

Beyond the Boundaries of Realism

Monstrous Islands and Literary Hybrids at the *Fin de Siècle* in Conan Doyle's, R.L. Stevenson's and H.G. Wells's Fiction

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Abstract This article explores the way in which at the *fin de siècle*, Doyle, Stevenson and Wells chose to set their works on marginal islands in order to spatially escape not only from the bleak reality of the modern world, but also from the constraints of realism, and to reconnect with more imaginative forms of writing. It thus aims to shed new light on the relationship between geographical space and literary aesthetics, and to demonstrate that the island space is especially conducive to generic excursions out of realism and towards the fantastic, the marvellous and even the monstrous, leading to the creation of eminently hybrid literary texts.

Keywords Islands. Monsters. Escapism. Genre. Realism. Romance. Gothic. Fantastic. Aesthetics. Form. Hybridity. Narrative Annexe. Space. Geopoetics. Border-crossing. Marvellous. Uncanny. Victorian Era. Fin de siècle. Stevenson. Doyle. Wells.

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1 Introduction

Islands are deeply embedded in the European literary imagination and their separate, isolated nature appears to be particularly conducive to the occurrence of marvellous or preternatural phenomena, making them a favoured setting for storytellers. This ‘magical’ and mythical potential has been exploited time and again since as far back as the foundational myth of the *Odyssey* and Odysseus’ wonderful encounters with a colourful bestiary of hybrid and monstrous creatures across the Mediterranean archipelago. Yet the desert island is also, somewhat paradoxically, one of the several possible birthplaces of the realist novel, with the publication of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719 (Watt 1984, 13). Such aesthetic plasticity might explain why by the turn of the 20th century, as the realist novel had reached its cultural peak, a number of authors decided to explore the *topos* of the ‘desert’ island anew and repeople it with some of its original monsters, in an attempt to negotiate their ambivalence towards the dominant realist model. Indeed, it is my contention that such a pregnant choice of setting can be interpreted as a way to spatially escape not only from the bleak reality of the modern world, but also from the constraints of realism, by reconnecting with more imaginative and marvellous forms of writing.

I thus aim to shed new light on the relationship between geographical space and literary aesthetics at the turn of the twentieth century, by demonstrating that the protean island space allowed some major *fin de siècle* authors to explore the boundaries of realism through various forms of generic excursions into the fantastic, the marvellous, and even the monstrous. I will focus in particular on H.G. Wells’s *Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) and on his short-story “In the Avu Observatory” (1894), and compare it with Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The Fiend of the Cooperage” (1897) and R.L. Stevenson’s *The Beach of Falesá* (1897), in order to determine how they each negotiate hybrid zoologic and generic encounters, notably through their representations of monstrous creatures or preternatural phenomena. This will lead me to highlight the way the island’s protean nature fosters hybridity at the diegetic but also at the textual level, as the island becomes a laboratory for the hybridisation of spatial, physical, as well as literary forms.

2 Islands and *Fin de Siècle* Escapism

In the Victorian era, the United Kingdom’s increased urbanisation and industrialisation brought about a sense of constriction which seems to have fuelled an escapist tendency in readers as well as in writers, who sought to expand their horizons through real or imag-

inary travels (Kitzan 2001, 85; Ho 2007, 2). Thus, while some went off to explore new lands, others found solace in literature and more particularly in the romance of distant lands, leading to a revival of the romance genre:

There has, indeed, arisen a taste for exotic literature: people have become alive to the strangeness and fascination of the world beyond the bounds of Europe and the United States. But that is only because men of imagination and literary skill have been the new conquerors – the Corteses and Balboas of India, Africa, Australia, Japan, and the isles of the southern seas. All such conquerors [...] have, at least, seen new worlds for themselves; have gone out of the streets of the over-populated lands into the open air; have sailed and ridden, walked and hunted; have escaped from the fog and smoke of towns. New strength has come from fresher air into the brains and blood, hence the novelty and buoyancy of the stories which they tell. Hence, too, they are rather to be counted among romanticists than realists, however real is the essential truth of their books. (Lang [1891] 1901, 200)

In this passage, the Victorian man of letters Andrew Lang highlights both the escapist potential of romance and its ability to breathe new life into fiction writing¹, contrasting it with the apparently more out-of-date and less vivid fictional mode of realism². The romanticist Henry Rider Haggard had made a very similar argument in his essay “About Fiction” a few years earlier, linking spatial exploration with poetic innovation:

Here we may weave our humble tale, and point our harmless moral without being mercilessly bound down to the prose of a somewhat dreary age. Here we may even [...] cross the bounds of the known, and, hanging between earth and heaven, gaze with curious eyes into the great profound beyond. There are still subjects that may be handled there if the man can be found bold enough to handle them. (1887, 180)

1 He also very clearly links it with the process of imperialist colonisation through the repeated use of the term “conquerors”, as this period witnessed the rise of a more aggressive and utilitarian imperialist trend, sometimes called “new imperialism” or “high imperialism”. I shall not, however, delve into this aspect of the island tale in this essay as it has already been discussed at length by many prominent critics (Brantlinger 1988; Loxley 1990; Phillips 1997; Weaver-Hightower 2007). I intend to focus instead on the narratological and poetic implications of such a pregnant geographical choice, which has been the object of much less critical attention in the existing literature.

2 He had already famously voiced his stance in the contemporary debate opposing realism and romance in an earlier essay entitled “Realism and Romance” (1887), in which he defended the merits of romance.

“[C]ross[ing] the bounds of the unknown” is thereby perceived as a way not only to reinvigorate the author’s literary imagination by opening it up to new spaces and new ‘subjects’, but also to break away from the constricting realist norm of the time (“the prose of a somewhat dreary age”).

Yet by the turn of the twentieth century, as the last remaining “blank spaces”³ had progressively disappeared from the map and most of the globe had been mapped out and settled through the process of colonisation, there seemed to be fewer and fewer places left for novelists to explore, and for their imaginations to roam freely. Islands were thus among some of the last unexplored spaces left, and appeared as the ultimate possibility for such geo-poetic freedom:

The central image of unknown space in the adventure story is, perhaps inevitably, the sketchy map of an island. (Phillips 1997, 8)

The choice of this *topos* indeed allowed authors to reconnect with romance and revive imaginative literature in a world that had developed an increasing faith in rationality and positivism, as indicated by the prominence of the realist and more particularly the naturalist movements at that time. Emile Zola went far as proclaiming “la déchéance de l’imagination” (the decay of imagination, my translation) in his *Roman Expérimental* in 1880 (206), intent as he was on championing his conception of writing as a transparent “maison de verre” (glasshouse) offering an exact depiction of reality (Zola 1893, 118). In reaction to this dominant trend, Robert Louis Stevenson was amongst the staunchest advocates for the revival of imagination and the rejection of the realist mimetic ideal, which he famously voiced in his literary “quarrel”⁴ with Henry James, debunking James’s definition of the “art of fiction” in an essay entitled “A Humble Remonstrance”:

The whole secret is that no art does “compete with life”. Man’s one method, whether he reasons or creates, is to half-shut his eyes against the dazzle and confusion of reality. (Stevenson [1884] 1948, 91)

3 To take up Joseph Conrad’s expression in his preface to *Heart of Darkness*, where he famously laments the disappearance of such unexplored areas: “Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, “When I grow up I will go there”. The North Pole was one of these places, I remember. Well, I haven’t been there yet, and shall not try now. The glamour’s off” ([1899] 1989, 33).

4 Which eventually became a friendship, as recorded in a collection edited by Janet Adam Smith and entitled *Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson: A Record of their Friendship and Criticism* ([1884] 1948).

In lieu of this apparently unattainable mimetic ideal, he foregrounds a vision of art that does not aim to “compete with life” or imitate it faithfully, but instead relies on the powers of imagination and narration to ‘filter out’ the chaos of reality and fulfil the readers’ escapist desire, transporting them away from the harsh reality of their daily lives:

The great creative writer shows us the realisation and the apotheosis of the daydreams of common men. His stories may be nourished with the realities of life, but their true mark is to satisfy the nameless longings of the reader, and to obey the ideal laws of the daydream. The right kind of thing should fall out in the right kind of place; the right kind of thing should follow. (Stevenson [1882] 1905, 236)

The use of the lexical fields of imagination and desire (“longings”; “daydreams”; “ideal”) bears testimony to his attempt to reconcile “great creative writ[ing]” with romance⁵ and imaginative literature, which tended to be dismissed as ‘low’ or ‘popular’ forms of fiction at the time (Letourneux 2010, 205-6). The final sentence moreover underlines the importance of place in this creative process, each location being associated with a specific kind of event or even a specific genre, as he indicates earlier in the same essay:

Some places speak distinctly. Certain dank gardens cry aloud for a murder; certain old houses demand to be haunted; certain coasts are set apart for shipwreck. (Stevenson [1882] 1905, 234)

Following this line of thought, we might suggest that some islands demand to be peopled with monstrous beasts and become the scene of wonderful events, as is exemplified by the abundant literary tradition mentioned in the introduction. The island’s location, at the far reaches of the known world, indeed seems to remove it from the norms of reality and even realism (Grosmann 2005, 135), thereby making the magical or the marvellous somewhat more acceptable: Frank Lestrington notably describes the island as a kind of gateway into the world of myths and legends (2004, 10), again highlighting the link between space and literary aesthetics.

⁵ The quoted essay was tellingly entitled “A Gossip on Romance”.

3 Liminal, Enchanted Islands

The literary island's utter liminality, at the threshold between the real and the imaginary, is still very palpable at the turn of the twentieth century in the three works under study. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* is set on what is initially depicted as an "unknown little island" ([1896] 2005, 19) "off the track to anywhere" (29), while its very existence is questioned from the start by the frame narrative, thus casting doubt upon the reliability of the tale:

The only island known to exist in the region in which my uncle was picked up is Noble's Isle, a small volcanic islet, and uninhabited. [...] So that this narrative is without confirmation in its most essential particulars. (5)

Due to its uncertain location, the island's existence is therefore never really ascertained, despite the fact that it is apparently set within the 'real' world: this leads the reader to inevitably question the veracity of this "strange story" (5), which is presented to him in the epistemic mode through the use modal verbs and phrases such as "he must have lived during the interval" or "it seems" (6). Moreover, in his preface to a later collection of his *Scientific Romances* (1933), Wells himself insisted on the marvellous nature of his tale and on the primacy of imagination over scientific accuracy, opposing it to Jules Verne's more verisimilar scientific tales:

As a matter of fact there is no literary resemblance whatever between the anticipatory inventions of the great Frenchman and these fantasies [which are] exercises of imagination in a quite different field. (cited in Bergonzi 1961, 17)

Similarly, Wells's short-story "In the Avu Observatory" is set at the edge of Borneo's still unexplored tropical forest, in a station that appears particularly difficult to access:

The observatory at Avu, in Borneo, stands on the spur of a mountain. To the north rises the old crater, black at night against the unfathomable blue of the sky. From the little circular building, with its mushroom dome, the slopes plunge steeply downward into the black mysteries of the tropical forest beneath. [...] [F]or the naturalist the virgin forests of Borneo are still a wonderland full of strange questions and half-suspected discoveries. ([1894] 1927, 241)

The observatory's round shape and its location at the top of a steep mountain make it appear all the more remote and insular, an enclaved

scientific outpost surrounded with wilderness. The spatial isolation of this island within the island again goes hand in hand with a departure from the realist norm, which is made evident by the author's lexical choices, as the terms "mysteries", "wonderland", and "strange" immediately transport the story into the realm of romance, despite its apparently realistic setting.

Conan Doyle's short story "The Fiend of the Cooperage" is similarly located "upon the edge of the great unknown" ([1897] 1924, 196), and appears as a gateway into the undiscovered and the strange: the island is located at the mouth of the Ogowai river (in current-day Gabon), which goes through a land "practically unknown to Europeans" according to one of its inhabitants, who adds:

Every log which is carried past us by the current has come from an undiscovered country. (196)

The island's liminal location, in-between river and ocean, wilderness and civilisation, thus seems to open the door to the most uncanny phenomena, as is again made clear by the use of a lexicon pertaining to the realm of the mysterious: "something out of the common"; "funny goings on"; "exciting"; "appealed very forcibly to my imagination" (198).

If Stevenson's island in *The Beach of Falesá* is located within a well-defined web of trading networks and in a seemingly realistic universe, its windward side nevertheless remains unexplored, and is depicted as a similarly desert and enclaved space:

For the whole "eye" of the island, as natives call the windward end, lay desert. From Falesá round about to Papamalulu, there was neither house, nor man, nor planted fruit-tree; and the reef being mostly absent, and the shores bluff, the sea beat direct among crags, and there was scarce a landing-place. (Stevenson [1893] 2008, 47)

A triple negation ("neither... nor... nor") emphatically hammers out the absence of civilisation in this part of the island, and the stark contrast it offers with the rest of the island. It is all the more enclaved as it is extremely difficult to access by sea as well as by land, being periodically cut off from the rest of the island:

[A]t high water the sea broke right on the face of it, so that all passage was stopped. Woody mountains hemmed the passage all round; the barrier to the east was particularly steep and leafy. (45)

The lexical fields of boundaries and wilderness only reinforce this sense of isolation, which is again linked with supernatural occurrences, as the main character Wiltshire finds out when he asks one

of the island's inhabitants why there is no road going towards this part of the island:

Too much devil he stop there. [...] Man devil, women devil; too much devil [...]. Man he go there, no come back. (46)

The desert part of the island therefore becomes a gateway into the island's folklore, and allows Wiltshire to learn about its myths and legends thanks to the help of his native wife Uma.

4 Marginal Zoologic and Generic Encounters

The fact that it should be divided in two spaces, the "realistic" part and the "magical" part, nevertheless highlights the hybridity of the island geography at the turn of the twentieth century, which mirrors Stevenson's aesthetic ambivalence towards realism. The very geography of the insular space therefore isomorphically reflects the text's generic oscillation and foregrounds the inevitable influence of the realist trend on the romance revival, a generic tension which Stevenson himself acknowledged:

I still think the fable too fantastic and far-fetched. But, on a re-reading, fell in love with my first chapter, and for good or evil I must finish it. It is really good, well fed with facts, true to the manners. (1917, 3: 309)

His hesitation between the marvellous and the realistic is mirrored in the novella's very structure, which starts off as what Stevenson called a "realistic South Sea story" (1917, 4: 95) centred around Wiltshire's trading outpost in Falesá and his encounter with the local population, but progressively moves towards the marvellous as the character begins to explore the wilder part of the island and discover its folklore. This essentially geopoetic⁶ distinction between genres and modes eventually leads the narrative to oscillate between the two tendencies according to the characters' trajectories, and their proximity to the edge of the island's wilder part. The frontier separating the two parts indeed seems to fluidify the distinction between species as it provokes the appearance of strange and hybrid creatures, a phenomenon that Franco Moretti has deemed typical of the border space (2000, 53). This is precisely what happens to Uma when she goes "too near the margin of the bad place" (Stevenson [1893]

⁶ By geopoetic, I mean the correspondence between space and literary form, and the way they interact.

2008, 50) and has an encounter with a seemingly hybrid creature in a gloomy atmosphere that is also reminiscent of the Gothic genre:

It was a dark day in the rainy season, and now there came squalls that tore off the leaves and sent them flying, and now it was all still as in a house. [...] Presently after she heard a rustle nearer hand, and saw, coming out of the margin of the trees, among the mummy-apples, the appearance of a lean grey old boar. It seemed to think as it came, like a person; and all of a sudden, as she looked at it coming, she was aware it was no boar but a thing that was a man, with a man's thoughts. At that she ran, and the pig after her, and as the pig ran it holla'd aloud, so that the place rang with it. (50)

In this new form of South Sea Gothic, approaching the "margin" leads the characters and the readers to experience what Tzvetan Todorov defined as the fantastic hesitation,⁷ insofar as when faced with an inexplicable occurrence, they are torn between the rational and the marvellous explanation. Indeed, Uma's inability to grasp this creature's essence is illustrated by the accumulation of indefinite nouns or pronouns ("it"; "a thing") and by the constant oscillation between animality and humanity ("boar"; "like a person"; "no boar"; "a thing that was a man"; "the pig"; "it holla'd"). The use of the comparison and of the subordinate clause highlight this duality and fantastic hesitation that prevent her (and the reader) from deciding on one interpretation or the other, leaving her in this in-between, liminal state of uncertainty and hybridity. When he eventually explores what lies beyond this margin, Wiltshire experiences a similar fluidity between the kingdoms, in a place that again appears as distinctively uncanny:

But the queerness of the place it's more difficult to tell of, unless to one who has been alone in the bush himself. The brightest kind of a day it is always dim down there. [...] It's all very well for him to tell himself that he's alone, bar trees and birds; he can't make out to believe it; whichever way he turns the whole place seems to be alive and looking on. (Stevenson [1893] 2008, 51)

The uncanniness of the scene makes it almost indescribable, and its surreal nature can only be expressed through the antithetical use of the superlatives "brightest" and "always dim", creating a *chiaroscuro* effect that is reminiscent of the Gothic genre. The entire for-

⁷ "The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvellous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" (Todorov 1975, 25).

est then seems to come alive in a highly anthropomorphic way, as it is successively endowed with fingers (“like the fingers of your hand” (51)), eyes (“looking on”) and even a mouth, which utters a sad, melodic complaint:

[T]here came a sound of singing in the wind that I thought I had never heard the like of. It was all very fine to tell myself it was the branches; I knew better. It was all very fine to tell myself it was a bird; I knew never a bird that sang like that. It rose and swelled, and died away and swelled again; and now I thought it was like someone weeping, only prettier; and now I thought it was like harps; and there was one thing I made sure of, it was a sight too sweet to be wholesome in a place like that. (52)

The hesitation process is illustrated by the binary syntactical structure and anaphoric parallelisms, added to the paratactic use of semicolons that makes the passage appear all the more chaotic, thereby mirroring the character’s conflicted train of thought. Wiltshire’s initially rational mind is gradually affected by the place’s superstitions, and he convinces himself he is faced with some of the fiendish legendary creatures Uma has been telling him about: “I had made up my mind to see an *aitu*⁸” (52). The introduction of Polynesian folklore thus allows Stevenson to depart not only from realism but also from more traditional forms of Gothic and marvellous tales, which usually relied on Western folk tales and superstitions.

Yet a few lines later, the fantastic hesitation and tension are suddenly deflated through a comically anticlimactic scene, in which Wiltshire realises he has in fact been fooled by the stratagem his enemy Case has devised to frighten the natives by toying with their superstitions:

I caught another glimpse of the thing, and that relieved me, for I thought it seemed like a box, and when I had got right up to it I near fell out of the tree with laughing. A box it was, sure enough, and a candle-box at that, with the brand upon the side of it. (53)

The evil fiend is therefore not marvellous but entirely real, as he lies at the core of the other white man, which might make it even more threatening. If the choice of the fantastic allows Stevenson to reconcile the tale’s conflicting generic tendencies by permitting the occurrence of seemingly supernatural phenomena in an apparently realistic universe, the author eventually decides to resolve this tension and return to the realist mode thanks to a third generic shift, towards the modern genre of the detective story: Wiltshire finally solves Case’s

8 A demon in the local language.

case⁹ and stages its theatrical revelation to the island's inhabitants, so that all loose ends are neatly tied up and he can return, victorious, to his trading outpost.

We might therefore analyse the narrative sequences devoted to such liminal spaces as examples of what Suzanne Keen defines as “narrative annexes”, which imply the crossing of a spatial as well as a generic boundary, so that the tale enters a space where fictional and moral norms, which are traditionally marked by clear boundaries, appear blurred:

All narrative annexes possess a shift to a previously unrepresented place and a simultaneous alteration in narrative language that sends signals of adjusted genre. (1998, 2)

She moreover highlights the transgressive nature of such boundary-crossings, and the intricate link between space and form in the Victorian era:

Since boundaries, borders, and lines of demarcation evoke not only the long tradition of traversing an ever-altering imaginary terrain, but also the censorious language of the Victorian cultural watchdog, or the formal purist (often but not always the same person), they become a vital element of the novelist's manipulation of spatial difference and dramatic generic admixture to challenge representational norms. (3)

The concept of “narrative annexe” thereby clearly underlines the isomorphism between space and literary form in the works under study, the crossing of the island's fluid spatial boundaries allowing for a certain fluidity between the kingdoms but also between the genres. In *The Beach of Falesá*, this results in the consistent subversion and hybridisation of generic norms as the author successively draws on romance, realism, folktales, the fantastic, the Gothic, and even the detective story: even the apparently realist ending is debunked by the text's inconclusiveness as it ends on a question mark and on Wiltshire's uncertainty about his daughters' fate, thus leaving the question of the text's genre open.

Similarly, Conan Doyle's short story “The Fiend of the Cooperage” opens on a rather difficult boundary-crossing, as the narrator Captain Meldrum, who later introduces himself as a “lepidopterist—a butterfly-catcher” ([1897] 1924, 194), struggles to go from sea to river and reach the island's shore with his ship:

⁹ The onomastics is rather revealing here, as Case's very name seems to clearly point to the detective story intertext.

It was no easy matter to bring the *Gamecock* up to the island, for the river had swept down so much silt that the banks extended for many miles out into the Atlantic. (192)

This border-crossing also results in a generic switch, as what initially appeared as a realistic sea story or even a scientific travel narrative swiftly turns into a “romance” (196) and a “mystery” (200; 201; 202) as soon as the scientist sets foot on the island. In addition to the semantic field of the strange mentioned above, we note again a certain fluidity between the kingdoms which adds to the uncanny atmosphere of the island, through the metaphorical animalisation of the fog which makes it appear like a monstrous maritime creature:

I looked and saw long tentacles of white vapour writhing out from among the thick green underwood and crawling at us over the broad swirling surface of the brown river. (Conan Doyle [1897] 1924, 198)

In this place, which is associated from the start with “fever” and “bacilli” (193; 195), we are indeed very far from the *topos* of the Edenic island. Despite this uncanny atmosphere, the mystery initially seems to adhere to the realistic codes of a detective case, which can be solved through rational thinking and deduction: “I have a little mystery to unravel” (201); “I mean to find out to-night what the cause of it all may be” (202). One of the island’s inhabitant, Doctor Severall, then proceeds to tell the narrator about the consecutive disappearances of two watchmen in the island’s cooperage, which have led the natives to believe that “there is a fiend in the cooperage” who “claims a man every third night” (202).

If the Doctor and the lepidopterist, whose scientific education makes them appear as the embodiments of the modern faith in rationality, initially reject these superstitious “Voodoo tales” (202) which they oppose to “facts” (202) and “evidence” (206), the “unnatural gloom” (204) surrounding their “dreary”, “melancholy” (203) night in the cooperage appears particularly trying on their nerves. The silent candlelight wait, which is marked by the appearance of a mysterious shadow and a “monstrous”, roaring storm (207), is again highly reminiscent of the Gothic genre, so much so that when they eventually go back to the house and find their friend’s dislocated, boneless dead body, the mystery turns into a horrific tale, with an emphasis on feelings of fear and terror: “dreadful face”; “a thrill of horror” (208); “a cry of horror” (209). The protagonists’ inability to make sense of this death leads them to experience doubt and fantastic hesitation, as they are progressively infected with the local superstitious fears:

It beats me - beats me clean. I’ve heard of Voodoo devilry, and I’ve laughed at it with the others. But that poor old Walker, a decent,

God-fearing, nineteenth-century, Primrose-League Englishman should go under like this without a whole bone in his body – it's given me a shake, I won't deny it. (210)

The insistence on the character's epitomical Englishness and even Victorianness, through the enumeration of the Victorian man's typical attributes, must have made his death all the more horrific to the readers of the time, the process of identification bringing the events even closer to home. Moreover, the fact that the other two should be a scientist and a doctor makes the supernatural element even more compelling, as the reader cannot but trust these evidently reliable characters' narrative. The narrator's recurrent comments on the Doctor's practical, courageous nature ("a big, bluff, hearty man", 198); "a man of iron nerves", 205) make the next scene all the more horrific, as the two white men abandon all courage and decide to flee the island and paddle to the yacht: the occurrence of the preternatural in this remote part of the world thus allows the author to speak to the reader's deepest fears, by threatening the typical Englishman's manliness, rationality, and courage.

On approaching the yacht, the pair notices one of the crew members pointing towards the sea and as they look, they come face to face with a fiendish, monstrous creature:

A huge black tree trunk was coming down the river, its broad glistening back just lapped by the water. And in front of it – about three feet in front – arching upwards like the figure-head of a ship, there hung a dreadful face, swaying slowly from side to side. It was flattened, malignant, as large as a small beer-barrel, of a faded fungoid colour, but the neck which supported it was mottled with a dull yellow and black. As it flew past the Gamecock in the swirl of the waters I saw two immense coils roll up out of some great hollow in the tree, and the villainous head rose suddenly to the height of eight or ten feet, looking with dull, skin-covered eyes at the yacht. (211)

The alternate use of vocabulary pertaining to the vegetal, the animal and even the human world leads the reader to wonder about the essence of this hybrid, seemingly wooden monster: "tree trunk"/"back"; "figure-head"/"face"; "fungoid"/"neck"; "mottled"/"coils". At the border between sea and river, boat and island, the monstrous makes a swift and terrifying appearance into the "real" world, only to be immediately evicted by the doctor's rational explanation:

"It is our fiend of the cooperage," said Dr Several, and he had become in an instant the same bluff, self-confident man that he had been before. "Yes, that is the devil who has been haunting our island. It is the great python of the Gaboon". (211)

As a metatextual replica of the effective story-teller Conan Doyle is, the Doctor maintains the fantastic hesitation until the very last sentence, and toys with the same Gothic tropes the narrative has consistently relied on (“fiend”; “devil”; “haunting”) until he finally reveals this creature’s essence, and with it, the solution to the “case”. The python, living in a hollow tree, had been brought down from the “undiscovered country” (196) to the island’s shore by the previous flood, and satisfied its periodical appetite with the watchmen until it was driven away by the candlelights, and later by the storm. All the loose ends are neatly tied up and the figure of the brave Englishman in the tropics reinstated, yet the python’s monstrous, horrific image cannot but echo in the reader’s mind: perhaps the fact that it is real makes it all the more terrifying, leading to the creation of a new kind of exotic or even zoologic Gothic/detective story. This new, hybrid genre relies on a new form of “real” monster in order to produce a stronger effect on the jaded reader looking for fresh sensations, thus departing both from realism and from traditional island stories. Here again, the “narrative annexe” (Keen 1998, 2) results in a generic excursion into the realm of the fantastic and even the horrific which allows the author to subvert generic codes, only to return to the realistic norm as the narrator crosses the boundary again to get back aboard his ship.

Wells’s short-story “In the Avu Observatory” (1894) similarly relies on a kind of zoologic Gothic or scientific romance, as its location at the edge of Borneo’s virgin forest makes it appear from the very first page as a gateway for the appearance of strange, monstrous creatures:

[T]he cry of some strange animal was heard from the midst of the mystery of the forest. Nocturnal insects appeared in ghostly fashion out of the darkness, and fluttered round his light. He thought, perhaps, 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. ([1894] 1927, 241)

The adjunction of the qualifiers “strange” and “ghostly” to these unknown creatures highlights the encounter between Gothic and zoology, with the same insistence on uncanny sounds and chiaroscuro effects resulting from the irruption of these queer yet very real creatures. The second sentence then presents the scientist as a new kind of explorer or adventure hero, and the island as the rich conservatory of wonderful, endemic species, thereby reflexively commenting on Wells’s attempt to reconcile romance and science through the use of this new kind of monsters.

Just like the previous narrative annexes¹⁰, the narrative sequence opens on a boundary-crossing, as the main character enters the observatory:

The lantern flared as Woodhouse entered his circular den, and the general darkness fled into black shadows behind the machine, from which it presently seemed to creep back over the whole place again as the light waned. (242)

Again, this crossing brings about a certain porousness between the kingdoms and between the human and the animal, as the term “den” likens Woodhouse to a wild animal, while the darkness itself comes to life through the use of the animal metaphor (“fled”; “creep back”). Like Conan Doyle, Wells recuperates the motif of the long nightly vigil, this time giving it not a detective but a scientific turn as the main character is preparing himself for a “watch upon the mysteries of space” (243). This vigil is again marked by its “whispering stillness” (243) and profound silence, except for the “shrill hum of a mosquito” (243) which, as in Conan Doyle’s story (“the shrill ping of an occasional mosquito”, [1897] 1924, 206), seems to be the tropical equivalent of the howling wind trope in more traditional Gothic tales. The setting of this uncannily still and dark atmosphere allows narrative tension to build so as to make the occurrence of the unexpected even more striking, pulling the character back from the abstract, “incorporeal” exploration of the “ether of space” (Wells [1894] 1927, 244) into the thick of life:

Infinitely remote was the faint red spot he was observing. Suddenly the stars were blotted out. A flash of blackness passed, and they were visible again. (244)

The protagonist’s first impulse is to provide a rational explanation for the uncanny phenomenon: “Queer. [...] Must have been a bird” (244). Yet the indefinite nature of the creature which then penetrates the entirely dark observatory leads the character to experience extreme uncertainty and horror due to his inability to grasp its essence, as is evidenced by the repeated use of indefinite nouns, adverbs and pronouns, and the proliferation of conflicting adjectives and substantives to describe it: “some huge vague black shape”; “the unknown creature”; “the thing, whatever it was”; “it was big, whatever else it might be”; “the beast, whatever it was”; “some strange bird-creature” (244). According to Roger Bozzetto, the essence of the fantastic lies precisely in this irruption of the indescribable into the real world,

¹⁰ As defined by Suzanne Keen in the passage cited above (1998, 2).

which causes the protagonist (and the reader) to experience uneasiness, terror and even horror, as they struggle with the limitations of signification (1998, 210). Again, Woodhouse tries to come up with a rational explanation for the occurrence, by tentatively naming the “thing”: “As his thought returned he concluded that it must be some night-bird or large bat” (Wells [1894] 1927, 245).

Thanks to the consistent use of internal focalisation, we are then given a rather impressionistic depiction of the creature, as it only appears in fleeting touches and dislocated parts to the eye of the focaliser who tries to light a match and get a glimpse of it: “a vast wing”; “a gleam of grey-brown fur”; “a claw”; “the outline of a head black against the starlight”; “sharply-pointed upstanding ears and a crest between them” (245). Woodhouse then resorts to comparisons in order to try to grasp the creature’s essence: “as big as a mastiff’s” (245); “like the ear of a big cat” (246). Finally, after a dreadful clinch with the beast he seems to have accepted the creature’s marvellous nature and uses term “monster” (247) to describe it, while later when telling his friend about it he returns to the fantastic hesitation as he cannot even name it, and just capitalises the word “Thing” (248). By turning the indefinite noun into a proper noun he essentialises the creature’s indefinite nature, thus reinforcing the horrific nature of the tale. As opposed to Conan Doyle’s story, the characters (and the readers) are not provided with a rational explanation but only with the local legends about the beast, so that the fantastic hesitation is never resolved: “The Dyak chaps talk about a Big Colugo, a Klangu-tang – whatever that may be” (Wells [1894] 1927, 249).

Woodhouse concludes the discussion and the narrative by adapting a famous line from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, highlighting the limited nature of human knowledge:

There are more things in heaven and earth, [...] and more particularly in the forests of Borneo, than are dreamt of in our philosophies. On the whole, if the Borneo fauna is going to disgorge any more of its novelties upon me, I should prefer that it did so when I was not occupied in the observatory at night and alone. (Wells [1894] 1927, 249)

If Woodhouse’s light tone allows him to deflate some of the tension accumulated, this intertextual passage nevertheless highlights the thin boundary between rational “philosophies” and “dream[s]”, or between the natural and the supernatural, especially when you approach the margins of the unknown. Hence, scientific explorations within the island space allow Wells to explore the limits of realism through his use of romance but also fantastic and Gothic tropes while still somehow adhering not to naturalism, but to 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". (2012, 12)

The use of internal focalisation questions the realist ideal of the omniscient, god-like narrator, as the last word is left to the character who refuses to resolve the fantastic hesitation. Unlike Stevenson's and Conan Doyle's narratives, which eventually presented the reader with a rational explanation for the uncanny phenomena encountered, the narrator here is unable to stabilise meaning and provide a definite answer, thus leaving the reader in a liminal state of fantastic hesitation.

Wells explored the liminality and generic plasticity of the island space time and again in his work, but perhaps the most striking example of this hybridising process can be found in his novel *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, published but a few years later (1896). This text is similarly presented from its paratextual threshold as a real travel narrative, being introduced narrator's nephew who claims to have found the manuscript in his uncle's papers. This typical device of the realist novel aims to prompt the reader's "willing suspension of disbelief"¹¹ by establishing the narrative's reliability, its veracity being guaranteed by the fact that we get the account first-hand from their main protagonist, Prendick, who emphasises his reliability from the narrative's very first page: "I have the best evidence for this assertion - I am one of the four men" (Wells [1896] 2005, 7). This apparent reliability is however immediately questioned by his tendency to contradict himself: "I must state that there never were four men in the dinghy; the number was three" (7). Moreover, if Prendick's nephew confirms the accuracy of the narrative's timeframe ("a date that tallies entirely with my uncle's story" (6)), he also immediately casts doubt on the narrator's reliability by introducing the possibility of his uncle's madness:

He gave such a strange account of himself that he was supposed demented. [...] His case was discussed among psychologists at the time. (5)

From its very threshold, the text thus tends to oscillate between reality and fiction, veracity and improbability, as the author uses the creative potential of the paratextual margin in order to undermine the narrative authority, and with it, the realist norm, by immediately locating the text in the midst of the fantastic hesitation. This generic ambivalence is precisely what Joseph Conrad pointed out when com-

¹¹ To take up the famous phrase coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* ([1817] 1983, 6).

menting on the innovative nature of Wells's art: "Realist of the Fantastic, whether you like it or not" (cited in Kleiner 1997, 161), while Wells similarly praised Conrad's dual aesthetics in a review of his novel *An Outcast of the Islands*: "Surely this is real romance - the romance that is real!" (cited in Parrinder, Philmus 1980, 92).

Prendick's sojourn on the island thus appears as another narrative annexe, where the character seems to spatially leave the world (or at least, the known world) for a given period:

[M]y uncle passed out of human knowledge about latitude 5° S. and longitude 105° W., and reappeared in the same part of the ocean after a space of eleven months. (Wells [1896] 2005, 6)

The terms "passed out" and "space" emphasise the spatial nature of such a narrative excursion. The character moreover has to cross a spatial boundary in order to reach the island, being shipwrecked and then picked up by a schooner, only to be cast away again near the island's shore. The uncanny nature of the place and its inhabitants is introduced from this very crossing through Prendick's encounter with one of the island's hybrid inhabitants on the schooner. He first describes him as "man", but later underlines its "animal swiftness" and the uncanny nature of its haunting appearance, as it gradually becomes an indefinite "creature" in his eyes:

I had paused halfway through the hatchway, looking back, still astonished beyond measure at the grotesque ugliness of this black-faced creature. I had never beheld such a repulsive and extraordinary face before, and yet - if the contradiction is credible - I experienced at the same time an odd feeling that in some way I had already encountered exactly the features and gestures that now amazed me. (14)

The feeling experienced by Prendick corresponds to the exact definition of the psychological uncanny, defined by Freud as the combined perception of something marvellous but also strangely familiar, like a *déjà vu* impression ([1919] 1973), the hesitation leading the character to question the reliability or at least the verisimilitude of his own perceptions. The fantastic uncanny may therefore be interpreted as a way for the author to renew the traditional marvellous by moving it into the meanderings of the human psyche, and questioning the character's mastery over his own mind.

This spatial, generic and even psychological transition allows Prendick to enter a strange, "enchanted" island world peopled with monstrous creatures, as can be sensed through the lexical emphasis on the marvellous and the uncanny: "strange crew"; "elfin faces" (Wells [1896] 2005, 27); "grotesque-looking creatures"; "extraordi-

nary" (28); "uncanny voices" (33). The place's boundaries moreover appear rather blurry, an instability which Prendick opposes to stable, stereotypical representations of the desert island:

[B]ut in spite of the brilliant sunlight and the green fans of the trees waving in the soothing sea-breeze, the world was a confusion, blurred with drifting black and red phantasms. (38)

In this mutable, liminal world, torn between the real and the "phantasms", the boundaries between the kingdoms and the genres in turn become increasingly blurred, as its inhabitant Moreau first defines himself as "a biologist", and the island as "a biological station - of a sort" (29), only to later describe it through the prism of the fairy-tale: "Our little establishment here contains a secret or so, is a kind of Bluebeard's Chamber, in fact" (32). The tension between the rational world of science and the marvellous realm of the fairy-tale is particularly striking here, and hints at the narrative's generic hybridity. Indeed, Prendick cannot resist the temptation to symbolically open this "chamber", which results in another generic switch towards the genre of the detective story as he tries to solve the island's mystery in order to understand those hybrid creatures' essence: "What could it mean?" (35). He thus decides to explore the island and after crossing the margins of the woods, he comes upon another boundary, that of a river, and momentarily lingers there. As he hesitates, he falls into a transitory state between sleep and consciousness, thereby questioning the reality of what he then perceives: "I fell into a tranquil state midway between dozing and waking" (39).

This spatial and mental transition brings about another narrative annexe, this time into the realm of the fantastic, as Prendick (just like Wiltshire in *The Beach of Falesá*) experiences the uncanny feeling of a tropical forest coming alive:

I began to realize the hardihood of my expedition among these unknown people. The thicket about me became altered to my imagination. Every shadow became something more than a shadow, became an ambush, every rustle became a threat. Invisible things seemed watching me. (41)

Note his initial tendency to present himself as a typical imperial romance hero, only to immediately start doubting his own senses as he hesitates between the supernatural and the "natural" explanation, that of his madness or hallucinatory state:

I half-persuaded myself that my pursuer had abandoned the chase, or was a mere creation of my disordered imagination. [...] I thought my nerves were unstrung and that my imagination was tricking me. (45)

The fantastic hesitation, which is illustrated in the first sentence by the exclusive coordination, is later echoed by Moreau's acolyte Montgomery, who suggests a marvellous explanation for the occurrence whilst simultaneously hinting at Prendick's potential madness: "If you don't sleep tonight [...] you'll be off your head tomorrow"; "I'm thinking it was a bogle" (49). Instead of the genre of the ghost story, Prendick then chooses to invoke the mythological tradition to try to grasp the situation:

[Moreau] had merely intended [...] to fall upon me with a fate more horrible than death, with torture, and after torture the most hideous degradation it was possible to conceive – to send me off, a lost soul, a beast, to the rest of the Comus route. (52)

Comus was a sorcerer in Greek mythology, the son of the enchantress Circe (whose island was indeed peopled with animals that once were men): he was the leader of a band of creatures, men whom he had turned into hybrid monsters. Moreau's monsters thus appear as the modern, scientific version of these mythical hybrids, a combination underlined by Prendick's repeated use of the term "Satyr" to describe one of them (86), a "creature of ape and goat" (83). Indeed, Prendick later finds out that to achieve these (evidently failed) metamorphoses, Moreau did not resort to magic but to vivisection, and he did not actually attempt to turn men into animals but animals into men: if they are not mythical hybrids, they are nevertheless monsters, whom Jean-Michel Racault defines as the products of incomplete metamorphoses (2010, 79). These modern monsters indeed speak to eminently modern fears, as they echo the contemporary debate on vivisection and the threat of an unethical use of science, but also the Victorian fear of evolutionary regression. From marvellous hybrids to scientific monsters, the island yet remains the ideal place to perform such metamorphoses, due to its extreme isolation, and its consequent ability to suspend natural laws and fluidify the boundary between the real and the imaginary: "I remember the green stillness of the island and the empty ocean about us as though it was yesterday. The place seemed waiting for me" (Wells [1896] 2005, 75), remarks Moreau when explaining how he came to settle on the island.

Yet in this case, Prendick's return to the "real" world does not lead to a return to the norm, as he lives as an outcast "near the broad free downland" (130) and is still haunted by the island and its grotesque "Beast People", which seem to have awakened the monster lurking within the chamber of his brain:

And it even seemed that I, too, was not a reasonable creature, but only an animal tormented with some strange disorder in its brain, that sent it to wander alone like a sheep stricken with the gid. (131)

The question of his potential madness thus remains open, leaving the reader in this fantastic oscillation and questioning the realist norm of textual closure: as Paul Ricoeur suggested, one might interpret this destabilisation of the character's identity and of the text's closure as proof of the narrative's modernity (1990, 177).

5 Conclusion

Due to its liminal, remote nature, the island appears as the ideal place for the irruption of the marvellous within a seemingly realistic universe, serving for a range of *fin de siècle* writers as a reservoir for mysterious monsters and strange creatures. This in turn makes them the perfect setting in which to revive imaginative literature whilst simultaneously renewing it, thanks to various types of generic mutations: if Stevenson finds new fiends and hybrids in Polynesian folklore, Conan Doyle and Wells explore the narrative possibilities offered by endemic zoology and scientific exploration, through the encounter with unknown yet potentially real or even manufactured creatures in these marginal islands. The excursion into the fantastic, in particular, allows authors to dwell in this in-between literary space, at the crossroads between realism and romance, and to challenge representational norms. This dialogic¹² process underlines the powerful creative potential of the insular "narrative annexe", and the intricate geopoetic link between space and literary form at the turn of the twentieth century. Yet some texts, in particular Wells's, go further than the others in this process of modernisation, and eventually leave the reader in this discomfiting yet delightful state of uncertainty by refusing to shut the door on these hybrid textual monsters.

Moreau's exploration of "the extreme limit of plasticity in a living shape" (Wells [1896] 2005, 75) may therefore aptly mirror the writers' efforts to explore the limits of generic and aesthetic plasticity in their insular laboratories. If Moreau can be considered as a meta-textual image of the artist¹³, "these strange creations of Moreau's art" (81) might be read as metonymies for the authors' queer tales, insofar as their creators explore the plasticity of the island narrative form and consistently dissect typical insular motifs to create hybrid literary "monsters". If Simon James suggested that "Wells himself is happy to murder romantic tropes to dissect them" (2012, 15), it is

¹² To take up the term Mikhail Bakhtin uses to refer to this process of intertextual dialogue, which he studies in his work entitled *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981).

¹³ "I suppose there is something in the human form that appeals to the artistic turn of mind" (Wells [1896] 2005, 73) ; "[he was] well known in the scientific circles for his extraordinary imagination" (34).

my contention that in fact the authors do not murder these tropes so much as they vivisection them, to paradoxically breathe new life into them through this highly reflexive hybridisation process. This leads to the creation of what Huntington described as a “new form” (1982, 11), which feeds on the aesthetic potential of the insular margin to go beyond generic limitations and create utterly heterogeneous literary objects.

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