p 54.

From smouldering mutiny to charting a new literary course

After McCoy has convinced him that Mangareva is what they should aim at, Captain Davenport calls the crew aft and explains the situation. A shrill Cockney voice remonstrates against McCoy – who seems to ignore what sailing on board this ‘floatin’ ’ell’ implies (*TP*, 84). The voice sounds like an echo from Stevenson’s South Sea novel *The Ebb-Tide* (1893), in which the character of Huish, another Cockney, embodies the lower instincts of greed and revolt against the aristocratic, tyrannical figure of Attwater who rules with an iron grip on his island. This Cockney sailor is in fact the spokesman for the general feeling of rebellion that smoulders on board the *Pyrenees* in much in the same way as the fire in the hold, a haunting image for London, who had sailed away from San Francisco after the earthquake had devastated the city. In *Benito Cereno*, Captain Delano also wonders: ‘might not the *San Dominick*, like a slumbering volcano, suddenly let loose energies now hid?’ (*BC*, 698). Even McCoy admits that the crew are starving. Davenport speaks to the crew again, ‘and again the throat-rumbling and cursing arose, their faces convulsed and animal-like with rage’. The second and third mates join the captain, and stand behind him at the break of the poop: ‘Their faces were set and expressionless; they seemed bored, more than anything else, by this mutiny of the crew’:

‘You see,’ the captain said to McCoy, ‘you can’t compel sailors to leave the safe land and go to sea on a burning vessel. She has been their floating coffin for over two weeks now. They are worked out, and starved out, and they’ve got enough of her. We’ll beat up for Pitcairn.’ (*TP*, 85)

The prospect of a mutiny suggests that History might repeat itself. The *Pyrenees* is, indeed, in very dangerous waters, those off and around Pitcairn, the very island where Christian and his fellow mutineers of the *Bounty* took refuge. To put it in the terms of the Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*, the risk is that ‘ancient grudge’ should:

... break to new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.¹⁸

18 William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Prologue, l. 3–4, London, Penguin Popular Classics, 2017 (1594), p. 2.

Obviously, Davenport has no intention of reliving the fate of his predecessor Captain William Bligh, and facing a civil war on board his burning ship – he thus beats up for Pitcairn.

‘But the wind was light, the *Pyrenees*’ bottom was foul, and she could not beat up against the strong westerly current’ (*TP*, 85). When asked for advice, McCoy calmly replies: ‘I think it would be better to square away for Mangareva. With that breeze that is coming, you’ll be there to-morrow evening’ (*TP*, 86). It seems, then, that the breeze, the current and McCoy’s placid, confident attitude cannot be resisted. The captain addresses the crew again, and explains the situation. Ironically enough, he now presents the newcomer as ‘the Honorable McCoy, Chief Magistrate and Governor of Pitcairn Island’. The effect of his speech is different from his first one: ‘This time there was no uproar. McCoy’s presence, the surety and calm that seemed to radiate from him, had had its effect’ (*TP*, 86). The paradox, then, is that it is McCoy, the great-grandson of ‘McCoy, of the *Bounty*’, the ship on board of which, in April 1789 (just a few months before the French Revolution), a revolution¹⁹ of sorts took place regarding who should embody law and order, peace and legitimacy, guidance and reason.²⁰ By advising the *Pyrenees* to sail away from and not towards Pitcairn, he first takes the risk of fuelling the fire of mutiny on board the *Pyrenees*, but he also diverts the ship from the course followed by Fletcher Christian, who, on arriving at Pitcairn on 23 January 1790, had to burn the *Bounty* so as to leave no trace of the ill-fated ship.²¹ Confronted with the ‘signal of distress’ hoisted by the *Pyrenees*, with the sense of urgency shared between officers and crew, with the impending explosion of both mutiny and fire, the present-day McCoy embodies a completely different attitude as far as time and space are concerned. Instead of advocating immediate action, he will defend a willing suspension of time as well as an extension of space. This suspension and this extension are instrumental

19 London may also have taken the mutiny motif from Stevenson’s novel *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889), which was completed in Waikiki, Hawai’i. In Chapter 9, entitled ‘Mr Mackellar’s Journey with the Master’, the house-steward, Mackellar, tries to push the master overboard, an attempt that leaves him ‘overcome with terror and remorse and shame’ (London, Macmillan, Tusitala Edition, vol 10, 1924a, p 171). Allusions to the French Revolution can be found in the fact that Mackellar deposits his manuscript ‘this 20th day of September Anno Domini 1789’ (Stevenson, 1924a, p xxii).

20 Jean-Pierre Naugrette, ‘A la recherche de La Pérouse: Dumont d’Urville et le voyage second’, in *Les Français et l’Australie. Voyages de découvertes et missions scientifiques de 1756 à nos jours*, Nanterre, Université Paris X-Nanterre, 1989, p 82. See also Pérez (1999, p 248).

21 Jean-Yves Delitte, *La Bounty. La Mutinerie des Maudits*, Grenoble, Glénat, 2014, p 46.

in creating the suspense of the story: if immediate measures are not taken, the obvious risk is that the *Pyrenees* may burst into flames, in mid-ocean, at a moment's notice, 'with her cargo of fire' (*TP*, 90).

Whereas officers and crew sound anxious to find an easy way out of their predicament, after 15 days spent on board what First Mate König calls 'the anteroom of hell' (*TP*, 84), McCoy seems in no hurry at all: he promises that he will escort them to Mangareva – but he must first return to Pitcairn and ask permission from his fellow islanders. When the captain bursts forth and asks 'Don't you realize that my ship is burning beneath me?', McCoy, 'as placid as a summer sea', explains that it is the usual custom. The governor must ask permission to leave the island, and the people 'have the right to vote their permission or refusal' (*TP*, 87). Abiding by a democratic rule of government, he must make arrangements for the conduct of the island during his absence. He will return in the morning, with two canoe loads of food – dried bananas will be best. Which he does, in due time.

Other tensions and suspensions, postponements and extensions appear as far as space is concerned. A first tension appears between 'the big general chart' (*TP*, 92) in the captain's cabin, and the concrete, first-hand knowledge of McCoy. When the latter mentions an alternative solution, Davenport retorts: 'I have no chart of Mangareva. On the general chart it is only a fly-speck. I would not know where to look for the entrance into the lagoon. Will you come along and pilot her in for me?' (*TP*, 86). In the Tuamotus, some islands are uncharted and, even then, currents often drive you away from the linear, ideal course traced by the abstract computing of courses. Jack London follows here in the literary wake of Robert Louis Stevenson. In *Treasure Island* (1883),²² Captain Smollett, when sighting shore in Chapter 12, asks if any of the men has 'ever seen that land ahead?'. Although he has a map of the island, he needs the first-hand experience of Long John Silver, who alone is able to give the lie of the land. Silver warns Smollett and the other gentlemen against a strong current that 'runs along south, and then away nor'ard up the west coast' (*TI*, 63–64). No map would indicate those crucial data. In *The Ebb-Tide*, the Findlay directory, when looked up by Captain Davis and his fellow adventurers, proves extremely vague about the precise bearings of New Island, 'which from private interests would remain unknown'. The very

22 Robert Louis Stevenson, *Treasure Island*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998b. Further references to this text are abbreviated *TI* and list page numbers only.

existence of the island 'is very doubtful, and totally disbelieved in by South Sea traders'.²³ Stevenson himself owned a copy of Findlay's *Directory for the Navigation of the South Pacific Ocean*.²⁴ In a letter to Charles Baxter, he writes that Findlay's *Pacific Directories* are 'the best of reading anyway, and may almost count as fiction' (*ET*, 284), a statement supported by Lloyd Osbourne, Stevenson's stepson, for whom he wrote *Treasure Island*, when reminiscing about 'Stevenson at Thirty-Eight':

Ah, the happy times we had, with outspread maps and *Findlay's Directories of the World!* Findlay who, in those massive volumes, could take the sailor anywhere, and guide him into the remotest bay by 'the priest's small, white coral house on a cliff bearing N.N.E.'; or a 'peculiarly shaped rock, not unlike a stranded whale and awash at high tides which, when in line South half West with the flagstaff on the old calaboose, ensures an absolutely safe entrance into the dangerous and little-known harbour of Greater Bungo'.²⁵

The paradox is that Findlay's directories are so precise, so circumstantial, that they eventually partake of what Stevenson, in his essay 'A Gossip on Romance' (1882), calls 'the poetry of circumstance', which, according to him, is a defining trait of 'romance'.²⁶ Lloyd's quotation from Findlay and Flint's indications as to where the treasure is buried seem to echo each other.²⁷ If maps, charts and directories 'may almost count as fiction', how can they be trusted?

What should have been a linear crossing, a mere trip from A (Pitcairn) to B (Mangareva), soon turns into a desperate kind of cruise, as if B, in a kind of Kafkaesque remoteness, were perpetually postponed; despite Davenport and Konig's computing, the *Pyrenees* misses Mangareva by a long shot, on the day after. McCoy sounds unperturbed: 'Why, let her drive, Captain. That is all we can do. All the Paumotus are before us. We can drive for a thousand miles through reefs and atolls. We are bound to fetch up somewhere' (*TP*, 91–92). As the captain mentions Acteon Islands, which are only 60 kilometres away, McCoy provides

23 Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Ebb-Tide*, in *South Sea Tales*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p 185. Further references to this text are abbreviated *ET* and list page numbers only.

24 Alexander George Findlay, *A Directory for the Navigation of the South Pacific Ocean*, 5th edn, London, Richard Holmes Laurie, 1884 (1851).

25 Stevenson, 1924a, p xi. See also Mehew (1997).

26 Stevenson, 'A Gossip on Romance', in *Memories and Portraits*, London, Macmillan, Tusitala Edition, vol 29, 1924c, p 120.

27 'Tall tree, Spy-glass shoulder, bearing a point to the N. of N.N.E.', Stevenson (1998b, p 34).

a detailed, comprehensive description, at the end of which he dismisses them for having ‘no entrances’, a point that drives the captain frantic. While Davenport still relies on his charts and reads chapters from his naval *Epitome*, McCoy proves to be the worthy heir to his navigating Polynesian ancestors, as he seems to have a metaphorical chart in his mind: ‘All these islands, reefs, shoals, lagoons, entrances and distances were marked on the chart of his memory’ (*TP*, 94). Borne along by the conflicting currents, the *Pyrenees* will miss them all: Moerenhout, Hao, Resolution, Barclay de Tolly, Makemo, Kation, Raraka – as elusive as mirages in the desert, treacherous and remote, out of reach. The captain wanders about ‘like a lost soul’ (*TP*, 90), as if his current-driven ship were that of ‘The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner’. ‘This cursed current plays the devil with a navigator’, he complains to McCoy, who replies that ‘The old navigators called the Paumotus the Dangerous Archipelago’ (*TP*, 92), an answer that shows, in response to the ancient mariner haunting the captain, he has a precise ‘old navigator’ in mind:

You never can tell. The currents are always changing. There was a man who wrote books, I forget his name, in the yacht *Casco*. He missed Takaroa by thirty miles and fetched Tikei, all because of the shifting currents. You are up to windward now, and you’d better keep off a few points. (*TP*, 95)

Besides being a living naval directory and knowing those islands by heart,²⁸ McCoy proves to be a sea library as well. The ‘man who wrote books’ in the yacht *Casco* is none other than Stevenson,²⁹ who, in the chapter of his book *In the South Seas* (1891) devoted to the Tuamotus (Paumotus) (Part II), describes the ‘Dangerous Archipelago’ in the following terms:

The huge system of the trades is, for some reason, quite confounded by this multiplicity of reefs; the wind intermits, squalls are frequent from the west and south-west, hurricanes are known. The currents are, besides, inextricably intermixed; dead reckoning becomes a farce; the charts are not to be trusted.³⁰

McCoy’s reference to Stevenson’s book will prove crucial in his effort to stop the crazy course of the *Pyrenees*, whose deck is described as so hot that, in order to move from one spot of the ship to another, crew

28 In the way that Polynesian *tahu’a* or expert *fa’atere va’a* used to (see Teriierooiterai, Chapter 1).

29 See Stevenson’s letter to Charles Baxter from on board the *Casco*, in which he mentions ‘the Dangerous Archipelago’ (6 Sep 1888), in Mehew (1997, p 379).

30 Stevenson, *In the South Seas*, London, Macmillan, Tusitala Edition, vol 20, 1924b, p 124.

members have now to run as fast as they can. It will constitute a mooring, an anchorage of sorts. In the second chapter of this part devoted to the Tuamotus, Stevenson describes at length ‘Fakarava: an atoll at hand’, and praises its entrance: ‘the lagoon has two good passages, one to leeward, one to windward’.³¹ Eventually, as the fire begins to spread so dangerously that ‘the *Pyrenees* was an open, flaming furnace’ (*TP*, 107), it is at Fakarava that she will find her final place of destination – i.e. in Stevensonian waters. Boats are lowered, the ship sails alone on her course in the lagoon, and, at long last, burns. If McCoy dismisses charts, he thus remembers *In the South Seas* and Stevenson’s cruise on board the yacht *Casco* in the Tuamotus (1888–89) to chart another course for the *Pyrenees*, an intertextual one. The Tuamotus are not only, as Captain Davis puts it in *The Ebb-Tide*, a ‘wide-lying labyrinth’ (*ET*, 158), but a palimpsest on which literary lines intersect;³² not so much a labyrinth in the nautical, as in the Borgesian sense. Stevenson’s text is used as a new kind of map, which can still be performative a few years later. While Davenport’s mind is still *Bounty*-oriented, McCoy’s is that of a Stevensonian reader, sailing according to *In the South Seas*, whose descriptions of the Tuamotus, its atolls, lagoons and entrances, are taken at their literal value. Quoting from, and sailing by the book is a reckoning of sorts, a means of following in the wake of a predecessor who charted those waters in more detail than the official, deficient maps.

As they drift along, it seems that the story of the *Bounty* has still to be exorcised, especially when ‘despair and mutiny’ are looming again on the smoking deck and, at one point, the crew refuse duty. Some members even spring to the boats, proceed to swing them out, and ‘to prepare to lower away’. It is only when McCoy’s ‘dovelike, cooing voice’ begins to speak that the mutineers pause to hear (*TP*, 100). The contents of his speech are not given – the narrative only mentions the soft, lulling quality of his voice, which König describes as having ‘hypnotized’ the rebellious crew. Once again, the ‘trouble’ has been averted (*TP*, 101). This rings a bell, the reminiscence of another ‘trouble’, another mutiny. Davenport asks McCoy to tell him ‘what happened with that *Bounty* crowd after they reached Pitcairn? The account I read said they burnt the *Bounty*, and that they were not discovered until many years later’ (*TP*, 102).

31 Stevenson, 1924b, p 132.

32 On *The Ebb-Tide* as palimpsest, and rewriting of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* or Virgil’s *Eneid*, see Jean-Pierre Naugrette (ed & trans), Introduction to *Le Creux de la Vague* (Paris, GF-Flammarion, 1993, pp 21–24); and Largeaud-Ortega (2012, pp 89–118).

McCoy willingly complies, and tells a tale full of sound and fury, ‘serenely cooing of the blood and lust of his iniquitous ancestry’ (*TP*, 102–03). Instead of indulging in a Byronic, idyllic, romantic version of the story (*The Island, or Christian and His Comrades*, 1823), McCoy spares no sordid detail: the picture he gives corresponds to what Michel Pérez calls a ‘Descent into hell’.³³ His own great-grandfather, he explains, had ‘made a still and manufactured alcohol from the roots of the ti-plant. Quintal was his chum, and they got drunk together all the time. At last McCoy got delirium tremens, tied a rock to his neck and jumped into the sea’ (*TP*, 103).³⁴ Seed of McCoy, but the question is, which seed? In the descendant’s version, the root, plant and seed motifs are explicitly related to the excesses of alcohol, and subsequent degradation. As opposed to this ‘iniquitous ancestry’, the governor of Pitcairn sounds like *the real McCoy*, an idiom referring to what is genuine, first-rate, of high quality; it may be used to designate an excellent brand of whisky, for instance, but the pilot of the *Pyrenees* seems to have transcended and redeemed the explosive nature of his male ancestor, who was associated with mutiny, the burning of the *Bounty*, the fateful ship as an image of individual combustion – as it is the case, for instance, in Zola’s *L’Assommoir* (1877). It is no coincidence if the seed image should be found again in the very cargo of the *Pyrenees*, this ‘cargo of wheat’ that is burning – but burning slowly, so slowly that the present-day ‘Anglified native’³⁵ McCoy, as opposed to his great-grandfather and his fellow-mutineers before him, thinks in terms of the island community, and is in a position to take all the time he needs. The title of the tale is thus more ironic than meets the eye: the governor of Pitcairn, who feels the need to consult his fellow Islanders before leaving for a few days, does not take after his hubristic, transgressive Scottish ancestor, William McCoy (c 1763–98). Telling the ill-fated story of the Pitcairn mutineers is thus a means of subduing, of soothing the incipient mutiny on board the *Pyrenees*: as a talking cure, the function of the embedded, *Bounty*-related story is clearly apotropaic, a means of telling the captain and the crew members that they are right

33 Pérez, 1999, pp 263–67.

34 Pérez mentions the fact that when women found William McCoy’s body at the bottom of the cliff, his hands and feet were bound. As he puts it, the isle of refuge had turned into a prison, and a grave. Ten years after the mutineers’ arrival on Pitcairn, only one sailor, Alexander Smith, had survived, along with 10 Tahitian women and a group of children.

35 Vanessa Smith, ‘Pitcairn’s “Guilty Stock”’. *The Island as Breeding Ground*, in Rod Edmond & Vanessa Smith (eds), *Islands in History and Representation*, London, Routledge, 2003.

in sailing away from Pitcairn, even if their ship is burning – or perhaps because it is burning – it should avoid following in the wake of the *Bounty* before them.

Although she is burning, what is remarkable is that McCoy's presence and directions should introduce some sort of balance, a stabilisation of sorts. Balance between combustion and conflagration – although the latter, we guess, is only postponed. Balance between drifting at random and following in the wake, thanks to the Stevenson intertext, which charts an intermediary (inter)course, on board the yacht *Casco*, between the *Bounty* and the *Pyrenees*. Balance between the impending destruction and the long, protracted cruise that carries the danger away from Pitcairn, across the 'Dangerous Archipelago'. Balance between time, which Davenport and the crew members experience as pressing, and space, which McCoy views as extensive – a clever, if devious, means of suspending present time by relying on literary predecessors. London may have found one in Jules Verne and his sea novel *Le Chancellor* (1874), in which the eponymous ship is also described as burning, a cargo of cotton whose combustion is compressed, repressed, delayed, because the bales are so tightly packed in the hold that the air, which any kind of fire needs to burst forth, is missing. 'You see, when we discovered the fire, we battened down immediately to suffocate the fire', Davenport explains (*TP*, 85). In his reading of Verne's novel, Michel Serres highlights those 'figures of balance' or 'syzygies' as so many stationary, if not stable, points, where a certain amount of balance is reached between contradictory elements. In Verne's novel, this stationary point of balance, even if it moves from one stage to another, is fully respected and maintained since the danger of fire is driven away by a storm and the reefs that stop the drifting ship in its erratic course: 'the static balance overcomes the thermic ending'.³⁶ The smouldering bales of cotton follow a kind of autonomous spiralling pattern of combustion, or 'positive feed-back loop', which makes each stage progress, but each time towards a new balance of elements and forces.³⁷

Although the protracted course of the ever-burning *Pyrenees* follows a similar pattern, the nature of McCoy's intervention is quite different in London's story. When McCoy boards the ship, he notices that the pumps are not working, but he will not attempt to reactivate them, a reaction that would be impossible in a Verne novel, where any dedicated

36 Michel Serres, *Jouvenances sur Jules Verne*, Paris, Ed de Minuit, 1974, p 117.

37 Serres, 1974, p 114.

captain would try. For McCoy, the forces of balance and composure are elsewhere to be found than in the fire/water equation, or the syzygy of elements. The issue at stake is not to prevent the *Pyrenees* from burning – she will, in the end, burn, there is no doubt about that. But only in the end. For the time, she ‘is burning’, as Davenport puts it, an ‘-ing’ form or present participle, which suggests a process, not a statement of fact. The kind of spiral or ‘positive feed-back loop’ McCoy relies on as a pilot is of a different nature. It has nothing to do with the laws of natural physics or dynamics, but with the balance to be found in and between previous narratives, which unfold on board the *Pyrenees* as she sails away from Pitcairn; between the embedded reminder of the original story of ‘the McCoy of the *Bounty*’ and the charting of a Stevensonian course ruled after *In the South Seas*, McCoy appears as the one who can ‘govern’ the island or ‘pilot’ the burning ship in literary waters. Hence the image of the ‘faint spiral of haze’ that he first sees when boarding her. There is no point in trying to compress the burning cargo in order to smother the smouldering fire by want of air. The spiral cannot be changed into a full circle. The repressed cannot be fully caulked.

Ships are burning: Between combustion and conflagration

When devising the spectacular, long-expected finale of his story, Jack London may have followed in the wake of two predecessors, who also described burning ships to dramatic effect.

The first is Robert Louis Stevenson and the ‘Tail-Piece’ of *The Ebb-Tide*, on which the novel closes like a curtain, in a highly cinematic scene. While repentant Captain Davis, who has converted himself to Attwater’s religion and rule, is described as ‘praying on the sand by the lagoon beach’, the Englishman Herrick’s skiff, in a zooming-in effect, is spotted ‘tacking towards the distant and deserted *Farallone*’ (*ET*, 250), the schooner that brought the trio of adventurers to Attwater’s New Island from Pape’ete. While still in Tahiti, Davis presents the vessel as the ‘last chance’ of the trio, although it seems plagued by its past:

She’s the *Farallone*, hundred and sixty tons register, out of ‘Frisco for Sydney, in California champagne. Captain, mate, and one hand all died of the small-pox, same as they had round in the Paumotus, I guess ...
(*ET*, 146)

When they board her, she is moored ‘well out in the jaws of the pass’ and branded as ‘an outcast’: she has indeed hoisted ‘the yellow flag’ of quarantine, ‘banished to the threshold of the port, rolling there to her scuppers, and flaunting the plague-flag as she rolled’ (*ET*, 152). When the third member of the trio, Huish, begins to remonstrate, Davis retorts that he is prepared to signal a man-of-war and send him ‘ashore for mutiny’ (*ET*, 154). In the next chapter, ‘The Cargo of Champagne’, Davis charts a clear course for the *Farallone*:

Now, if this South East Trade ever blew out of the S.E., which it don’t, we might hope to lie within half a point of our course. Say we lie within a point of it. That’ll just about weather Fakarava. Yes, sir, that’s what we’ve got to do, if we tack for it. Brings us through this slush of little islands in the cleanest place: see? (*ET*, 158)

At this ‘point’, Stevenson’s *In the South Seas* and *The Ebb-Tide* intersect: both voyages and fiction confirm that Fakarava is ‘the cleanest place’, a safe destination to steer by. Sailing as he was in the wake of Stevenson’s South Sea works,³⁸ London may have remembered those elements for ‘The Seed of McCoy’ – the signal of distress, the sense of isolation, the motif of the doomed ship that can only bring bad luck to her crew, the risk of mutiny, the Tuamotus and the atoll of Fakarava.

In the ‘Tail-Piece’, while Davis is still praying on the sand, with his eyes closed, Herrick is bent on a specific mission:

and presently the figure of Herrick might have been observed to board her, to pass for a while into the house, thence forward to the forecandle, and at last to plunge into the main hatch. In all these quarters, his visit was followed by a coil of smoke; and he had scarce entered his boat again and shoved off, before flames broke forth upon the schooner. They burned gaily; kerosene had not been spared, and the bellows of the Trade incited the conflagration. (*ET*, 250–51)

London will use the same word, ‘conflagration’, at the end of his story. But the burning of the ship is voluntary here: while Davis is praying, Herrick sets fire to the schooner, which embodies illness, ill-fate and mishap, a reminder of ‘Herrick’s picture of the life and death of his two

38 Sometimes edited and collected as part of a whole, like in the German edition *In der Südsee, Erzählungen und Erlebnisse Mit Illustrationen von Wolfgang Würfel* (Berlin, Verlag Neues Leben, 1972). The edition includes *The Beach of Falesá*, ‘The Bottle Imp’, ‘The Isle of Voices’ and *In the South Seas*. (Thanks to Manfred Diehl.)

predecessors; of their prolonged, sordid, sodden sensuality as they sailed, they knew not whither, on their last cruise' (*ET*, 170) – an image that may be related to the *Bounty* sailing towards Pitcairn, and to the *Pyrenees*, whose 'bottom' is described as 'foul' (*TP*, 88). The *Farallone* must be sacrificed, purified, so that a new kind of adventure, a more spiritual one, perhaps, a kind of redemption, may take over. But, unlike what happened to the *Bounty* when reaching Pitcairn, burning one's boats does not mean cutting oneself off from society, so as to escape pursuit: 'There she burns! and you may guess from that what the news is', a triumphant Herrick explains to prayer-bound Davis (*ET*, 251). In fact, a new ship, the *Trinity Hall*, has been sighted half an hour ago, and Herrick means to use it on his trip home – a far cry from Fletcher Christian and his comrades' isolation on Pitcairn.

Another influence may be traced back to Joseph Conrad's story 'Youth', first published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1898, whose second part deals with the *Judea*, and her cargo of coal, beginning to burn in the Indian Ocean, while bound for Bangkok:

The cargo was on fire.

Next day she began to smoke in earnest. You see it was to be expected, for though the coal was of a safe kind, that cargo had been so handled, so broken up with handling, that it looked more like smithy coal than anything else. Then it had been wetted – more than once. It rained all the time we were taking it back from the hulk, and now with this long passage it got heated, and there was another case of spontaneous combustion.³⁹

Like in the case of the *Chancellor*, the captain tries 'to stifle this 'ere damned combustion by want of air', but this proves to be of no avail, the smoke keeps on 'coming out through imperceptible crevices; it forced itself through bulkheads and covers; it oozed here and there and everywhere in slender threads ... This combustion refused to be stifled' (*Y*, 109–10). The rest of the story is suspended to whether this 'spontaneous combustion' of the cargo will keep on smouldering and wait until the *Judea* reaches a safe haven, or suddenly burst forth into flames in mid-ocean, while the crew is unprepared. At one point, an 'explosion' takes place, but Marlow describes it in slow motion, in a series of fractured, split impressions, a narrative technique that London will remember for

39 Joseph Conrad, 'Youth', *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*, Cedric Watts (ed), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990, p 109. Further references to this text are abbreviated *Y* and list page numbers only.

the ending of his story. Eventually, as smoke is more and more visible on board, a steamer is seen far astern, and the *Judea* hoists two flags, ‘which said in the international language of the sea, “On fire. Want immediate assistance”’ (Y, 116) – a motif also taken up by London, this time at the beginning of his story. After the steamer, the *Somerville*, has taken the *Judea* in tow, fire is seen for the first time: ‘The speed of the towing had fanned the smouldering destruction’ (Y, 119). The final description of the burning ship is highly poetic, as may be expected from a sailor like Marlow who has ‘a complete set of Byron’s works’ (Y, 106) at hand:

Between the darkness of earth and heaven she was burning fiercely upon a disc of purple sea shot by the blood-red play of gleams; upon a disc of water glittering and sinister. A high, clear flame, an immense and lonely flame, ascended from the ocean, and from its summit the black smoke poured continuously at the sky. She burned furiously; mourning and imposing like a funeral pile kindled in the night, surrounded by the sea, watched over by the stars. A magnificent death had come like a grace, like a gift, like a reward to that old ship at the end of her laborious days. The surrender of her weary ghost to the keeping of stars and sea was stirring like the sight of a glorious triumph. (Y, 125)

The image of the ‘funeral pile’ might be read as a reminder of PB Shelley’s pyre being lit by his friend Trelawney and Lord Byron after he drowned off Leghorn on 8 July 1822. The ‘death’ of the *Judea* is described as a kind of ceremony, a magnificent, romantic ritual of burial at sea eventually transcending the original introduction of the ship as being ‘all rust, dust, grime – soot aloft, dirt on deck’, but consistent with the ‘touch of romance’ that makes Marlow ‘love the old thing – something that appealed to my youth!’ (Y, 95).

In that respect, even if the waters are clearly Stevensonian, the ending of ‘The Seed of McCoy’ is highly Conradian. The last movements of the *Pyrenees* into the lagoon of Fakarava, until she strikes bottom, are described as if in slow motion, or at least the fire spreading to the sundry parts of the ship suggests some sort of slow explosion, ‘exploding-fixed’:⁴⁰ ‘Shreds and patches of burning rope and canvas were falling about them and upon them’ (TP, 119). Thanks to McCoy’s advice and wise piloting, the final ‘conflagration that had come to land’ (TP, 119) has nothing to do with the hasty, reckless burning of the *Bounty* by Christian and his iniquitous ancestor, or, for that matter, with the swift, joyful spreading

40 André Breton’s ‘explosante fixe’, also the title of a musical piece by Pierre Boulez (1972–93).

of kerosene on the *Farallone* for the sake of purification. Like in 'Youth', the spontaneous combustion of the cargo, if not stifled or mastered, has been displaced, postponed, extended as far as possible. 'Following the sea', as the phrase goes, in the wake of Herman Melville, Jules Verne, Stevenson and Conrad is a means for London of exorcising the ill-fated story of the *Bounty*, and perhaps of his own cruise on the *Snark*: the benevolent, calm, radiant, gentle, smiling, blessing, soothing, peaceful, tender, compassionate, dignified, sweet, placid, serene, persuasive, simple, gracious, blissful, ragged – and ultimately, Christ-like – figure of McCoy, governor and beachcomber, has managed to take and tuck away the burning ship to her final, 'beautiful bed' (*TP*, 109).

This text is taken from *The Bounty from the Beach: Cross-Cultural and Cross-Disciplinary Essays*, edited by Sylvie Largeaud-Ortega, published 2018 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/BB.10.2018.05