

Wasted Gifts: Robert Louis Stevenson in Oceania

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IN late 1888 Robert Louis Stevenson sent a letter from Tahiti—part of an intermittent chain of correspondence—to a Bournemouth friend, Adelaide Boodle. He and his wife, Fanny Stevenson, had left numerous birds and stray animals they had accumulated during their residence in Bournemouth in Adelaide’s care, and so he would typically address her “Dear Gamekeeper” and sign himself “the Squire.”¹ This letter, however, departs from that script. It commences “Dear Giver,” and Stevenson thereafter adopts the voice of the “Wooden Paper-Cutter” that Adelaide had gifted to him before he embarked on his travels:

Dear Giver, I am at a loss to conceive your object in giving me to a person so locomotory as my proprietor. The number of

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¹ Adelaide’s later memoir offers much detail of the Stevensons’ life in Bournemouth (see Adelaide Boodle, *R. L. S. and His Sine Qua Non: Flashlights from Skerryvore* [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1926]). For a perceptive account of the relationship between Adelaide and the Stevensons, see Olena M. Turnbull, “The Squire and the Gamekeeper: RLS and Miss Adelaide Boodle,” in *Robert Louis Stevenson Reconsidered: New Critical Perspectives*, ed. William B. Jones, Jr. (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co., 2003), pp. 215–27.

thousand miles that I have travelled, the strange bedfellows with which I have [been] made acquainted, I lack the requisite literary talent to make clear to your imagination. I speak of bedfellows; pocket-fellows would be a more exact expression, for the place of my abode is in my master's right hand trouser-pocket; and there, as he waded on the resounding beaches of Nukahiva, or in the shallow tepid water on the reef of Fakarava, I have been overwhelmed by and buried among all manner of abominable South Sea shells; beautiful enough in their way, I make no doubt, but singular company for any self-respecting paper-cutter. . . . I am sorry I ever left England, for here there are no books to be had, and without books, there is no stable situation for, Dear Giver, Your affectionate
Wooden Paper-Cutter²

"I am at a loss to conceive your object," writes the paper-cutter, in the first of a series of puns and double-entendres that riddle the letter, and one that sets the unsentimental tone of the exchange. The gift, as it dispassionately tells its own "Dear Giver," finds itself ill-assorted and useless: an object out of place among unfamiliar objects—the clutter of seashells rather than the accoutrements of the writing table. Via a thank-you letter that is a playfully thankless version of the eighteenth-century it-narrative, the gift looks itself in the mouth, declaring its impotence by misassociation. The paper-cutter offers Stevenson a portal into a metropolitan perspective on his travels; mediating his meditations on how it must appear, from Britain, to have swapped the literary for the littoral.

Stevenson's next letter to Miss Boodle, from Honolulu, dated 6 April 1889, abandons the it-narrative format for a third-person account of the fate of the object. Apologizing for his shortcomings as a correspondent, Stevenson writes:

I would let the paper-cutter take my place; but I am sorry to say the little wooden seaman did after the manner of seamen and deserted in the Societies. The place he seems to have stayed at—seems, for his absence was not observed till we were near the equator—was Tautira; and I assure you he displayed good taste,

² Robert Louis Stevenson, letter to Adelaide Boodle, 10 October 1888, in *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Mehew, 8 vols. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1994–95), VI, 212–13.

Tautira being as ‘nigh hand heaven’ as a paper-cutter or anybody has a right to expect.³

The paper-cutter, it seems, has had a remarkable change of heart regarding reefs and beaches. Stevenson tactfully reconfigures his own neglect of the gift as an act of voluntary desertion on its part: the object has turned beachcomber and jumped ship, lured by the South Sea idyll.⁴ This cursory account also serves to herald Stevenson’s own announcement, in the same letter, of his delayed and later aborted return to Britain: “I think all our friends will be very angry with us, and I give the grounds of their probable displeasure bluntly: we are not coming home . . .” (*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, VI, 279). Though he is merely announcing a postponed return at this stage, Stevenson proved himself to be entering upon an exile that would become permanent, from home and all its things.

In *Portable Property* (2008), John Plotz draws attention to the “long-distance attachment” that Victorian settlers abroad evinced for objects that spoke of home.⁵ Noting that such items attained a paradoxical worth, “at once priceable and invaluable,” through their displacement, Plotz extrapolates a broader “Victorian conception of dematerialized portability (that is, the notion that abstract concepts like Englishness, race, or familial heritage can become metaphorically portable by being incarnated in crucial objects)” (*Portable Property*, pp. xiv, 46). If, according to this premise, you have traveled abroad with a paper-cutter, then its very incongruence becomes a testimony to the homeland it metonymizes. Far from being shamed by seashells, its exclusivity as a conductor of sentiment is only confirmed by their proximity. The violent yet tender assistant at the birth of those supremely portable objects, novels, cutting the membrane between book and narrative, its “stable situation” maintaining the unilateral flow of encultured

³ Robert Louis Stevenson, letter to Adelaide Boodle, 6 April 1889, in *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, VI, 278–29.

⁴ For an account of the Pacific beachcomber in relation to Stevenson’s South Seas oeuvre, see Vanessa Smith, *Literary Culture and the Pacific: Nineteenth-Century Textual Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998) pp. 18–52.

⁵ John Plotz, *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2008), p. 45.

sentiment from Britain to the periphery is in fact assured. What, though, to make of a writer who casually loses and then almost passive-aggressively reports his disengagement from the to-be-cherished object from home?

We might think of this as a process of object relation, materializing the fraught feelings that attend separation in the realm of significant things. But for the Victorian in the Oceanic part of the world, object relations take a specifically mediated form. Oceania has, post Stevenson's time, proved itself to be the place where Western people go to think about gifts. Bronislaw Malinowski's researches into the *kula* ring from his own island exile in the Trobriands during World War One were integral to Marcel Mauss's formulation of his theory of the gift.⁶ Anthropologists Marilyn Strathern, Nicholas Thomas, Chris Gregory, and Annette Weiner have since all used case studies from the "sea of islands" to refine Mauss's recognition that gifts are part of a total system of continual circulation based on reciprocal obligation.⁷ I want to return briefly to Mauss here for the ways in which he helps us to think about the gift as an object fundamentally in motion. Mauss was a synthesizer, who inevitably betrayed European attitudes to prestation and commodification, even as he purported to delineate a stable and transparent set of Pacific-basin gifting practices. Stevenson, too, strove for ethnographic overview, yet his attempt to identify and participate in pristine forms of gift culture exposed his imbrication in a debased and uneven post-contact version of exchange.

⁶ See Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1922).

⁷ See Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1988); Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991); C. A. Gregory, *Gifts and Commodities* (London: Academic Press, 1982); and Annette B. Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping While Giving* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1992). The phrase "sea of islands" derives from the work of the Tongan theorist Epeli Hau'ofa, who employed it to counter the continental drift of postcolonial scholarship (see Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," in *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*, ed. Eric Waddell, Vijay Naidu and Epeli Hau'ofa [Suva, Fiji: Univ. of the South Pacific, 1993], pp. 2–16).

In Polynesia, where he begins his study, Mauss identifies chains of obligation that guarantee that gifts will flow back to the “Dear Giver,” often across generations. Part of Mauss’s challenge is to refute the idea of “a ‘natural’ economy,” that is, one devoid of economic and legal structures, which had been propagated within Europe to explain “societies that we lump together somewhat awkwardly as primitive or inferior”; a representation that, in the case of Polynesia, he slates back to James Cook’s foundational representations of Oceanic exchange.⁸ Mauss identifies complex “economic and legal systems” underpinning the “simple exchange of goods” in such societies, which fundamentally imbricate personhood with thinghood (*The Gift*, p. 6). Within such systems, property functions not simply as accumulation, but as talisman, acquiring a value incommensurate with wealth and instead calibrated to an ethics of exchange.⁹ Since any act of giving incorporates the acknowledgment of return, the emphasis of gifting is not on objects accumulated or held, but on the ways in which they are brought into play on ritual occasions. In Samoa, Tahiti, and other areas of Oceania through which Stevenson was traveling as he wrote to Miss Boodle, Mauss found societies in which individuals were left the richer not by accumulation but by the connected processes of receiving and relinquishing items of value. The pull of ritualized and sanctified codes of reciprocity across distances of space and time ensures, according to Mauss, that an integral aspect of cherishing for gift cultures must always be letting go.

By the time he wrote his second letter to Miss Boodle from Honolulu, Stevenson had traveled extensively in Oceania. He had sailed on the yacht *Casco* to Nukuhiva and Hiva Oa in the Marquesas, where he had spent altogether about six weeks, ferrying between the yacht and various locations on shore. He had then wended through the Tuamotus, spending some time at Fakarava. From there he had continued to Tahiti,

⁸ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (London: Routledge, [1950] 1990, 2002), p. 6.

⁹ Mauss writes of “that notion of property-as-talisman, which we are sure is general throughout the Malaysian and Polynesian world, and even throughout the Pacific as a whole” (*The Gift*, p. 13).

shifting from Papeete to Tautira on Tahiti-iti (the smaller of the two circles of land that give Tahiti its Venn diagram shape), where he was stranded for eight weeks while the yacht underwent repairs. The *Casco* then brought him to Honolulu, where it was surrendered, and the Stevenson party looked into other ways of traveling around the islands. They would eventually find berths on the schooner *Equator*, traveling to Butaritari and Ape-mama in the Gilbert Islands (today Kiribati), where they spent six and eight weeks respectively, and then to Samoa, where Stevenson secured the property, Vailima, on which he was to spend the last four years of his life.

In Nukuhiva, Fakarava, and Tautira—each of the paper-cutter’s enumerated destinations—Stevenson had found himself uncomfortably exposed by experiences of gift exchange. In Nukuhiva he befriended a poor Hawaiian, Tari, who had ended up in the Marquesas, and of whose few and humble possessions Stevenson declared himself able to “give a perfect inventory.”¹⁰ Tari gifted the party a pig, which they declined. By adjudicating against Tari’s capacity to give on the basis of his humble inventory, they denied him the power of displaying generosity, measuring his wealth not by his gifting, but by an assessment of his home contents. “We were still strange to the islands,” Stevenson writes; “we were pained by the poor man’s generosity, which he could ill afford; and by a natural enough but quite unpardonable blunder, we refused the pig” (*In the South Seas*, pp. 24–25). The choice of “strange” rather than “strangers” is telling here: rather than using their status as foreigners as excuse, Stevenson registers the strangeness that their behavior manifests when measured by local codes. Alone of his party, he faced up to the reproaches of Tari and the full shame of his mistake:

[Tari] was a poor man; he had no choice of gifts; he had only a pig, he repeated; and I had refused it. I have rarely been more wretched than to see him sitting there, so old, so grey, so poor, so hardly fortunate, of so rueful a countenance, and to appreciate,

¹⁰ Robert Louis Stevenson, *In the South Seas: Being an Account of Experiences and Observations in the Marquesas, Paumotu and Gilbert Islands in the Course of Two Cruises on the Yacht “Casco” (1888) and the Schooner “Equator” (1889)* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1896), p. 24. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

with growing keenness, the affront which I had so innocently dealt him; but it was one of those cases in which speech is vain. (p. 25)

The cadences here begin confidently Dickensian, and close with self-silencing. In Fakarava, Stevenson occupied a villa for a period of weeks without ever determining who had claim to the property, eventually insisting on paying rent to the “catechist and convict” Taniera Mahinui (who performed the act of leasing it to him) rather than to any of a number of suspected owners (p. 172). Again, Stevenson registers estrangement via his inability to fathom the trajectories of reciprocity: “On this I gave up all desire of understanding; . . . I duly paid my rent to Taniera. He was satisfied, and so was I. But what had he to do with it?” (pp. 180–81).

Finally, in Tautira, Stevenson entered into a formal bond friendship, exchanging names and, by entailment, all possessions, with chief Ori a Ori, henceforth known as Rui (that is, Louis).¹¹ Name exchange underwrote gift exchange in Tahiti: a necessary preliminary to “all subsequent exchanges of goods and services.”¹² Fanny Stevenson in turn exchanged names with the mother of the high-ranking Princess Moë, noting: “one part of the name carries with it large estates which I could claim if I were mean enough to take that advantage.” Almost immediately the Stevensons were impelled to call upon the reciprocal obligations of this formal friendship, when delays to the repair of their yacht left them dependent on Ori’s hospitality. Despite the fact that the bond they had just forged ratified exactly such an obligation, Fanny found that “what depressed [her] the most of all, was the fact of Louis having made brothers with him just before this took place.” When Rui made the, in

¹¹ Tahitian pronunciation of British names (and presumably also British mispronunciation of Tahitian names), which often effectively produced whole new identities rather than simple exchanges, was a trope of the literature of contact. Joseph Banks, for example, complained: “As for our names they make so poor a hand of pronouncing them that I fear we shall be obliged to take each of us a new one” (Banks, *The “Endeavour” Journal of Joseph Banks, 1768–1771*, ed. J. C. Beaglehole, 2 vols. [Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1962], I, 265).

¹² Vanessa Smith, *Intimate Strangers: Friendship, Exchange and Pacific Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), p. 100.

Oceanic terms, predictable offer of hospitality, Fanny writes, “Louis dropped his head into his hands and wept, and then we all went up to Rui and shook hands with him and accepted his offer.”¹³ Formal exchange as personal relationship remains understood by Fanny in sentimental terms. As Mauss was to explicate, however, such gifting is an expression of power: hence the affect generated in the British recipient teeters between gratitude and mortification.



In each of these locations Stevenson finds himself exposed by the culture of gift giving to different forms and degrees of shame. He is too rich or too poor or too foreign to know how to receive or how to give. In response he struggles, in his nonfictional writings, to extract from his range of awkward experiences a comprehensive theory of Oceanic gift exchange: to make sense of his disparate humiliations. Stevenson was tirelessly eager—overeager, in his wife’s eyes—to learn about Oceanic practices and lifeways. Genealogies, dances, mourning rituals, legends, food preparation, and navigation all came under his intense scrutiny and were subject to theoretical speculation. But his analysis of gift exchange has a different feel. He remains all at sea, his observations tinged by what read as traces of personal unease or twinges of conscience. These find expression through his novelist’s tendency to underpin his observations with an ethically charged theory of character (hence his Dickensian sentimentalizing of poor Tari). His overall thesis is equally characterological:

... among the greedy and rapacious, a gift is regarded as a sprat to catch a whale. It is the habit to give gifts and to receive returns, and such characters, complying with the custom, will look to it nearly that they do not lose. But for persons of a different stamp the statement must be reversed. The shabby Polynesian is anxious till he has received the return gift; the generous is uneasy until he has made it. The first is disappointed if you have not

¹³ Fanny Stevenson, letter to Sidney Colvin, [7?] December 1888, in *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, VI, 228, 231.

given more than he; the second is miserable if he thinks he has given less than you. (*In the South Seas*, pp. 83–84)

If gifting is here reduced to a litmus test for identifying the heroes and villains of Stevenson's South Seas narrative, then the use of the adjective "shabby," a term that blurs the line between object and behavior, nonetheless discloses the fundamental conflation of person and thing that underpins such an attempt at character-driven synthesis. Stevenson's simplistic binary misses, however, the importance of the thing itself, rather than the participants in the exchange, to Oceanic gifting. We can return to Mauss here. Drawing on information provided by the Maori elder Tamati Ranapiri, Mauss elaborates a distinction between the *taonga* (or treasure), the valued object that is exchanged, and the *hau*, the force or spirit within the gift. "What imposes obligation in the present received and exchanged," writes Mauss,

is the fact that the thing received is not inactive. Even when it has been abandoned by the giver, it still possesses something of him. Through it the giver has a hold over the beneficiary just as, being its owner, through it he has a hold over the thief. This is because the *taonga* is animated by the *hau* of its forest, its native heath and soil. . . . the *hau* follows after anyone possessing the thing. (*The Gift*, p. 15)

The notion of the animated gift enables an understanding of gift transactions that transcends the individual motivations of donor and recipient. "The thing given," Mauss reiterates, "is not inactive. Invested with life, often possessing individuality, it seeks to return to . . . its 'place of origin' or to produce, on behalf of the clan and the native soil from which it sprang, an equivalent to replace it" (*The Gift*, p. 16). Within such systems of exchange, then, return does not simply constitute a mode of accounting, a paying of dues (the returns one receives for expenditure), but rather the self-motivated action of an animated gift (returning to its place of origin).

Was Stevenson thinking of his own recent faux pas of pre-station on those same Oceanic shores when he turned the paper-cutter into an animated gift that absconds from its duty

to return? His acknowledgment of the object's desertion, as I noted earlier, comes only a sentence before he announces the beginnings of his own refusal to return—something that would be understood by the literary networks within which he had moved in Britain as a throwing away of his gifts. The notion of wasted talent and the costs of exchanging metropolitan salons for Oceanic beaches is at the forefront of much of Fanny Stevenson's correspondence as the Stevenson party navigates its way around the Oceanic world. Writing from Honolulu to Sidney Colvin some six weeks after Stevenson reported the desertion of the paper-cutter to Miss Boodle, Fanny complained: "Louis has the most enchanting material that any one ever had in the whole world for his book, and I am afraid he is going to spoil it all."¹⁴ A year later, from Samoa, she described her "desperate engagements with the man of genius," who appeared lost in a world of research on the Pacific islands, reading "Darwin on the Coral Insect" rather than writing what they both hoped would be the definitive "South Sea book." She continued:

We had stopped when cruising . . . at a most curious and interesting Island. We were all going ashore together, but to my surprise Louis refused to start with us, but said he would follow in a second boat. Lloyd [Fanny's son] and I spent several hours wandering over the island, having some odd adventures and seeing many curious things. But no Louis. At last we gave him up and went down to the beach to return to the ship. There was that gentleman on the reef, halfway between the ship and the shore, knee-deep in water, the tropical sun beating on his unprotected head, hammering at the reef with a big hatchet. His face was purple and his eyes injected with blood. 'Louis, you will die,' I cried, 'come away out of the sun quickly'. 'No' he answered, 'I must get specimens from this extraordinary piece of coral. I can't take the whole of it, for it's too heavy, but after two hours' hard work I have got off bits showing the different sorts of formation. I still haven't got all there is to be got, and the work is so hard nobody will help me.'

¹⁴ Fanny Stevenson, letter to Sidney Colvin, 21 May [1889], in *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, VI, 303.

Fanny offers this tableau of nonportability as a way of explaining Stevenson's inability to achieve the lightness of touch required to create a portable text—his South Seas book. She claims that at this point she intervened with “brutality”:

He then showed me the fragments that he wished me to take to the ship; for dinner, fatigue, nothing should get him away from the important discoveries he was making. I looked at his specimens with contempt. ‘Louis,’ I said, ‘how ignorant you are! Why, that is only the common brain coral. Any schoolboy in San Francisco will give you specimens if you really want them.’¹⁵

It is unclear whether or not Fanny is referencing Samuel Taylor Coleridge when she mocks “the Man of Genius.” In a March 1818 lecture to the London Philosophical Society, posthumously published in 1836 as “On Poesy, or Art,” Coleridge suggested that the artist needs first to “*eloign* himself from Nature,” refraining from acts of “painful copying,” in order to produce properly animated work. Deploying what is generally accepted to be the first proto-Freudian use of the word “unconscious,” Coleridge proposed that “there is in Genius itself an unconscious activity—nay, that is *the* Genius in the man of Genius.”¹⁶ Certainly, Fanny's letter offers a portrait of the artist's psyche in denial, acting out a form of writer's block on a resistant block of coral, even as her self-declared “brutality” and “contempt” indicate her own far from unconscious aggression toward the talent she has taken it upon herself to nurture. Stevenson's *objets trouvés*—Charles Darwin, or brain coral—are Fanny's waste; they image the greater despoliation of Stevenson's gifts that, in the latter anecdote, she links to a perceived inability to evaluate materials to hand. The recalcitrant lump, like the abominable shells that affronted the paper-cutter, is in

¹⁵ Fanny Stevenson, letter to Sidney Colvin, January 1890. Yale Univ., Beinecke Library ms 3674.

¹⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Lecture 13,” in “Lectures on the Principles of Judgement, Culture, and European Literature,” in his *Lectures, 1808–1819, on Literature*, ed. R. A. Foakes, 2 vols. vol. 5 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; and Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1987), II, 222.

the wrong company. It should be ranked with common things, treasured by the schoolboy not the “man of genius.”

Fanny’s confident positioning of the foreign object on a sliding scale that encompasses the metropolitan texts and talents with which it is brought into contact exposes in turn the very different level of psychic ambivalence that underwrites Stevenson’s discussion of value in his published writing. Objects surface in Stevenson’s late fictions not as prized mementoes, but as waste, wreckage, resonant empty vessels. In *The Ebb-Tide* (1894), take the “multiplicity and disorder of romantic things” that Robert Herrick finds in a stone house on Attwater’s atoll:

Therein were cables, windlasses and blocks of every size and capacity; cabin windows and ladders; rusty tanks, a companion hutch; a binnacle with its brass mountings and its compass idly pointing, in the confusion and dusk of that shed, to a forgotten pole; ropes, anchors, harpoons, a blubber-dipper of copper, green with years, a steering-wheel, a tool-chest with the vessel’s name upon the top, the *Asia*: a whole curiosity-shop of sea-curios, gross and solid, heavy to lift, ill to break, bound with brass and shod with iron.¹⁷

While this concatenation of hyphen-hinged objects is fodder for Herrick’s “aroused imagination,” his attempt to “find a parable” is dismissed by Attwater, who declares it “junk, . . . only old junk!” (*The Ebb-Tide*, pp. 145, 146). In *The Wrecker* (1892), take the “squalid heap” of “clothes, personal effects, the crockery, the carpet, stale victuals, tins of meat, and in a word, all movables from the main cabin. . . . books, instruments, and clothes” that the crew piles into a “growing midden on the deck” of the *Flying Scud*.¹⁸ From “such trash as might be expected from the turning out of several seamen’s chests” two tell-tale objects, a palette knife and a Winsor and Newton BBB pencil, emerge: artist-tool clues from which Loudon Dodd will eventually salvage a story (*The Wrecker*, pp. 209, 224). Yet in response to such

¹⁷ Robert Louis Stevenson and Lloyd Osbourne, *The Ebb-Tide: A Trio and Quartette* (London: William Heinemann, 1894), p. 145.

¹⁸ Robert Louis Stevenson and Lloyd Osbourne, *The Wrecker* (London: Cassell and Co., 1892), pp. 218, 209. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

bathetic South Seas discovery the skeptical Captain Nares conflates trash and treasure, story and value in ways that complicate Fanny's hierarchy of value, surmising that pencil and palette indicate that an artist has been invited "to come up and illustrate this dime novel," and that "the *Flying Scud* is rubbish" (pp. 224, 225). Stevenson repeatedly figures arguments between men as hinged on questions of object value that are understood to be, equally, questions of figurative worth. Does the house of flotsam offer a bounty of metaphor, or the hollow ring of false metal? Can narrative only emerge through demolition? What do the "squalid heap" of the pirate and the artifacts of the domestic "midden" share in terms of creative possibility to those prepared to repurpose, recycle, and reevaluate? Do gifts always depend on the spirit in which they are received? Is fiction just an assemblage of junk?

In a 2014 essay that looks to *The Ebb-Tide*, among other works, for its examples, Cannon Schmitt has focused on the ways in which objects underpin *Bildung* across Stevenson's oeuvre. Schmitt proposes that technical mastery—"the learning and deployment of technical knowledge sedimented in a specialist lexicon"—becomes the index of maturation, not just for Stevenson's heroes, but in implicit partnership with an author who must acquire and display the language requisite to describe such development.¹⁹ In terms that echo Fanny's linking of a relationship to objects to a sense of authorial reputation, Schmitt suggests:

[Stevenson's] devotion to the literal and technical—the insistence on including maps in novels, on giving the precise coordinates in longitude and latitude for the location of imaginary islands, on forcing readers to work through maritime terminology and Scots dialect unaided by notes or glossaries—is undoubtedly part of what has kept Stevenson from being granted the stature of a great Victorian novelist. ("Technical Maturity in Robert Louis Stevenson," p. 60)

¹⁹ Cannon Schmitt, "Technical Maturity in Robert Louis Stevenson," *Representations*, 125 (2014), 56.

Schmitt argues that texts such as *The Ebb-Tide* try to reverse this logic by making “a bid to yoke growing up to the technical” (“Technical Maturity in Robert Louis Stevenson,” p. 70). To recall, however, Fanny’s crushing dismissal of Stevenson’s technical examination of brain coral as “schoolboy” work is to register that the Oceanic world poses (culturally) specific problems for the importation of European forms such as the *bildungsroman*. In encountering Oceanic objects, or European objects defamiliarized within Oceanic settings, Stevenson is forced to reconfigure “technical maturation” as cross-cultural competence rather than boy’s-own badge attainment. Moreover, he is brought to acknowledge models of character-formation that incorporate an Oceanic ethics of exchange, and to question authorship’s implication within such a code of practice.

In contrast to the steady progress of object-oriented maturation and mastery that Schmitt charts in those works he categorizes as Stevensonian *bildungsromane*, the examples from Stevenson’s South Seas letters and travel account that I have cited so far register self-doubt—a sense of being shamed or exposed by encounters with objects. Stevenson repeatedly, always differently, ultimately systematically misses how to behave. He fails quite to measure up to the moral challenges of gift exchange. Rather than simply declaring, as so many Victorian travelers axiomatically do, that his home values have been intellectually challenged by foreign experiences, Stevenson makes ethically palpable a sense of being wrong-footed and empty-handed: lacking in an ontological sense. His recursion to lost, undervalued, binding, or misattributed gifts in these non-fictional texts offers an alternative model for considering his South Seas fiction, challenging some of the more automatic ways we have come to think of Victorians at the periphery of Empire. Stevenson’s “Pacific” oeuvre tends most often to have been discussed as a prescient exposé of colonial relations, with the exchanges and trading schemes it features so prominently read as critical interrogations of imperial venture capitalism.²⁰

²⁰ See for example Kevin McLaughlin, “The Financial Imp: Ethics and Finance in Nineteenth-Century Fiction,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 29 (1996), 165–83; Katherine

But such interpretations cannot fully account for the bad faith and bad conscience that perplex these late narratives, and that find uncomfortable echoes in anecdotes from the scene of writing. In these complex fictions, Stevenson works through those feelings of social anxiety that manifested in his Oceanic encounters, as he tried to comprehend animated gifts in reciprocal motion. They reflect the politics of contact back to British audiences not as parable of capitalism, but via a system of gift exchange from whose ethics they are fundamentally and damnably exempt.



In the remainder of this essay I first return to *The Wrecker* and then turn to “The Bottle Imp” (1891)—texts that have been understood to represent two poles in Stevenson’s Oceanic oeuvre. *The Wrecker*, cowritten with Stevenson’s stepson Lloyd Osbourne, has been viewed as a South Seas fiction only in name, in which, to quote a recent essay, “the Pacific setting is used to foreground trade and speculation among Americans and Europeans” (Steer, “Romances of Uneven Development,” p. 348). “The Bottle Imp” has been figured by contrast as a genuine Oceanic artifact; the closest thing Stevenson produced to a wholly South Seas tale. (So, junk and a parable; common brain coral and extraordinary specimen.) I argue that these texts are less dissimilar than critics have assumed, and that both are underpinned by uneasiness about where gifts come from, what animates them, and the ethics of proper reciprocation.

The Wrecker is narrated by Loudon Dodd, an American who dreams of a career as an artist. Having tried business college in his Midwest hometown of Muskegon, he negotiates the support

Bailey Linehan, “Taking Up with Kanakas: Stevenson’s Complex Social Criticism in ‘The Beach of Falesá,’” *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920*, 33 (1990) 407–22; Ann C. Colley, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Colonial Imagination* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); Timothy S. Hayes, “Colonialism in R. L. Stevenson’s South Seas Fiction: ‘Child’s Play’ in the Pacific,” *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920*, 52 (2009) 160–81; and Philip Steer, “Romances of Uneven Development: Spatiality, Trade, and Form in Robert Louis Stevenson’s Pacific Novels,” *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 43 (2015), 343–56.

of his millionaire father to study sculpture in Paris. His father turns bankrupt and dies while Dodd is abroad, and in reduced circumstances Dodd accepts an offer of support from his friend Jim Pinkerton. Eventually Dodd acknowledges his own lack of genius and joins his friend in San Francisco, where they become partners in a variety of shonky schemes: public lecturing, brandy retailing, advertising, chartering fishing boats, refurbishing condemned vessels, event-managing weekend picnics, and investing in agricultural shares. Their biggest gamble is the purchase of a wreck, the *Flying Scud*, which has been abandoned by its crew on the equatorial guano island of Midway, and which they suspect contains a stash of opium. Dodd and a cobbled-together crew, captained by Nares, head to Midway to break up the wreck; however, no opium, nor anything else, is discovered to make sense of its cost. Dodd returns to San Francisco to find Pinkerton a bankrupt, but Dodd conveniently comes into a small inheritance, which enables the pair to make fresh starts. In Dodd's case this involves tracking down one Norris Carthew, whom he suspects of holding the key to the *Flying Scud* mystery. He finds Carthew living among the Barbizon artist community, and is at last gifted the story of the wreck. Carthew, the shiftless son of an aristocrat living as a remittance man in Sydney, had risked a trading venture in the South Seas. His vessel, the *Currency Lass*, became stranded on Midway after having made an exceptional profit on their cargo. The *Flying Scud* had come to their aid, but its scurrilous captain tried to hustle them out of their profits in exchange for rescue. The crew of the *Currency Lass* massacred the ship's entire company and then returned to San Francisco masquerading as the *Flying Scud*'s crew. Dodd forms a bond with Carthew, and eventually becomes his partner in a venture that is all circulation and no profit: cruising the South Sea islands in a yacht with a trade cargo that ostentatiously fails to pay.

The Wrecker's devolving rather than cumulative plot remains, as this attempt to summarize it attests, irreducibly confusing, and the eventual gory, albeit retrospected, denouement seems to lack any ethical rationale. Yet the relentless mirroring between the three main characters—Dodd, Pinkerton, and Carthew—means that the narrative, so peripatetically involved

that it apparently lacks structure, is not without recognizable form; it is simply that form does not appear to underpin any “parable,” to use Attwater’s term again. The transfers of loyalty that motivate the action do not add up as stories of business venture or treasure hunt, with associated expectations of accumulation or consolidation. The novel’s weightings seem all wrong: no fortune lies at its center, and there is no clear hierarchy of “major” and “minor” to its characterization. *The Wrecker* makes sense neither as plot nor as feeling. Moreover, it seems to mock its readership by alerting us to these very shortcomings. Dodd declares himself “indignant . . . at any implication of art and ethics” (*The Wrecker*, p. 297). Captain Nares, viewing the pile of discarded objects in the cabin of the *Flying Scud*, preempts critical judgment when he opines, “there’s no sense to it, and no use in it, and no story to it—it’s a beastly dream” (p. 224).

The Wrecker has “no use” as a tale of trade, venture capital, or treasure hunt, because things do not stand for other things in its world—they become rubbish each time we try to recycle them as allegory. But if anything underpins this narrative of morphing roles, doubled and redoubled masculinity, and vanishing and rematerializing profits, and its concomitant aesthetic of looming and receding character, it is an ethics of reciprocal obligation. It seems appropriate when reading this novel, written in Butaritari and Abemama only a few months after the episodes of humiliated gifting and poorly handled debt that surfaced in the Stevensons’ letters, to notice that gifting provides the ethical compass and plot map that *The Wrecker* otherwise seems to lack. Over the course of the narrative, profits invariably dissolve, strong affects are revealed in their wake, and character is defined by the protagonists’ capacity to give and receive. Legacies are shared; gifts circulate and create new energies and allegiances. Dodd’s shame and immaturity in the early parts of the novel, where his financial dependency undermines his artistic ambition, proceed from an incapacity to give and an inability to accept. He dwells at length on the ambivalent sentiments that attach to the acceptance of gifts: “It took me a long time, and it had cost us both much grateful and painful emotion, before I had finally managed to

refuse his offer”; “I was leaving all I cared for, and returning to all that I detested, the slave of debt and gratitude” (*The Wrecker*, pp. 65, 80). The terms “generous” and “shabby” are repeated throughout the novel to characterize Dodd’s growing understanding of the intricate indebtedness that constitutes sociability and the impoverishment of self-serving accumulation (equated with singular art versus communal experience). “Generous” and “shabby” were of course the two adjectives by which Stevenson had distinguished Polynesians in relation to the politics of gift exchange only weeks before he began writing *The Wrecker*.

While Dodd makes much of the muscle growth he experiences breaking up the *Flying Scud’s* timbers on Midway as the key to his shift from dependent artist to active man, readerly sympathy rises and falls depending on the degree to which he grasps how to receive and to give: to recognize his debts to Pinkerton, and to try to make commensurate or greater returns. And part of this involves giving up his artistic “gifts” (whose mediocrity is acknowledged) for the labor of breaking up recalcitrant things, just as Fanny feared Stevenson might.²¹ Having learned to accept Pinkerton’s generosity, Dodd takes

²¹ The question of artistic gifts and their relationship to indebtedness resonates into the publication and critical reception of Stevenson’s coauthored works. Critics consistently refer to Lloyd Osbourne’s contributions to *The Wrecker* and *The Ebb-Tide* as nominal, reinforcing a long-standing image of Stevenson’s adoptive family as parasitic on his gifts (see for example Edwin M. Eigner, *Robert Louis Stevenson and Romantic Tradition* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1966] pp. 98–99, n. 34). Lloyd’s account of the writing process, however, figures the writing of the two books as properly reciprocal, and the manuscripts as gifts in motion; almost self-animated in their development. Of *The Wrecker*, Lloyd writes: Stevenson “would review my work, read such of it as he had rewritten, and brightly discuss the chapter to come” (Lloyd Osbourne, *An Intimate Portrait of R.L.S.* [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1924], p. 108). This immediacy of back and forth was substituted, with the writing of *The Ebb-Tide*, by a more drawn-out process of exchange. Lloyd wrote the first section in Honolulu at around the same time Stevenson was writing to Adelaide Boodle, receiving much praise from his stepfather. With this encouragement Lloyd drafted the rest of the work, which was to be the beginning of a longer novel, but his gifts at this stage failed to gratify: “Then the commendation ceased; try as I would I could not please R L S” (*An Intimate Portrait of R.L.S.*, p. 98). The manuscript was laid aside, and it was not until years later that it was appreciated by a visitor, taken up again, and rewritten by Stevenson. When the novel received poor reviews, however, Stevenson contemplated erasing Lloyd’s name from the title page; nonetheless Lloyd continued to recall this collaboration as a founding moment for himself as author, during which he first gained a sense of his own gifts:

over the reins of the story when his legacy allows him to reciprocate with interest. His friendship with Carthew, in turn, is sealed with the cancellation of a debt, and sustained with the gifting of a subsistence. The bonds that gifts create in the novel are much more than transactional. Exchange, debt, and gratitude cement and even precede relationships. Dodd says of Carthew, before they have met in the flesh, "I rather think he is my long-lost brother" (*The Wrecker*, p. 327). Fanny, we might recall, referred to the bond friendship that initiated all gift exchange in Tahiti, and that lead Stevenson to drop his head in his hands in shamed gratitude, as "making brothers."

If the principle of reciprocation can be understood reflexively in this way, as a model for salvaging a wreck (giving it sense, use, and story), in "The Bottle Imp" tale and teller are also complicated. The *hau* of the object, eager to elicit returns or to itself return, motivates not only the plot but, I shall argue, the equally complicated gift-narrative of the text's production. Keawe, a Hawaiian sailor, is strolling about San Francisco when he notices a man looking despondently from the window of a luxurious mansion. The man invites Keawe into his home and shows him the bottle that is the source of his enviable fortune. An imp dwells within it, which will grant all its owner's wishes. If the owner dies with the bottle in his or her possession, however, the owner is damned. It can be sold, but only for less than its purchasing price; otherwise, it will magically return to the seller. Keawe is tricked into buying the bottle, initiating a series of exchanges in which affective relationships are tested against this logic of diminishing returns.

Although some critics have insisted on its primarily capitalist subtext, "The Bottle Imp" is a tale of what modern Oceania has made of the spirit of the gift.²² The bottle is clearly an

"After it he regarded me seriously as a fellow craftsman; sought my judgment and often took it" (*An Intimate Portrait of R.L.S.*, p. 99).

²² McLaughlin, for instance, views "The Bottle Imp" as an economic fable, paying attention to the speculative terms of the contract the bottle enshrines (the bottle must be exploited and then passed on before time runs out, and the owner must consider carefully both the appropriate moment and the appropriate price for its resale in order to achieve its maximum value and his or her own minimum loss). McLaughlin suggests that the bottle is, in Aristotelian terms, "related to money," since like money it serves as guarantee of a thing that has not itself been exchanged ("The Financial Imp," p. 174). He further

animate object, impelled by a will to return (“the *hau* follows after anyone possessing the thing,” as Tamati Ranapiri told Mauss). However, the bottle’s movement within the expansive realm of a later-nineteenth-century global exchange that sees Hawaiian sailors from Kona ship to San Francisco, or Scottish writers transported via San Francisco to Tautira, has become motivated by a paradoxically debased principle of incremental loss. It is the means by which the recipient can accumulate status, yet the status does not reside in the possession of the object itself, but in forms of prestige that can be secured only by its continued circulation (indeed, to hold onto the bottle is to place one’s status fundamentally at risk). Characters in the story are left richer not by holding onto the gift, but by relinquishing it—as Mauss would also find. But Stevenson’s own novelistic conception of prestation again ensures that the bottle turns out to be primarily a touchstone of character. Whereas it is most often used for the quick accumulation of showy wealth and knick-knacks, Keawe and the bride he wins, Kokua, enter into a sequence of secret purchasings aimed at ensuring the endurance of their love. These transactions are made at a stage when the bottle has become so devalued that each believes he or she accepts damnation to save the other: this is redemptive gifting.

The idea that “The Bottle Imp” was either derived from Oceanic folklore or first created for an Oceanic audience has been essential to its popular and critical reception. In a prefatory note, Stevenson wrote: “the fact that the tale has been designed and written for a Polynesian audience may lend it

proposes that the choice of the term “imp” for the creature inside the bottle reinforces its association with money: “imp” being secondarily defined as something designed to increase or restore powers of flight. According to McLaughlin, the “use of the word ‘imp’ to describe an operation designed to increase powers of flight intersects precisely with Stevenson’s financial understanding of ‘aspiration’ and ‘adventure.’ For, it is in this sense that the term ‘to imp’ became associated in English with what many saw as the evil of financial credit and in particular paper money” (“The Financial Imp,” p. 175). Describing the hermeneutic maneuvers involved in linking this particular definition with Stevenson’s story as a precise intersection obfuscates the level of hyperinterpretation required to translate into a purely financial allegory a story that, I argue, speaks primarily to Oceanic economies of gift exchange.

some extraneous interest nearer home.”²³ And in an August 1893 letter to Arthur Conan Doyle, Stevenson elaborated on the response his Samoan audience gave to the fiction:

You might perhaps think that, were you to come to Samoa, you might be introduced as the Author of ‘The Engineer’s Thumb’. Disabuse yourself. They do not know what it is to make up a story. ‘The Engineer’s Thumb’ (God forgive me) was narrated as a piece of actual and factual history. Nay, and more, I who write to you have had the indiscretion to perpetrate a trifling piece of fiction entitled ‘The Bottle Imp’. Parties who come up to visit my unpretentious mansion, after having admired the ceilings by Vanderputty and the tapestry by Gobbling, manifest towards the end a certain uneasiness which proves them to be fellows of an infinite delicacy. They may be seen to shrug a brown shoulder, to roll up a speaking eye, and at last the secret bursts from them: ‘Where is the bottle?’²⁴

If Stevenson’s story has generated Samoan misapprehension about the facticity of the bottle, then the myth of the tale’s Oceanic provenance reveals a not entirely dissimilar literalism. It is well known that “The Bottle Imp” was serially published in Samoan, as “O le Fagu Aitu,” in the missionary journal *O le Sulu Samoa* of May–December 1891. The Samoan translation of the tale, made by Stevenson under the guidance of the missionary Arthur Claxton, is often mistaken for its first appearance, though in fact it had been serialized in both the *New York Herald* and *Black and White* some weeks prior to this. Copies of the relevant issues of *O le Sulu Samoa* subsequently acquired a greater value than the original English newsprint, possibly because the flimsiness of the paper on which they were published made them harder to preserve.²⁵ “O le Fagu Aitu” is generally understood to have been the source of Stevenson’s

²³ Robert Louis Stevenson, “The Bottle Imp,” in his *Island Nights’ Entertainments* (London: Cassell and Co., 1893), p. 150. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

²⁴ Robert Louis Stevenson, letter to Arthur Conan Doyle, 23 August 1893, in *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, VIII, 155.

²⁵ See Albert Lee, “‘Black and White’ and ‘O Le Sulu Samoa,’” *Black and White*, 6 February, 1897, p. 175.

authorial reputation among the Samoans, and the reason he was given by them the name “Tusitala”—teller of tales.

In the story’s appearance in *Black and White*, Stevenson self-deprecatingly credits the source of his story to “a piece once rendered popular by the redoubtable B. Smith.”²⁶ However, in a 1910 article in *Modern Language Notes*, Joseph Beach traced the original plot back to a romance drama by Richard John Smith, nicknamed “Obi,” and then further to an 1823 volume entitled *Popular Tales and Romances of the Northern Nations*, which features the tale of “Das Galgenmännlein” by the Baron de Lamotte-Fouqué.²⁷ While Beach stresses that Stevenson shaped the tale in his “inimitable” style (“The Sources of Stevenson’s *Bottle Imp*,” p. 17), a more aggressive editorial in the *New York Sun* a few years later questioned the originality of the “Bottle Imp” narrative. The writer in the *Sun* claimed that Stevenson’s effective theft of the plot raised issues regarding “the canons of artistic conscience, the ethics of appropriation and adaptation, and the equities of ownership.”²⁸ The *Sun* correspondent is concerned to reclaim the story from what is here understood to be its Oceanic adaptation to its Northern origin, and to find out to whom the bottle is owed.

While Stevenson himself did not actively encourage misapprehensions regarding the provenance of the tale, his writing works hard to replicate Oceanic narrative technique. His sentences are constructed with the aggregative, syntactically inverted format of oral discourse. Similes invoke an Oceanic frame of reference: “Keawe could see him as you see a fish in a pool upon the reef” (“The Bottle Imp,” p. 152). In his letter to Conan Doyle, Stevenson figured his Samoan audience as absolutely literalist, unable to distinguish between fantasy and history. Yet a literalist reader is, in fact, constructed by the tale. The narrator of “The Bottle Imp” repeatedly alludes to the

²⁶ See Robert Louis Stevenson, “The Bottle Imp,” *Black and White*, 28 March 1891, p. 240. The note does not appear in the story’s first appearance in the *New York Herald*, 8 February 1891, p. 13. The source is corrected to “O. Smith” in the 1893 edition of *Island Nights’ Entertainments* (p. 150).

²⁷ See Joseph Warren Beach, “The Sources of Stevenson’s *Bottle Imp*,” *Modern Language Notes*, 25 (1910), 12–13.

²⁸ [Anon.], “The Story of the Bottle Imp,” *New York Sun*, 28 June 1914, p. 8. See also [Anon.], “Stevenson’s Borrowed Plot,” *The Literary Digest*, 49 (1914), 105–6.

nonfictional status of characters and events within the tale. The name Keawe, we are told, is a pseudonym: “There was a man of the Island of Hawaii, whom I shall call Keawe; for the truth is, he still lives, and his name must be kept secret” (“The Bottle Imp,” p. 151). As the story progresses, the narrator continually avoids mentioning the names of recipients of the bottle: “(I must not tell his name)”; “the name of a man, which, again, I had better not repeat” (pp. 187, 188). It appears that all those who touch the fictive object risk real-world incrimination. This is a cast of living people, disguised as characters, who must be protected from the imputations of fiction. Stevenson is clearly refashioning the *Märchen*—his narrative found-object—for Samoan purposes. Is this in order to palm something off, as the New York *Sun* correspondent suspects—to profit from the labor of others? Or is it to keep a gift of a story in circulation—to pass it on to new recipients, under his adopted name of Tusitala?

Stevenson’s description of his “unpretentious mansion” (Vailima), with its “ceilings by Vanderputty and the tapestry by Gobbling,” alludes to William Makepeace Thackeray’s *The Book of Snobs* (1848). A proto-ethnography of English pretension (“*Snobs are to be studied like other objects of Natural Science*”) narrated by a “Snobographer,” Thackeray’s book collected a series of popular *Punch* character-sketches that he had published over the preceding two years.²⁹ In one, the Snobographer is shown the “Great All” of a large country estate by its housekeeper. “The ceiling,” she announces, “by CALIMANCO, represents Painting, Harchitecture and Music, (the naked female figure with the barrel horgan) introducing GEORGE, fust LORD CARABAS, to the Temple of the Muses. The winder ornaments is by VANDERPUTTY” (*The Book of Snobs*, p. 135). In *The Book of Snobs*, class inflections turn “showing” into “showing up”: the grotesque “temple” becomes equated in the Snobographer’s impressions with the presumption of the “tower of Babel” (*The Book of Snobs*, p. 136). Stevenson also tries, Babel-like, to flatten culturally differentiated acuity with this

²⁹ William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Book of Snobs*, ed. John Sutherland (St. Lucia: Univ. of Queensland Press, 1978), pp. 3, 134.

anecdote. Although he deploys the allusion to Thackeray to disown an impression of grandeur, playfully assuming the role of showman of his estate, he remains exposed by his encounter with the Samoan visitor. His self-deprecating humor cannot fully gloss over the pertinence of the question, “Where is the bottle?” Posed with “infinite delicacy,” not pressing too hard on a writer “strange to the islands” and awkward in the language of prestation, the recursively sensitive Samoan query nonetheless implies that the wealth of foreign objects that remains in Stevenson’s possession, that does not circulate further within a system of reciprocation, can only be ill-gotten.

We have seen that Stevenson was alert to the opportunities for shame inherent in the mishandling of gifts: in inadequate recompense or creative squandering. In his clubbish letter to Conan Doyle, however, he briefly neglects reciprocal obligation. British allegiances trump local relationship as Stevenson sketches a stereotype of native incomprehension in order to highlight his own capacity not to recycle a *Märchen*, but to “make up a story.” Yet Stevenson’s own gift-attuned character taxonomies come back to bite him here. “Infinite delicacy” bespeaks neither Samoan ignorance of literary form nor magical thinking, but rather a discreet sensitivity to the affective etiquette that informs cross-cultural exchanges, material and literary, and a penetrating awareness of their precarious complication.

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ABSTRACT

Vanessa Smith, “Wasted Gifts: Robert Louis Stevenson in Oceania” (pp. 527–551)

This essay takes some letters from Robert Louis Stevenson’s travels in the South Seas as a starting point to rethink both Stevenson’s South Seas oeuvre and the Victorian cross-cultural encounter. Reengaging with Marcel Mauss’s classic theorization of gift exchange, the essay suggests that Stevenson’s encounters with Oceanic systems of exchange were experienced in terms not of cultural dominance, but of ontological lack. The practices of gifting to which Stevenson found himself subject in the Marquesas, Tuamotus, and Tahiti rendered both British etiquette and largesse ineffectual. The essay relates Stevenson’s growing sense of the complexities of Oceanic gifting to the tendency of his metropolitan readers to understand his South Seas “exile” as a waste

of his own gifts. Focusing in particular on *The Wrecker* (1892) and “The Bottle Imp” (1891), it proposes that Stevenson deployed his expanded understanding of what Oceanic gifting entailed to replenish his fiction in both structural and figurative terms, even as he was forced to acknowledge those failures of reciprocity that continued to inform its production.

Keywords: Robert Louis Stevenson; gift exchange; Marcel Mauss; Marquesas; Tahiti