Navigating Chance: Statistics, Empire, and Agency in R. L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island*

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By all accounts, the dashing adventure in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* is a success. Having risked life and limb against piracy and the high seas, the adventurers discover an immense fortune, which allows them all to live out their lives as respectable gentlemen. Even the former pirate Ben Gunn, despite blowing through his portion of the fortune in nineteen days, settles into a parish lodge, where he becomes “a great favourite ... with the country boys, and a notable singer in church” (Stevenson, *Treasure Island* 190). The discovery of treasure—no matter its origins in expropriation and violence—facilitates closure and affirms the novel's heroes. Yet, despite this affirmation, the novel's conclusion is strangely undermined by the return of a motif that is, as we shall see, prodigious in the novel. While en route to Bristol, where the journey began, Jim Hawkins calculates that “five men only of those who had sailed returned with her” (189). The note of “five men only” is part of a vast vocabulary of numbers, quantities, odds, and chances that recurs throughout the novel. These numbers often solicit a feeling of suspense, as characters struggle against impossible circumstances. Here, however, numbers have the effect of distancing the reader from the characters. It is not that Jim, Captain Smollett, Squire Trelawney, Dr. Livesey, and Abraham Gray—all characters we have come to know and identify—return against unlikely odds, but “five men only.” I will return to this scene later in my essay, but for now, I want to note how surprisingly disinterested this evocation of numbers is for a novel preoccupied with the ways in which English, male professionals adapt to the circumstances of the high seas. This de-personalization undercuts success, which no longer derives from any force of character or quality of a particular subject. Rather, these numbers point to a domain of mechanical causality, where individual volition is replaced by abstract bodies in motion.

Yet, what is the adventure novel absent this agential and heroic subject? In the pages that follow, I examine *Treasure Island*'s obsession with numbers and with acts of counting and calculating. This numerical discourse represents an important, yet overlooked, counterpoint in the novel to its thematic celebration of heroic subjects. By tallying and enumerating characters and by turning them into quantities and aggregates, *Treasure Island* responds to cultural assumptions about the relationship between the one and the many, a relationship that underwent a transformation as a result of two major events: first, the rise of social statistics, and, second, the expansion of the British Empire. Both statistics and imperial expansion gradually effaced the one in favor of the many. While for some this left room for individual variation and free will, it also meant that the structure of

collective life operated independently of individual intention or agency—and, thus, why the actions of identifiable characters might be unassimilable to the anonymous behavior of the “five men” who returned.

In her study of sea adventure fiction, Margaret Cohen argues that the genre is exceptional among novel genres for its portrayal of the rhythms and dynamics of labor, which achieve representative density in the figure of the “compleat mariner.” The compleat mariner, writes Cohen, “achieved iconic status for his ability to navigate a path safely through the marine element” (4). This focus on the agency of a particular subject is an expression of the performative ability—rather than deep psychology—necessary for survival on the high seas. By emulating through action rather than through thought or feeling, the adventurer matures into a successful sailor who is capable of navigating the uncertainties of an aqueous and modernizing world. As he successfully weathers storms, battles pirates, and navigates the unknown, the mariner performs the virtues of labor, and these acts of self-fashioning “affirm [his] identity—an identity that expresses a culture’s constitutive values” (3). Yet, by the 1880s, when *Treasure Island* was published, it was no longer safe to assume that the behaviors or values of a culture ran parallel to the actions of a particular individual—or, for that matter, that an embodied individual was the best representative of a culture. The growth of statistical rationality and the expansion of the British empire both suggest that macrosocial patterns were often incommensurate with the realities of particular individuals. In this essay, I show how both of these events, which I argue are paradigmatic of a broader conceptual shift in the figuration of society toward quantity, contributed to the subject’s gradual dislocation, as the one and the many came into conflict with one another. *Treasure Island* not only registers this dislocation but examines the ramifications of it, particularly for questions of responsibility and justice.

By connecting *Treasure Island*’s fascination with quantity to the problem of responsibility, I will suggest how the novel elaborates a model of accountability that is particularly salient in light of the divorce of the particular from the general that both statistics and imperial expansion enabled. Central to the overlap of these terms is the question of intentionality, or the capacity of the individual to will the actions for which they are held responsible. For example, critics of statistical rationality often argued that its exclusive focus on frequencies, patterns, and distributions within big data seemed to confound judgments of guilt and responsibility.¹ Similarly, partisans of imperial expansion often imagined that it took place seemingly independent of particular subjects, which allowed arguments in favor of imperial domination to cohabit the same discursive space as those arguments in favor of liberal individualism. Yet, as the tension between numbers and individual characters in *Treasure Island* indicates, structures and patterns do not absolve the individual of responsibility but make it necessary to articulate models of responsibility that are not beholden to strictly causal determinations of will or intention. Drawing on Stevenson’s defense of the “typical” in his essay “A Humble Remonstrance,” I argue that *Treasure Island* addresses this conundrum most vividly in its characterization of Jim, whose many acts of bravery and recklessness suggest the need to re-evaluate to what end agency is being championed in the novel. “Navigating chance,” in the words of my title and in the context of the novel, means operating in the absence of a deterministic universe. But, it also means that individual actions were no longer a reliable model for the order and patterns of collective behavior. Instead—and this is the point made by the novel—

participation in a group or community becomes the basis of judgments about individual responsibility.

1. Outnumbered: enumeration and statistical rationality

Treasure Island's thematization of adventure and piracy is rhetorically paralleled by the novel's dense network of numerical allusions. The idiom of enumeration underwrites both the harrowing sense of being "outnumbered" by the pirates (109) and by Long John Silver's acts of "playing double" (166). When the pirates finally turn on Silver, suspecting rightly that he is conspiring with Dr. Livesey, they do so "one after another" (156). Even seemingly banal phrases take on a second meaning in this ubiquitous numerical lexicon. Shortly after learning about the pirates' plan for mutiny and murder, Captain Smollett asks of Squire Trelawney, "We can *count*, I take it, on your own home servants?" (65, emphasis added). And, when all is said and done, Jim values their treasure at the cost of "the lives of seventeen men" (185).

Throughout the novel, enumeration is part of the process of rationalization that is necessary for navigating chance and adventure, where characters are at risk of being done in by duplicity, mutiny, and violence. Survival in this world is connected to judging correctly, or finding patterns and structures within the morass of contingencies. That is why determining who is a friend and who is an enemy, or pirate, is such a crucial thematic element to the novel. Even Jim's surname, Hawkins, suggests that what sets him apart from others is an ability to make keen judgments regarding the available data. (In Jim's case, however, this naming is somewhat ironic, or at least aspirational, given how often his decisions are made spontaneously.)

The inferential movement between the particular and the general, observation and judgment, can be a matter of life and death. In a crucial narrative moment, with the protagonists defending their garrison against the pirates, individual distinctions dissolve in the hurly-burly of armed conflict. Accounting for the enemy quickly becomes a way to eliminate chance and to control the contingencies of battle: "Of the four who had scaled the palisade, one only remained unaccounted for" (113). After the pirates retreat, Captain Smollett counts over the dead bodies: "Five against three leaves us four to nine. That's better odds than we had at starting" (113). Like the double-entry pages of modern accounting, the captain's system of counting and calculating odds here is premised on "the effect of accuracy," whereby the precise nature of enumeration is supposed to produce an accurate reflection of reality (Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact* 30). Yet, Jim's narration confounds this accuracy. In the only editorial note given in the entire novel, Jim adds to the captain's calculation, noting that "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 that was, of course, not known till after by the faithful party" (113). Rather than undermine the captain's calculations, however, Jim's paratextual correction reinforces the ironic structure of the epistemology that supports the captain's method. In that method, knowledge of the unknown or unseen is mediated through induction, and the concrete specifics of the present become evidence of a general concept or truth. In the absence of an omniscient perspective, any generalization must remain an approximation of what is uncertain and open to ironic reversal or correction.

By representing and evoking this movement between particulars and generals, Stevenson evokes the discourses of statistics and probability, which revolutionized a wide range of disciplines in the nineteenth century, from the social sciences to the study of the planets, from public health to thermodynamics. Since Foucault's influential account of statistics and the rise of biopolitics, literary critics have elaborated on this history, demonstrating how the sheer ubiquity of this new discipline necessarily complicates our ideas about Victorian liberalism and utilitarianism, social reform, and literary aesthetics.² It is generally accepted that, with the adoption of the national census in 1801 and the establishment of the British General Register Office in 1837, the nineteenth century marked a turning point in the history of statistical rationality.³ Between 1820 and 1850, the British exhibited an unprecedented "enthusiasm for statistical data-collection," and inquiry was directed toward the large-scale enumeration of the population, of behavior, of bodies, and of the contingencies of modern social life (Hacking, "Biopower and the Avalanche of Printed Numbers" 281).

What fueled the statistical revolution was the discovery of an underlying regularity within seemingly accidental and contingent events. From the rate of undelivered mail in Paris to the spread of cholera among soldiers during the Crimean War, this regularity became newly visible as a consequence of enumeration.⁴ This pattern within collected data came to be named the Law of Large Numbers. Recognized as a general mathematical principle since the 17th century, when it was first demonstrated by the Swiss mathematician Jakob Bernoulli, the Law of Large Numbers was later named and connected to the problem of social statistics by Siméon-Denis Poisson, a French mathematician, in 1837. Poring over census data collected within France, Poisson realized that the average frequency of events tended to remain regular from year to year (Gigerenzer et al. 39–40). Some Victorian writers, like the historian Henry Thomas Buckle, determined that this regularity was evidence of universal laws for natural and social life, while most others hesitated to infer any sort of causality about these patterns and frequencies. Thus, one of the great intellectual developments of the nineteenth century was the idea "that the world might be regular and yet not subject to universal laws" (Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* 1). In other words, statistics guaranteed a regular order at large scales without necessarily implying causal determinism. At the level of the individual subject or event, chance dominated.

One of the principal features of statistical rationality that developed as a consequence of the Law of Large Numbers was the belief that this large-scale quantification of society offered a clearer portrait of objective reality than the messiness of life at the scale of the individual. The historian Alain Desrosières argues that these statistical patterns "had to do with society and its stability, and no longer concerned individuals and the rationality of their decisions" (68). As a result of statistical evidence, probability models abandoned efforts to make speculative or predictive claims about particular events or subjects. While probability was a distinct area of study, separate from statistics, probability models were nonetheless influenced by social scientific data, and the study of probability turned away from earlier models of classical probability, which attempted to answer questions of subjective belief and expectation, for what is known as objective or frequentist probability, which focused on patterns and distributions within aggregated data. According to Lorraine Daston, classical probability came to be seen as "dangerously subjective," which meant that it was limited both by the fallibility of individual interpretation and by its emphasis on conduct and behavior (370).

Objective probability, in turn, stressed that individuals were, in some sense, ancillary to statistical models and frequencies. In *The Logic of Chance* (1866), the philosopher John Venn writes of these frequencies: “Here then we have a class of things as to the individuals of which we feel quite in uncertainty, whilst as we embrace large numbers in our assertions we attach greater weight to our inferences” (3). While Venn refers to this class, which he also calls a series, as a “mere fiction or artifice necessarily resorted to for the purpose of calculation” (120), he nonetheless argues that it is the basis of all knowledge, citing the epigrammatic “ignorance of the few, knowledge of the many” to summarize his epistemology (124).⁵ Like John Stuart Mill, who offered a similar defense of the frequentist interpretation in *A System of Logic*, Venn refused to make inferences about the single case, arguing that it could easily match with any number of different and even contradictory probability series (Porter 87).⁶ In a famous example, Venn imagines the case of a “consumptive Englishman” who must decide whether to travel to Madeira or not (222). The two probability series, based on the vital statistics gathered by health reformists and life insurance companies, contradict one another. One suggests that he would benefit from the trip (as a consumptive), and the other suggests that he would be negatively affected (as an Englishman). What would be the rational or probable consequence of a decision to travel to Madeira? Can, in fact, statistics be appealed to when making judgments of this sort? “One would cause us in some considerable degree to believe what the other would cause us in some considerable degree to disbelieve,” writes Venn before concluding, “Without further data, therefore, we can come to no decision” (223).

Venn’s defense of the frequentist interpretation is interesting because, by taking the series as the basis of knowledge and judgment, he retains a space for individual autonomy while nonetheless making the question of our knowledge of the individual all but disappear. Mary Poovey refers to this dynamic as the “double paradox of statistical thinking” (“Figures” 269). On the one hand, the individual forms the basis of statistical data-collections, insofar as nineteenth-century statistical methods had not yet developed techniques for sampling and, therefore, were dependent upon empirical experience. On the other, probabilistic inferences depend upon relative frequency and repetition; the individual, as a result, “is obliterated by the numerical average or aggregate that replaces him” (269). Adolphe Quetelet’s *l’homme moyen*, or average man, is a perfect example of this propulsive movement away from particularity toward the representativeness of an artificial construct that nonetheless retains the shape of that original individual. The example of the consumptive Englishman in Venn’s *Logic of Chance* is illustrative because it is not so much an exception that proves the rule as it is a singularity that cannot be accommodated within a higher-order abstraction. The consumptive Englishman is thus distinct from the notion of a statistical outlier—the “monstrosities” and “dwarfs and giants” that Venn argues must be included within probabilistic frequencies for accuracy (30).

It’s hard to read these statements about probabilistic series and not think of the case of the double-crossing Long John Silver. Despite the ways in which the novel frames him as an oddity or an outlier, Silver is more like the consumptive Englishman insofar as he occupies different categories with contraindications.⁷ He often operates within the threshold between categories. For example, his crutch and peg-leg give him the appearance of a “bird” (42). This hybrid status—at the ontological boundary between human and animal—generates a particular for which there is no general type. Through his duplicity and categorical liminality, Silver is produced as an exception, which explains why it is

so difficult to make inferences about his character.⁸ But, in some ways, it also explains one draw of the adventure novel: a progressive movement forward, toward more examples and evidence that might make a final judgment possible.

Earlier, I quoted Jim's tally at the end of the novel that "five men only of those who had sailed returned." What I delayed mentioning was the fact that Jim's calculations do not end with his enumeration of the crew. In the next sentence, Jim compares the body count on the *Hispaniola* to another "case": "to be sure, we were not quite in so bad a case as that other ship they sang about: 'With one man of her crew alive, / What put to sea with seventy-five'" (189, emphasis in original). Alone, neither calculation is really statistical, insofar each is an isolated case. Together, however, they demonstrate a movement toward a statistical inference, as discrete particulars combine to produce a truth that is greater than the sum of the parts; we might call this something like the "mortality rate" or rate of marine casualties. What's striking about this example is that it not only implies the effacement of the particular through its gesture toward statistics but it carries that effacement in its content—or, rather, in what is missing from that content. The "one man" of the lines of verse is not just *any* man: he is the famous English pirate Blackbeard, who reportedly marooned an entire crew on a deserted island in the Caribbean following an attempted mutiny. Ironically, "one man" undermines the one-ness of that man by refusing to name him and thereby withholding the particularity of his will. The lines suggest that individual particularity in this case is less an effect of having done anything than simply having returned. What emerges in Jim's comparison is a more general sense of the risk or danger involved in sea travel, which justifies the need for an intentional and heroic subject while simultaneously suggesting that the final circumstances of travel are independent of individual will. Together, these two cases appear less like the summaries of exciting adventures and more like the tables of "wrecks and casualties" that were collected by statisticians and published by insurance companies in order to calculate risk.⁹

Because statisticians focused on aggregation and large-scale patterns, critics in the nineteenth century argued that the discipline confounded the more important questions of individual accountability and intention. Writing on Thomas Carlyle's admonishment of statistically motivated reform, Elaine Hadley writes, "Liberals have always troubled over the relation between the 'machinery' that sought to change 'society' or 'the population' or some other aggregative entity and the soul of the individual whose isolated journey to freedom, judgment, and accountability seemed a different story" (74). *Treasure Island*, I have been suggesting, refuses to isolate these stories. On the one hand, the novel documents Jim Hawkins's growth into discernment, or a more acute and hawk-like judgment. By the end of his journey, Jim is more clearly the hero of an adventure novel. Yet, on the other hand, the novel makes it clear that in order to act *as* a hero, Jim must first learn to evaluate the evidence of the world around him. The status of this evaluative judgment is complex because it is connected to a particular subject and empirical evidence while effacing both in favor of abstract quantities, general truths, and concepts that exceed the particular unit.

I want to conclude this section by suggesting that one effect of the circulation of statistical discourse and numbers in *Treasure Island* is that it shifts the locus of the novel from the particular "I" (Jim) to a general "we" (the sailors and, perhaps, the nation). To return to my first example, it is the shift that Jim alludes to when he calculates that "five men only of

those who had sailed returned with her.” In other words, *Treasure Island* is less a novel about Jim than about social participation within a community and the construction, transport, and legibility of that community as an object of knowledge. Venn, in his discussion of statistical series, is quick to dissuade readers from assuming that any one series is fixed or determined in advance: “Keep on watching it long enough, and it will be found almost invariably to fluctuate” (14). In *Treasure Island*, the unpredictability of this collective structure is both a cause for suspense and frustration and one of the motivating factors for imperial adventure. In the next section, I will examine how this logic of the particular and the general carries over into imperialist discourses at the end of the nineteenth century, which attempted to justify expansion by rationalizing empire as if it were an object independent of individual agents.

2. Adventure and empire, or the one versus the many

To make the argument that *Treasure Island* is a novel about chance and the uncertainties of participating in *collective* life might seem odd or surprising, given Stevenson’s delight in the unusual, the monstrous, or the singular. In a review of Stevenson’s body of work, which originally appeared in *Century Magazine* in 1888, Henry James writes that what is most notable about Stevenson is his “portrayal of the strange, the improbable, the heroic” (1248). One point I have been arguing so far is that the idea of the “heroic” undergoes a modification in *Treasure Island*, and it might make more sense to align it with the *probable*, as that was understood in the wake of the statistical revolution. Yet, critics of Stevenson often fixate on this singular subject. In his discussion of Stevenson’s Pacific novels *The Wrecker* and *The Ebb-Tide*, Philip Steer argues that these novels display a non-rational aesthetic, observing that the novels are defined by “a relentless discontinuity and non-linearity” that reflects the archipelagic geography of the South Pacific (344). Steer also argues that this aesthetic is evidence of Stevenson’s anti-imperialism for the ways in which it resists the teleology of the imperial romance. Naomi Wood draws a similar conclusion in her discussion of *Treasure Island*, which she situates in the context of contemporary debates around the gold standard and the cultural construction of economic or social value. Wood’s discussion of Stevenson’s ludic de-mystification of value “shows him resisting categories and actively deconstructing binaries in favor of a far more ambiguous aesthetic” (62). These readings evoke the radically particular and the improbable as evidence of Stevenson’s anti-essentialist aesthetics, as well as of his critical response to imperialist or capitalist ideologies.

One limitation of these characterizations is that they tend to overlook Stevenson’s defense of the typical and the logical, and thus the flexibility of his anti-imperialist method. In “A Humble Remonstrance,” which he published shortly after *Treasure Island* and as a rejoinder to Henry James’s famous essay “The Art of Fiction,” Stevenson breaks with Jamesian realism and its over-investment in specificity, particularity, and concreteness. Instead, Stevenson makes a claim of value for what he calls the “typical”: “Our art is occupied, and bound to be occupied, not so much in making stories true as in making them typical; not so much in capturing the lineaments of each fact, as in marshalling all of them towards a common end” (284). What seems important for Stevenson in this essay is to disarticulate the typical from the empirical, the general “all” from the singular “each.” The artist is one who mediates historical or social life instead of representing it with

granular and atomistic realism. The relation of power and agency seems equally important for Stevenson; against the imperious domination implied by “capturing” reality, Stevenson suggests that the novelist must be humble, “marshalling” and collecting the elements of that reality without a prescriptive intent.

In a later passage, Stevenson makes the surprising turn to the subject of geometry to elaborate on his philosophy of literary composition. What unites these two domains, Stevenson writes, is their shared investment in an anti-positivist aesthetic, which he calls the “figmentary abstraction” (283):

Life is monstrous, infinite, illogical, abrupt and poignant; a work of art, in comparison, is neat, finite, self-contained, rational, flowing and emasculate ... A proposition of geometry does not compete with life; and a proposition of geometry is a fair and luminous parallel for a work of art. Both are reasonable, both untrue to the crude fact; both inhere in nature, neither represents it. (285)

By analogizing art to geometry, Stevenson highlights their shared act of world-downsizing, which turns the “infinite” into the “finite” and “self-contained.” In other words, art and geometry evince a common compulsion to formalize by drawing boundaries, divisions, and limits—or, alternatively, giving space length, width, and depth. Rather than reflect reality, or the “crude fact,” both art and geometry aspire to be representative of it and to affirm continuities or patterns of repetition within that “infinite” plenitude. Thus, the typical in art becomes a method of union, a vision that Stevenson echoes within his rhetoric. The anaphora, “both ... both ... both,” produces a formal parallel between the seemingly dissimilar domains of art and geometry, while the final term in the series (“neither”) extends that continuity while allowing for a space of particular difference and autonomy.

Stevenson’s defense of the “typical” is crucial to understanding the dynamics of imperialism in *Treasure Island*. The presence of the type in Stevenson’s fiction brings to light a desire for repetition and structure that cannot easily be conflated with the ideological discourse of imperialism at the late century, which Said defines according to a “fundamentally static notion of identity” (Said, xxv). While it produces correspondences among dissimilar parts, the type does not necessarily compel identification, and it will be useful to distinguish between the probabilism of this model, which enables space for difference and variation, and a homogenizing model of identity. *Treasure Island* is perhaps the best case study for this distinction and its implication for the social structures modeled in the novel.

Treasure Island records Jim Hawkins’s gradual emulation of the disciplinary institutions of British imperial modernity and their shared rationalities. These institutions are figured by the character types Captain Smollett (the navy), Squire Trelawney (the aristocracy), and the magistrate Dr. Livesey (the bourgeois, bureaucratic state). According to Wood, Jim gradually follows the examples set by these men, and the novel concludes with “Jim’s transmutation from Other into establishment man” (67–8). It is tempting to read Jim as an example of the power of British institutions to compel their own reproduction. The typical character thus modeled in *Treasure Island* corresponds to a national culture, which is not only modeled by representative figures but analogically models others in its image.

Stevenson’s attention to this prescriptiveness of the typical follows the models set by earlier novelists of maritime fiction, including James Fenimore Cooper and Frederick

Marryat. Earlier, I quoted Cohen, who argues that the adventure novel in this tradition tests a heroic subject in order to affirm his identity and, thereby, the “constitutive values” of the culture he represents. Yet, Cohen’s description of the character type, and of typicality, is different in one key respect from Stevenson’s theory of the typical in art. Like Stevenson, Cohen argues that the hero of adventure fiction is representative of an abstract totality (“a culture” and its characteristic rhythms of labor and duty) that both includes and exceeds him. Yet, unlike Stevenson, Cohen’s model of typicality is premised on emulation and reproduction. Writing on Cooper, Cohen argues, “Sea fiction ... asks readers to identify with active workers rather than remain passive spectators ... Integrating readers into an imaginary community of labor, sea fiction’s performance of craft not only entertains and instructs ... but it also ennobles the struggles of the everyday, inciting readers to become the equivalent of the compleat mariner” (Cohen 146). Identification, integration, and equivalency unsettle the genre’s focus on the hero’s embodiment and his self-fashioning. What looks like a movement toward individuality ends up as a form of instrumentality, as particulars dissolve in a homogenizing medium.

By contrast, Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* represents a late development of the genre, with its dual investment in individual variation and common structure. In this model of adventure, the hero is neither wholly dependent upon the cultural values or types that precede him nor is he a completely autonomous and isolated subject. Stevenson himself illustrates the dynamics of this form of typicality in the verse preface “To the Hesitating Purchaser,” which commences *Treasure Island*:

If sailor tales to sailor tunes,
Storm and adventure, heat and cold,
If schooners, islands, and maroons
And Buccaneers and buried Gold,
And all the old romance, retold
Exactly in the ancient way,
Can please, as me they pleased of old,
The wiser youngsters of to-day:

—So be it, and fall on! If not,
If studious youth no longer crave,
His ancient appetites forgot,
Kingston, or Ballantyne the brave,
Or Cooper of the wood and wave:
So be it, also? (xxx)

The ballad form, with its emphasis on patterns of repetitions and affinities, helps to emphasize the substance of the poem and its emphasis on intertextual correspondences. Yet, Stevenson’s twin statements—“So be it” and “So be it, also?”—suggest both affirmation and resignation, thereby introducing a note of difference that interrupts the closure of complete identification and emulation.

From its opening gesture, *Treasure Island* preempts the homogenizing movement of identification or emulation. On the one hand, Stevenson’s theory of the typical shares affinities with the epistemology of social statistics. As I previously discussed, it was commonly

accepted that “statistical regularity provided an insufficient basis for any conclusions about the determination of individual behavior” (Gigerenzer et al. 48). On the other, we can also connect the idea of typicality to the shape of late-nineteenth-century imperialism, and especially the patterns of extension that were supposed to take place independently of conscious or intentional will. In a representative statement, the late-nineteenth-century English historian J. R. Seeley writes, “There is something very characteristic in the indifference which we show towards this mighty phenomenon of the diffusion of our race and the expansion of our state. We seem, as it were, to have conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind” (8). In his defense of his post-colonial methodology, Said picks up on this absentmindedness as an enabling fantasy of British imperialist ideology, while clarifying that it neglects the “inconsistency, persistence, and systematized acquisition and administration” of empire (9). The erasure of the individual subject justified imperial expansion by suggesting that empire was merely the effect of universal laws rather than of a series of intentional acts. It also, conveniently, left no one responsible for these acts.

In her study of twentieth-century totalitarianisms, Hannah Arendt turns to the late-nineteenth-century imperial romance in order to describe models of human agency and responsibility that operate independently from intention, or the “conscious founding of colonies” (*The Origins of Totalitarianism* 209). Arendt describes the British style of colonial governance as one that attempted to square a circle, or to align the economic realities of imperial expansion with liberal philosophies of independence and self-determination. One technology of this justification of expansion was the “legend” of the imperial romance. “Man, who has not been granted the gift of undoing,” writes Arendt, “who is always burdened with a responsibility that appears to be the consequence of an unending chain of events rather than conscious acts, demands an explanation” (208). According to Arendt, the explanation that imperialism offers is given by the figure of the “imperialist character” (209). This imperialist character was typical insofar as it modeled a worldview that was able to rationalize the co-existence of imperial domination and liberal self-determination. In Arendt’s formulation, the idea of imperialism as it was modeled in the British imagination was chiasmatic, insofar as it offered an inversion of historical reality. Instead of a planned and systematic expansion, imperialism was supposed to occur absentmindedly, as if “the consequence of an unending chain of events.” And instead of the subject as a vector for the reproduction of British hegemony, the imperialist character was supposed to be an autonomous and intentional agent.

While we have long recognized the ways in which imperial romances either transmit or critique hegemonic forms—with our idea of critique often modeled as unique or singular—we have fewer models for discussing how literary texts can be responsible for and responsive to their context without this looking like a project of blame. I have been suggesting that *Treasure Island* is valuable for how it allows us to think part and whole, individual and collective, in productive tension with one another rather than wholly in terms of conflict or separation. Statistics and probability provide us with a kind of language for thinking the co-operation and incommensurability of the individual and the collective. As I conclude, I would like to consider how *Treasure Island* also articulates a model of collective responsibility.

Throughout the novel, Jim moves through the world as if responding to events spontaneously or without reason. In his influential theory of the adventure novel, Mikhail

Bakhtin suggests that this form of diminished agency is the sign under which the protagonist's heroism manifests. It is through this diminished agency that the adventure novel represents a materialist world, governed by chance and devoid of transcendental meaning (86–110). For example, shortly after arriving to the island, Jim makes the reckless decision to journey to shore with the pirates:

At last, however, the party was made up. Six fellows were to stay on board, and the remaining thirteen, including Silver, began to embark.

Then it was that there came into my head the first of the mad notions that contributed so much to save our lives. If six men were left by Silver, it was plain our party could not take and fight the ship; and since only six were left, it was equally plain that the cabin party had no present need of my assistance. It occurred to me at once to go ashore. (72)

As with other examples of counting in the novel, these numbers facilitate a crucial movement toward generalization. On the one hand, they enable the representation of a known quantity of discrete particulars as an aggregate or serial form. Despite the fact that we might be able to name some of the six or the thirteen, it seems beside the point to individualize in this way. What matters is the pattern of repetition that transforms the individual variations into a single unit, a movement whereby aggregation produces generality and formal unity, as in the case of the “six fellows” who become “six men” and finally just “six.” Counting and numbers lubricate this transformation. On the other hand, it is also this counting which permits a vital exclusion. Jim, like Silver, resists being counted or made into a generalization. Jim, more than any other character, is at the mercy of chance—“Then it was that there came into my head ... It occurred to me at once.” As with Bakhtin's discussion of the phrase “suddenly” (92), phrases like these reflect the submission of the individual to the shifting winds of chance. Yet, in certain respects, it is the fact of Jim's exclusion that permits the formal coherence of the others into a known quantity. What's more, it is Jim's haphazard and spontaneous actions, as well as his cleverness and ingenuity, that facilitate the survival of the group of adventurers.

The convergence of collectivity and individual variation in *Treasure Island* represents a model of character that is divorced both from intentionality, which explains Jim's spontaneous actions, and from determination, which would rationalize Jim's actions as the product of a group of which he is a part. Jim is typical in the sense described by Stevenson, insofar as he represents an affinity between the individual and the collective. This dynamic is what I earlier referred to as “responsibility,” and it demonstrates how Jim can be held responsible for effects that occur independent of his will. After Jim successfully retakes the *Hispaniola* and navigates it to rescue his shipmates, he declares rather fatuously to Silver, “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! ... 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” (153–4). Despite Jim's repeated pronouncements that “it was I,” the reality of his actions is much less heroic. O'Brien was dead when Jim first arrived at the ship, most likely killed by Israel Hands in a drunken brawl. Jim's captaining of the *Hispaniola* would have been an impossible solo feat, and he conveniently leaves out how necessary Israel Hands was to this achievement. Earlier, Jim acknowledges that Hands's death was an accident and not a consequence of his intention: “In the ... 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” (142). By implying that these events were the consequence of his own volition, Jim is not per se admitting to a larger-than-life agency. Rather, he is taking responsibility for events that he *may* have caused, even if unintentionally. This moment is ironic insofar as it highlights the distance between Jim’s pronouncement and the narration, and this distance enables the reader to suspend their judgment in this *particular* case. As a result, the concept of responsibility is generalized and distributed, which does not exculpate Jim nor does it insist on individual blame as the end-result of probabilistic judgment.

This collective responsibility, which operates independent of what any one individual could have consciously willed or chosen, offers a model for inferring the transport or expansion of imperial forms *independently* of individual volition. In an essay that she published subsequent to *On Totalitarianism*, Arendt makes the provocative claim, “There is such a thing as responsibility for things one has not done; one can be held liable for them” (Arendt, “Collective Responsibility” 147). Liberal philosophers of the nineteenth century, like Venn and Mill, were preoccupied with how to accommodate imperial order with individual autonomy, and, as I have been arguing, the logic of statistics and probability, which focused on the large-scale structures and independent parts, offered a discourse for that adjustment. Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*, insofar as it mediates the logic of statistical enumeration and categorization, works to challenge the withdrawal of Britain from taking responsibility for the effects of their imperial expansion. To carve out a space of individual volition within a regular and probabilistic universe is not, therefore, to insist on freedom from that social order or its effects. Counting in *Treasure Island* is equally a matter of accounting for the damage one causes when navigating chance.

Notes

1. Dickens and Carlyle, for example, excoriated the discipline, and their reactions were particularly salient in light of the public reaction to the perceived lack of accountability for the mismanagement of the Crimean War. See Hadley.
2. For an elaboration of Foucault’s notion of biopower and its relation to the history of nineteenth-century statistics, see Hacking, “Biopower and the Avalanche of Printed Numbers.” For examples of how literary criticism has been influenced by these histories, see Hadley; Hensley; Rosenthal; and Steinlight.
3. Influential histories of statistics and probability that center on the nineteenth century include Desrosières; Hacking, *The Taming of Chance*; Porter; and Stigler.
4. The idea of “dead letters” is brought up in both Rosenthal; and Seltzer, 91–118. Statistical data connected to the health of soldiers during the Crimean War were famously collected and analyzed by Florence Nightingale. See Hadley; and Magnello.
5. Daniel Williams draws on Venn’s definition of series to describe what he calls “serial thinking,” which he connects to literary genre and Thomas Hardy’s inferential method. See Williams.
6. While Venn’s defense of frequentism had more influence on other philosophers, like Charles Sanders Peirce, Mill’s defense had more explicitly political influence on mid-century concepts of sovereignty and liberal subjectivity. See Hensley.
7. The only exception to Silver’s singularity, which points to the ways in which he is unquestionably a statistical being, is to be found in his disability. Disability studies has provided literary criticism with a notably attentive and responsive approach to the normative and prescriptive histories of statistical research and methodology. It is one regret of this essay

that I am unable to discuss Silver's disability in more detail. For more history on statistical methodology and disability, see Davis.

8. One consequence of statistics and its focus on frequencies was that it had the tendency to generate exceptions like this, which were unassimilable to or neglected by statistical models. For how writers like Charles Dickens responded to these exceptions, see Steinlight.
9. Starting in 1872, the *Journal of the Statistical Society* of London began to publish the yearly statistics of maritime casualties that were gathered by the trade periodical *Lloyd's Lists*. Previously, this data was published by *Lloyd's*, but when that publication was discontinued, the Statistical Society elected to publish the data, citing "considerable value, both actual and potential" (Editors 519). For more information about the Statistical Society and how it fit into the growth of statistics during the nineteenth century, see Hacking, "Biopower and the Avalanche of Printed Numbers"; and Poovey, "Figures."

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the audiences at the annual conferences for the North American Victorian Studies Association and INCS for their responses to early drafts of this argument, with gratitude to John Kucich in particular, who offered feedback when it was still a mere conference presentation. I would also like to acknowledge Abigail Mann and Jennifer Camden for their guidance and stewardship of this article. A special note of debt is due to Nathan Hensley, who allowed me to present some early thoughts on the adventure novel to his students at Georgetown University, as well as to David Kurnick and Jason Bartles, who offered priceless feedback on various drafts.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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