

## Occasional Paper: Recent German-language RLS Criticism

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**Dieter Petzold, "Robert Louis Stevenson und die Ambivalenz des Abenteurers".**  
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It is surely not an easy task to assess the international impact of Scottish literature with any degree of precision: though in many respects, it seems to be easier now than it has ever been before. The BOSLIT project, for instance, has collated a wealth of data concerning all kinds of translations; and it would no doubt be a worthwhile undertaking to gather a comparable corpus of criticism on Scottish literature that is written in languages other than English. I am sure that a concerted effort would uncover a surprising amount of material and insight. Ever since in the 1970s I tracked down a copy of a Japanese study of Neil Gunn's fiction and had the gist of it summarised for me by a Japanese fellow student, I have been periodically reminded of how much is out there that one may never learn about or from; and I have thus come to be aware of the fact that an ideal scholar of Scottish literature would need to be a more polyglot person than I myself can claim to be.

I am at least lucky enough, however, not to be linguistically challenged when it comes to German, and consequently I was able to read the abovementioned article on "Robert Louis Stevenson and the Ambivalence of the Adventurer" by Professor Dieter Petzold of the University of Erlangen, located near and affiliated with Nuremberg in southern Germany. In his compact and comprehensive characterisation of Stevenson's life and work, Petzold portrays the notion of adventure, defined as the single-minded and free-ranging pursuit of self-interest regardless of the consequences for oneself and for others, as a focus of constant attraction and revulsion in Stevenson's real and imagined travels and narratives. Those, Petzold argues, show a playful handling or manifestation of contradictory impulses: the yearning for adventure on the one hand, and the distaste for real adventurers on the other.

Petzold's portrait of Stevenson as a rebel with the handbrake on, or as a bohemian with a safety net, is built up in four stages. First comes an account of Stevenson's background and early

travels, documenting a restlessness rooted in the rejection of bourgeois restraints and paternal expectations. This is followed by an analysis of early travel writings in which, Petzold argues, the author betrays a histrionic tendency to act the vagrant and vagabond, while preserving an ironic distance from his own persona, and talking of genuine low life in terms that at least partly reflect values such as those of his staid Victorian father. Petzold characterises Stevenson's attitude towards lower-class emigrants to America, for instance, as showing "a mixture of admiration, pity, and cool contempt".

The following section on *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped* portrays Jim Hawkins and David Balfour as reluctant and temporary adventurers, set in contrast to the true adventurers Long John Silver and Alan Breck as well as to the non-adventurous world of bourgeois respectability. The final analysis of *The Ebb-Tide* then suggests that in Stevenson's literary production, the initial ambivalence gives way to a clearly weighted picture: the attraction of the adventure recedes, and the reality of adventurers appears as being one of losers, failures, or amoral egotists. Stevenson's typical adventurer, Petzold concludes, reveals himself as "an incarnation of human hubris and greed, the true impulses of colonialism".

The argument which I have summarised here is accompanied by a good deal of references to primary as well as secondary sources. It is a solid piece of work which proceeds systematically from a well-defined starting point towards an appropriate conclusion, although this conclusion seems to me to present an unrealised or at least unverballed new question. To wit, if Stevenson ended up disillusioned with colonial adventure, did this constitute an abandonment of rebellious and bohemian leanings in favour of bourgeois values, or rather a new level of rebellion against the bourgeois reality from which the colonial venture emanated? This seems an interesting and perhaps necessary continuation of Petzold's investigation, in which references to other parts of Stevenson's voluminous oeuvre might also have helped to add a few more shades to the overall image.

Nonetheless, the article is a sound and noteworthy addition to Stevenson scholarship, and could be as good a reason as any to open one's German dictionary. Meanwhile, though, the editors of *Anglistik*, official organ of the German Association of University Teachers of English, have decided to change their periodical into a refereed journal whose contributions will be exclusively in English.