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## Motion and Agency in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*

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As a young man, Robert Louis Stevenson described an occasion on which his thoughtless interference in an ant colony led to contemplations

of how close we are environed with frail lives, so that we can do nothing without spreading havoc over all manner of perishable homes and interests and affections (Booth & Mehew, eds. 1994-1995, vol. 2, p.10).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these reflections contributed to Stevenson's

favourite mood of an holy terror for all action and all inaction equally — a sort of shuddering revulsion from the necessary responsibilities of life (Booth & Mehew, eds. 1994-1995, vol. 2, p.10).

However, ten years later, the victim of almost perpetual ill health, he lamented, 'I am condemned to a complete inaction, stagnate dismally, and love a letter' (Booth & Mehew, eds. 1994-1995, vol. 4, p.258). By October of 1885, a maturing Stevenson could affirm to William Archer that his own theory was 'that literature must always be most at home in treating movement and change; hence I look for them' (Booth & Mehew, eds. 1994-1995, vol. 5, p.143). Clearly, Stevenson desired — in literature as in life — to delegate a central role to motion as a practical ideal as well as a theoretical concept.

This paper will investigate the author's basis for literary heroism — whether the realisation of heroism for Stevenson's maturing protagonists is based in part upon an achievement of agency through motion. In other words, whether, for Stevenson,

heroism within the *bildungsroman* is defined by a protagonist's heightened ability to conceive of and execute ethical motion within the context of his adventures. The term *ethical* is important here (although hardly unproblematic) because it denotes a mathematical idea of velocity — motion in a specific direction. Stevenson, after all, came from a family of engineers.

In his biography of Stevenson, G. K. Chesterton observed that the author was not in the habit of committing

murders without knowing it, in the manner of our more subconscious criminals and maniacs in modern fiction. He was not in sympathy with those more recent heroes who seem to seduce and betray and even stab in a sort of prolonged fit of absence of mind (1927, p.222).

Nor did he allow his protagonists to achieve any goal of significance by aimless wandering, for such is the territory of roving villains and anti-heroes, such as Long John Silver and *The Master of Ballantrae's* (1889) James Durie. Yet in *Treasure Island* (1883) Jim Hawkins does not recapture the *Hispaniola* by mistake. Likewise, in *The Black Arrow* (1888), Richard Shelton's battle tactics may be rash, but they are never accidental. If time permitted, similar arguments could be made for the actions of David Balfour of *Kidnapped* (1886), and Monsieur St. Ives in the novel bearing that surname (1898). All of these characters demonstrate a sense of movement. But if we can conclude that, for Stevenson's protagonists, the quest is not achieved by accident but rather through conscious ethical motion, is such motion necessary to their eventual realisations of heroism? If so, then does this realisation essentially invalidate the enormously popular critical conception of Stevenson's young protagonists as static characters — simplistic, unreliable, and amoral? The following case study examines the *bildungsroman* journey of young Jim Hawkins, the

protagonist of *Treasure Island*, in order to reach answers to these questions.

Due to its extraordinary popular appeal, *Treasure Island* has remained Stevenson's most translated work for over a century and has received much critical acclaim as an adventure story (Hubbard 2007, p.17). However, in a similar vein to many other critics, Robert Kiely argues that *Treasure Island* and certain of the *New Arabian Nights* (1882), 'are exquisite and captivating shells, beautifully contrived, a pleasure to behold, but brittle, insubstantial, and irrelevant' (1964, p.261). Yet a close reading of the text demonstrates that as a novel *Treasure Island* is neither 'insubstantial' nor 'irrelevant' within Stevenson's oeuvre. It is true that when Stevenson first embarked upon writing *Treasure Island*, he wrote that this was a story with 'no need for psychology or fine writing', but later he seems to have changed his mind (1922a, p.xxii). Indeed, after the original version of the story was serialised in *Young Folks*,<sup>1</sup> Stevenson decided to 're-write *Treasure Island* in the whole latter part, lightening and *siccating* throughout' for publication in book form (Booth & Meheew, 1994-1995, vol. 3, p.276). In his article 'Youth on the Prow: The First Publication of *Treasure Island*', David Angus provides an insightful comparison of the periodical and later print versions, pointing out that

the conscious artist in Stevenson (an enormous part of him) was simply forced to take over, mayhap, and to provide an 'older' approach, a more responsible attitude altogether (1990, p.98).

Indeed, it seems that Stevenson's revision of the *Treasure Island* manuscript for book publication demonstrates that at some point he

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<sup>1</sup> The story was serialized in *Young Folks*, under the pseudonym of Captain George North, from October 1881 through January 1882, then revised for publication in book form in 1883.

was overtaken by his lifelong preoccupation with finely crafted narrative and psychologically nuanced characters. That is, the original ‘awful fun’ boy’s story came to be imbued with more of the author’s typical depth (Booth & Mehew, 1994–1995, vol. 3, p.225). He would later write to his friend W. E. Henley that

I do desire a book of adventure — a romance — and no man will get or write me one. [. . .] I want to hear swords clash. I want a book to begin in a good way; a book, I guess, like *Treasure Island*, alas! (Booth & Mehew, 1994–1995, vol. 4, p.307).

The very fact that Stevenson, the famously severe critic and consummate aesthete, should assign such a high value to any book, especially his own, is noteworthy. Thus, it seems that the novel can hardly be considered as ‘naïve’ as many critics would like to categorise it. Equally important to the analysis of motion as it relates to the heroism of Stevenson’s *bildungsroman* is Angus’ assertion that, for the most part, the pirates of *Treasure Island*

came out pretty much unchanged in the book. It was the heroes, not the villains, that caused R.L.S. furiously to labor over his revisions (1990, p.97).

Stevenson’s determination to perfect Jim Hawkins and Doctor Livesey in particular — the primary protagonist/narrator and secondary narrator — reveals his attention to the specifics of his protagonists’ heroic endeavours. Thus, *Treasure Island* proves an especially helpful text for this investigation.

At the beginning of the novel, Jim Hawkins is an average adolescent boy — curious, eager for adventure and noticeably timid of the ‘tall, strong, heavy, nut-brown man’ with ‘a soiled blue coat’, ‘ragged and scarred hands’, and a ‘sabre-cut across one cheek’ who appears at the Admiral Benbow inn (Stevenson 1922b, p.21). Jim’s

only recorded movements in regards to Billy Bones are those which fulfil the ‘Captain’s’ orders: he serves the man rum, observes silence when Bones is drunk, and stays on the lookout for the dreaded ‘seafaring man with one leg’ (Stevenson 1922b, p.14). At this early point in the story, Jim’s motion does not appear to be self-determined. Thus, when Black Dog appears at the inn, it is the pirate who determines Jim’s actions: Jim reports that Black Dog ‘motioned me to draw near’ (Stevenson 1922b, p.21). Likewise, after delivering the black spot, Pew, the terrifying blind pirate

suddenly left hold of me, and, with incredible accuracy and nimbleness, skipped out of the parlour and into the road, where, as I still stood motionless, I could hear his stick go tap-tap-tapping into the distance (Stevenson 1922b, p.37).

Quite noticeably, the early portion of this adventure is marked by passivity on the part of Jim whilst the agents of villainy — here symbolised by Black Dog and Pew — are characterised by action. This serves to set the scene so that while

in the early chapters he [Jim] is a lucky boy who is on the spot through no particular doing of his own,’ later ‘having taken charge, he makes his own luck and forces the development of events (Hardesty *et al.* 1986, p.5).

Indeed, the first glimmer of initiative that we see in Jim takes place after Billy Bones has been issued the black spot and fallen dead. Since Jim and his mother know that the pirates will be returning later that night, they walk to the nearest hamlet to recruit help for the defence of the inn. However, their neighbours prove useless for any such task, causing Jim’s shocked comment that

you would have thought men would have been ashamed of themselves — no soul would consent to return with us to the ‘Admiral Benbow’ (Stevenson 1922b, p.40).

Despite their best attempts at persuasion, the Hawkins' only success is to have a messenger dispatched to Dr. Livesey in search of armed assistance. This experience awakens Jim to the realisation that 'cowardice is infectious; but then, argument is, on the other hand, a great emboldener' (Stevenson 1922b, p.41), an insight which will prove prophetic in the latter half of the novel. At this stage, however, Jim has perceived the need for action and found courage by attempting to persuade necessary measures to be taken by conventionally 'able' characters — the grown men. Yet it is still early in Jim's quest, and he shows himself unable to follow through with any major heroic movement, both physically, because of his age, and psychologically, because he lacks maturity and experience. Thus, he hides from the pirates who ransack the Admiral Benbow, for although, in Jim's own words:

my curiosity, in a sense, was stronger than my fear [. . .] I could not remain where I was, but crept back to the bank again, whence, sheltering my head behind a bush of broom, I might command the road before our door (Stevenson 1922b, p.48).

Significantly, these are the very same pirates whom Jim will later actively oppose. However, although Jim possesses psychological and emotional courage even at this early phase of the *bildungsroman* — after all, he does help his mother to safety when she faints, rather than abandoning her to in order put more distance between himself and the pirates — he lacks the agency to act upon the situation in an ethical manner. Indeed, it is the pirates' own inability to initiate movement which prevents them from recovering the map: after realizing that it has been lifted from Bones' sea chest, they fall to quarrelling rather than searching for the Hawkins', inaction for which Pew accuses them of lacking 'the pluck of a weevil in a

biscuit' (Stevenson 1922b, p.51). Meanwhile an older, narrating Jim takes the opportunity to assert that this argument was 'the saving of us' (Stevenson 1922b, p.52), for it allows the necessary time for Supervisor Dance and the revenue officers to reach the Admiral Benbow, thus frightening away the avaricious buccaneers.

As the story progresses, it is important to note the distinct physical motion with which Dr. Livesey invites Jim to join the story's principle law-abiding adult characters in opening the oilskin packet containing Billy Bones' map:

The squire and I were both peering over his shoulder as he opened [the packet], for Dr. Livesey had kindly motioned me to come round from the side-table, where I had been eating, to enjoy the sport of the search (Stevenson 1922b, p.60).

This is a crucial moment for Jim, when the doctor's invitation signals a sort of initiation or rite of passage as young Hawkins embarks upon the transition from youth to adulthood — a passage which will be marked by Jim's heightened ability to claim agency within his threatening surroundings. Moreover, Stevenson's use of the term *sport* in relation to the impending adventures surrounding the map could be interpreted as retaining latent physical connotations of motion.

The next major phase in Jim's development as a *bildungsroman* protagonist begins with his fortuitous discovery of the pirates' plan to mutiny, which he overhears whilst concealed from sight in the bottom of an apple barrel. After Jim reports his discovery to Captain Smolett, Squire Trelawney, and Dr. Livesey, they express a desire that he should act as a mole amongst Long John Silver's men, since the pirates are accustomed to him and will not find his presence suspicious. Jim admits:

I began to feel pretty desperate at this, for I felt altogether helpless; and yet, by an odd train of circumstances, it was indeed through me that safety came (Stevenson 1922b, p.114).

This comment is especially relevant to any discussion concerning the ‘static protagonist’ idea, because a confession by Stevenson’s heroes of feeling inadequate often seems to lead to a rather naïve, if unfortunately widespread, critical deduction of their actually being inadequate. Edwin Eigner certainly exemplifies this idea with his statement that

the first and the last thing to note about Stevenson’s characters is that they usually fail in life. There is scarcely a full-blooded success in the lot of them (1966, p.47).

Eigner also maintains that, for Stevenson, ‘the only action that can come from good seems to be the act of resignation from life’ (1966, p.127). Yet the states of being and feeling are hardly identical, as Stevenson’s foreshadowing in the previously quoted passage demonstrates. Indeed, only a few pages after Jim has voiced these anxieties, he discloses that ‘there came into my head the first of the mad notions that contributed so much to save our lives’ (Stevenson 1922b, p.123). In this context, Jim’s ‘notions’ transmute easily to motions, since action is always at the very heart of Hawkins’ plans. The idea to which he is referring here is that of going ashore with the pirates in boats, whilst the remainder of the loyal crew stay aboard the *Hispaniola*.

After leaving the ship, as soon as Jim’s boat touched the island’s shore, he ‘caught a branch and swung [himself] out, and plunged into the nearest thicket’, totally disregarding Silver’s order to stay. Jim reports that he ‘paid [Silver] no heed; jumping, ducking, and breaking through, [he] ran straight before [his] nose, till [he] could run no longer’ (Stevenson 1922b, p.124). These deliberately

chronicled movements end up saving his life. Alternatively, characters who find themselves unable to actively resist villainy often suffer, even to the point of death. A good example of this is Tom, an honest crewman from the *Hispanolia* who possesses the moral determination to resist Silver's pressure to turn traitor but who lacks the agency to physically do so. He is brutally killed by Silver and lays 'motionless upon the sward' while his 'murderer minded him not a whit, cleansing his blood-stained knife the while upon a wisp of grass' (Stevenson 1922b, p.130-131). After witnessing the murder from a hiding place, Jim recalls how 'I ran as I never ran before' (Stevenson 1922b, p.131), thus demonstrating his realisation that purposeful movement away from evil is essential to survival on Treasure Island.

Although at this point in the story Jim has achieved some degree of agency for motion, he has yet to demonstrate conscious and ethical action, which is established throughout Stevenson's fiction as the basis for heroism in a protagonist. Noticeably, soon after fleeing Silver, Jim remembers that he possesses the implements with which to take action (i.e. pistols): 'As soon as I remembered I was not defenceless, courage glowed again in my heart' (Stevenson 1922b, p.134). He has witnessed his ability to survive by moving away from danger, and now he is beginning to comprehend his own aptitude for taking initiative. Nevertheless, Stevenson refuses to present a world of simple morality for his protagonist. Thus, we know that Jim's envy of the doctor's errand into the forest is 'not by any means so right' (Stevenson 1922b, p.197), but it does open the way to useful, and even ethical, motion. Jim plans to sneak away from the stockade and find Ben Gunn's boat, an escapade which eventually leads to the re-capture of the *Hispaniola*. Jim acknowledges that leaving

when nobody was watching [. . .] was so bad a way of doing it as made the thing itself wrong. But I was only a boy, and I had made my mind up (Stevenson 1922b, p.198).

Just as Jim freely admits his own morally ambiguous motives, so he owns that

I was a fool, if you like, and certainly I was going to do a foolish, over-bold act, but I was determined to do it with all the precautions in my power (Stevenson 1922b, p.197-198).

With statements such as this, the adult Jim reminds us of the protagonist's youthfulness, but this is never used as an excuse for his decisions. That is, Stevenson never hints that Jim is ethically unaware or inculpable; in other words, Jim is not amoral. Nevertheless, readers are naturally lenient towards him precisely because he is in the midst of the maturing process — his perception of danger and realisation of the need for action is stronger than his cognitive ability to weigh up risk. Yet this weakness is also his strength, for, ultimately, as Hardesty *et al.* point out, 'what defeats the pirates is Jim's venturesome, youthful strategy' (1986, p.10).

The 'venturesome, youthful strategy' is the very thing which emboldens Jim to take Ben Gunn's flimsy coracle out to the *Hispaniola*. Upon reaching the schooner, he reports that;

my hands came across a light cord that was trailing overboard across the stern bulwarks. Instantly I grasped it.

Why I should have done so I can hardly say. At first it was mere instinct; but once I had it in my hands and found it fast, curiosity began to get the upper hand, and I determined I should have one look through the cabin window (Stevenson 1922b, p.207-208).

Here, Jim's action goes from being merely instinctive to being the product of volition, which allows him to accomplish his mission: cutting the schooner away from its anchor. This done, he continues journeying steadily toward the achievement of heroism, despite encountering moments of frailty, such as when he realises that his path to shore is blocked by treacherous rocks and unfamiliar animals, and records that he 'felt willing rather to starve at sea than to confront such perils' (Stevenson 1922b, p.212). Yet when the coracle fills with seawater, he bales it out, 'moving with all care' (Stevenson 1922b, p.213-214), while his plan to paddle toward land in the smoother areas of water is, 'no sooner thought upon than done' (Stevenson 1922b, p.214). When the morning light reveals him to be close to the drifting *Hispaniola*, Jim hatches a bold plan to retake the schooner:

The scheme had an air of adventure that inspired me, and the thought of the water-breaker beside the fore companion doubled my growing courage (Stevenson 1922b, p.216).

Once aboard the schooner, the morality of his actions becomes even more apparent — he throws the pirate flag overboard and helps to bind up Israel Hands' wound (Stevenson 1922b, p.223-225). Indeed, it is also worth noting that Jim refuses to partake in what he believes to be immoral action — namely, tossing O'Brien's body into the water at Hands' suggestion (Stevenson 1922b, p.227-228).

After Hands has helped sail the *Hispaniola* to the North Inlet, the pirate attacks Jim with a dagger, but Jim eludes him — partly because he can play and dominate 'a boy's game' of dodging one's opponent (Stevenson 1922b, p.235). After a violent lurch of the ship knocks the two opponents off their feet, Jim takes immediate action:

quick as thought, I sprang into the mizzen shrouds, rattled up hand over hand, and did not draw a breath till I was seated on the cross-trees [. . . where] I lost no time in changing the priming of my pistol (Stevenson 1922b, p.236).

Hands chases Jim and, following a brief standoff, throws a dagger at him, pinning the boy's shoulder to the mast. Jim's account of what happens next is fascinating:

in the horrid pain and surprise of the moment — I scarce can say it was by my own volition, and I am sure it was without a conscious aim — both my pistols went off, and both escaped out of my hands (Stevenson 1922b, p.238).

Although Jim claims that his killing of Hands is subconscious — indeed, almost accidental — it is important to consider this assertion within the context of the book. Two things are noteworthy here. The first is that Jim's account, as we learn from its opening lines, is presumably an official document written at the request of prominent public figures, and therefore liable to be widely circulated. Thus, like Supervisor Dance earlier in the novel (Stevenson 1922b, p.55), Jim is understandably keen to exonerate himself from any guilt associated with manslaughter — even when the dead man is a pirate and the killing a seemingly clear case of self-defence. Second, we are given to understand from the adult narrator that, 'I was no sooner certain of [Hands' death] than I began to feel sick, faint, and terrified' (Stevenson 1922b, p.239), a reasonable reaction, especially when coupled with the observation that at the time Jim's psychological sufferings are worse than the physical pain of Hands' knife in his shoulder (Stevenson 1922b, p.241). Thus, it is also possible that the grown Jim is uncertain of how to explain the shock caused by psychological trauma to his boyish self.

Regardless of the rationale behind Jim's claim that Israel Hands' killing was inadvertent, the conscious motion involved with recapturing the ship and the battle with Hands has certainly changed the boy, and there is an underlying pathos in his admission that he can deal with O'Brien's body now that 'the habit of tragical adventures had worn off almost all my terror for the dead' (Stevenson 1922b, p.241). This action does not prove that Jim has suddenly abandoned his ethical code — only that he has encountered a revelation in the 'tragical' experience of adventure. With maturity comes the realisation that moral issues are not always as clear as we would like them to be, and sometimes an ethical decision involves choosing the lesser of two evils. Thus, Jim elects to favour the living over the dead — his action of throwing O'Brien's body overboard foregoes the opportunity to provide a proper funeral, but cleanses the ship of a contaminating presence, both literally and metaphorically.

After the recapture of the *Hispaniola*, Jim's adventures continue, as does his increasingly heroic behaviour — although in Stevenson's writing ideas of 'heroism' are invariably problematised. Christopher Parkes argues that, in *Treasure Island*, Jim Hawkins 'emerges an image of a heroic civil servant' (2006, p.332), but this is certainly something of a simplified picture. After all, by the novel's end Jim has single-handedly killed another man and been party to the marooning of three others — hardly the respectable behaviour of any conscientious civil servant, heroic or otherwise. Yet Parkes lucidly points out that, for Stevenson, 'the settled world may be respectable but with too much respectability comes a lack of heroism' (2006, p.337-338). In Stevenson's best fiction, the uncomfortable side of heroism, which might repulse polite society, comes glaringly to the forefront. Indeed, nothing could be more wrong than Kiely's comment that 'death in *Treasure Island* is quick,

clean, and above all, efficient for the rapid advancement of the plot' (1964, p.74). Some critics have even attributed Stevenson's substantial re-writing of Dr. Livesey for the story's publication in book form to his being 'toned down' because 'the ethic of the adolescent adventure novel requires heroism to be demonstrated and not merely insisted upon' (Hardesty *et al.*, 1986, p.7). Even in the final version, we find, as the story progresses, that Dr. Livesey's

is a too intellectual style of play against opponents as desperate as Silver and his crew. Jim, on the other hand, plays a more adventurous, romantic game, emphasizing the offensive and relying on unexpected gambits such as stealing the ship back from the pirates (Hardesty *et al.* 1986, p.10).

Heroism in Stevenson's *bildungsroman* is anything but tidy, but it is this very rawness which haunts Stevenson's fiction in the best romance tradition.

Indeed, as the end of the novel approaches, even Long John Silver believes (or at least claims to believe) that Jim is 'more a man than any pair of rats of you [pirates]' (Stevenson 1922b, p.258). In other words, the tables have been turned — the boy who once hid in fear from the pirates ends up conquering them, both physically, as demonstrated by the stand-off with Hands, and psychologically. Perhaps nowhere is Jim's psychological agency better demonstrated than by his fiery speech to the pirates who have captured him at the stockade, which also invites reading as a catalogue of the boy's increasingly heroic movements:

here you are, in a bad way: ship lost, treasure lost, men lost; your whole business gone to wreck; and if you want to know who did it — it was I! I was in the apple barrel the night we sighted land, and I heard you, John, and you, Dick Johnson, an Hands, who is now at the bottom of the sea, and told every word you said before the hour

was out. And as for the schooner, it was I who cut her cable, and it was I that killed the men you had aboard of her, and it was I who brought her to where you'll never see her more, not one of you. The laugh's on my side; I've had the top of this business from the first; I no more fear you than I fear a fly (Stevenson 1922b, p.255-256).

Despite the fact that Jim does express some lingering trepidation of the pirates to Doctor Livesey in private, the very fact that this *bildungsroman* has progressed so far that a boy who a few months earlier hid in the bushes while pirates ransacked his home can now face them with such defiance is enormously significant. Jim's innocence at the outset of the story has been replaced with an experience achieved through ethical motion — motion which has proved crucial both to his survival and his attainment of heroism, but will inevitably haunt his dreams when the *Hispaniola* has sailed away from Treasure Island forever.

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