

# That Accursed Island. *Treasure Island* and Imperial Disappointments

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**Abstract:** This essay examines the depictions of colonial spaces and the failure of imperial endeavours in Robert Louis Stevenson's 1883 novel *Treasure Island*. By combining several theoretical approaches, the aim is to foreground the ways in which Stevenson subverts the norms of imperial romance and creates an adventure story that calls into question the very premise of its genre.

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Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) occupies a special place within the canon of boys' adventure literature. Despite being grouped together with the conventionally imperialist stories of Haggard and Kipling (Green, 1980: 230), it engages with colonial spaces and imperialist actors in a strikingly unusual way (Carpenter, 1984: 83 f.). *Treasure Island* does not shy away from dangers and violence – it is an adventure story at heart. However, the way in which such events are experienced by the protagonists (and thereby framed to the reader) distinguishes it from other representatives of its genre. Franco Moretti's analysis points out some key traits of the imperial romance:

Penetrate; seize; leave (and if needed, destroy). It's the spatial logic of colonialism; duplicated, and 'naturalized', by the spatial logic of the one-dimensional plot. And then, at the end of the journey (with the exception of *Heart of Darkness*), we don't find raw materials, or ivory,

or human beings to be enslaved. In lieu of these prosaic realities, a fairy-tale entity – a ‘treasure’ – where the bloody profits of the colonial adventure are sublimated into an aesthetic, almost self-referential object: glittering, clean stones: diamonds, if possible. (Moretti, 1990: 62)

In comparison, Stevenson subverts the expectations of readers who might expect a traditional boys’ adventure novel glorifying boyish pluck and the British imperial project, and turns its colonial setting, the eponymous *Treasure Island*, into a place more fit to be left behind than conquered.

By invoking the long history of maritime writing, of sea-songs, of romance, and the adventure novel (which he was instrumental in reviving), Stevenson situated *Treasure Island* in a heightened world (Peck, 2014: 158) – a world of adventure with high stakes on the high seas:

Fifteen men on the dead man’s chest—  
Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!  
Drink and the devil had done for the rest—  
Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum! (Stevenson, 1998: 140)

Most analyses of Stevenson’s works in the context of imperial literature and colonialism tend to focus on his South Seas writings, as his relocation to Samoa added to his mythos (Green, 1980: 228). The move was accompanied by a major shift towards experimentalism (Sandison, 1996: 6) – a shift that was not always positively received (Elleray, 2020: 173 ff.). However, *Treasure Island* serves as a prelude to these later writings that “are as sceptical about the influence of white civilization as anything Conrad wrote” (Brantlinger, 1988: 39). It contains within itself the naïve glee and adventurism so typical of imperial romance, as well as the first traces of the incisive deconstruction of traditional adventure stories that Stevenson would flesh out in his subsequent novels (Brantlinger, 1988: 40 ff.).

Stevenson openly acknowledged the derivative aspects of *Treasure Island*, even jokingly referring to his use of characters and motifs from earlier adventure stories and maritime history as *plagiarism* in his letters (Carpenter, 1984: 83 ff.). *Treasure Island* is largely determined by the highly conventionalized framework of imperial romance. However, Stevenson introduced innovative changes to this framework, and quickly became the new blueprint to be emulated, as *Treasure Island* thrust the genre into renewed popularity (Honaker, 2004: 27). Although Stevenson was decidedly writing a commercially viable adventure story (Buckton, 2007: 103), he also openly engaged with the trauma and the cost of adventure, rather than obscuring those less glamorous aspects. This exploration of Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* focuses on its depictions of disappointed imperial ambitions, which unveil the grim reality of colonial adventure and its impacts.

## Dead Man's Chest – Genre Conventions

“[When] we come to Kipling, Conrad, Arthur Conan Doyle, Rider Haggard, R. L. Stevenson, George Orwell, Joyce Cary, E. M. Forster, and T. E. Lawrence, the empire is everywhere a crucial setting” (Saïd, 1994: 63). The traditional boys' adventure novel is at its core an affirmation of the dominion of empire and the supremacy of Englishmen. However, Stevenson's island is not a promised land, nor an empty slate for the fulfilment of imperial ambitions – it is a space that has already been marked by the consequences of colonialism and piracy. It is not the site of Moretti's decontextualized treasure (Moretti, 1990: 62), but rather a space which holds within itself a history inspired by reality, one carefully constructed by Stevenson.

Additionally, neither Stevenson's pirates nor his gentlemen are quite what one might expect them to be (Deane, 2011: 659 f.). Expanding the conventions of the genre and indicating that *Treasure Island's* internal rules are distinct from the traditional trappings of adventure stories and their stock characters (Peck, 2014: 158), Stevenson's world allows for pirates to be charming, and shows imperial actors as venal and foolish. The quest for treasure relies more heavily on blind luck than the idea of fitness for adventure and colonial rule being quintessentially British.

Moretti's *Atlas of the European Novel* examines in detail how imperial romances represent colonial and imperial spaces, and thus provides the basis for comparing *Treasure Island* to the *rules* of imperial literature. Although Moretti expresses disagreement with some of Saïd's economic observations in *Culture and Imperialism* (Moretti, 1990: 24–28), Saïd's text serves as another central source of knowledge on the role and position of empire in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature. While Stevenson features only incidentally in Saïd's treatise, his observations are nonetheless invaluable:

It is no paradox, therefore, that Conrad was both anti-imperialist and imperialist, progressive when it came to rendering fearlessly and pessimistically the self-confirming, self-deluding corruption of overseas domination, deeply reactionary when it came to conceding that Africa or South America could ever have had an independent history or culture, which the imperialists violently disturbed but by which they were ultimately defeated. (Saïd, 1994: xviii)

Though the particulars of what Stevenson and Conrad were respectively *progressive* about differ, they both exemplify the simultaneously anti-imperialist and imperialist mode Saïd speaks of, highlighting Stevenson's connection to this later mode of adventure writing.

As Loxley lays out, the adventure on *Treasure Island* is a value-extracting endeavour, and the island is certainly the object of colonial and imperial attentions, but it is not a settler-colonial space. It is where transitions and chan-

ges take place, but the island itself is not a prize to be seized. It is a place of struggle, confrontation, and of threats.

[*Treasure Island* is not a story] of establishment and settlement in an overtly colonial situation, but rather one of a journey of acquisition, transient in nature, different in form. The attraction to and of the island lies exclusively in the fact that it shelters hidden treasure. The dissolution of complicating political factors in the simplification of the island setting is, then, here re-mapped. The problem of order and instability is represented by the threat of lawlessness and criminality internal to the system of European cultural identification, that is, issuing from within its own ranks as opposed to the threat posed by a racial, territorial or cultural otherness from outside. (Loxley, 1990: 132)

Despite ostensibly only being of interest due to the treasure, *Treasure Island* is also a locale for the exploration of the deep-seated anxieties Victorians felt regarding travel, emigration and the potential failure thereof. These were anxieties Stevenson experienced first-hand and explored in his travel writings, such as *The Amateur Emigrant* (1895). Wagner points out the benefits of looking at the Victorian fear of failed emigration:

To look at failure likewise helps us avoid being tricked by nationalist or imperialist jingoism [...]. Narratives of failed emigration and return, we have seen, dramatize a longing for home, a longing that we only fully realize when we are away and unhappy. (Wagner, 2016: 260)

This concern over failed emigration can also be observed in *Treasure Island*. While the island is never framed as a potential home, and while the relocation is never considered permanent, the disappointment of the expectations Jim had built up surrounding the island still connects to this history of imperial anxiety and fascination with failure. Even given the “simplification of the island setting,” morality is still grey, and the human cost of treasure hunting is too great for the protagonist to continue his involvement in it. *Treasure Island* is a fundamentally destabilising locale, and as such it challenges conventional perceptions and morality. As Peck remarks on the subversive nature of the story: “[In] *Treasure Island*, despite its undoubted power as a sea story, we actually see the sea story collapsing into confusion” (Peck, 2014: 158).

### “A Connection Made Visible” – Stevenson’s Cartography

Harkening back to the opening quote by Moretti, *Treasure Island* continues to be an anomaly. Stevenson’s island is rich in implied history, even if it does primarily act as a decontextualized locale, due to the protagonist’s limited point of view. This simultaneous adherence to the clichéd approach of “Penetrate;

seize; leave” (Moretti, 1990: 62) – as evidenced by the successful retrieval of the treasure and subsequent abandonment of the island (and mutineers) – and subversion of the expectations of colonial adventure, make for an ultimately ambiguous treatment of colonial space. Given Stevenson’s interest in cartography and his reflections on the potential of maps in the shaping of a story, his *Treasure Island* must be analysed both as a real colonial space and as a conceptual space, the map being a representation of reality which proves to be inaccurate. Moretti describes maps as “connection made visible” (Moretti, 1990: 3), and Baudrillard’s explanation of simulacra and the relationship between representation and reality speaks to this connection. In fact, Baudrillard’s famous analysis of maps as simulacra can be read as a precise description of Stevenson’s artistic process in the creation of *Treasure Island*:

The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory – precession of simulacra – it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. (Baudrillard, 1988: 166)

Although Stevenson was engaged in the creation of a fictional map, rather than acting as an imperial cartographer upon reality, the order of creation still speaks strongly in favour of a cartography-focused reading of *Treasure Island*. Stevenson drew the original map while playing with his stepson, creating the story afterwards. The map predates the fiction it will come to represent, and in turn shapes the story. It is an imperialist cultural logic which presumes that reality will conform to the simulacrum that supposedly represents it, because the map is created with authority. Stevenson manages to subvert this presumption in a text whose creation reflected the imperialist attitude towards maps as crucial representational tools (Cohen, 2013: 159). The authority of maps as representations of reality is subverted, and this subversion extends past the fictional frame: Stevenson’s original map was lost in the mail and had to be recreated from his memory. Billy Bones’ treasure map is replicated and separated from the object it is supposed to represent, without anyone’s knowledge (Buckton, 2007: 114). In both cases, the solution to failed representation is memory and experience: Stevenson re-traced his descriptions of the island and created the map anew, and Ben Gunn was able to find and relocate the treasure, without requiring or creating a symbolic representation of its location. Had either the adventurers or the mutineers been left to rely only on the allegedly authoritative map, the treasure would remain lost.

The key to reading Stevenson’s usage of the map in *Treasure Island* as ultimately anti-colonial is in its failure to fulfil its purpose. As has been remarked by Buckton and Cohen, the map becomes an empty signifier, “Pure sign, no longer compass to the world” (Buckton, 2007: 118) – divorced from the rea-

lity of the island, the object of desire becomes nothing more than a pointless trinket to be traded between factions for manipulation, without holding inherent value (Cohen, 2013: 159). The second map, identical to the first in all but the X which marks the location of the treasure, is therefore a simulacrum of a simulacrum. “[The] very act of reproduction necessary to make the logo-map entails a loss of ‘aura’ that leads to disappointment” (Buckton, 2007: 118). Stevenson’s map becomes a bad cheque, an imperial promise left unfulfilled. The move from the map as an object of desire, to the map as imperfect representation of reality cements *Treasure Island’s* unusual approach to imperial romance. Stevenson’s map is not just Baudrillard’s simulacrum or Moretti’s connection made visible, it is a physical manifestation of the failure of imperial mythmaking to truthfully represent reality. This understanding of the map in *Treasure Island* as an ideological tool stripped of its usefulness recontextualizes many of the events Buckton explores at length:

The efficacy of the map as a tool for bridging the gap between child and adult readers and adventurers and establishing the commodity-text derives in part from its role in imperialist and nationalist projects. (Buckton, 2007: 117)

The map can effectively be read as a piece of inaccurate imperial propaganda, as its value is derived from a claim towards authoritative representation of colonial reality – a claim that is shown to be false.

### “Diamonds, If Possible” – Recontextualizing Treasure

Stevenson’s treasure straddles the line which Moretti draws between categories – it is certainly mythologized and reminiscent of a fairy-tale – the history of its accumulation is pointedly reduced to it being *Flint’s Treasure*, last owned by a dead man, accrued illicitly and thus free for the taking by *worthy* imperial actors – but it is not Moretti’s aesthetic, self-referential object (Moretti, 1990: 62), because the only part of the treasure which is recovered is “minted money” (Stevenson, 1998: 204) – standardised currency, bound to various nations, at various times. Strikingly, these coins, moved by Ben Gunn, are the only thing taken from the island, while “[the] bar silver and the arms still lie, for all that I know, where Flint buried them” (Stevenson, 1998: 208) – these “prosaic realities” (Moretti 1990: 62) are extant, but not seized, due to the overwhelming amount of minted coin. This choice to cease a profitable endeavour echoes Trelawney’s dramatic exclamation of “Hang the treasure!” (Stevenson, 1998: 48), effectively confirming that the extraction of wealth from a colonial space was never a priority – the idealised dream of adventure was.

The marooning of mutineers means that the island is given a new set of potentially dangerous *natives* to take the place of Ben Gunn – one adventure’s

completion has effectively created the necessity of future colonial endeavours that will once again involve fighting the pirates, if the rest of the treasure is to be retrieved. In the wake of abandoning the mutineers to their own devices, Jim speculates about how many lives the treasure and myth surrounding it have already cost (Stevenson, 1998: 202), in a scene that can be read as an implicit criticism of imperialist ventures (Loman, 2010: 21 f.). *Treasure Island* thus does not have a neat conclusion – *Treasure Island* will continue to hold objects of desire (Sergeant, 2016: 919), and the story is poised to continue with different characters, until nothing remains to be extracted.

Flint's treasure is not clean by Moretti's standard, and the guns and silver are seemingly of little interest to the protagonists. It shows the strange complexity of the treasure – not even the earliest encounter with the money in Billy Bones' chest is simple – minted money refers back to something else, it shows the reach of global capitalism (Loman, 2010: 15 f.). Money relies on authority, like maps do, and thus Jim's mother struggles to pick out only the coins which she recognizes, ones which signify wealth in a way that is understandable to her. The unearthed treasure only translates this same problem onto an even larger scale:

It was a strange collection, like Billy Bones's hoard for the diversity of coinage, but so much larger and so much more varied that I think I never had more pleasure than in sorting them. English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Georges, and Louises, doubloons and double guineas and moidores and sequins, the pictures of all the kings of Europe for the last hundred years, strange Oriental pieces stamped with what looked like wisps of string or bits of spider's web, round pieces and square pieces, and pieces bored through the middle, as if to wear them round your neck – nearly every variety of money in the world must, I think, have found a place in that collection. (Stevenson, 1998: 204)

In Silver's eyes and hands, the disparate currencies are all equally worth taking, unlike Jim's mother's careful selection of only those coins she had familiarity with. This allows for the interpretation that Long John's escape with part of the wealth speaks to his ability to reconcile contradictions – something central to his character.

The sea-cook had not gone empty-handed. He had cut through a bulk-head unobserved and had removed one of the sacks of coin, worth perhaps three or four hundred guineas, to help him on his further wanderings. (Stevenson, 1998: 207)

Silver is able to synthesise seemingly disparate objects, just as he synthesises his roles of pirate captain and affable cook – he is fundamentally outside of the norms of polite society, even when he plays at conforming to them. The men who survived on the winning side receive their compensation: “[all] of

us had an ample share of the treasure and used it wisely or foolishly, according to our natures” (Stevenson, 1998: 208), but the only person who seems untouched by the trauma of the experience is Silver. The happy ending is his.

## Colonial Space as Locus of Disappointment

‘Fertile continents’ and ‘wide spaces’, ‘spice-lands, corn-lands, timber-lands’, existent colonies and prospective, become merged into one undifferentiated, mythic site, an island of potential civility amidst those ‘many sounding seas’ of savagery. The synthesis provides the perfect alternative discursive space for a harmonious resolution of the evils of both the Old World and the New. (Loxley, 1990: 2)

Stevenson’s treatment of colonial settings differs from common imperialist depictions found in much of boys’ adventure literature. Jim’s relationship to adventure begins and ends with dreams. The chapter “I Go to Bristol” is filled with flights of fancy and Jim’s imagined landscapes, including fights with wild beasts and natives expected of a boys’ adventure novel.

I brooded by the hour together over the map, all the details of which I well remembered. Sitting by the fire in the housekeeper’s room, I approached that island in my fancy from every possible direction; I explored every acre of its surface; I climbed a thousand times to that tall hill they call the Spy-glass, and from the top enjoyed the most wonderful and changing prospects. (Stevenson, 1998: 47)

These changing prospects speak to the power of the imperial ideology already inculcated within Jim:

Sometimes the isle was thick with savages, with whom we fought, sometimes full of dangerous animals that hunted us, but in all my fancies nothing occurred to me so strange and tragic as our actual adventures. (Stevenson, 1998: 47)

His daydreams are fundamentally unable to prepare Jim for the realities of his adventure, and his respectable friends, Squire Trelawney and Doctor Livsey, are of little use in preparing him for his transition from the relative comfort of childhood into the strange and dangerous adult world he becomes part of by accompanying them. Jim’s imagined *Treasure Island*, his imaginary adventure, reflects Moretti’s codification of colonial romance almost exactly:

[Colonial] romances have no bifurcations. No well-lit inns, or brilliant officers, or picturesque castles that may induce one to wander from the prescribed path. In these stories – as in their archetypal image: the expedition that moves slowly, in single file, towards the horizon – there



is only a linear movement: forwards, or backwards. There are no deviations, no *alternatives* to the prescribed path, but only obstacles – and therefore, antagonists. Friends, and foes. On one side the white men, their guide, Western technology, a discolored old map. [...] On the other lions, heat, vegetation, elephants, flies, rain, illness and natives. All mixed up, and at bottom all interchangeable in their function as obstacles: all equally unknowable and threatening. (Moretti, 1990: 58 f.)

Jim is acutely aware of the rare moments in which he is able to exercise agency (Stevenson, 1998: 145). Although he grows and learns to take charge when necessary (Sandison, 1996: 50), he is not even given the last word in the story he is telling (Sandison, 1996: 48 f.). Jim's recounting of the adventure, prompted by Livesey and Trelawney, is the framing device of the novel, but the last word belongs to Captain Flint, Silver's parrot. The last word thus belongs to Jim's nightmares.

Once *Treasure Island* leaves the realm of imagination, of dreams of adventure, it crystalizes into a real and dangerous space. Jim's unease when first seeing the island, with its dangers and generally inhospitable nature (Stevenson, 1998: 81 f.) is in stark contrast with idealised promises of virgin lands ready for the taking.

[Perhaps] it was the look of the island, with its grey, melancholy woods, and wild stone spires, and the surf that we could both see and hear foaming and thundering on the steep beach — at least, although the sun shone bright and hot, and the shore birds were fishing and crying all around us, and you would have thought anyone would have been glad to get to land after being so long at sea, my heart sank, as the saying is, into my boots; and from the first look onward, I hated the very thought of *Treasure Island*. (Stevenson, 1998: 81 f.)

The island does not discriminate between the two groups of white men who find themselves on its shore – there are no natives to speak of, and it is the environment itself that is challenging, inhospitable, and an overall apt setting for this tale of disappointment. *Treasure Island* is an alternative discursive space, but it is not a place of reconciliation. Instead, the island setting heightens the simmering conflicts among the crew, and between them and the mutineers. As Trelawney mistakenly hires pirates – his short-sighted desire for wealth and adventure causing tragedy – Stevenson implies that not all men are suitable for colonial ventures, and even those who are do not escape unscathed (Stevenson, 1998: 208).

## Crossing the Threshold – *Treasure Island* and Boundaries

“External frontiers [...] easily generate narrative – but in an elementary way: they take two opposite fields, and make them collide,” (Moretti, 1990: 37). Despite on its surface being set in an unoccupied and exoticized location, an *external frontier*, the fundamental conflicts in *Treasure Island* are more indicative of what Moretti terms *internal borders*, as the theme of trust and betrayal is central to the relationship between Jim and Long John Silver. A potential explanation of this ambiguous depiction of *Treasure Island* – both an extension of empire in which internal conflicts play out, and an untamed frontier – comes from Michel Foucault. *Treasure Island* mirrors his idea of the heterotopia; a complex space whose liminality renders it rich in potential, but also poses a fundamental challenge to pre-existing ideas of the Self. Foucault points to ships as notable heterotopic spaces:

[The] boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea [...], it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures [...], you will understand why the boat has not only been for our civilization, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development (I have not been speaking of that today), but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination. The ship is the heterotopia *par excellence*. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up [...]. (Foucault, 1986: 27)

Michelle Elleray also labels Stevenson’s islands as heterotopias (Elleray, 2020: 171) – the island as adventure location holds within itself the potential for a fundamental reinterpretation of both the Self and the Other, as one is separated from the accepted mores of dominant society. Additionally, the narrative of *Treasure Island* is also situated within a heterotopia by linking the island to the eighteenth century; to the time of Flint’s exploration: this bygone era looms large in the background of the novel.

When comparing Foucault’s statement that “the cemetery begins with this strange heterochrony, the loss of life, and with this quasi-eternity in which her permanent lot is dissolution and disappearance,” (Foucault, 1986: 26) to the ways in which *Treasure Island* is a heterotopic space between past and present; between life and death – it becomes clear that the island itself is a setting of great complexity and transformative potential for those who reach its shores. Being a *Bildungsroman* at its core, *Treasure Island* follows Jim’s transition into adulthood, the island serving as a physical manifestation of this inflection point (Sandison, 1996: 50). As the story is set in heterotopic spaces – coasts, ships, boats and islands – liminality and the crossing of boundaries present a major theme. The choice made by Stevenson’s editor to title the story *Treasure*

*Island* rather than *The Sea Cook* (*The Saturday Review*, 1883) thus proved to be more than apt.

The tides of *Treasure Island* are a significant motif when examining liminality – as Stevenson describes the beaching of the *Hispaniola* in the chapter *Pieces of Eight*, the shifting tide is accompanied by nightfall and a raising of the stakes, as it cuts off an escape route for protagonists and antagonists alike:

By this time the whole anchorage had fallen into shadow – the last rays, I remember, falling through a glade of the wood and shining bright as jewels on the flowery mantle of the wreck. It began to be chill; the tide was rapidly fleeing seaward, the schooner settling more and more on her beam-ends.

I scrambled forward and looked over. It seemed shallow enough, and holding the cut hawser in both hands for a last security, I let myself drop softly overboard. The water scarcely reached my waist; the sand was firm and covered with ripple marks, and I waded ashore in great spirits, leaving the *Hispaniola* on her side, with her main-sail trailing wide upon the surface of the bay. About the same time, the sun went fairly down and the breeze whistled low in the dusk among the tossing pines. (Stevenson, 1998: 161)

Given that Stevenson's later novel, *The Ebb-Tide*, employs similar motifs, the tidal imagery in *Treasure Island* merits attention. The receding sea brings not only a chill, but also the knowledge, for both the reader and for Jim, that the ship will remain immobile until the tide shifts once more. The *Hispaniola* has been commandeered and secured by Jim, but is not a safe refuge until she can sail once again. The tide becomes both a ticking clock and a locked door, as the beaching of the ship makes escape an impossibility. The sea itself is unreliable and dangerous – as evidenced by Jim's coracle being smashed beneath the waves (Stevenson, 1998: 145 f.).

Another important geographical feature – one that is plainly visible on Stevenson's careful illustration of the map – is *Treasure Island's* rather large intertidal zone, the stretch of beach which is laid bare or submerged by the tides. In a text concerned with travel, transition, ambiguity, and the crossing of boundaries, this notable geographical characteristic of the island draws attention to its role as an ambiguous and ever-changing setting. The changing nature of the island reflects the changes the adolescent protagonist goes through, once again lending credence to the argument that this adventure novel is a *Bildungsroman* at heart (Sandison, 1996: 50). Jim repeatedly crosses the threshold – he is both metaphorically and literally forced to leave behind the old, and move into an unknowable future.

## Imperial Romance, Imperial Gothic – The Weird and the Eerie

A sense of the eerie seldom clings to enclosed and inhabited domestic spaces; we find the eerie more readily in landscapes partially emptied of the human. What happened to produce these ruins, this disappearance? What kind of entity was involved? What kind of thing was it that emitted such an *eerie cry*? As we can see from these examples, the eerie is fundamentally tied up with questions of agency. What kind of agent is acting here? Is there an agent at all? (Fisher, 2017: 11)

*Treasure Island* fundamentally calls into question the agency of those who reach its shores – the forces of nature often overpower and terrify Jim. The island functions in much the same way for Ben Gunn, although readers are not privy to the details of his descent into madness over the years he spent on the eerie island, kept company only by the traces of his former shipmates. What stands out is that Ben Gunn eventually becomes the precise kind of eerie presence that Fisher describes above, attempting to scare off the mutineers with his own *eerie cries*. Even in his failure, this adds to the sense of *Treasure Island* as an eerie, gothic space. Before Jim properly meets him, Ben Gunn is a source of horror for him (Stevenson, 1998: 91 f.), and he continues to fill the role of unseen, haunting entity for the mutineers.

This analysis of the island as an eerie space – a space which has been marked, but then conspicuously emptied of the human – necessitates another look into the matter of the treasure itself. The island is shown as having already been the target of colonial ventures. This history has fundamentally changed its nature. As Fisher writes, “Capital is at every level an eerie entity: conjured out of nothing, capital nevertheless exerts more influence than any allegedly substantial entity” (Fisher, 2017: 11). The eerie draw of the treasure has drawn numerous pirates and adventurers into their deaths, as a previous section has shown. Arguably, it is precisely the eerie aura of the treasure that renders the island itself eerie. The presence of the treasure can be read as the incursion of capitalism, of wealth accrued through colonial ventures, into a previously natural and neutral space. What is eerie about *Treasure Island* is linked to its history as a locus of violence, and this violence was driven by a desire for treasure. Neither the abandoned garrison nor the carefully placed human skeletons are inherent to the island – the natural parts of the island examined in the first section are certainly *challenging*, but only when these spaces are influenced and codified by humans do they become eerie.

The unforgiving and inhospitable nature of Stevenson’s island allows for a reading that situates the story closer to the imperial gothic than the imperial romance Stevenson purported to be writing. A protagonist pushed and pulled by the tides of fate, with limited individual agency, faced with an environment that is entirely beyond his preconceived notions of colonial space can be read as a horror protagonist as much as an adventurer. Imperial romances show

a tendency to gloss over how keenly horror accompanies adventure, as their protagonists are meant to be idealised heroes, embodiments of the British spirit. Conversely, *Treasure Island's* ending situates Jim's experience with adventure firmly within the realm of nightmare.

Moretti's focus on the spatial aspects of stories can be utilised to great effect when examining the ways in which horror is built into *Treasure Island* and its spaces:

As style is indeed correlated to space, so *space is correlated to plot*: from Propp to Lotman, the crossing of a spatial border is usually also the decisive event of the narrative structure. The relationship, here is a triangular one: tropes, space and plot. (Moretti, 1990: 46)

If the eponymous *Treasure Island* is a space within which a horror story plays out, this ought to show in the very geography of the literary location. This section is therefore concerned with those aspects of *Treasure Island* which engender a sense of dread in Jim and the reader (Sandison, 1996: 72). While *Treasure Island* is not quite the *Dead Man's Chest* of Stevenson's sea-song, it still holds a long history of death and violence. The skeleton-turned-signpost pointing in the direction of Flint's original burial location is certainly the most macabre trace of this history, but it is far from the only one. The signifiers of danger are everywhere once one knows to look for them – from the islet in the southern cove being called Skeleton Island, to the looming Spy-glass Hill: “The sun was up but was still hid from me behind the great bulk of the Spy-glass, which on this side descended almost to the sea in formidable cliffs” (Stevenson, 1998: 142). The tall cliff blocks out the sun and stands in stark contrast to how Jim once imagined climbing it (Stevenson, 1998: 47). Its name evokes seafaring and adventure, but also the sense of being observed – this duality is made manifest in the contrast of Jim's early imaginings and the reality of his exploration while hiding from the mutineers.

“[From] Stevenson's point of view, darkness is the foundation of seeing” (Colley, 2004: 99). Jim repeatedly waits for night to fall and for darkness to provide him cover: “I stole round by the eastern end, keeping close in shadow, and at a convenient place, where the darkness was thickest, crossed the palisade.” (Stevenson, 1998: 163), but the darkness is also frequently the source of sudden, frightening noises. The darkness provides cover, regardless of who seeks it. Colley spoke of Stevenson's experience in Samoa, when his particular fascination with the interplay of light and dark truly crystallised (Colley, 2004: 99), but *Treasure Island* shows traces of this nuance in thinking. As opposed to the missionaries he knew in Samoa, who defined this interplay in terms of stark opposition and struggle (as their ideology hinged on the necessity of bringing the light of civilization into the perceived darkness of savagery; Brantlinger, 1988: 39–45), Stevenson had a nearly dialectic and “enduring in-

fatuation with patterns of light and darkness” (Colley, 2004: 111). *Treasure Island* is constructed in shades of grey, and it is precisely this all-encompassing ambiguity, expressed under the banner of a genre with simplicity at its core, that renders *Treasure Island* a remarkable exploration of the nuances of how imperial incursion has shaped, and arguably corrupted, colonial spaces.

Although the eerie features of the island are certainly meant to denote danger, some aspects of it are perceived as dangerous specifically because the reader is mostly relying on Jim’s point of view. Stevenson repeatedly opts to bring the limitations of Jim’s perspective into focus, to great effect, such as when the boy encounters local wildlife:

I beheld huge slimy monsters – soft snails, as it were, of incredible bigness – two or three score of them together, making the rocks to echo with their barkings.

I have understood since that they were sea lions, and entirely harmless. But the look of them, added to the difficulty of the shore and the high running of the surf, was more than enough to disgust me of that landing-place. I felt willing rather to starve at sea than to confront such perils. (Stevenson, 1998: 142)

This moment can be viewed both as brief comedic intermission, and as a stark reminder of just how little the story’s protagonist knows of the world he is maturing into. In describing the harmless sea lions as “huge slimy monsters – soft snails,” Stevenson effectively communicates to the reader that Jim, for all his courage and willingness to put himself at risk, is still a relatively sheltered child, and has not had an opportunity to learn many things adults might take for granted. Though it is not a moment of danger that defines the island *per se*, this scene nonetheless illustrates how foreign the world of *Treasure Island* is to Jim (Sandison, 1996: 68). The sea lion encounter shows how even innocuous aspects of *Treasure Island* might be misconstrued as a threat, due to the overall atmosphere of dread and sense of repulsion that Jim has come to associate with all his endeavours on the island.

## Conclusion

Stevenson’s subversion of expectations – the explicit disappointment of dreams of imperial adventure – is most evident in Jim’s dislike of the island as soon as it has moved from the imaginary into the real, and in the ultimate uselessness of the treasure map, which had been exalted as an object of almost mythical importance until its disconnectedness from the reality of the island was discovered. The map of *Treasure Island*, having been examined both as a simulacrum and as an *object of desire*, is unable to fulfil the imperial fantasy. This failure is shown to be a consequence of its propagandistic nature – its

separation from material reality, paired with its power to spark the desires of would-be-adventurers, leads to calamity. The power of imperial mythmaking is made evident in the character of Trelawney, and the unpreparedness that comes from him helming the expedition. By being overly eager, the adventurers inadvertently place themselves into a situation of great precarity – all because they wished to experience the idealised adventure they constructed in boyish dreams. It is both ironic and unfortunate that “[in] the British schoolroom, increasingly devoted to propagandizing empire, *Treasure Island* became a standard” (Simmons, 2007: 47). *Treasure Island* gained popularity by being read as a straightforward boys’ adventure, although the nuances of Stevenson’s later works were already present in it.

Altogether, having examined how it relates to its wider context and how some specific aspects of *Treasure Island* might speak to a variety of colonial issues, as well as how they can be understood by employing modern frameworks of spatiality and representation, the question remains whether *Treasure Island* – with all its innovations and implicit criticisms of the very form it takes – still is what it claims to be. I would argue that on its surface, *Treasure Island* is an imperial romance, it is a boys’ adventure story, and it certainly is everything it has been commonly understood to be – if it were not, it would not have endured as steadily as it has. The boys, both young and old, certainly enjoyed the story they perceived it to be (Simmons, 2007: 47 f.).

However, *Treasure Island* is simultaneously a refutation, or at least a distortion and a reimagining of these things. Stevenson’s novel fundamentally subverts the traditionally imperialist stylings of adventure novels. Despite the successful retrieval of Flint’s treasure, it remains a tale of disappointed imperial ambitions. The appeal of the imperial romance is acknowledged and explored, but it is ultimately undercut by the grim, gothic reality of adventure and its consequences.

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