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Charles Johnston

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Wilt thou ...

Wilt thou not ope thy heart to know
What rainbows teach, and sunsets show?
Verdict which accumulates
From lengthening scroll of human fates,
Voice of earth to earth returned,
Prayers of saints that inly burned, -
Saying, What is excellent;
As God lives, is permanent
Hearts are dust, Hearts' loves remain;
Heart's love will meet thee again.

. . . .

House and tenant go to ground,
Lost in God, in Godhead found.

Intro ...

When the scanty shores are full
With Thought's perilous, whirling pool;
When frail Nature can no more,
Then the Spirit strikes the hour:
My servant Death, with solving rite,
Pours finite into infinite.

R. W. Emerson

Foreword

It is admitted, by common consent, that the works of Emerson stand at the head of American literature. The cause of their pre-eminence, it might well be added, is the rebirth, in them, of the thoughts and ideals of the most ancient Upanishads. Emerson himself was perfectly aware of this affinity; he found no fitter illustration of his understanding of immortality than the teaching of Death, with which I have begun this volume. His words may well be repeated:

"Within every man's thought is a higher thought; within the character he exhibits today, a higher character. The youth puts off the illusions of the child; the man puts off the ignorance and tumultuous passions of youth; proceeding thence, puts off the egotism of manhood, and becomes at last a public and universal soul. He is rising to greater heights, but also rising to realities; the other relations and circumstances dying out, he entering deeper into God, God into him, until the last garment of egotism falls, and he is with God; shares the will and immensity of the First Cause. It is curious to find the selfsame feeling, that it is not immortality but eternity, not duration but a state of abandonment to the Highest, and so the sharing of His perfection, appearing in the farthest east and west. The human mind takes no account of geography, language, or legends, but in all utters the same instinct. Yams, the lord of Death, promised Nachiketasa, the son of Gautama, to grant him three boons at his own choice" - and then follows the teaching, as I have given it

The central thought, and almost the very words of the second Upanishad here translated, concerning the worlds, and their putting forth by the Divine, are faithfully imaged in another of Emerson's essays:

"But when, following the invisible steps of thought, we come to enquire, whence is matter? and where to? Many truths arise out of the recesses of consciousness. We learn that the highest is present to the soul of man; that the dread universal essence, which is not wisdom, or love, or beauty, or power, but all in one, and each entirely, is that for which all things exist, and that by which they are; that spirit creates; that behind nature, throughout nature, spirit is present As a plant upon the earth, so a man rests upon the bosom of God; he is nourished by unfailling fountains, and draws, at his need, inexhaustible power."

To cite all the passages in which Emerson bears testimony to the truth contained in the third passage I have rendered: that the soul of man is one with the immemorial Soul that wove the worlds, would be, to repeat the greater part of what he has written; for this, more than anything else, is the heart of his message. One passage, out of many, will be enough:

"The soul gives itself, alone original and pure, to the Lonely, Original and Pure, who, on that condition, gladly inhabits, leads, and speaks through it. Then it is glad, young, and nimble. Behold, it saith, I am born into the great, the universal mind. I, the imperfect, adore my own perfect. I am somehow recipient of the great soul, and thereby I do overlook the sun and the stars, and feel them to be the fair accidents and effects which change and pass. More and more the surges of everlasting nature enter into me, and I become public and human in my regards and actions. So I come .to live in thoughts, and act with energies, which are immortal."

Let me add, to these three, one more passage, which shows the same primeval power, that gave birth to the imagery of ancient wisdom, once more actively creative; a passage, more eloquent, perhaps, than all else that Emerson has written:

"There is no chance, and no anarchy, in the universe. All is system and gradation. Every god is there, sitting in his sphere. The young mortal enters the hall of the firmament; there, he is alone with them alone; they pouring on him benedictions and gifts, and beckoning him up to their thrones. On the instant, and incessantly, fall snow-storms of illusions. He fancies himself in a vast crowd which sways this way and that, and whose movements and doings he must obey; he fancies himself poor, orphaned, insignificant. The mad crowd drives hither and thither, now furiously commanding this thing to be done, now that. What is he that he should resist their will, and think or act for himself? Every moment new changes and new showers of deceptions to baffle and distract him. And when by and by, for an instant, the air clears, and the loud lifts a little, there are the gods still sitting around him on their thrones; they alone, with him alone."

Charles Johnston

To G. W. Russell

The brown and yellow of autumn are touching the chestnut-leaves again for the tenth time since those early days when we first began to seek the small old path the seers know.

On such a day as this, rejoicing in the sunlight, we lay on our backs in the grass, and, looking up into the blue, tried to think ourselves into that new world which we had suddenly discovered ourselves to inhabit. For we had caught the word, handed down with silent laughter through the ages, that we ourselves are the inventors of the game of life, the kings of this most excellent universe: that there is so sorrow, but fancy weaves it; that we need not even knock to be admitted, for we already are, and always were, though we had forgotten it, within the doors of life.

That young enthusiasm and hourly icy of living was one of old destiny's precious presents, a brightness to remember when storms gathered round us, as they did many a time in the years wince: there was a gaiety and lightness in the air then, a delight of new discovery, that I do not think we shall find again; yet I know, and you also know, what excellent strength we have gained instead. For, carrying our high hopes with us, all these years, as one side of life after another was turned to us, as we had to pass through rough ways as well as smooth, to wrestle with the stubborn tendencies of things, full-breasted and strenuous, we have fought and worked into ourselves an intimate knowledge of what we then only divined, we have realized much that then loomed dim and ghostly before us, we have learned to abide confidently by spiritual law.

To gain our experience side by side would have been very pleasant, had fate so willed it; but fate willed quite otherwise. Almost at the outset; destiny carried me, vagrant, to the distant rivers of the east, whose waters mirror old towered shrines among the palm-trees, while the boatman's song floats echo-like across; or where the breakers of the lonely, limitless ocean cast forth strange shells upon the sand; or through the grey alder-forests stretching away desolate to the frozen seas; or again, among rugged mountains, shaggy with pine-forests, where rainbow-sparkles carpet the snow.

And you, whom outward fate has held stationary, travelled perhaps further after all; finding your way homeward to the strange world the seers tell of, the world at the back of the

heavens; and sending to us your "Songs by the Way."

It was an ambition of mine, in those old days, to translate, from the Indian books of Wisdom, the story of the Sacrificer's son who was sent by his father to the house of Death. This story has always seemed to me a teaching of admirable worth, carrying with it the most precious gift of all, a sense of the high mysteriousness and vast hidden treasure of life, which makes us seekers forever, always finding, yet always knowing that there is still more to find; so that every day becomes a thing of limitless promise and wonder, only revealing itself as containing a new wonder within. For what teaching could bring a more wonderful sense of the largeness and hidden riches of being than this: that our sincerest friend is the once-dreaded king of terrors; that death teaches us what no other can - the lesson of the full and present eternity of life? We need not wait till our years are closed for his teaching: that wisdom of his, like every other treasure of life, is all-present in every moment, in full abundance, here and now. It is the teaching of Death that, to gain the better, we must lose the dearer; to gain the greater, we must lose the less; to win the abundant world of reality, we must give up the world of fancy and folly and fear which we have so long held dear: we have been learning it all these years since we began; learning also Death's grim jest, that there is no sacrifice possible for us at all, for while we were painfully renouncing the dearer, his splendid generosity had already given us the better - new worlds instead of old.

Well, the ten years are passed, and my ambition is fulfilled; I hand you my rendering of Death's lesson, and two more teachings from the same old wise books.

I have found them wise, beyond all others; and, beyond all others, filled with that very light which makes all things new; the light discovered first within, in the secret place of the heart, and which brimming over there fills the whole of life, lightening every dark and clouded way. That glowing heart within us, we are beginning to guess, is the heart of all things, the everlasting foundation of the world; and because speech is given therein to that teaching of oneness, of our hearts and the heart eternal as eternally one, I have translated the last of these three passages from the books of Wisdom.

You will find in them, besides high intuition, a quaint and delightful flavour, a charm of childlike simplicity; yet of a child who is older than all age, a child of the eternal and infinite, whose simplicity is better than the wisdom of the wise.

There is no answer in words to the question: What is in the great Beyond? nor can there be; yet I think we know already that, in the nameless mystery of the real, it will be altogether well with us - now and after. This strong reconciliation with the real is, very likely, the best fruit of our ten years' learning.

Charles Johnston
Ballykilbeg,
October 15, 1895.

In The House of Death

The First Part

Vajashravasa, verily, seeking favour, made a sacrifice of all he possessed. He had a son, also, by name *Nachiketas*. Him, though still a child, faith entered, while the gifts were being led up.

He meditated:

They have drunk water, eaten grass, given up their milk, and lost their strength. Joyless worlds, in truth, he gains, who offers these.

He addressed his father:

“To whom, then, wilt thou give me?” said he.

Twice and thrice he asked him. To Death I give thee, said he.

Nachiketas ponders:

I go the first of many; I go in the midst of many. What is Death's work that he will work on me today?

Look, as those that have gone before, behold so are those that shall come after. As corn a mortal ripens, as corn he is born again.

Nachiketas comes to the House of Death; he speaks:

Like the Lord of Fire, a pure guest comes to the house. They offer him this greeting. Bring water, O Death. Son of the Sun!

Hope and expectation, friendship, kind words, just and holy deeds, sons and cattle, this destroys, for the foolish man in whose house a pure guest dwells without food.

After three days Death comes. Death speaks:

As thou hast dwelt three nights in my bowie, without food, thou, a pure guest and honourable - honour to thee, pure one, welfare to me - against this choose thou three wishes

Nachiketas speaks:

That the descendant of Gotama may be at peace, well-minded, and with sorrow gone, towards me, O Death; that he may speak kindly to me when sent forth by thee; this, of the three, as my first wish I choose.

Death speaks:

As before will the son of Aruna, Uddalaka's son, be kind to thee, sent forth by me; by night will he sleep well, with sorrow gone, seeing thee freed from the mouth of Death.

Nachiketas speaks:

In the heaven-world there is no fear at all; nor art thou there, nor does he fear from old age. Crossing over both hunger and thirst, and going beyond sorrow, he exults in the heaven-world.

The heavenly fire thou knowest, Death, tell it to me, for I am faithful. The heaven-worlds

enjoy deathlessness; this, as my second wish, I choose.

Death speaks:

To thee I tell it; learn then from me, Nachiketas, finding the heavenly fire. Know thou also the obtaining of unending worlds, the resting-place, for this is hidden in secret.

He told him then that fire, the beginning of the worlds, and the bricks of the altar, and how many and how they are. And he again spoke it back to him as it was told; and Death, well-pleased, again addressed him.

This is thy heavenly fire, O Nachiketas, which thou hast chosen as thy second wish. This fire of thine shall they proclaim. Choose now, Nachiketas, thy third wish.

Nachiketas speaks:

This doubt that there is of a man that has gone forth: "He exists," say some; and "He exists not," others say: a knowledge of this, taught by thee, this of my wishes is the third wish.

Death speaks:

Even by the gods of old it was doubted about this; not easily knowable, and subtle is this law. Choose, Nachiketas, another wish; hold me not to it, but spare me this.

Nachiketas speaks:

Even by the gods, thou sayest, it was doubted about this; and not easily knowable is it, O Death. Another teacher of it cannot be found like thee. No other wish is equal to this.

Death speaks:

Choose sons and grandsons of a hundred years, and much cattle, and elephants and gold and horses. Choose the great abode of the earth, and for thyself live as many autumns as thou wilt.

If thou thinkest this an equal wish, choose wealth and length of days. Be thou mighty in the world, O Nachiketas; I make thee an enjoyer of thy desires.

Whatsoever desires are difficult in the mortal world, ask all desires according to thy will. These beauties, with their chariots and lutes - not such as these are to be won by men - be waited on by them, my gifts. Ask me not of death, Nachiketas.

Nachiketas speaks:

Tomorrow these fleeting things wear out the vigour of a mortal's powers. Even the whole of life is short; thine are chariots and dance and song.

Not by wealth can a man be satisfied. Shall we choose wealth if we have seen thee? Shall we desire life while thou art master? But the wish I choose is truly that.

Coming near to the unfading immortals, a fading mortal here below, and understanding, thinking on the sweets of beauty and pleasure, who would rejoice in length of days?

This that they doubt about, O Death, what is in the great Beyond, tell me of that. This wish that draws near to the mystery, Nachiketas chooses no other wish than that.

Death speaks: