

It is always an interesting thing to see an artist at work, and some of the means which Stevenson used in the perfecting and individualization of his style are on the surface of his work. In the first place there is, of course, the finest and most fastidious sense of the fitness of words, the gift of felicitous expressions, and unwearied perseverance in improvement. In this he resembles Tennyson, who again points us back to

“Old Virgil, who would write ten lines, they say
At dawn, and lavish all the golden day
To make them wealthier in his readers’ eyes.”

I do not know how it may be with Virgil, but the other two very occasionally show the defect of their quality, and we become aware of over-elaboration. This, however, is an occurrence very rare. Stevenson has many devices for arresting attention and driving his point home. One of the most effective is the use of Latin words in their original derivative meaning, as in the lines

“Yet when the lamp from my expiring eyes
Shall dwindle and recede, the voice of love
Fall insignificant on my closing ears —”

Is not the whole tragedy of Love and Death in that line? Pushing this idea a little further, you may have descriptions in words suitable to some analogous sensation, as when the saloon of a ship is said to be hung round with reverberating mirrors, or the odour of a forest is compared with the rude pistolling smell of the sea. Again, he secures a striking effect by unexpected combinations of words, sometimes mutually contradictory, as when David Balfour, gazing on the gibbeted corpse, “stood drinking in discomfort”; or when evening falls upon the holiday-maker, his body full “of delicious pains”; or when people hearing of courageous deeds are “abashed into high resolutions.” This is one of his most characteristic touches, amounting almost to a mannerism, and betraying imitators into sad blunders, since it is an accomplishment beyond any but a master-hand.

Sometimes he employs the technical terms of the engineer, at whose meaning the uninitiated can only guess, but whose sound helps the general effect, for instance, in the lines on the Skerryvore light —

“There
Eternal granite, hewn from the living isle
And dowed with brute iron, rears a tower
That from its wet foundation to its crown
Of glittering glass, stands, in the sweep of winds
Immovable, immortal, eminent.”