

Madame Blavatsky on Old Age



What is more agreeable than a learned retirement? I speak of that learning which makes us acquainted with the boundless extent of nature and the universe, and which even while we remain in this world discovers to us both heaven, earth, and sea.

— CICERO¹

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TO DESTROY OLD AGE MAY BE TRULY GLORIOUS; yet we, Theosophists, at any rate many of us, would rather decline the offer. Eternal youth is an alluring, but dangerous gift. Youth is quite long enough as it is, to allow each mortal to spin a Karmic web vast enough to cover the span of several successive lives with a dark veil of sorrow. We agree with the Greek chorus in *Oedipus at Colonus*,² that the happiest fate for man is not to be born at all, while the second best is to die — no sooner he sees the light. Sophocles was a wise man in advising mankind to lament rather than rejoice over every new birth. He, whom the Gods love, dies young, Menander tells us. At any rate, old age is less dangerous and more respectable in every country than youth, a defect of which, luckily, man is very soon cured. Progress toward old age is the first approach to the secure haven of life, for every one; and, as Brück has it, it is far from being [391] an evil. The wave of every individual life, he says, rises out of the sea of Being to return to its parent source once more; and in exceptionally healthy people the vital functions become weakened gradually, and without being noticed. A happy old age carries us insensibly, as on a ship, away out of the current of life. We do not ourselves sense the motion, but feel as if the shores were moving and passing before us, until we reach unawares the Ocean of eternal sleep

Just so; and the “Ocean” is preferable to the “Sea of Being” or Life. Life is certainly, and at its best, “but a walking shadow”; and short as it may be, each mortal will find, one day, that he has lived too long. With most of us:

¹ Cicero: *Tusculan Disputations*, V xxxvi (Tr. Yonge)

² 1224

. it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing ¹

With everyone, without exception, life is as full of pains and sorrows as a bramble bush of thorns. An undesirable thing, at best.

“But this is Buddhist pessimism!” we hear the reader say. Not at all. No more Buddhist than Christian; and quite as Biblical as Buddhist. For, see for yourself. Does not Jacob complain to Pharaoh of the sorrows of life, when asked his age? “And Jacob said . . . The days of the years of my pilgrimage are an hundred and thirty years: few and evil have the days of the years of my life been, and have not attained unto the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their pilgrimage” [Gen. xlvii, 9]. And Joshua the son of Sirah describes life from the beginning to its end as one uninterrupted wave of sorrow! In his view, wherever we look we find but cares, fear, dangers, broken hopes and then — death. Do not the long-suffering Job, and the much-married King Solomon, depict life under the same colours? Life is a series of hard trials for the “Soul”; *a new initiation of the Ego into a new mystery*, every time IT incarnates. Believe me, reader; the luckiest ticket man can draw in that [392] never ceasing, dark Lottery called human life, is an — empty ticket.



¹ [Macbeth, Act V, scene 5, lines 26-28]