GRACE AFTER GOOD WORDS

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A CRITIC is never so well employed as in giving honest thanks. Then, if never else, not merely judgment but a sincere emotion seeks to fix itself in words. It is in all senses a rare happiness, choice in quality, seldom found, when this emotion is created by a new author or a new work. Yet since the critic's feeling must always be allied, and a little alloyed, with judgment, the movement towards thanksgiving for what is new must always carry in itself some temper of doubt. It lacks, it cannot have, the confidence of final probation. The new dazzles a little, bewilders; and there is an inward monitor advising us against that temptation which lies in the delight of discovery. Besides, whoever knows literature knows that what will last in prose or verse can never be fully enjoyed, much less fully appreciated, at the first encounter. Our real debt is to the literature that we re-read; and time must elapse, the reader much change with time, before there can be absolute assurance that what appealed so strongly did not appeal to a passing mood.

I pay my thanks to-day, render my homage with assurance, and with the more cordial happiness because an old loyalty is in question. Many of us who learnt our trade of writing during the ten or fifteen years in which Robert Louis Stevenson, still living, was famous, chose him for our master and champion. There was that in the known circumstances of his life and fate which commanded devotion as well as discipleship; perhaps not least of all, the knowledge which no one possessed so fully as he of his limited achievement. His craftsmanship stood admitted, but hardly the individual masterpiece, except perhaps that strange tour de force, *Jekyll and Hyde;* we certainly could not point to the well-nourished body of genial creative work which assures survival. While he lived, we his adherents were determined that he should be great, that he should survive, because of an allegiance which he had won, because of our attachment to his personality. I am sure that even when writing as a critic of the work of near friends I have never written so little dispassionately, never been so much an advocate rather than a judge, as when dealing with the art of this stranger, entirely unseen and unknown. It is almost twenty-six years since a detailed study of his novels by me appeared, in a *Review* sufficiently important to make the publication an event for the young writer

that I was then; but my chief satisfaction was a hope that pleasure and possibly even encouragement might come to this exiled chief of my craft, so far away in Samoa. Ten days after the *Review* appeared, came the news of his death; and the very real grief I felt had a quality which, as I now look back, seems significant. I grieved, naturally and instinctively, over the loss of what yet lay in him to do.

That, if you come to think, was an act of faith strangely mixed with doubt. It is scarcely possible that any writer's death should trouble any reader with a sense that the world is impoverished by it; our common store is already too inexhaustible. Grief was for the man's sake, not the world's; for a cherished career broken before it was secure of full and final development. To-day I find happiness in perceiving that the grief sprang from an error. The essence of this man lay not in his art but in his personality; and that personality is transmitted in a form certain to endure.

Exactly how much of Stevenson's work will continue to be read—except by the few curious—is of course highly debatable; and if he does not survive by his prose, whether in fiction or in the varying forms of the essay which he handled, then as an artist he has failed. For prose was his special craft, on which indeed he left a mark that no historian of literature can ignore. But speaking now of survival in no such academic sense, I could to-day more easily indicate pages in his prose which have gone dead than those where lasting life makes itself indisputably felt. This negative attitude of mine, however, represents probably some temperamental dullness; what stands out vividly to my mind to-day is the assured preservation of his personality through a different craft. Stevenson, like so many others from Scott to Kipling, was of those ambidextrous talents which can use prose or verse at will—or rather, as something which it is not their will directs. In such a case, for what is quintessential in the man, look to his verses; they are nearly always written on an impulse, for the sheer pleasure of writing. Nothing is more characteristic of Scott, nothing expresses Scott better, than his ballad of "Bonny Dundee", born in the very hour when he bent his great shoulders with a clearly settled resolution to the task of clearing away that mountainous debt. "Can't say what made me take a frisk so uncommon of late years as to write verses of free-will. I suppose the same impulse which makes birds sing when the storm has blown over": so Scott noted in his Diary, private receptacle for so much the like of which Stevenson habitually confided to the world. A writer of conscious self-study, of deliberate self-revelation, Stevenson has fixed the significant

details of his life in admirable pages; and perhaps the assistance so given to our imaginations was the necessary condition for giving effect to his personality—which, as I insist, meant more to his generation and even to his disciples than his craftsmanship. Yet the survival of that personality, the force it still is, was revealed to me by no page of his prose essays, though to them I have turned back more than once of late. Nowhere did he give me that quickening sense of confirmation concerning a work's vitality which a critic cannot mistake. This final assurance I have in these days received from his verses, not indeed from his verse at large, but from a small group of poems, which are among the most truly autobiographic things in literature.

In quest of something to read to an invalid, for whom nothing in literature was too good, yet who had an invalid's craving for something that exhilarates, I picked up the *Songs of Travel*, and on the way to the hospital looked into them. The poems were utterly familiar to me; in stanza after stanza, once the start given, I could have finished it from memory; yet with the open page came the direct voice, the contact with a living creature. There are times when any honest man in any country of Europe, and certainly in this Ireland, may feel himself weighed down with a morbid depression; and I was sick of that disease, when suddenly it was as if clear sun and wind had chased the vapours off one. Well might the poet say:

> Bright is the ring of words
> When the right voice rings them;
> Fair the fall of songs
> When the singer sings them.
> Still they are carolled and said—
> On wings they are carried—
> When the singer is dead
> And the maker buried.

What first caught me was the gallant lilt of those lyrics that have roaming youth's desire for their burden:

> Give to me the life I love,
> Let the love go by me,
> Give the jolly heaven above
> And the byway nigh me.

Or, better still:

> The untented Kosmos my abode,
> I pass, a wilful stranger,
> My mistress still the open road
> And the bright eyes of danger.

When the love-note comes into them, it has the same tone; the same personality breathes through it:

> I will make my kitchen and you shall keep your room
> Where white flows the river and bright blows the broom,
> And you shall wash your linen and keep your body white
> In rainfall at morning and dewfall at night.

These have the authentic voice of youth, but of youth with all youth's gravity as well as youth's light foot. It is the youth of a personality which out of its maturer mind inevitably frames a kindred vision of life's end. As I read these earlier lines, there ran, like an undersong in my memory, the "Epitaph" with its lovely close, soothing yet quickening, like rest in the open air:

> Here he lies where he fain would be;
> Home is the seaman, home from the sea,
> And the hunter is home from the hill.

Yet if all life be travel, travel is only one phase of life; and the *Songs of Travel* hold a complete revelation of Stevenson's personality because they show you also the traveller's heart when it is least content with its journeying. One felt always in him, beyond the gallant eagerness to see and know, to move instead of mouldering, a yet more gallant resolution to go on. This aspect of him could never be rendered in anything so simply lyrical as the few songs which I have named, or as the even more perfect "Sing me a song of a lad that is gone", where the melancholy of retrospect on youth's clean rapture is simple as the rapture it recalls. The heart of a man whom the zest of life has forsaken, and whom age has not yet tranquillized, is shown in a poem of very different order: I quote only the last lines of "If this were Faith"—

> To go on for ever, and fail, and go on again,
> And be mauled to the earth and arise,
> And contend for the shade of a word and a thing not seen with
> the eyes,
> With the half of a broken hope for a pillow at night,
> That somehow the right is the right
> And the smooth shall bloom from the rough;
> Lord, if that were enough?

Who that has passed middle age, and tried to do anything worth doing, does not feel an echo to those words? Who but those who never really knew what was worth doing, or the very few who in their achievement found content? This is the natural cry of life's strenuous traveller, as the others are the songs of life's adventure; and together they give you Stevenson and give him you

alive. No more is needed to preserve his personality; yet I would add to my group the lines written from Samoa in reply to the dedication of a Scottish novel by Mr. Crockett; probably also a stanza here and there from less completely successful poems, and certainly one isolated quatrain—"I have trod the upward and the downward slope". This gathering will complete for any sympathetic reader the human contact with him who died a generation ago, and yet this week was able to move and rouse me as no living friend could do. For what is imperishable in his poetry, I would add only the haunting verses to the tune of "Wandering Willie":

> Home no more home to me, whither shall I wander?

and that, after all, is another phase of the wanderer's mood, charged with Stevenson's personal colour. The single poem of his likely to matter to posterity, which may not be regarded almost as the direct expression of his own life, is that superb thing, "Mater Triumphans"; and it has far more affinity with his best prose than with any of his poetry, except what are really essays in verse.

For whereas in prose he was among the most complex and laborious of artists, his best verse is simple as some old ballad. It makes no pretence to technical mastery; and no one will claim for its author by reason of it a place among the great masters. I claim for him only that by it he lives not less assuredly than Lovelace by his lines to Lucasta, or Graham of Gartmore by his "If doughty deeds my lady please", and lives indeed more than they, with a fuller revelation of his being, a comrade-loving counsel as well as comfort, source of strength as of delight. I know, having returned to it; and if grace after meat and drink, so easily come by, be fitting, then why not grace after good words?