

IX

PULVIS ET UMBRA

We look for some reward of our endeavors and are disappointed; not success, not happiness, not even peace of conscience, crowns our ineffectual efforts to do well. Our frailties are invincible, are virtues barren; the battle goes sore against us to the going down of the sun. The canting moralist tells us of right and wrong; and we look abroad, even on the face of our small earth, and find them change with every climate,[1] and no country where some action is not honoured for a virtue and none where it is not branded for a vice; and we look in our experience, and find no vital congruity in the wisest rules, but at the best a municipal fitness. It is not strange if we are tempted to despair of good. We ask too much. Our religions and moralities have been trimmed to flatter us, till they are all emasculate and sentimentalised, and only please and weaken. Truth is of a rougher strain. In the harsh face of life, faith can read a bracing gospel. The human race is a thing more ancient than the ten commandments; and the bones and revolutions of the Kosmos, in whose joints we are but moss and fungus, more ancient still.

I

Of the Kosmos in the last resort, science reports many doubtful things

and all of them appalling. There seems no substance to this solid globe on which we stamp: nothing but symbols and ratios. Symbols and ratios carry us and bring us forth and beat us down; gravity that swings the incommensurable suns and worlds through space, is but a figment varying inversely as the squares of distances; and the suns and worlds themselves, imponderable figures of abstraction, NH₃ and H₂O.[2] Consideration dares not dwell upon this view; that way madness lies;[3] science carries us into zones of speculation, where there is no habitable city for the mind of man.

But take the Kosmos with a grosser faith, as our senses give it to us. We behold space sown with rotatory islands; suns and worlds and the shards and wrecks of systems: some, like the sun, still blazing; some rotting, like the earth; others, like the moon, stable in desolation. All of these we take to be made of something we call matter: a thing which no analysis can help us to conceive; to whose incredible properties no familiarity can reconcile our minds. This stuff, when not purified by the lustration of fire, rots uncleanly into something we call life; seized through all its atoms with a pediculous malady; swelling in tumours that become independent, sometimes even (by an abhorrent prodigy) locomotory;[4] one splitting into millions, millions cohering into one, as the malady proceeds through varying stages. This vital putrescence of the dust, used as we are to it, yet strikes us with occasional disgust, and the profusion of worms in a piece of ancient turf, or the air of a marsh darkened with insects, will sometimes check our breathing so that we aspire for cleaner

places. But none is clean: the moving sand is infected with lice; the pure spring, where it bursts out of the mountain, is a mere issue of worms; even in the hard rock the crystal is forming.

In two main shapes this eruption covers the countenance of the earth: the animal and the vegetable: one in some degree the inversion of the other: the second rooted to the spot; the first coming detached out of its natal mud, and scurrying abroad with the myriad feet of insects or towering into the heavens on the wings of birds: a thing so inconceivable that, if it be well considered, the heart stops. To what passes with the anchored vermin, we have little clue: doubtless they have their joys and sorrows, their delights and killing agonies: it appears not how. But of the locomotory, to which we ourselves belong, we can tell more. These share with us a thousand miracles: the miracles of sight, of hearing, of the projection of sound, things that bridge space; the miracles of memory and reason, by which the present is conceived, and when it is gone, its image kept living in the brains of man and brute; the miracle of reproduction, with its imperious desires and staggering consequences. And to put the last touch upon this mountain mass of the revolting and the inconceivable, all these prey upon each other, lives tearing other lives in pieces, cramming them inside themselves, and by that summary process, growing fat: the vegetarian, the whale, perhaps the tree, not less than the lion of the desert; for the vegetarian is only the eater of the dumb.

Meanwhile our rotary island loaded with predatory life, and more

drenched with blood, both animal and vegetable, than ever mutinied ship, scuds through space with unimaginable speed, and turns alternate cheeks to the reverberation of a blazing world, ninety million miles away.

II

What a monstrous spectre is this man, the disease of the agglutinated dust, lifting alternate feet or lying drugged with slumber; killing, feeding, growing, bringing forth small copies of himself; grown upon with hair like grass, fitted with eyes that move and glitter in his face; a thing to set children screaming;--and yet looked at nearer, known as his fellows know him, how surprising are his attributes! Poor soul, here for so little, cast among so many hardships, filled with desires so incommensurate and so inconsistent, savagely surrounded, savagely descended, irremediably condemned to prey upon his fellow lives: who should have blamed him had he been of a piece with his destiny and a being merely barbarous? And we look and behold him instead filled with imperfect virtues: infinitely childish, often admirably valiant, often touchingly kind; sitting down, amidst his momentary life, to debate of right and wrong and the attributes of the deity; rising up to do battle for an egg or die for an idea; singling out his friends and his mate with cordial affection; bringing forth in pain, rearing with long-suffering solicitude, his young. To touch the heart of his mystery,[5] we find in him one thought, strange to the

point of lunacy: the thought of duty;[6] the thought of something owing to himself, to his neighbour, to his God: an ideal of decency, to which he would rise if it were possible; a limit of shame, below which, if it be possible, he will not stoop. The design in most men is one of conformity; here and there, in picked natures, it transcends itself and soars on the other side, arming martyrs with independence; but in all, in their degrees, it is a bosom thought:--Not in man alone, for we trace it in dogs and cats whom we know fairly well, and doubtless some similar point of honour sways the elephant, the oyster, and the louse, of whom we know so little:--But in man, at least, it sways with so complete an empire that merely selfish things come second, even with the selfish: that appetites are starved, fears are conquered, pains supported; that almost the dullest shrinks from the reproof of a glance, although it were a child's; and all but the most cowardly stand amid the risks of war; and the more noble, having strongly conceived an act as due to their ideal, affront and embrace death. Strange enough if, with their singular origin and perverted practice, they think they are to be rewarded in some future life: stranger still, if they are persuaded of the contrary, and think this blow, which they solicit, will strike them senseless for eternity. I shall be reminded what a tragedy of misconception and misconduct man at large presents: of organised injustice, cowardly violence and treacherous crime; and of the damning imperfections of the best. They cannot be too darkly drawn. Man is indeed marked for failure in his efforts to do right. But where the best consistently miscarry, how tenfold more remarkable that all should continue to strive; and surely

we should find it both touching and inspiriting, that in a field from which success is banished, our race should not cease to labour.

If the first view of this creature, stalking in his rotatory isle, be a thing to shake the courage of the stoutest, on this nearer sight, he startles us with an admiring wonder. It matters not where we look, under what climate we observe him, in what stage of society, in what depth of ignorance, burthened with what erroneous morality; by camp-fires in Assiniboia,[7] the snow powdering his shoulders, the wind plucking his blanket, as he sits, passing the ceremonial calumet and uttering his grave opinions like a Roman senator; in ships at sea, a man inured to hardship and vile pleasures, his brightest hope a fiddle in a tavern and a bedizened trull who sells herself to rob him, and he for all that simple, innocent, cheerful, kindly like a child, constant to toil, brave to drown, for others; in the slums of cities, moving among indifferent millions to mechanical employments, without hope of change in the future, with scarce a pleasure in the present, and yet true to his virtues, honest up to his lights, kind to his neighbours, tempted perhaps in vain by the bright gin-palace, perhaps long-suffering with the drunken wife that ruins him; in India (a woman this time) kneeling with broken cries and streaming tears, as she drowns her child in the sacred river;[8] in the brothel, the discard of society, living mainly on strong drink, fed with affronts, a fool, a thief, the comrade of thieves, and even here keeping the point of honour and the touch of pity,[9] often repaying the world's scorn with service, often standing firm upon a scruple, and at a certain cost,

rejecting riches:--everywhere some virtue cherished or affected,
everywhere some decency of thought and carriage, everywhere the ensign
of man's ineffectual goodness:--ah! if I could show you this! if I
could show you these men and women, all the world over, in every stage
of history, under every abuse of error, under every circumstance of
failure, without hope, without help, without thanks, still obscurely
fighting the lost fight of virtue, still clinging, in the brothel or
on the scaffold, to some rag of honour, the poor jewel of their souls!
They may seek to escape, and yet they cannot; it is not alone their
privilege and glory, but their doom; they are condemned to some
nobility; all their lives long, the desire of good is at their heels,
the implacable hunter.

Of all earth's meteors, here at least is the most strange and
consoling: that this ennobled lemur, this hair-crowned bubble of the
dust, this inheritor of a few years and sorrows, should yet deny
himself his rare delights, and add to his frequent pains, and live for
an ideal, however misconceived. Nor can we stop with man. A new
doctrine,[10] received with screams a little while ago by canting
moralists, and still not properly worked into the body of our
thoughts, lights us a step farther into the heart of this rough but
noble universe. For nowadays the pride of man denies in vain his
kinship with the original dust. He stands no longer like a thing
apart. Close at his heels we see the dog, prince of another genius:
and in him too, we see dumbly testified the same cultus[11] of an
unattainable ideal, the same constancy in failure. Does it stop with

the dog? We look at our feet where the ground is blackened with the swarming ant: a creature so small, so far from us in the hierarchy of brutes, that we can scarce trace and scarce comprehend his doings; and here also, in his ordered politics and rigorous justice, we see confessed the law of duty and the fact of individual sin. Does it stop, then, with the ant? Rather this desire of well-doing and this doom of frailty run through all the grades of life: rather is this earth, from the frosty top of Everest[12] to the next margin of the internal fire, one stage of ineffectual virtues and one temple of pious tears and perseverance. The whole creation groaneth[13] and travaileth together. It is the common and the god-like law of life. The browsers, the biters, the barkers, the hairy coats of field and forest, the squirrel in the oak, the thousand-footed creeper in the dust, as they share with us the gift of life, share with us the love of an ideal: strive like us--like us are tempted to grow weary of the struggle--to do well; like us receive at times unmerited refreshment, visitings of support, returns of courage; and are condemned like us to be crucified between that double law[14] of the members and the will. Are they like us, I wonder in the timid hope of some reward, some sugar with the drug? do they, too, stand aghast at unrewarded virtues, at the sufferings of those whom, in our partiality, we take to be just, and the prosperity of such as, in our blindness, we call wicked? It may be, and yet God knows what they should look for. Even while they look, even while they repent, the foot of man treads them by thousands in the dust, the yelping hounds burst upon their trail, the bullet speeds, the knives are heating in the den of the

vivisectionist;[15] or the dew falls, and the generation of a day is blotted out. For these are creatures, compared with whom our weakness is strength, our ignorance wisdom, our brief span eternity.

And as we dwell, we living things, in our isle of terror[16] and under the imminent hand of death, God forbid it should be man the erected, the reasoner, the wise in his own eyes--God forbid it should be man that wearies in well-doing,[17] that despairs of unrewarded effort, or utters the language of complaint. Let it be enough for faith, that the whole creation groans in mortal frailty, strives with unconquerable constancy: Surely not all in vain.[18]

NOTES

During the year 1888, part of which was spent by Stevenson at Saranac Lake in the Adirondacks he published one article every month in Scribner's Magazine. *Pulvis et Umbra* appeared in the April number, and was later included in the volume *Across the Plains* (1892). He wrote this particular essay with intense feeling. Writing to Sidney Colvin in December 1887, he said, "I get along with my papers for Scribner not fast, nor so far specially well; only this last, the fourth one.... I do believe is pulled off after a fashion. It is a mere sermon: ... but it is true, and I find it touching and beneficial, to me at least; and I think there is some fine writing in it, some very apt and pregnant phrases. *Pulvis et Umbra*, I call it;

I might have called it a Darwinian Sermon, if I had wanted. Its sentiments, although parsonic, will not offend even you, I believe." (Letters, II, 100.) Writing to Miss Adelaide Boodle in April 1888, he said, "I wrote a paper the other day--Pulvis et Umbra;--I wrote it with great feeling and conviction: to me it seemed bracing and healthful, it is in such a world (so seen by me), that I am very glad to fight out my battle, and see some fine sunsets, and hear some excellent jests between whiles round the camp fire. But I find that to some people this vision of mine is a nightmare, and extinguishes all ground of faith in God or pleasure in man. Truth I think not so much of; for I do not know it. And I could wish in my heart that I had not published this paper, if it troubles folk too much: all have not the same digestion nor the same sight of things.... Well, I cannot take back what I have said; but yet I may add this. If my view be everything but the nonsense that it may be--to me it seems self-evident and blinding truth--surely of all things it makes this world holier. There is nothing in it but the moral side--but the great battle and the breathing times with their refreshments. I see no more and no less. And if you look again, it is not ugly, and it is filled with promise." (Letters, II, 123.) The words Pulvis et Umbra mean literally "dust and shadow": the phrase, however, is quoted from Horace "pulvis et umbra sumus"--we are dust and ashes. It forms the text of one of Stevenson's familiar discourses on Death, like *Aes Triplex*.

[Note 1: Find them change with every climate, etc. For some striking

illustrations of this, see Sudermann's drama, Die Ehre (Honour).]

[Note 2: NH₃ and H₂O. The first is the chemical formula for ammonia: the second, for water.]

[Note 3: That way madness lies. King Lear, III, 4, 21.]

[Note 4: A pediculous malady ... locomotory. Stevenson was fond of strange words. "Pediculous" means covered with lice, lousy.]

[Note 5: The heart of his mystery. Hamlet, Act III, Sc. 2, "you would pluck out the heart of my mystery." Mystery here means "secret," as in I. Cor. XIII, "Behold, I tell you a mystery."]

[Note 6: The thought of duty. Kant said, "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above and the moral law within." (Conclusion to the Practical Reason--Kritik der praktischen Vernunft, 1788.)]

[Note 7: Assiniboia ... Calumet. Assiniboia is a district of Canada, just west of Manitoba. Calumet is the pipe of peace, used by North American Indians when solemnizing treaties etc. Its stem is over two feet long, heavily decorated with feathers etc.]

[Note 8: Drowns her child in the sacred river. The sacred river of

India is the Ganges; before British control, children were often sacrificed there by drowning to appease the angry divinity.]

[Note 9: The touch of pity. "No beast so fierce but knows some touch of pity." Richard III, Act I, Sc. 2, vs. 71. This ennobled lemur. A lemur is a nocturnal animal, something like a monkey.]

[Note 10: A new doctrine. Evolution. Darwin's Origin of Species was published in 1859. Many ardent Christians believe in its general principles to-day; but at first it was bitterly attacked by orthodox and conservative critics. A Princeton professor cried, "Darwinism is Atheism!"]

[Note 11: Cultus. Stevenson liked this word. The swarming ant. "The ants are a people not strong, yet they prepare their meat in the summer."--Proverbs, XXX. 25. For a wonderful description of an ant battle, see Thoreau's Walden.]

[Note 12: Everest. Mount Everest in the Himalayas, is the highest mountain in the world, with an altitude of about 29,000 feet.]

[Note 13: The whole creation groaneth. Romans, VIII, 22.]

[Note 14: That double law of the members. See Note 10 of Chapter VI above.]

[Note 15: Den of the vivisectionist. See Note 2 of Chapter VI above.]

[Note 16: In our isle of terror. Cf. Herriet, *The White Island*.

"In this world, the isle of dreams,
While we sit by sorrow's streams,
Tears and terrors are our themes."]

[Note 17: Man that wearies in well-doing. Galatians, VI, 9.]

[Note 18: Surely not all in vain. At heart, Stevenson belongs not to the pessimists nor the skeptics, but to the optimists and the believers. A man may have no formal creed, and yet be a believer.