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David D. Mann

Odds on *Treasure Island*

Knowledge of a writer's life can often help readers glimpse how that writer crafted fictional worlds. Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) is a case in point.¹ Because *Treasure Island* is an imaginative work of fiction specifically designed for younger readers, contemporary audiences seldom see the relevance of Stevenson's life to the novel they read. Yet an examination of what Stevenson was doing in 1881, when he wrote the original narrative, provides us with some understanding of how it was written and why Stevenson used certain fictive elements in the fabric of the novel.² Knowing that Stevenson wrote part of the novel in Scotland and part in Switzerland—with a long interruption between the efforts—forces us to consider the differences between these two parts.

Stevenson began the novel in late August 1881, basing the setting on a map he had drawn to entertain his stepson (Samuel) Lloyd Osbourne (the S. L. O. of the book dedication). Writing in Braemar, Scotland, at the family's vacation cottage, Stevenson produced about a chapter a day until he, his wife Fanny, and

¹Citations to the text of *Treasure Island* are to the first edition (London, 1883), the only reliable text. We have added chapter numbers to citations in the text for the convenience of readers without access to this edition. We should note that the manuscript is no longer extant.

²See William H. Hardesty, III, and David D. Mann, "Stevenson's Method in *Treasure Island*: 'The Old Romance, Retold,'" *Essays in Literature*, 9 (1982), 180-93.

her son Lloyd left for Switzerland for reasons of Stevenson's health. Since *Young Folks* had already begun the serialization of the novel, Stevenson was pressured to get copy to the magazine; then, about the middle of the book, he seemed to be stuck with what we now call "writer's block."

What we will focus on in this essay is how Stevenson, after being away from his novel for almost the entire month of October 1881, regained his ability to write the concluding chapters (19-34), when Jim resumes the narration. We believe the odds that had been set up in the earlier part of the novel—that is, the relative strengths of the opposing parties, expressed in numbers of fighting men on each side—provided Stevenson with a "war of attrition" and helped him get on with his writing. We will examine, first, how Stevenson uses the odds up to Chapter 15, how they are continued through Dr. Livesey's narrative (Chapters 16-18), and how they become more significant in the last sixteen chapters.

Throughout the novel, Stevenson is responsive to the demands of the genre: the young protagonist and his older friends must succeed against apparently overwhelming forces. For maximum reader satisfaction they must carry away the treasure; for best effect they must snatch it from the very grasp of the pirates. The readers' interest would be fixed on exactly how the treasure was to be wrested from the villains and sustained by thrills generated out of their ruthlessness and barbarity. One of the pleasures of reading *Treasure Island*, then, is the way Stevenson has the underdogs succeed. Convention required Stevenson to keep the reader informed of the odds against the loyal party. Poorly handled, his account of the action could have read like the summary of a chess match, with the reader merely following a tabulation of the moves. But Stevenson deftly keeps the odds in the background, giving his audience the intellectual pleasure of constantly re-calculating the forces opposed to the protagonist, guessing how effective they are likely to be, and considering methods of countering them. Although readers are aware of the changing numbers from the pirate attack on the inn until the final return to England, Stevenson only occasionally insists that we attend to them, in order not to impede the action.

The technical problem facing the novelist was to maintain suspense over the course of the fiction by keeping the pirates strong enough to threaten the loyal party, but not so superior a force as to overwhelm it. Stevenson's solution was both to keep track of the odds and to make the reader aware of them. Almost from the beginning, the pirates outnumber Jim and his allies. Early in the tale the odds seem insurmountable. "Seven or eight" buccaneers, led by Blind Pew, come to the Admiral Benbow Inn, seeking Captain Flint's treasure map, stolen by the first mate Billy Bones and found by Jim and his mother in Bones's sea chest after his death (pp. 33 ff, Ch. 4). They are pitted four to one against the Hawkinses. When Mrs. Hawkins faints, Jim can merely observe the pirates plundering the inn, searching for the map he has taken. Not finding it, they fall to quarreling, neglecting Jim and his mother; the forces are evened by the sudden arrival of Supervisor Dance and "four or five" armed men

(p. 41, Ch. 5), routing the pirates. Pew, the initiator of the quarrel, blunders onto the road in the face of the oncoming horsemen and is trampled to death.

This incident is prototypical of the tale's usual situation: the pirates typically outnumber Jim and his friends; they attack only with security of numbers, avoiding conflict with equal forces. While the pirates never actually calculate the odds, they simply assume they are stronger than their foes. They blunder by acting rashly on this assumption. The pirates usually fail, however, because they quarrel among themselves. The implied moral lesson is, of course, that good prevails against evil: right makes might. This Victorian cliché is summed up by Tennyson in "Sir Galahad" (1842): "My strength is as the strength of ten/Because my heart is pure."³ Jim, a pure (if naive) boy, brings the pirates' "whole business . . . to wreck" (p. 231, Ch. 28) because they are his moral inferiors. Jim's values are the accepted ones of Stevenson's middle-class audience; he wins because his middle-class values are superior. For instance, when he sees the wasteful pirates "so careless of the morrow," he knows they cannot endure a long campaign (pp. 257-58, Ch. 31). Ultimately, most are shown to be cowards as well as wastrels, whereas Jim insists on the honorable course (as in refusing to break his word to Silver [pp. 250-51, Ch. 30]). Jim's integrity even leads Silver to claim that Jim is more manly than some of his pirate cronies (p. 234, Ch. 28).⁴

Having established this adversarial pattern before he left England, Stevenson returned to the use of odds in the novel once he was settled in Davos. In the latter part of the novel, written in Switzerland, Stevenson keeps the thrilling adventures on Treasure Island moving swiftly through fights which continually redefine the odds that Jim and his friends face. Having lost the opening skirmish, the pirates plot to ensure their superiority of numbers. Thus, when Squire Trelawney goes to Bristol, planning to recruit "a round score of men," he meets, "by the merest accident" Long John Silver, who promptly gets "rid of two out of the six or seven" that Trelawney had recruited. These are replaced by "the toughest old salts imaginable" (p. 56, Ch. 7). Many of them are, of course, Silver's former shipmates from Flint's *Walrus*. Long John's villainy is not fully revealed, nor does the reader grasp that the pirates have established their desired advantage of three to one.

Hispaniola sails without the pirates' plans being detected. In the course of the voyage, the first mate Arrow is lost (or thrown) overboard (p. 79, Ch. 10). Then, just before their arrival at Treasure Island, Jim discovers the planned pirate mutiny and tells his friends. At the outset of the main conflict, then, "the grown men on [Jim's] side [are] six to [the other side's] nineteen" (p. 101, Ch.

³ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Poems*, ed. Christopher Ricks, (London, 1969), p. 610.

⁴For a more detailed discussion of conservative ethical lessons found in the text, see David Jackson, "Treasure Island as a Late-Victorian Adult's Novel," *Victorian Newsletter*, 72 (1985), 28-32.

12). Upon arriving at Treasure Island, Captain Smollett, wishing to avoid an outright mutiny, allows thirteen of the crew, including Long John, to go ashore, while six remain aboard. When Jim stows away on one of the boats going ashore, he is apparently outnumbered thirteen to one, while the odds aboard ship are even—six to six.

The nineteen presumed pirates include six former members of Flint's crew: Long John Silver, quartermaster; Job Anderson, boatswain; Israel Hands, coxswain; George Merry; Tom Morgan; and O'Brien, a seaman. There are also thirteen recruits, including Dick Johnson, the youngest hand; John; and eleven unnamed sailors. The six adults in the loyal party are Captain Alexander Smollett, master of *Hispaniola*; Squire John Trelawney; Dr. David Livesey; Tom Redruth, Trelawney's gamekeeper; John Hunter, Trelawney's servant; and Richard Joyce, Trelawney's valet.

The reader observes, over the next few pages, rapid changes in these tallies. First, the pirate numbers are reduced: two presumed pirates, Alan and Tom, are murdered by the buccaneers for refusing to throw in with them (pp. 114-15, Ch. 14). Second, the loyal party is augmented by Ben Gunn, a sailor from Flint's crew who has lived alone on the island since being marooned several years before. Finally, Jim's original tally omits the youth himself, although the captain regularly counts him. Thus, by the end of Jim's shore adventure (Ch. 15), the opening phase of the encounter is well begun: battle lines have been drawn, some pawns have been sacrificed, and the loyal party has a potential ally in Ben Gunn.

The inaccuracy of the rolls constitutes Stevenson's subtle reproducing of what historians and wargamers call "the fog of war." No one person in battle ever has exact knowledge of the forces on both sides; since casualties constantly alter the numbers, participants can never be sure of how many survive. Nor can any person know whether friend or enemy will fight effectively. In *Treasure Island*, Stevenson incorporates this "fog" by reminding us of the differences between Jim's knowledge of the odds, the Captain's, Silver's and the reader's. For instance, though the Captain believes they are opposed nineteen to six, we and Jim know the count is different, for Alan and Tom have been murdered. Likewise, Silver and Jim don't know (though the reader does) that Gray has defected to the loyal party. Although the reader almost always has enough information to construct the real odds, Stevenson sometimes deliberately misleads us into accepting apparent odds miscalculated by one of the characters. This tactic serves, of course, to heighten suspense and keep the reader turning the pages. That Stevenson deliberately manipulates real and apparent odds is confirmed by the footnote he appended to the end of chapter 21 of the book text: "The mutineers were soon only eight in number, for the man shot by Mr. Trelawney on board the schooner died that same evening of his wound. But this was, of course, not known till after by the faithful party" (p. 174).

Three chapters (16–18), narrated by Dr. Livesey, complete the opening phase of the war of attrition. The captain persuades Abraham Gray to join him on the last trip from *Hispaniola*; the squire wounds one of the pirates who are firing the ship's gun at the departing jolly boat. Thus, at the end of Chapter 17, the loyal party has seven, plus Jim, against eleven pirates ashore and five aboard *Hispaniola*. Odds, originally reckoned at three to one, are now nearer two to one.

At the beginning of Chapter 18, “seven mutineers—Job Anderson, the boatswain, at their head” attack the stockade, which they believe to be defended only by Hunter and Joyce. Arriving from the ship, the remainder of the loyal party surprises the attackers; “one of the enemy” falls in the brief skirmish, and Tom Redruth is shot from ambush immediately afterward (p. 143). After Redruth's death Captain Smollett sets down the roll of the loyal party in the log book (p. 147): Smollett, Livesey, Gray, Trelawney, Hunter, and Joyce. When Jim returns at the end of the chapter, their number becomes seven; the pirates now boast fifteen, ten ashore and five afloat.

The shift of the narrator from Jim to Dr. Livesey establishes a different tone in the narration. A reliable adult is entrusted with the narrative not only for reasons of the plot (to tell us what happened aboard *Hispaniola*, while Jim is ashore), but also to assist Stevenson in composing these three chapters. In his letter to Henley in September 1881,⁵ Stevenson said he had written up to Chapter 19. But twelve years later when he recalled the events, he had only written through Chapter 15 before he was stymied.⁶ To make sense of these two conflicting accounts, we posit that Stevenson was far more confident about Jim's description of events in the opening fifteen chapters than he was about Dr. Livesey's narration. Perhaps he began his work in Switzerland by reworking the doctor's three chapters before having Jim resume the tale in Chapter 19.⁷ This part of the composition process required Stevenson not only to regain his mastery of Jim's voice, but also to reduce the cast of characters by slowly eliminating the pirate band.

With the war of attrition begun in earnest, Stevenson slowly reduces the pirate forces. The next morning, under flag of truce, Silver complains that during the night one of the pirates had his head “stov[ed]” in. Jim realizes that Ben Gunn “had paid the buccaneers a visit while they all lay drunk together

⁵Robert Louis Stevenson, *Letters*, ed. B. A. Booth and E. Mehew (New Haven and London, 1994), III, 231.

⁶“My First Book,” *Works*, II, xxxiii.

⁷See Patricia W. Hardesty, William H. Hardesty, III, and David D. Mann, “Doctoring the Doctor: How Stevenson Altered the Second Narrator of *Treasure Island*,” *SSL*, 21 (1986), 1-22. See also David Angus, “Youth on the Prow: The First Publication of *Treasure Island*,” *SSL*, 25 (1990), 83-99.

round their fire, and I reckoned up with glee that we had only fourteen enemies to deal with" (pp. 162-63, Ch. 20). However, nobody—including Jim—yet counts Gunn with the loyal party; and of course the pirates know nothing about his presence on the island. By reducing the odds against the loyal party, Stevenson can more easily resume his composition after the disrupting move to Switzerland, as well as regain the thread of the story.

Confident in their numerical superiority, the pirates again assault the stockade (Ch. 21). In this main battle the number of attackers is unclear: four scale the palisade, while at least seven fire in support from the woods (p. 170). During the battle five mutineers fall; the loyal party loses Hunter, Joyce, and the captain, who is disabled by a wound. Nevertheless, the captain gloats, "Five [dead] against three leaves us four to nine. That's better odds than we had at starting. We were seven to nineteen then . . ." (p. 174, Ch. 21). As usual, the Captain counts Jim.

When Jim leaves on his sea adventure, the pirates in fact number only eight, including Long John Silver, Israel Hands, a fellow in a red nightcap (later identified as O'Brien), George Merry, Dick Johnson, Tom Morgan, and two others. (Stevenson makes this clear to the reader in the footnote at the end of Chapter 21.) Most of these survivors are former members of Flint's crew, presumably more experienced and canny than their recent recruits—though one of Flint's crew, Job Anderson, has been "cut down" during the fight in the stockade (p. 172, Ch. 21).

Several other members of Flint's old crew had been lost to them earlier. Ben Gunn, of course, was marooned on Treasure Island several years before. Billy Bones, who betrayed his old shipmates by stealing the map, has died of apoplexy brought on by his confrontation with Blind Pew, himself soon killed by Dance's horsemen. And Black Dog has been left behind because Jim would recognize him as the pirate sent to convince Bones to return the map. Thus, the pirates' numbers have been whittled away from the first by internecine strife. By framing the tale with two defections from their ranks—Bones's theft and Gunn's aiding of the loyal party—Stevenson underscores another aspect of his conventional moral point: there is no honor among thieves.

Jim observes this when he boards *Hispaniola* and finds O'Brien dead as the result of a quarrel (p. 200, Ch. 25) with Israel Hands, who is scarcely alive and badly in need of a drink. A cat-and-mouse game between Jim and the coxswain culminates in a chase up the rigging, where Jim must face Hands alone. As we have previously seen, the implicit tactical favoring of a morally-superior force occurs in incidents pitting one against one. Livesey, earlier, faced down the drunken Bones (pp. 8-9, Ch. 1), armed only with the authority of a magistrate and correct demeanor. Jim, however, is better armed, having two pistols against the pirate's concealed knife, but this is offset by Hands's experience and cunning. When Hands hurls his knife and pins Jim's shoulder to the mast, Jim fires his pistols without his "own volition, and . . . without a conscious aim"

(pp. 216-17, Ch. 26). Having involuntarily killed the pirate, Jim, for the first time, has himself altered the odds in favor of the loyal party.

That Jim and his allies are winning the war of attrition is confirmed when, having beached *Hispaniola*, Jim discovers his adversaries in control of the block-house.

There were six of the buccaneers, all told; not another man was left alive. Five of them were on their feet, flushed and swollen, suddenly called out of the first sleep of drunkenness. The sixth had only risen upon his elbow: he was deadly pale, and the blood-stained bandage round his head told that he had been recently wounded. . . (p. 227, Ch. 28).

Shortly afterward (p. 231), we can deduce from Silver's conversation with Jim that the two parties are of equal strength. Silver reports that Livesey bargained away the stockade and the map on behalf of four (himself, Trelawney, Gray, and the wounded Smollett); however, since Ben Gunn is now an ally and Jim has proved himself, each side actually has five able-bodied members and one wounded.

The next morning, with Jim in tow, the pirates set out to retrieve the treasure. When they discover that the cache is empty, the pirates blame Silver. Though Silver has armed Jim, they are outnumbered five to two (p. 276, Ch. 33). At the crucial moment, Jim and Silver have help from the loyal party, the doctor, Gray, and Ben Gunn (p. 278). The man with the bandaged head and George Merry are shot; the three remaining pirates flee, ultimately to be marooned on the island. The loyal party (now for the first time outnumbering the villains) loads the treasure and sails for Central America.

There Silver (who has been brought along to stand trial) escapes with some of the treasure, leaving Jim to make one final count:

Five men only of those who had sailed returned with her. 'Drink and the devil had done for the rest,' with a vengeance; although, to be sure, we were not quite in so bad a case as that other ship [the pirates] sang about: 'With one man of her crew alive,/What put to sea with seventy-five' (p. 291, Ch. 34).

A tale that began with a rough listing of the survivors ("Squire Trelawney, Dr. Livesey, and the rest of these gentlemen" [p. 1]) ends with an exact recapitulation of them.

What appears to be incidental in the text of *Treasure Island*—recurring tallies of the odds—is thus more important than has been acknowledged. Stevenson accomplished two purposes by taking care with the odds in writing and revising the text, one literary and one practical.

First, Stevenson creates suspense by having the tale depend on the odds against the loyal party. Readers still take pleasure in accounting for all the sailors and landmen who go to the island. Moreover, the gradual manipulation of the odds to favor Jim and his allies reinforces the implied ethical lesson

Victorian audiences would have expected, a lesson summed up by reversing the cliché already cited: in this text “right makes might.”

Second, and more important, the constantly changing odds have a *raison d’être* beyond their helping readers keep track of the action. Through Stevenson’s increased attention to the odds, he provided a framework enabling him to regain his writing momentum. By slowly reducing the numbers facing the loyal party, Stevenson could view the plot as a series of episodes in which the threat of the hostile party is slowly reduced. After all, he had begun by writing a chapter a day.⁸ Thus he could work his way to the end of the story by a similar chapter-a-day method.⁹ What appears to readers as a simple tally of the wearing down of Jim’s enemies functioned also as a way for Stevenson to continue the tale. In fact, the odds are so thoroughly interwoven into the story that most readers absorb the count unconsciously. If we take time to examine Stevenson’s use of the odds, we can see the care that went into the construction of the tale. It is this care in writing and revision that makes *Treasure Island* a masterpiece.¹⁰

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⁸“My First Book,” p. xxxiii.

⁹“My First Book,” p. xxxiv.

¹⁰We wish to thank Professors Barry Menikoff (University of Hawaii), William J. Gracie, Jr. (Miami University), and Susan Garland Mann (Indiana University Southeast) for their helpful suggestions on earlier drafts of this essay.