

## The Golden Age About Us

A child sits on the grass or strays in darkening woods, and its first going inward in dream may make inevitable a destiny. When inner and outer first mingle it is the bridal night of soul and body. A germ is dropped from which inevitably evolves the character and architecture of the psyche. It is seed as truly as if it were dropped into earth or womb. Only what is born from it is a spirit thing, and it grows up and takes its abode in the body with its other inhabitants, earth-born or heaven-born. There may be many other minglings of heaven and earth in childhood which beget a brood which later become desires, thoughts or imaginations, but the earliest are the masters and they lie subtly behind other impulses of soul.

This I found many years ago when I began to practice a meditation the ancient sages spoke of. In this meditation we start from where we are and go backwards through the day; and later, as we become quicker in the retracing of our way, through weeks, through years, what we now are passing into what we did or thought the moment before, and that into its antecedent; and so we recall a linked medley of action, passion, imagination or thought. It is most difficult at first to retrace our way, to remember what we thought or did even an hour before. But if we persist the past surrenders to us and we can race back fleetly over days or months. The sages enjoined this meditation with the intent that we might, where we had been weak, conquer in imagination, kill the dragons which overcame us before and undo what evil we might have done. I found, when I had made this desire for retrospect dominant in meditation, that an impulse had been communicated to everything in my nature to go back to origins. It became of myself as if one of those moving pictures we see in the theatres, where in a few moments a plant bursts into bud, leaf and blossom, had been reversed and I had seen the blossom dwindling into the bud. My moods began to hurry me back to their first fountains. To see our lives over again is to have memories of two lives and intuitions of many others, to discover powers we had not imagined in ourselves who were the real doers of our deeds, to have the sense that a being, the psyche, was seeking incarnation in the body.

As a tribe of gay or dusky winged creatures we followed might lead us home to their nest, so a crowd of delicately coloured desires led me back to the moment in childhood when, about four or five years of age, beauty first dawned on me. I had strayed into a park, and I remembered how I lay flat on grass overcome by some enchantment flickering about a clump of daffodils.

A little later I read a child's story, and in this what fascinated me was that the hero had a magic sword with a hilt of silver and a blade of blue steel. The word "magic" stirred me, though I knew not what it meant, as if there was some being within me which could foresee the time when the whole universe from wheeling stars to the least motion of life

would appear to be wrought by, or depend on, the magic of some mighty mind. It lay in memory, that word, without meaning, until a dozen years later its transcendental significance emerged as a glittering dragon-fly might come out of a dull chrysalis.

But the harmony of blue and silver at once bewitched me. I murmured to myself, "Blue and silver! blue and silver!" And then, the love of colour awakened, a few days later I saw primroses and laid the cool and gentle glow of these along with the blue and silver in my heart, and then lilac was added to my memory of colours to be treasured. And so, by harmony or contrast, one colour after another entered the imagination. They became mine or were denied, as they could or would not shine in company with those delicate originals of blue and silver. This love of colour seemed instinctive in the outer nature, and it was only in that retrospective meditation I could see that the harmonies which delighted me had been chosen by a deeper being and were symbolic of its nature and not of that unthinking child's. I think it was because in the first contact of soul and body I could remember beauty was born, that later in life I accepted ideas, philosophies and causes for the beauty they suggested, and I have always shrunk from any activity in which I could not see that magic thing.

As my meditation revealed to me the birth here of the aesthetic sense, so it revealed to me when the sympathy for revolt was born. I was lying on my bed, a boy of fifteen or thereabouts. The faculty of dreaming while I was awake had then become active, though I hardly know whether what I have to tell was a dream of the waking self or revelation from some more ancient inner being. In my fantasy I was one of the Children of Light in some ancestral paradise, and it was rumoured to us there were Children of Darkness, and the thought of them was fearful and abhorrent to us. But I in my imagination had wandered far outside the circle of light into a wilderness of space, and, far from that paradise, I became aware of a dark presence beside me, and I trembled because I knew it was one of the Children of Darkness. But this being whispered gently to me, "We of the Darkness are more ancient than you of the Light," and, at the saying of that, I forsook my allegiance to the Light, and my whole being yearned to lose itself in that Divine Darkness. This imagination of boyhood long forgotten I rediscovered years after in that retrospective meditation as the company of thoughts marched back with me along the road I had travelled. I knew in this lay the root of my many revolts against accepted faiths, and how later I could write a flaming rhetoric on behalf of those in my own country who were in revolt against its orthodoxies : exulting over the soul, resolutely putting aside all external tradition and rule, adhering to its own judgment, though priests falsely say the hosts of the Everlasting are arranged in battle against it, though they threaten the spirit with obscure torment for ever and ever: still to persist, still to defy, still to obey the orders of another captain, that unknown deity within whose trumpet-call sounds louder than all the cries of men.

I wrote so fiercely because the idea of revolt had incarnated in the hot body of youth and the gentleness of the whisper from the divine darkness was forgotten ; and I did not

then know that every passionate energy which goes forth evokes at once its contrary or balancing power, and that wisdom lies in the transmutation or reconciliation of opposites, and, if we were gentle enough, the God would give us a star to lead. The spirit of revolt sank later to more mystical depths, but it was from that original fountain of dream that many poems came like that I wrote where the man cries to the angel.

They are but the slaves of Light  
Who have never known the gloom.  
And between the dark and bright  
Willed in freedom their own doom. . . .  
Pure one, from your pride refrain,  
Dark and lost amid the strife,  
' I am myriad years of pain  
Nearer to the fount of life.  
When defiance fierce is thrown  
At the God to whom you bow,  
Rest the lips of the Unknown  
Tenderest upon my brow.

In that retrospect, too, I regained memory of the greatest of all wonders in my boyhood, when I lay on the hill of Kilmashogue and Earth revealed itself to me as a living being, and rock and clay were made transparent so that I saw lovelier and lordlier beings than I had known before, and was made partner in memory of mighty things, happenings in ages long sunken behind time. Though the walls about the psyche have thickened with age and there are many heavinesses piled about it, I still know that the golden age is all about us and that we can, if we will, dispel that opacity and have vision once more of the ancient Beauty.

There was another divine visitation in boyhood when I was living in the country and was told of a woman who was dying, how, a quarter of an hour or so before she went, she wept that she was unable to rise and nurse a sick neighbour; and there came on me a transfiguring anguish because of this self-forgetfulness of hers, and though the mood was too high for me sustain, and I passed from it to many egoisms, yet this was the starting-point of whatever selflessness was in my life. Yet because the love of beauty was the first-born of the union between soul and body I could never be like Plotinus and place the good above the beautiful.

One after another the desires and idealisms of later life were, in that retrospect, traced back to their fountains. There grew up the vivid sense of a being within me seeking a foothold in the body, trying through intuition and vision to create wisdom there, through poetry to impose its own music upon speech, through action trying to create an ideal

society, and I was smitten with penitence because I had so often been opaque to these impulses and in league with satyr or faun in myself for so many of my days.

Yet this meditation, which discovers another being within us, unites us to it in some fashion; and in retrospect we seem to have lived two lives, a life of the outer and a life of the inner being. I do not know indeed, but I suspect of that inner being that it is not one but many; and I think we might find if our meditation was profound that the spokes of our egoity ran out to some celestial zodiac. And, as in dream the ego is dramatically sundered into This and That and Thou and I, so in the totality of our nature are all beings men have imagined, aeons, archangels, dominions and powers, the hosts of darkness and the hosts of light, and we may bring this multitudinous being to a unity and be inheritors of its myriad wisdom.

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*Song and Its Fountains*, 1932

extract from chapter 1