ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON, AND HIS WRITING.

NO other writer of our time has come as near as Stevenson to the conquest of a perfect English style. He is the one who stands first with true lovers of the art of words. He is the one who, most unceasingly inspired (in his honor I may use his own expressions) by «an inextinguishable zest in technical successes,» has also most constantly remembered «the end of all art: to please.» It seems over-bold to write of him who really knew how to write, and especially to comment on his art in writing, which is what I wish to do.

Yet a truth that Stevenson has himself recorded lays a certain obligation upon all humbler workmen to celebrate, as best they may, a master of their craft. The public can appreciate some kinds of literary merit; but «to those more exquisite refinements of proficiency and finish which the artist so ardently desires, and so keenly feels, for which (in the vigorous words of Balzac) he must toil ‹like a miner buried in a landslip,› for which, day after day, he recasts and revises and rejects—the gross mass of the public must be ever blind.» Yes; and also in some degree even the most diligent, hearty, and sensitive lover of literature if he has never practised with the written word himself. Only those who have been taught through brotherhood in effort can perceive with clearness the highest kinds of technical success, and value them at their full worth. Others may see the beauty, but not the whole of it; they may feel it, but not with all their heart. They cannot realize in how many different ways of varying faultiness everything may be said, or how difficult it is to say anything even reasonably well; therefore they cannot adequately prize the skill which finds the one perfect form of utterance. Lacking full insight, they fail of full sympathy; without this there can never be the fullest measure of appreciation; and so the tribute of any one who has actually tried to write is somewhat excused of useless temerity.

STEVENSON himself has told how his technical studies were begun. He has told of the years when he went about with an English classic in one pocket and pencil and paper in the other, trying with devoted doggedness to reproduce his model's style, and when the task was achieved, changing to another model and beginning a similar task afresh. It would be discouraging to read of this modest yet proud persistence were there any reason why, instead, it should not be inspiring. Of course we are hardly wise if we dream that we also were born with our hands full of the gold of genius, and we may not always be wise if we endeavor to beat out the grains of our little talent in the same way that Stevenson chose. Yet surely his example commands us and encourages us to disengage them somehow—somehow to purify them and prove them before we mint them and try to purchase a public hearing for our thoughts.

This chapter of Stevenson's, showing how the greatest artist of his land and day laid the foundations of his skill, and his «Letter to a Young Gentleman,» showing how to the end of his days the true artist moils and travails in the sweat of his brow, as must the man who digs the ground, but sweating also the blood of his heart and the ichor of his soul—these should lie underneath the pillow of every youth who ventures to think, «I will please with my pen.» And there is another chapter of Stevenson's that ought to lie with them. I have forgotten its name, and have not chanced upon it among his collected essays. I read it long ago in a magazine, and I lent it to a friend (until then my friend), who carried it off to Europe and never brought it back. It analyzed the riches, poverties, and peculiarities of the English tongue from the technical point of view; and it must have come with a sort of blinding light, as of a revelation from the mount of art, to many a man who had long believed that he knew how to use this tongue. It showed that mere sound helps or hinders sense, and that all sounds must be considered even apart from sense. It showed that a right respect for them means a delicate regard, not merely for constructions and conspicuous cadences, but also for words and syllables as such, for slightest accentuations, for individual letters, their contrasts and harmonies, and the curious meanings they somehow bear irrespective of the sense to which, in this word or in that, man has forced them to contribute. It showed that an artist does not simply set out the broad pattern of his verbal mosaic with care, and carefully proportion its main

parts, but thinks of every sentence as a work of art in itself, of every word and letter as a possible jewel or blot, sure to enhance the effect of the finished work if selected rightly, to mar it if chosen by a listless ear.

In short, this chapter explained an art so difficult, and set a task so subtile, endless, and complex (like the task of the fairy-tale princess who was told to sort the feathers pulled from a thousand different birds), that in reading it one might easily have exclaimed, «No man can write well,» but for the cheerful fact that its own words had been set in array by Stevenson. Revealing his attitude toward his art, his persistently beheld ideals, it proved that the attitude was not overstrained, that the ideals might be achieved. Perfectly achieved? Constantly, consistently achieved? Stevenson may answer. Perfect sentences, he says, have often been written, perfect paragraphs at times—never a perfect page.

If thoughts of such labors and ideals as these, and of such a partial possible success, discourage instead of inspiring you, young gentlemen who wish to please with your pens, you will do best to set your wishing-caps at another angle. In a literal sense you hardly could have been born to write; but, it seems, you were not born even to learn to write. The seed of the artist is not in you. Our wise and gentle master tells you how to apply the test: «If a man love the labor of any trade, apart from any question of success or fame, the gods have called him»; otherwise he has mistaken the voice. The mark of the artist's vocation is an «unfaltering and delighted industry,» a «laborious partiality» for the unremitting technical struggle it demands. Notice the words: love, not endurance; not sufferance, but partiality; not mere unfaltering, but delighted labor. If you really love vocables and phrases, constructions, cadences, rhythms, accentuations, consonants and vowels, and even punctuation-marks, for their own dear sake, and not alone because they can serve your personal needs; if you care more to make their beauty plain than to win notice for yourself; and if you find the struggle thus implied a veritable joy, then, and then only, you may believe that you were born—certainly to begin to try to learn to write, and possibly, in the far end, to succeed.

Of course, without all this you may tell, in printed words not loudly offensive to the ear, many things that people will like to know; and perhaps they will win you for a time what may seem a literary place: but the preparatory work you do with your pen will not really be writing, and so the waters of oblivion will soon undermine the pillars of that place. Nothing but art endures. Even if the thoughts which lie behind your want of art have a lasting value, it will simply be as food for other minds competent to give them an imperishable form.

But, on the other hand, you may learn to write pretty well and yet have little to say; the gods sometimes call men to be artists, granting them gifts of ear and eye and patience, and then cramp their art by declaring that they shall have commonplace souls and brains. In such a case you may still be welcome in the world, putting your trifle of thought into agreeable words. But really to serve the world as a great artist serves it, really to attain to beautiful, individual, and immortal words, you must have much to say, and things which no one else has perceived and felt in quite the same fashion. You must be a person as well as an artist. And this truth, too, Stevenson's work supports. Within and beyond the technical perfection of his style, inspiring and infusing it, and to a great degree creating it, lies the strong and charming personality of the man.

ALL his friends praise the spirit that resided in this man. They delight to speak, not of special qualities and gifts, but of the man as a whole—the character, the nature, the personality which his gifts and qualities composed. The doer, they tell us, was better than any of his deeds, his art in living finer than his art in writing: even more remarkable, more admirable, even less easily to be analyzed and explained.

I was not a friend of his. I talked with him only once for a scanty hour. Yet this is the very fact which impels me to lay my little stone on the cairn that his friends are building. They may be attainted of conscious exaggeration, or at least of loving, if unwitting, bias—they, but not I, the stranger. And, besides, an impression received by a stranger and preserved alone in the memory for years, neither disturbed nor reinforced by repetitions, may, if it tallies with the impressions left by long acquaintance, have a special value of its own.

This, then, is the stranger's witness, and it is precisely like the friend's: No man could have a more definite personality than Louis Stevenson's; none could more surely awaken immediate interest or exert a more instant charm, or could seem more convincingly to guarantee that the charm and interest would perennially flourish and increase. There is one kind of success which Stevenson rarely can have known—the slow subdual of indifference; and one kind of disappointment which

he seldom can have felt—the pause of the foot of friendliness on the threshold of love.

He was ill when I saw him in New York in the spring of 1888, after he had come down from the Adirondacks. He was in bed, as he often used to be for days together—so often that the beautiful portrait which, in the previous autumn, St. Gaudens had made of him, backed by his pillows and covered by his blankets, must, I fancy, seem to many American friends the Stevenson whom they knew best. He was in a dismal hotel, in the most dismal possible chamber. Even a very buoyant soul might have been pardoned if, then and there, it had declined upon inactivity and gloom. But these were not the constituents of the atmosphere I found.

There were a great many things on Stevenson's bed—things to eat and to smoke, things to write with and to read. I have seen tidier sick-beds, and also invalids more modishly attired: this one wore over his shoulders an old red cloak with a hole for the head in the middle (a *serape*, I supposed), which, faded and spotted with ink, looked much like a school-room table-cloth. But the untidiness seemed a proof of his desire to make the most of each passing minute; clearly, the littering things had been brought, not in case they might be wanted, but as answers to actual and eager needs. Ill as he was, Stevenson had been reading and writing—and smoking, as St. Gaudens shows; and in fact, I call him an invalid chiefly because, as I remember him, the term has such a picturesque unfitness. His body was in evil case, but his spirit was more bright, more eager, more ardently and healthily alive than that of any other mortal.

I find myself repeating the one word «eager.» There is none which better befits Stevenson's appearance and manner and talk. His mind seemed to quiver with perpetual hope of something that would give it a new idea to feed upon, a new fact to file away, a new experience to be tested and savored. I could read this attitude even in the quick cordiality of his greeting. The welcome was not for me, as myself, but for the new person —for the new human being, who, possessing ears and a tongue, might possibly contribute some item to the harvest of the day.

Despite his mastery of the arts of language, I do not believe that Stevenson ever excelled in the artifice of small talk; he must always have had too many real words to say, and have felt too sure that other folk would like to hear them. This, indeed, was one great secret of his charm: he assumed that you too were alertly alive; he believed that you would understand and share his interest in all interesting things. Therefore one interview was enough to prove him what his friends assert and his books declare him to have been—a philosopher very wise in that most precious kind of lore which gives the soul modesty and poise, cheerfulness, humor, and courage; a student of human nature, not with classifications and categories to fill out, but with a special welcoming niche prepared for the reception of each new human soul; a «detached intelligence,» but a heart, intimately attached to every palpitant fiber in the web of existence, which loved to love, and chose for its hatred only fundamentally hateful and harmful things like hypocrisy, vanity, intolerance, and cowardice in the face of life. He seemed so individual, not because he was more eccentric than others, but because he was more genuine and more broad, more self-expressive, and possessed of a wider and richer self to be explained.

Look at his portrait in profile, and you will see sensitiveness and refinement of a virile sort in the general cast of the face and head, sagacity in the long but not prominent nose, and poetic feeling in the contour of the brow. But in a full view the countenance was still more remarkable. The upper part, extraordinarily broad between the eyes, was deerlike in its gentle serenity, but the lower part, very narrow in comparison, was almost fox-like in its keen alertness; and the mobility of the mouth hardly seemed to fit with the steady intentness of the wide, dark eyes. But if at first this face appeared to contradict itself, the reason lay, I think, in the fact that we seldom see the face of a man who is at once a lover of action and a lover of dreams and of books, an astute and yet a most affectionate observer of life and of men and of the humors of the lives of men, and, besides, an artist of imaginative mold.

I remember how Stevenson's face looked when he said that, long though he had been tied to sedentary habits, and deeply though he loved the art they permitted him to practise, the one thing in the world that he held to be the best was still the joy of outdoor living: it was a beautiful face just then, because it revealed a soul which could endure without bemoaning itself. And for the same reason it was beautiful again when it turned merry over a little tale of attempts to learn the art of knitting as a solace for hours of wearisome languor—unavailing attempts, although he had persisted in them until he brought himself to the verge—nay, he declared, actually over the verge—of tears. An

amusing little story it seemed as he told its details, yet in itself and in the manner of its telling it might have moved a listener to tears in his turn, so unconscious did the teller seem that a lifelong story of smiling conflict with bitter denials and restrictions, when reduced to its very lowest terms, then showed the very sharpest, most tragical edge of its pathos.

I should like to make you understand how Stevenson gave this story, and how he spoke (now with a very conscious pride) about the strategical soldier-games which, in scientific ways, he and his stepson were in the habit of playing; I should like to relate how he pounced upon every Americanism I chanced to utter, not deriding it, but shaking it in the teeth of a pleased curiosity as a bit of treasure-trove, a new fragment of speech with an origin, a history, a utility that must be learned; and in other ways to explain what a zest he had for those myriad little interests, little occupations, discoveries, and acquisitions, which make existence a perpetual joy to a fresh and questing mind, but which most adult minds have grown too stiff and dull to value. And of course I should like to record how he spoke about his own writings, and, with even quicker pleasure, talked about those of others. But to mummify beautiful, vivid speech is to do it deep injustice, and so I will not try to reproduce his words; and if I should try to paraphrase them, I should merely blur their meaning to myself and make it clear to no one else.

Rather, let us read once more in his printed pages. He was interpreting himself when he wrote, «Gentleness and cheerfulness—these come before all morality; they are the perfect duties»; and again, quaintly, in one of his babyhood poems:

> The world is so full of a number of things
> I 'm sure we should all be as happy as kings.

To make other people happy, and to turn everything in the populous, Protean world to profit and pleasure for himself by really seeing it and feeling it—these were the key-notes of Stevenson's fine philosophy; these were the corner-stones of that code of ethics which, put into practice under trials that we can hardly measure, enabled him to demonstrate, for the benefit of us all, what he once described as the great Theorem of the Livableness of Life. And it was needful to define this code, this philosophy, in speaking of his art, because it inspired his books as well as his words and deeds, and not only their intellectual, but their esthetic, distinction. Definitely esthetic gifts helped him, of course, in his conquest of an almost perfect style; but he was helped quite as much by his moral gifts: of course by that determination to make the most of existence which is the mainspring of industry, and by the patience, the cheerfulness, the hopefulness, the delight in small discoveries and achievements, which make industry a joy; and furthermore, by the gentleness and loving sympathy which alone can render a spirit clear and sensitive and logical, and by that desire to make other people happy which includes the belief that the end of all art is to please.

BRILLIANT as were Stevenson's powers of thought and word, he was no epigram-turner, no pyrotechnist in idea or expression. A clear and coherent train of thought runs through his most sparkling chapters; in its elucidation every phrase plays an indispensable rôle; and the garment of style fits the thought so closely that, although each sentence is in itself a work of art, none exists for itself, but all for the sake of the general effect of the whole.

Singularly excellent is this whole as a medium for the transference of thought; impeccably lucid and limpid, translating all shades of perception, sensation, and emotion with such ease and preciseness that the reader scarcely remembers he is absorbing the thought of another. But even this rare merit does not necessarily imply great charm of style. To achieve the highest kind of charm, of beauty, the ear must be enchanted while the mind is definitely and delicately led.

If you do not possess an ear for the music of prose (which has nothing at all to do with the ear for music proper, and is different even from an ear for verse, and a good deal less common), no one can make you understand the extraordinary beauty of Stevenson's work. But if you do possess this organ, you will rate him, as an artist, at least as high as any poet. The essentials of good poetic form, with its organized measure and accentuation, and often its determined rhymes, are symmetry and balance, diversified uniformity, varied repetition, echoing assonance and resonance. The essentials of good prose form are a graceful asymmetry, a discreet avoidance of actual in favor of suggested balance, harmony in perpetual diversity, no obvious repetitions or echoings, and yet in every phrase a recognition of the form and color of all accompanying phrases. Thus a more subtile if not a higher technical sense goes to the making of very good prose than of even very good poetry: there are no formulas or rules to give assurance or warning, no signal-cries

determined upon in advance, and thereafter loudly audible as helpers of a doubting ear.

The greatest danger which attends the would-be writer of harmonious prose is the pitfall laid by his knowledge of the sweet expedients of verse. It can hardly be said of any other modern writer of English whose pages are as musical as Stevenson's that he always avoids this pitfall. But in Stevenson's we never come upon the smallest fragment of pseudo-verse—a too prettily rounded paragraph, a too surely expected cadence, a too evident balancing of phrases, a too regular arrangement of words or repetition of sounds. Of course he is never seduced by the vulgar charms of the rhetorical, the grandiloquent, or the sentimental mode; and it is almost an insult to take pains to say that he never descends to «cheap finish,» is never caught by the prompt appeal of trite verbal formulas, by the attractiveness of superfluous words or of words which do not precisely reproduce the thought, or by those terrible brummagem devices, like loud alliteration, which are so often loved by English writers when they aspire to style at all, and so generally accepted by the public as proofs of technical mastery. Perfect accord between sense and sound, perfect beauty of sound, and a perfect avoidance of palpable artifice—these, with freshness and a very masculine vigor, are the qualities of Stevenson's prose style.

But the main fact which entitles it to be called a perfect style is its constancy in excellence and charm. It is always firm and complete in texture, and uniform in the sense that, while it varies in spirit to suit the subject in hand, it does not vary in quality from line to line, from page to page. I think that Stevenson himself has really written perfect pages; and at all events, his style delights us more as a whole than in any of its parts, striking or exquisite though many of these may still appear when torn away from their context. If you like best to be surprised by independent epigrams, by unexpected bursts of eloquence, by sudden marvels of expressional felicity, turn to some other writer. Stevenson will not amaze you thus. But, except very slightly now and then in his earliest efforts, he will never disappoint you or let you down. And this experience ought to seem more amazing than any other could. To do things flawlessly from end to end is a rarer and more satisfying merit than to do portions of them magnificently well. To strike a beautiful key and always maintain it, even when treating of ugly or commonplace things, and yet to keep the thing and its expression in accord—this is the noblest of literary triumphs.

Hand in hand with such constancy in technical success goes, of course, great simplicity of means and method. Much splendor in treatment, much richness in the elements employed, may be perfectly managed in little pieces of work, or may make a large one so dazzlingly gorgeous that only a trained eye will perceive discrepancy between its parts. But this discrepancy must exist. The limitations of human power forbid that a cathedral shall be elaborated—chiseled and jeweled all over—like a small shrine for the bones of a saint; and if the thing were done, the laws of art would forbid its looking well. No one could write a book from end to end as Ruskin has written his most sumptuous passages; and if he could, it would weary and distress the reader. But «The Pilgrim's Progress» is homogeneous from end to end; its beauty is complete because the great artist who wrote it was classically serene and simple in style. And none of the emphatic and violent, the sweetly sentimental, the elaborately «precious,» or the perfervid, luscious, and luxuriant writers of our day approaches Stevenson in his power to be always at his best. Yet, in saying that his work is beautiful, I have affirmed, of course, that its simplicity is never monotonous, bald, or hard. It is like the work of a Greek sculptor, which would be grievously deformed were it besprinkled with East Indian jewels.

Catholic in sympathy and eagerly active of brain, Stevenson wrote in many moods, and his style served him equally well in all. There is no greater pleasure than to prove these facts by reading, in close contrast, the stories and essays that most widely differ. Take «The Merry Men,» for instance, and then «Will o' the Mill,» «Pulvis et Umbra,» «Markham,» «The Flight through the Heather,» and the mysterious tale of negro magic and tornadoes. Tone and temper could hardly vary more, and the words, as perspicuous and as beautiful in the one case as in the others, seem to have been twin-born with the thoughts. But, oh, how far from the truth this seeming must lie! What unfaltering and delighted industry must have wrought this perfect union, in so many different keys, of thoughts, inchoate till the right words were found, with words which had to be chosen from among ten thousand, and arranged in the one right way of many score! Only those who have tried to write can fancy it all. Only those who have never quite succeeded can properly envy the feeling Steven-

son must have known each time he inscribed his «Finis.» Doubtless in his later years the work went more easily than at first. But work it must always have been, and the joy in its completion can never have decreased; for, once they are successfully outlived, the memory of our most desperate hours of struggle remains to give to readier accomplishment a delicious flavor of surprise. And this is not the least among the facts which proclaim, quite unmistakably, the livableness of life.

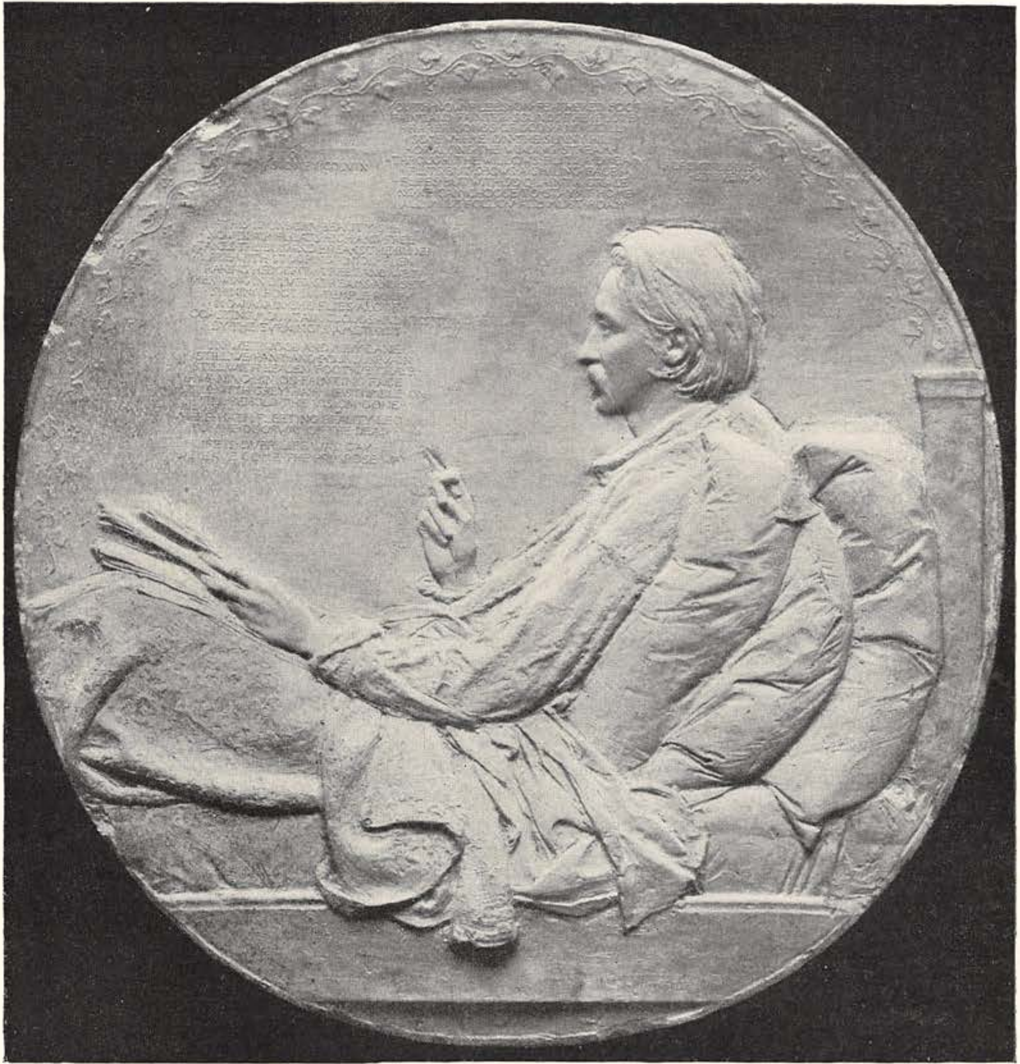
The simplicity of Stevenson's style is very notable in connection with its frequent poetic force. Not more for poetical suggestiveness than for dramatic clarity or for picturesqueness in narration did he need to draw upon flourishing turns of phrase, or upon words that are strikingly sonorous, recondite, or even uncommon. Take this passage, for example: «And if he had anything like the same inspiring weather, the same nights of uproar, men in armor rolling and resounding down the stairs of heaven, the rain hissing on the village streets, the wild bull's-eye of the storm flashing all night long into the bare inn chamber—the same sweet return of day, the same unfathomable blue of noon, the same high-colored halcyon eves»—I need not finish the sentence, for these words suffice. If you find them unpoetic because with one exception they are simple and common words, while that one is scarcely rare, then you must be among those who think that wine is not wine unless it is heated and spiced.

Again, Stevenson's exquisite mastery of the means of expression nowhere does him better service than in translating his gently smiling outlook upon life. Of course he is never, crudely, a maker of mirth, although upon occasion there is an actual laugh in his words. But he is always the man of humor. Sometimes you scarcely notice that he smiles; but when you lay down the book your heart is warm, and this is proof of the smile, and also of its difference from the grin of the cynic or the simper of the fatuous. And often his smiling sparkles like sunlight on water, or glows like a hearth-fire cheering some dusky chamber of thought into which he has bidden us to consider themes as tragical as «sad stories of the death of kings.» No one but a great artist can thus blend emotions, infusing gloom with the reflection of cheerfulness, and merriment with the memory of the pathos of all life. Every one of us feels this blending at times; but an incomparable skill in words is needed to express it without affectation or excess.

THERE are many other things which should be said of Stevenson's art in writing. Here, however, I can only try to tell what, in a personal way, it has meant to me, and thus explain with more distinctness why I could not withhold my hand from its praise.

I can fairly complain that the technical struggle has been much harder for me than for the majority. Yet I can fairly boast that I have loved it better than the majority, even in its hardest and dullest phases, and that (I remember how Stevenson applauded when he had drawn out the confession) twenty rewritings, in whole or in part, and thirty, and fifty, have often come within my not unpleased experience. Yet one day last winter, when I tried to write, neither the effort nor the result seemed in the least worth while. A useless task, a savorless possible success—this is what I felt. And then, suddenly, the difference between to-day and yesterday proved itself an echo of my knowledge that Stevenson had died. Of course I had never looked forward to writing as he did: there are bounds to sane ambitions. And I had never expected him to read what I might write, much less to approve it. Yet somewhere, I now discovered, although I had not clearly realized the truth before—somewhere down in the bottom of my heart had always been the feeling: If he does chance to see this, what a pity if it should be less good than, with every effort, I can manage to make it; and what a triumph if it should be good enough for him to read without actual distress! Such, I now discovered, had been the spur; very vague and foolish and unreasonable; but how potent, how helpful, how insistent in its sharp monitions, how delightfully warming in its utterly vague reminders of a possible crown for what I knew to be an all-but-impossible true success—this I realized on the day of which I speak, and this I shall never again forget. For now that the throne of the prince is vacant in our little world of art, in our strenuous little world of oft-defrauded but perennial aspiration, I feel that there will never again be quite as much joy in the technical struggle; and I know that, even if I could ever write a page as he wrote hundreds, success would bring a pang of disappointment—now that the most foolish dreamer can no longer anticipate that happy hour in which Stevenson was to smile and say, «*Well done.*»

M. G. Van Rensselaer.



MODELED IN BAS-RELIEF BY AUGUSTUS ST. GAUDENS IN 1887, DURING STEVENSON'S ILLNESS IN NEW YORK.

Robert Louis Stevenson