

Contradictory Epitaph

January 17, 2015

*Under the wide and starry sky
Dig the grave and let me lie
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.*

*This be the verse you 'grave for me:
Here he lies where he longed to be.
Home is the sailor, home from sea
And the hunter home from the hill*

—R.L.Stevenson (1850–1894)

This epitaph for the poet himself is eloquent by its simplicity, and touching, because it touches on death, that inevitable tragedy of human life. Commemorating life and love, poets often treat of death, which so mysteriously cuts off both. Not wishing to think on the meaning of life or death, poor materialists cut off poetry and will print it as prose if they can, precisely to avoid having to think about anything higher than matter. But the mystery remains . . .

In theory, Stevenson's epitaph is brave. In the last three lines of each verse, in six lines out of eight, he says in six different ways that he is happy to die. But the poem is laden with contradiction. If "Glad did he live," how could he gladly die? If he was so glad to die, how could he have been glad to live? To be as glad to die as he claims, he must have lost his will to live, or shut it down, which he could only do by refusing to his life any destiny or meaning or existence beyond his animal death, and this he could only do by pretending to be no more than an animal. But what animals take the trouble to write poems eloquent and touching?

O Robert Louis, you knew you were not just an animal. You took the trouble to write many literary works, including a

spellbinding tale of life and adventure for boys, *Treasure Island*, and a harrowing tale of corruption and death for adults, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and your collected works make of you currently the 26th most translated author in the world. True, your parents were Scottish Presbyterians, a Calvinist sect dour enough in mid-19th century to turn many a good man into an atheist. But how could you sell yourself so short at death? How could you pretend that death is “home”?

The Creator did not originally design for animal death the rational animal that is man. Had all men from Adam and Eve made the right use of their rationality, or reason, for the appointed duration of their earthly lives, then instead of their now inevitable animal death they would have glided painlessly into the eternal life which the right use of their reason would have deserved for them. But that original design was frustrated when Adam disobeyed his Creator, and when by the mysterious solidarity of all future mankind with its first Father, he dragged down all men into original sin. From that moment on, contradiction is intrinsic to all human nature and life, because we have a created nature from God at war with our fallen nature from Adam. Our true – not false – “immortal longings” come from our nature as made by God and for God, while our animal death is “home” only to our nature as fallen. “Unhappy man that I am,” cries out St Paul (Rom.VII, 24–25), “who will deliver me from this body of death? The grace of God, by Jesus Christ Our Lord.”

Kyrie eleison.