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The Strange Case of *The Beach of Falesá* in Soviet Russia

Ideas are more powerful than guns.

Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin

Works of Robert Louis Stevenson have hardly been a subject for serious critical discussions until very recently. Frank Swinnerton's study on Stevenson which appeared in 1914 though having acknowledged the author's talent, labelled him »a writer of the second class« (Swinnerton 1914, 207) and claimed that »it is no longer possible for a serious critic to place him among the great writers, because in no department of letters – except the boy's book and the short-story – has he written work of first-class importance« (ibid.). Nonetheless Stevenson has always been a popular writer and »continued to have his followers and among them were mature and intelligent readers« (Maixner 1995, 1).

Soviet literary critics have always considered »bourgeois« writers of the capitalist »rotten« West to be a big menace to an average Soviet reader. The approach of the Soviet censorship to the so-called »non-Soviet writers« was completely based on the concern of the political nature of the state; the aesthetic aspect of the creations was not the sole criterion, if taken into account at all.¹ The frames of socialist realism, which deals with working-class realities, were too narrow to appraise the merits of many foreign writers, including the pre-revolutionary ones. In his article *Foreign Authors and Soviet Readers* Maurice Friedberg explains and describes the principles of classification in Soviet criticism and presents some data on the influence of the Soviet censorship on the literary life behind the Iron Curtain.

In Stalin's Russia Robert Louis Stevenson suffered the same fate as many writers whose ideas and opinions could be a threat to the basis of this »perfect« socialist society with a brilliantly developed censorship net. It is reasonable to ask why and how Stevenson would have subverted the ideals of the Communist Regime and presented a menace to the existing government. As mentioned before, socialist realism, the dominant style in official Soviet Literature and art from 1934 onwards was characterized by its heroic depiction of labour and glorification of the ruling Communist Party. It required from writers and artists a truthful portrayal of realities in their revolutionary development and a commitment to the ideological remoulding of the people in the spirit of socialism. The writer was defined as the »engineer of the human soul, the expression is often attributed to Stalin himself, though in fact it was originally coined by Yury Olesha, a Russian novelist whose works, in spite of the rigid censorship, were imbued with deep ambiguity; and ironically one of the three authors who influenced his whole oeuvre was none other than Robert Louis Stevenson. The optimism of socialist realism was habitually contrasted with what Andrey Zhdanov – Stalin's henchman and one of the dictator's closest associates – called »the riot of mysticism, religious mania and pornography« (Zhdanov 1934) that supposedly characterized the decaying

1 For a general survey on literary politics in Soviet Russia cf. Ermolaev 1997.

culture of Western capitalism. At the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers Zhdanov gave an influential speech on socialist realism, defining its method and saying that »...the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic portrayal should be combined with the ideological remolding and education of the toiling people in the spirit of socialism.« (Ibid.) Another aspect touched upon by Zhdanov was »a rupture with romanticism of the old type, which depicted a non-existent life and non-existent heroes, leading the reader away from the antagonisms and oppression of real life into a world of the impossible, into a world of utopian dreams.« (Ibid.) Therefore any literature, including foreign ones, which could become a medium of escape from the Soviet reality was fiercely attacked and pursued by censorship. In the postwar years the Soviets attempted to satisfy the demand for adventure novels by creating »reliable« Communist-spirited works of domestic production; thus the works of Stevenson were ones which could have disturbed this »master« plan. It is interesting to mention in this connection that cases of »editorial changes« in Soviet censorship were aimed at the »improvement« of the plot so it could become at least digestible for a Soviet citizen. In the Soviet film *Treasure Island* (1937) based on the novel by Robert Louis Stevenson, the boy hero Jim turns into a girl named Jenny to make it possible for Dr. Livsey to fall in love with her and to show this romantic story against the background of the Irish Rebellion which, if one refers to the novel, was not even mentioned by the author. A study of such numerous examples gives a real picture of the extent to which Soviet citizens were exposed over those years to Western literature and as M. Friedberg points out »Soviet book publishers and literary critics are obsessed with political considerations, real and sometimes far-fetched, to a degree unknown in the West« (Friedberg 1977, 129).

The first publication of *The Beach of Falesá* (1892) in Russia dates back to 1896. It was printed in *Nablyudatel* (Observer), a monthly magazine, published since 1882 in St. Petersburg without prior censorship, under the title Берег Фалезы. The next one titled Берег Фалеза was issued in the collected works of Robert Louis Stevenson in 4 volumes published in St. Petersburg in 1901 in the translation of A. Enkel. In 1904 it appears in miscellany translated by M. Dubrovina. In 1913–1914 in St. Petersburg in *The Complete Collection of Novels, Tales and Stories* in 20 issues or 12 volumes it is published as Берег Фалеза translated by A. Enkel. In 1927 in a series *Biblioteka Molodezhi* (*The library of youth*) printed by Gosizdat in Moscow and Leningrad (former St. Petersburg) *The Beach of Falesá* is represented among some other stories. After this publication it took this novel 40 years to appear again before the eyes of a Soviet reader. In 1967 the Moscow publishing house *Pravda* issued the collected works of Stevenson in five volumes where *The Beach of Falesá* was included along with his other works already famous in Russia due to previous publications. Unfortunately, this 40-year »oblivion« affected not just *The Beach of Falesá*, but all of the works of Robert Louis Stevenson in general. Only very few editions were issued during the period 1927–1967 (see appendix).

To illustrate the obsession of Soviet book publishers and censors with political considerations, which sometimes were real and sometimes preposterous, I refer to the *The Beach of Falesá*, the idea of which Stevenson remarked »shot through me like a bullet in one of my moments of awe«. He proudly named it »the first realistic South Sea story; I mean with real South Sea character and details of life. Everybody else who has tried, that I have seen, got carried away by the romance, and ended in a kind of

sugar candy sham epic, and the whole effect was lost—there was no etching, no human grin, consequently no conviction«. (Stevenson 1995 vol. 7, 129) It was actually the first story in which Stevenson turned away from romance to a realism, which exposed the ugliness inherent in the colonial enterprise (cf. Calder 1979, 7–23). In this narrative Stevenson questions the very fact of the moral supremacy of the whites over kanakas and impugns the effectiveness of converting them to Christianity. Moreover, Stevenson undermines the idea that European expansion in the South Pacific brings progress to this land.

Here we come up to the point of contradiction in terms of the ideological views of the novel and those of the Soviet censorship. Though one should be very careful with reaching conclusions about the social views conveyed in *The Beach of Falesá*, and there are many opinions on the story's social message, one of them is »the exposure of white racism« (Menikoff 1984, 57) and imperialism. The logical question, why this country, which is declaring itself a bulwark against the world's imperialism, would disapprove of such novel, reasonably appears. And the censoring of it could seem a complete non sequitur. Which »ideas« could make this novel not suitable for an average Soviet reader in the eyes of the Soviet censorship? The issue is that almost any Soviet reader, who was able to analyse the text, could parallel the situation described in *The Beach of Falesá* to the one existing in his native country. These ideas, which are »more powerful than guns«, were the biggest concern of the Soviet censorship machine. The very word »imperialism«, though having a very negative connotation in Soviet Russia, was blossoming there, yet the country denied its existence. The struggle of the Soviet Union against imperialism was one of the stated principles of government policy as long as the imperialists the regime was against were from the capitalist world. In fact the policy of Stalin was far from being an anti-imperialistic one and especially the new postwar Stalinist imperialist expansionism contradicts the statement of this Georgian romantic, who turned into an imperialist, saying that »We don't want an inch of anyone else's territory but let the capitalists be sure to keep their noses out of ours.«

As Soviet people have always been very good at reading between the lines, reading *The Beach of Falesá* could evoke numerous allegories, unacceptable for the existing regime. Case controls the villagers, having convinced the natives he possesses the devil's power, and having imposed the worship of made-up idols on kanakas. The picture of a supreme manipulator coveting power, profit and pleasure, who even presents a favourable first impression on Wiltshire as he »[...]would have passed muster in a city. [...] it was clear he came of a good family and was splendidly educated« (Stevenson 1984, 117). A recognizable Stalin-like figure of the »Great Leader«, »Father of the Country«, »the Great and Wise Teacher« is peeping out of this character, which is ultimately demystified and eliminated by Wiltshire, who becomes the only one trader on the island. He discovers the inhuman music playing around the shrine has been produced by an Aeolian harp made out of a candle-box and banjo-strings from Case's store. The »idols« turn to be the forged »island curiosities« which Case sells to travellers, arrayed in the bush, they »served the man a double purpose: first of all, to season his curiosities, and then to frighten those that came to visit him« (Stevenson 1984, 181). Wiltshire having murdered Case actually attains the dream of the latter to get the unbounded power. »So there was I left alone in my glory at Falesá« (Stevenson 1984, 185), he says proudly. Stevenson's choice to give a realistic explanation for Case's

power has caused some hostile critical comments. Edwin Eigner frowns on the way the author »finally converted his real and terrible wizard into a cheap stage magician.« (Eigner 1966, 35) Robert Kiely echoes Eigner's words saying that Stevenson evaded the question of evil offering the readers a substitute for one, which is »more appropriate to a boy's adventure story than a work of fiction for adults.« (Kiely 1964, 175) Albert Guerard is of the same opinion as Eigner and Kiely claiming Stevenson is cheating his readers and his own vision by presenting and then retracting an image of evil as diabolic atavism (cf. Guerard 1958, 43). Patrick Brantlinger accuses Stevenson of some sort of »degradation in his treatment of the supernatural« and speaks about »a realistic, parodic inversion of imperial Gothic.« (Brantlinger 1985, 248-249) But they seem to have overlooked the real evil Case perpetrates, which is the murder of at least two of his rivals at Falesá, including the burial alive of the paralytic, Underhill. To reveal Case's atavistic behaviour Stevenson has no need to employ the additional elements of diabolism or supernaturalism, it is shown in a realistic context of trade and village politics quite obviously.

Assuming that Soviet censorship had accepted the idea of the novel as the one aimed at the struggle against the capitalist imperialism, *The Beach of Falesá* would have again contradicted the postulate of socialist realism. John Wiltshire, who is supposed to be the utterly evil and callous representative of the »rotten Western capitalist society«, turns to have a human face and to be an ambivalent character. A British trader who comes to The South Sea Island of Falesá to exploit the natives »undergoes a moral conversion« (Buckton 2000, 384) and is far away from being a monosemous impersonal sample of the capitalist evil, which would be the way the Soviet censorship would want him to come into sight of Soviet readers. Wiltshire »makes an unlikely but ultimately likable hero« (Meckier 1986, 489) and »had surely, under his beastly ignorant ways, right noble qualities« (Stevenson 1995, vol. 7, 282), Stevenson writes to his friend Sidney Colvin. Though the final phrase about his half-caste children »I can't reconcile my mind to their taking up with kanakas, and I'd like to know where I'm to find them whites?« (Stevenson 1984, 186) shows that Wiltshire, despite the fact that his emotions have been already freed from racial ideology, however, is still ensnared in it, it would not be enough for Soviet censors to accept this novel as a proper reading for a Soviet reader to reveal the malicious essence of imperialism.

Another detail, which could also be a big obstacle for this novel to reaching its readers in Stalin's Russia, is spelled out by Stevenson himself for Colvin: »will you please to observe that almost all that is ugly is in the whites?« (Stevenson 1995, vol. 7, 282) This comment contradicts some critics' opinions as, for instance, R. Kiely's one, who finds Stevenson basically uncritical of Wiltshire's racist views (cf. Kiely 1964, 170-171). It rather fits with the reading of Brantlinger and Menikoff since they see implicit critique of white racism in the novel. Darren Jackson points out that »the savages in the story turn out to be the white traders« and also makes a conclusion: »Perceiving people as dominated was perhaps a necessary condition to dominate them, and that is precisely how Stevenson and his readers see the Samoans.« (Jackson 2000, 81) The existing government could not accept the spread of such 'ideas' and moreover, on the one hand proclaiming unsparing war against racial discrimination and fighting for the equal rights for everybody, on the other hand, the above-mentioned government, as known from the course of history, had some discrepancies between its words and deeds.

The novel described by Stevenson himself with illusive simplicity as »a trader telling his own adventure in an island« (Stevenson 1995, vol. 7, 161) could have provided food for thought and cause some ›ideas‹ undesirable for the Soviet state and was therefore strictly controlled by the Soviet censorship. And last but not least, Stevenson »was a thinker, as was every other literary man of importance. He had ideas to express – not one or two or half a dozen but many.« (Aydelotte 1912, 345) The ideas, which due to the efforts of the Soviet censorship, have made his works go astray on their way to the Soviet readers. The ideas, which are not sufficient to make a good writer without the power to think and to see, which Stevenson definitely possesses since Russian readers keep enjoying his literary creations revealing in them time and time again something new.

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APPENDIX

<i>Original Title</i>	<i>Russian Title</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Place</i>
The Rajah's Diamond 1882	Бриллиант Раджи	1901	St.Petersburg
	Брильянт Раджи	1913-14	St.Petersburg
	Бриллиант Раджи	1956	Ordjonikidze
	Алмаз Раджи	1958	Leningrad
	Алмаз Раджи	1967	Moscow
The Beach of Falesá 1892	Берег Фолезы	1896	St.Petersburg
	Берег Фалеза	1901	St.Petersburg
	Берег Фалезы	1904	St.Petersburg
	Брег Фалеза	1913-14	St.Petersburg
	Берег Фалеза	1927	Moscow
	Берег Фалеза	1967	Moscow/Leningrad
The Merry Men 1881-82	Веселые ребята	1901	St.Petersburg
	Веселые ребята	1913-14	St.Petersburg
	Веселые ребята	1927	Moscow
	Веселые молодцы	1967	Moscow
Will o'The Mill 1887	Чудак Билль	1901	St.Petersburg
	Билль с мельницы	1913-14	St.Petersburg
	Вилли с мельницы	1967	Moscow
The Bottle Imp 1891	Дьявольская бутылка	1896	St.Petersburg
	Дьявольская бутылка	1901	St.Petersburg
	Волшебная бутылка	1904	St.Petersburg
	Волшебная бутылка	1909	St.Petersburg
	Дьявольская бутылка	1913-14	St.Petersburg
	Волшебная бутылка	1961	Moscow
	Сатанинская бутылка	1967	Moscow
Thrawn Janet 1887	Джэнет продала душу дьяволу	1901	St.Petersburg
	Джэнет продала душу дьяволу	1913-14	St.Petersburg
	Окаянная Дженет	1967	Moscow

<i>Original Title</i>	<i>Russian Title</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Place</i>
The Pavillion on the Links 1880	Павильон на холме (линке)	1901	St.Petersburg
	Павильон на холме	1913–14	St.Petersburg
	Павильон на дюнах	1946	Moscow/Leningrad
	Павильон на дюнах	1956	Orjonikidze
	Дом на дюнах	1957	Moscow
	Дом на дюнах	1967	Moscow
The Story of a Lie 1882	История одной лжи	1927	Moscow
The Treasure of Franchard 1887	Клад под развалинами Франшарского монастыря	1901	St.Petersburg
	монастыря		
	Клад под развалинами Франшарского монастыря	1913–14	St.Petersburg
	монастыря		
	Франшарский клад	1927	Moscow
The Suicide Club 1887	Клуб самоубийц	1888	St.Petersburg
	Клуб самоубийц	1901	St.Petersburg
	Клуб самоубийц	1913–14	St.Petersburg
	Клуб самоубийц	1956	Orjonikidze
	Клуб самоубийц	1967	Moscow
Markheim 1885	Преступник	1901	St.Petersburg
	Убийца	1913–14	St.Petersburg
	Маркам	1918	Moscow
	Маркам	1923	Moscow
	Маркхейм	1967	Moscow
Olalla 1887	Олалла	1901	St.Petersburg
	Олалья	1913–14	St.Petersburg
	Олалла	1967	Moscow

<i>Original Title</i>	<i>Russian Title</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Place</i>
The Isle of Voices 1893	Остров голосов	1896	St.Petersburg
	Остров голосов	1901	St.Petersburg
	Остров голосов	1904	St.Petersburg
	Остров голосов	1913-14	St.Petersburg
	Остров голосов	1967	Moscow
The Body-Snatcher 1884	Похитители трупов	1895	St.Petersburg
	В поисках трупа	1906	St.Petersburg
	Похитители трупов	1913-14	St.Petersburg
	Похитители трупов	1926	Moscow
Providence and the Guitar 1878	Предчувствие и гитара	1901	St.Petersburg
	Провидение и гитара	1913-14	St.Petersburg
The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde 1886	Странная история доктора Джекиля и мистера Хайда	1888	St.Petersburg
	Доктор Джекиль и м-р Гайд	1901	St.Petersburg
	Странная история доктора Джекиля и мистера Хайда	1908	St.Petersburg
	Странная история доктора Джекиля и мистера Хайда	1913-14	St.Petersburg
	Странная история доктора Джекилля и мистера Хайда	1916	Moscow
	Странная история доктора Джекилля и мистера Хайда	1918	Moscow
	Странная история доктора Джекилля и мистера Хайда	1923	Moscow
	Странная история доктора Джекиля и мистера Хайда	1967	Moscow