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***Migrating Selves and Shifting Egos:  
Walter Besant in the Indian Ocean  
(The Bourbon Journal, 1863;  
Autobiography, 1902)***

This paper examines the physical, intellectual, psychological and spiritual impact on Sir Walter Besant (1836-1901) of his first encounter with the natives, the coolies and the European inhabitants of the colonial societies in the Seychelles, Mauritius, Quarantine Island and Reunion, as related in Besant's *The Bourbon Journal*—a lively, anecdotal and entertaining diary published in 1869—, and an unrevised autobiography posthumously published in 1902. Besant spent almost seven years in Mauritius which had been a British colony in the Indian Ocean since the 1814 Treaty of Paris, known whilst a French possession as the “Ile de France.” During his stay there, he walked across Mauritius, spent a fortnight on Quarantine Island, and in August 1863 sailed with his friend Scott to Reunion, where he climbed the formidable Piton des Neiges. From the journal of his visit there, *The Bourbon Journal*, he wrote an article which he sent to James Rice, the editor of *Once a Week*—the founding act of a famous literary collaboration: the Besant-Rice novels (till Rice's death in 1881). But it should be noted from the outset that the literary qualities of Besant's writings in the Indian Ocean are of little interest here. Even though Besant occasionally resorts to some of the *topoi* of exoticism common in nineteenth-century travel literature, his early writing rarely relies on the use of tropes or literary effects, and the mock epic style of the bombastic title opening the sequence of his climb of the Piton des Neiges is in fact meant to deflate the caricatural rhetoric of Empire: “the unrivalled performances of the Acrobatic Englishmen or Bounding Brothers of the Pyrenees on the precipices of the Piton des Neiges” (Besant 1869: 35). What I am mostly concerned with in this essay is what Besant has to tell us concerning the discovery of the other, a progres-

sive experience which, I am going to argue, ended up in an almost borderline discovery of the true self. *The Bourbon Journal* and the *Autobiography* may in fact be read as the story of the process leading to artistic creation, as a portrait of the artist as a melancholic castaway (Anzieu 1981: 99).

After obtaining his degree at Christ College, Cambridge, in 1859, and a short period as school master, Besant left for Mauritius where he took up a post as a teacher of mathematics at the Royal College. Prior to his departure from England, Besant had undergone an emotional and personal crisis, the symptom and consequence of which were his rejection of his native country's religious conventions. Sprigge underlines “[h]is hatred—for no other word can be used—of the evangelical teachings of his youth” (Besant 1902: x) in the preface to the *Autobiography* where Besant describes his dull college days (Besant 1902: 67-98) and his ultimate realization that he was not fit to take orders: “with great depression of spirits prepared myself for perjury, because by this time I understood that the white tie would choke me.” (Besant 1902: 110). But becoming an outsider in his home country as well as a foreigner, an *extraneus*, in his country of adoption, was to be an even more destabilizing experience, as Besant acknowledges in his *Autobiography*:

A man who goes away at 24 and comes back at 31 speedily discovers that his old place among his friends is filled up... the old ties are broken... it is felt that a man who goes out to a colony ought—I know not why—to remain there. (Besant 1902: 151)

At first, the encounter with the other enhances Besant's comforting sense of belonging to the superior community of the European passengers on board the *Nepaul*—a few French colonists, Baron Van Decken from Prussia, and the new doctor, all grouped together under a reassuring collective “we”:

Therefore the whole company slept on deck. The mattresses were laid up and spread out, we lied side by side, with faces muffled to keep off the moonshine. It was curious to wake in the night and to see by the light of the moon the sleeping figures and to watch the waves in the

white light, and the jagged outlines of the mountains of Arabia. In the evening, when we were near enough to see them, the rocks assumed all colours... (Besant 1902: 113-14).

As opposed to the representatives of civilization, the languid people of the Seychelles are perceived as wallowing in a state of pre-lapsarian, pagan indolence, as if the traveller's fascinated gaze were also a backward glance at a primeval state of humanity, transforming the voyage in space into a voyage in time:

I believe the islanders have no energy; . . . they have no desire for wealth; . . . they care nothing for the outside world; they lie in the shade . . . There is a resident commissioner, who has nothing to do; there is a magistrate; there are one or two priests . . . but . . . life comes unasked, it lasts awhile, it goes away. Where does it go? Nobody asks; nobody cares . . . Life *is*. What more does one want? Why should one enquire? (Besant 1902: 114-15)

Once in Mauritius, Besant mixes with all sorts of people, but all belonging in fact to the same community-group of lively bachelors, the soldiers of the two regiments based in Port-Louis, the planters, civil servants, bank managers and accountants, partners in mercantile houses, English railway engineers, his colleagues at the Royal College—"the staff of the college was a mixed lot" (Besant 1902: 119; "the masters were a wonderful scratch lot" (Besant 1902: 121)—, missionaries, French adventurers, and Freemasons—immersing himself in an intense social life which is also meant to protect him from the "locals." Paradoxically, though, Besant's new self gradually emerges from this experience, as the young man feels more and more at odds with this European community. Besant explicitly mentions this loss of bearings: "It was a *strange, confused, picturesque* kind of life that one led there" (Besant 1902: 122, emphasis mine).

The tropical experience then turns into a fantastic experience, Besant gradually allowing himself to drift into a regressive quest for places remote from the urban centres of the colony—"After a while I found the air of Port-Louis . . . confined and relaxing. I therefore . . . lived for a time three or four miles out . . . Finally, and for the last two

years, I settled in a charming little bungalow ten miles from town” (Besant 1902: 116)—a process that inevitably strands him in melancholia: “It was, I think, in 1864 that I became aware of an increased tendency to a form of melancholia which made me uneasy at first. Gradually the symptom became a burden to me” (Besant 1902: 142). Besant’s malaise is all the more agonizing as he cannot take refuge in intellectual activities:

The newspapers of the colony were contemptible; there were no lectures, partly because no one would want to go out in the evening except to dinner, while no one would go to a lecture before dinner, and partly because everybody knew everybody else, and could get any information that he might want without the trouble of going to a lecture. A few private persons had collections of books but there was not much reading. There was a circulating library which was very poorly supported. There was a subscription library, which fell to pieces... (Besant 1902: 139-40)

Besant’s tense relations with the Rector of the Royal College exacerbate his stress: Charles Arthur Redl is clearly the Other, the enemy, much more so than the natives or coolies, or even the French. For he is an Austrian, a traitor to the Protestant cause, arrogantly incompetent in all matters pedagogical:

Imagine the wisdom of the colonial office, and its profound knowledge of the colonies, when it selected for a post of so much importance an Austrian for a colony almost entirely French, a man who had thrown over his religion for a Roman Catholic community, and an ex-lieutenant of the Austrian army in the very year when the French were driving the Austrians out of Italy! (Besant 1902: 117)

Gradually, the exotic dreamland turns out to be peopled by the specters of colonial History, conjured up by the Mauritius fever of 1866-67 which, according to Besant, embodies the return of the white man’s repressed faults and guilt:

A fever enquiry commission was appointed by Sir Henry Barkley in 1867 . . . and established that many hundreds of lives were lost . . . through the want of cleanliness and over-crowding in the Indian and creole camp. (Besant 1902: 145)

Informed by the numerous sea captains he is acquainted with, Besant is highly sensitive to the dreadful treatment of the coolies; he recounts terrible stories of men trying to escape by swimming ashore, thereby risking their lives, and of unscrupulous captains preferring to throw overboard the bodies of infected men rather than submit to the island's strict quarantine measures. There is a radical shift in the tone of Besant's autobiography, then dominated by feelings of empathy and compassion:

The number of deaths rose to 300 a day over the whole island [...] the funerals went on all day long in Roman Catholic churches; and in the cemeteries priests said the last prayers for the dead without intermission over fosses communes as the coffins were brought in and laid side by side. (Besant 1902: 144)

Besant indicts the merchants' avarice, the absence of any public health policy and the incompetence of the colonial authorities in times of crisis (Besant 1902: 144). This, according to him, is shocking evidence of the paltry results of the Franco-British agreements of 1860 and 1861, imposed by the British and aiming at controlling and improving the hiring conditions of coolies in Reunion and Mauritius. Indeed, the British, outraged at the way Reunion and Mauritius planters treated their coolie labourers, had imposed a more constraining legislation, prior to the 1861 and 1862 agreements. But there were so many breaches of the law that Great Britain banned coolie labour from its territories in 1882—the system survived in the French comptoirs till 1934 (Reunion hired labourers from further off countries, notably from China and Australia). Besant compellingly argues that solidarity and mutual help would have been enough to face up to the catastrophe:

We had some fever, but not much; our servant's camp contained a few patients, and we doctored them ourselves with good results. It was a strange experience. (Besant 1902: 144)

An Englishman ironically posing as a liberator of coolies from the yoke of French colonists? Besant's outrage in this case is but the first in a long series of charity endeavours. A renowned reformer and philanthropist, Besant would later set up "a People's Palace in London where working men could meet, play games, attend lectures and discussion groups . . . evening institutes where instruction was given in cottage industries" (Hollingworth 1965: 154).

But more profoundly, the question has to do with religion, a crucial issue for Besant. In this multi-cultural, paradise-like island where meditation and prayer are no priority indeed, the urban landscape is not centred round churches or chapels, quite unlike continental or British towns:

The English had their cathedral, but they made very little use of it; they had also two or three little churches in the country, but they were not much frequented. The Scotch, for their part, waking one day to the understanding that they had no church, built one, and imported a clergyman. The first day's service they all attended, on the following Sunday, there was no one; and there has never been anyone since except a few skippers and people of the ports. (Besant 1902: 135)

But Besant is very careful to underline his own open-mindedness: the Anglican bishop "formed a centre of quiet life" (Besant 1902: 122), "some of the Roman Catholic priests were very good fellows" (Besant 1902: 122) and his agnostic friends' loss of faith is understandable (Besant 1902: 133-4). One of his closest friends, a Prussian physician, is said to have denied the whole of religion, but of having "died of the yellow fever while working in hospitals there [Buenos Aires]" (Besant 1902: 134). Besant is particularly interested in the spiritual evolution of half a dozen missionaries. One is said to have been "a man of large reading in one Book, [who] found that he no longer believed in the letter of his creed or in the letter of the Book" (Besant 1902: 131-2). Another one, who "was in the English holy or-

ders” and whose “field had been India,” “had found it impossible to pretend that he believed his creed” and “given it up” (Besant 1902: 132). Besant wonders “how many such missionaries there are” (Besant 1902: 132). In his accounts, they stand out as idealistic eccentrics, misfits and rebels very far from the traditional image of mercenary settlers. He obviously sides with these creative, generous though unconventional prophets, travellers and explorers in quest of genuine truths and, for this reason, lost in unstable zones. For just like them, Besant loses his Anglican faith, and is initiated into Freemasonry. Interestingly, however, Besant never refers to the other religions, notably Hinduism or even Islam, as an explanation to this phenomenon. And yet, how could Annie Besant’s brother-in-law ignore that Hinduism fascinated these men who were more inclined to spirituality than to a blind obedience to a set dogma or a religious establishment?

It was then that Besant deeply felt the need for “a change of scenery”:

It was, I think, in 1864 that I became aware of an increased tendency to a form of melancholia. . . . I suppose it was caused partly by overwork; partly by worry on account of my exasperating chief, and partly by the monotony of a climate which was sometimes much too hot and sometimes a little too wet but never cold. . . . I took advice of my German friend. He advised an immediate change of scenery, if not of climate (Besant 1902: 142).

Besant discovered Quarantine Island first, and then Reunion Island. Apart from the doctor, the population of Quarantine, a tiny speck of an island (2.5 kilometres in circumference) was very sparse: two men to man the lighthouse and a few Indian coolies. Yet, the virginal and neutral space, the white page unmarked by History so much sought after by Besant, was again haunted by the ghosts of the dead:

At sunset the Indians hastened to take refuge in the cottages; if they looked out after dark they saw white things moving about; there was no kind of doubt in their minds that they actually did see white things.

. . .



. . . How my friend could exist in such a solitude, with the unseen presence of the white things, was most amazing. (Besant 1902: 128-9)

This is a “ghost island,” a dreamland peopled with weird creatures and “things” (Besant 1902: 129). Still, Besant remembers his experience there as a fortnight of hedonistic pleasures: eating, fishing, bathing, sleeping, playing cards, smoking, peaceful contemplation and meditation:

The lonely life among the dead men and their ghosts, the sea outside — a sea without boats or a ship or a sail ever within sight, the sea itself with creatures; the silence broken only by the screaming of the sea birds and the lapping of the waves, made up a strange appearance, one to be remembered. (Besant 1902: 129-30)

The next change of scenery takes place in Reunion, an island Besant was not totally unacquainted with when he first set foot on it. Among his likely sources, were *The History of Mauritius or the Isle of France and the Neighbouring Island* (1801) by Charles Grant, based on Grant's father's memoirs, and accounts by Rennefort (1655), de Quesne (1690), Rochon (1718) and Admiral Kempenfelt (1758). All of these authors were unanimous in describing Reunion as a fabulous cornucopia abounding in “coral, ambergris, water, land turtles, sea turtles, cedars, ebony, acajou . . . hogs and goats . . . partridge, turtle dove, goose, parroquets, Dodo” (de Quesne, quoted in Grant 1801: 154). Rochon adds the crops of “rice, potatoes, yams, sugar cane, coffee” and “fermented liquor” (quoted in Grant 1801: 152). Considering its natural assets and its sublime beauty, Reunion was a paradisiac land. In the 1869 *Bourbon Journal*, as its title indicates, Besant oddly calls the island “Bourbon,” sounding slightly nostalgic for the Ancien Régime to French ears (its name had been changed in 1848). But to Besant, Reunion is also strongly reminiscent of the old world: this is at long last a place where he can make himself at home, with its roses “possessing the real European fragrance” (Besant 1869: 27-8), or even the rain which falls in a “steady, business-like, European way” (Besant 1869: 25).

Still, Besant, like everyone else in England and Mauritius, is fully aware of the terrible reputation of the French island, a haven for the mixed, impure descendents of renegades and pirates (see Kempenfelt, quoted in Grant 1801: 159). Saint-Denys, the capital city, looks “like Paris before the Revolution” (Besant 1869: 16). Reunion's prosperity had been checked in 1863 by devastating cyclones and by a severe sugar crisis. But Besant's wary approach is based on historical and political reasons, too. The French Créoles make no secret of their dislike of English rule (Besant 1902: 122-3). In *The Bourbon Journal*, the list of the Bourbonnais' many flaws is a long one, indeed: the city is “rather dull,” its inhabitants being uncommonly lazy, coarse and poorly educated (Besant 1869: 15, 18). The French, in general, are perceived as vainglorious and superficial (Besant 1869: 30), poor conversationalists (Besant 1869: 9), and even worse orators (Besant 1869: 30), dishonest (Besant 1869: 18), and abominably filthy (Besant 1869: 26, 28, 36). Their engineering and industry are described in ironical undertones at best—“the road to Salazie [is] a good specimen of French engineering” (Besant 1869: 20)—, and as extremely primitive or even underdeveloped in other instances (Besant 1869: 28).

A closer scrutiny of the Bourbon texts reveals Besant laboring under the influence of the racist stereotypes prevailing in the 1860s. At the bottom of the hierarchy of races stand those “unfortunate niggers” (Besant 1869: 30), “clumsy Mozambiques” whose heads may be clubbed with oars without hurting them (Besant 1869: 12). Before climbing the Piton, Besant does not sound particularly sensitive to the extreme poverty of the inhabitants of Salazie. One of the porters, Tillotine, is said to be “touched with the tar brush . . . and like a monkey over the rocks; barefooted, like the rest of them” (Besant 1869: 35), “obstinate as a pig” (Besant 1869: 33). The *Malgache* who carries him in a *fauteuil* has “the trot of an uneven-paced horse” (Besant 1869: 53). Worse still, black people are first described as a devilish presence, in the 1902 *Autobiography*—“the sleepless daemons who swab the deck” (Besant 1902: 11)—as well as in the 1869 *Bourbon Journal*: “After dinner to Church. Found it was the “Black Mass.”” (Besant 1869: 18). It should be remembered here that in a very recent past,

fugitive slaves were still hunted down like wild animals, as Grant notes in his memoirs:

We have here a species of hunting, as we are on that subject I shall not omit to mention: it is indeed of a cruel kind, but absolutely necessary in terms of policy. It consists in pursuing the Maroon Negroes, or deserters, in the woods and the mountains, where they are treated as wild beasts: they are shot whenever an opportunity offers . . . . (Grant 1801: 297)

The image of the Chinese immigrants can hardly be said to be better. Chinese immigration was a recent (1862) phenomenon in Reunion, where they came from Mauritius (their presence there being attested from the eighteenth century). “John Chinaman” whom Besant encounters (and nicknames) is typically portrayed in the *Bourbon Journal* as “evil smelling and crafty looking. A mistaken feeling of humanity prevented our dropping him into the water” (Besant 1869: 13).

And yet, Reunion is the very place where Besant finds a cure for his melancholy, in the form of redemption. The ascent of the Piton des Neiges, the highest summit in the Indian Ocean, provides here the necessary physical as well as spiritual challenge. For a marked evolution then takes place, carrying Besant away from his initial sweeping generalizations to the acknowledgement of the other's intrinsic value. One of the sure symptoms of this shift is Besant's choice of names for the “others” he encounters. If he first (nick)names the unknown Chinese who jumps into his boat ('John Chinaman'), never actually names the black porters, and even truncates part of Tillotine's name, whom he calls “Tillot,” in what could be considered as a symbolical act of castration... he will finally use his companions' real names—Cusard, Léon, Fayette, Gamin, Docété, Mangras (Besant 1869: 25)—in the course of their shared trial.

Another crucial step in this process consists in drinking and eating local staples, from warm, fetid spring water to repugnant snails (Besant 1869: 22, 24). After what could be interpreted as a ritual of communion, some kind of low-mimetic Lord's Supper, Besant's point of view changes, gradually freeing itself of British prejudice and ste-

reotypes: “After eating snails, and enjoying them, I find myself fully prepared to go in for frogs, whenever I get any” (Besant 1869: 25). Moreover, however cold and indifferent their relationship may have initially been, the fact of sharing the same trials, tribulations and feelings gradually welds together this heterogeneous group of men toiling up the slopes of the Piton (Besant 1869: 35). Forced into collaboration by the climb, the group changes into a brotherhood of men, and a feeling of silent comradeship emerges, as is the case when at the end of the day, the men smoke their pipes together, in what should be read as another version of the first shared meal:

Great are the merits of tobacco. After entirely stripping, wrapping ourselves in our blankets and plaids, and depositing our bare feet in the hot wood ashes, we lighted our pipes, took a gentle pull at the brandy, and grew cheerful. (Besant 1869: 41)

Besant's relationship with Tillotine is particularly revealing of this evolution, notably after Tillotine saves Besant's life: “a slip here would probably put an end to a man altogether. But Tillot took me by the arm, and led me up, guiding my trembling steps with a paternal hand” (Besant 1869: 39, see also p. 40). The other's self is gradually taken into account, which implies a recognition of the other's identity as a potential self, *i.e.* as a potential alter ego: this is suggested when the pronouns remarkably shift from the “they/us” dichotomy, so characteristic of Besant's initial approach, to a collective “us” from which the non-Europeans are no longer excluded: “every one of us was wetted through and through” (Besant 1869: 40). The surest sign of Besant's evolution is his repeated attempts at overcoming the language barrier in order to communicate without the mediation of an interpreter. His first, still timid, try concerns a dialogue with “John Chinaman,” which involves the use of non-verbal language—a sign language which he humorously calls the “Winkian”: “The conversation was as follows—translated from the “Winkian.”” (Besant 1869: 13).

Wink 1. *WB*. You've got tolerable cheek, John Chinaman.

Wink 2 *Chinaman*. I jump into your boat and I get ashore for nothing.

Wink 3 *WB*. Ah! Wait till the boatman comes upon you.

Wink 4 *Chinaman*. Give me a cigar (gets one and smokes it).

Wink 5. *WB*. What have you got in your bag, old boy?

Wink 6. *Chinaman*. Traps to sell.

Wink 7. *WB*. Going to take in the natives?

Wink 8 *Chinaman*. Winks horribly and repeatedly. Grins and slaps his pockets.

Wink 9. *Chinaman*. Couldn't get on in Mauritius. Too many of us. This is the place to make money. Give me a *pourboire*.

Wink 10. *WB refuses*. (Besant 1869: 13-14)

This “conversation in ten winks” is of course meant to provide some kind of comic relief at the expense of the Chinaman, and the European is constantly assumed to be superior to his interlocutor. Soon enough, though, Besant half-heartedly acknowledges his own shortcomings. His poor command and understanding of the language spoken in Reunion—“a funny sort of patois” (Besant 1869: 32)—first inspires him with a vigorous indictment of “Patois Auvergnat,” which he curiously mistakes for Creole (Besant 1869: 26). Later, his efforts at decoding the local French toponyms are equally unsuccessful: “the Plain d’Affouches. The Affouche is a sort of tree, and there are none in the plain, so that, like Capt. Bunsby, it might be called anything else, for the matter of that” (Besant 1869: 28-9). The same remark applies to a Swiss missionary, whose dodgy French grammar Besant mistakenly considers to be “créole patois” (Besant 1902: 136). Accordingly, Besant’s transcriptions and interpretations of real Creole utterances are wrong: for example, according to him, “Ranzez grand grand cien, cape'l morder tout de monde” means “Draw a big dog, able to bite anybody.” “Encore ranzez que' qu'çose” means “draw something else” (Besant 1869: 32), whereas the creole verb meaning “to draw” is “désinn.”

But Besant’s efforts at mastering the French language are less misguided and more successful. As a matter of fact, his gradual familiarization with and appropriation of the other’s language in the contact zone can be measured by the proportion of French words incorporated into the *Journal*, which is literally, graphically, invaded and con-

taminated by local utterances, as if the monologic text of the beginning were gradually turning into a polyphonous, dialogic one. The one French colloquial expression “Pas si bête” (Besant 1869 : 11) in the first twenty pages, is to be compared to the following pages abounding in foreign words and expressions not primarily aimed at local colour but testifying to the effects of Besant’s immersion in the other’s language: “métier,” “chef de cuisine,” “doctaire” (sic) (Besant 1869 : 21); “et voilà tout!” (Besant 1869 : 22), “a parti,” “a véritable farçeur,” “vinaigre” (Besant 1869 : 25), “a sort of superior ouvrier” (Besant 1869 : 26), “je n’étions ni hommes, ni femmes, ni Français, mais j’étions Auvergnât” (Besant 1869 : 27), “et la gloire,” “c’est ça. Mais que voulez-vous ?” (Besant 1869 : 30), “au contraire” (Besant 1869 : 32), “amour propre,” “la bénédiction du Bon Dieu, et le beaux (sic) temps” (Besant 1869 : 34), “commençons par le commencement” (Besant 1869 : 35), “filons donc,” “bon voyage” (Besant 1869 : 37), “a quart d’heure, peut-être petit morceau de plus” (Besant 1869 : 46, 50), “the last coup de vent” (Besant 1869 : 51). This gradual opening to a linguistic otherness, it should be noted, is concomitant with Besant’s study of the French language under his friend Léon Doyen’s guidance, as we learn from the *Autobiography* (Besant 1902: 140), and coincides also with Besant’s first attempt at fiction-writing (the novel was turned down by the publishers who nevertheless thought it “had promise” (Besant 1902: 141-2).

What emerges from the *Journal*, therefore, is the gradual realization that literary creativity implies not a strict adherence of self to self, but a distanciation from one’s self, which only the experience of viewing oneself reflected in the strangers’ eyes, as an outsider—as the other’s other—can in fact procure. This, Besant seems to realize here, requires a certain degree of familiarity with the other’s language—an experience of alterity which, in the psychoanalytical parlance, is often the key to the language of the Other. My suggestion, therefore, is that Besant’s borderline experiences in such uncanny zones, haunted by the various voices of the ghosts of colonial History, both caused and cured his existential crisis. The outcome of this crisis was no less than Besant’s “take-off” as a creative writer, a psychological process very

much akin to the necessary work of mourning after melancholia, according to psychoanalytic theory (Anzieu 1981: 19-20).

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