

BODY AND SOUL

By ROBERT J. O'CONNELL

FEW ARTISTS OF our time have more stubbornly wrestled with modern man's quest of a liveable self-image than the playwright, Tennessee Williams. In *Summer and Smoke*, for example, he faces us with two principal characters: Alma (whose name, we are pointedly reminded, is spanish for 'soul'), and John. A medical student and later a doctor, John is determined to shatter what he considers to be Alma's illusions on what the human being is about: he sets her before a chart of the human anatomy (prominently displayed throughout the drama) and angrily tries to persuade her that this bundle of glands and sacs and tubing is all there is to the animal called man. Alma, however, is adamant: 'There is something not shown on that chart', she cries. Earlier, she had spelled out her vision of the human condition by asking John whether he has ever weighed the message of the gothic cathedral:

How everything reaches up, how everything seems to be straining for something out of the reach of stone – or human fingers? . . . The immense stained windows, the great arched doors that are five or six times the height of the tallest man – the vaulted ceiling and the delicate spires – all reaching up to something beyond attainment! To me – well, that is the secret, the principle back of existence – the everlasting struggle and aspiration for more than our human limits have placed in our reach . . . Who was it that said that – oh, so beautiful thing! – 'All of us are in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars!'¹

Williams deftly exposes the weakness of John's view: 'It's funny', he exclaims, but (reminding Alma of a time when he had apparently tried to seduce her) he now admits that even had she consented, 'I couldn't have made love to you . . . I'm more afraid of your soul than you're afraid of my body . . . I wouldn't feel *decent* enough to touch you . . .' But if John has confessedly been leaving something

¹ Williams, Tennessee, *Summer and Smoke*, scene 6.

out, so has Alma. To her query on the authorship of that 'oh, so beautiful thing' about gutters and stars, John drily supplies the name of Mr Oscar Wilde. Alma's annoyed reaction underlines the fact that her self-image does not permit her to accept her body, her sexuality, the battery of hungers and drives that the human animal inherits from centuries of evolution. She persists in thinking of man as something far too akin to the 'angel of the fountain' that occupies centre-stage throughout the play. And life's vengeance on her is cruel: in the final scene, Alma has become a common, quite pitiable slut.

Some years later, Williams returned to this same problem of self-image in *The Night of the Iguana*. Here the ruined clergyman, Shannon, finds his opposite number in a refined New England spinster, Hannah Jelkes. Obsessed by God, but tormented by his sexual excesses (they stand as the personal focus for the stench and rot of an entire universe symbolized by the steaming jungle of the play's setting), Shannon's latent fury at the graceful peace in which Hannah moves finally explodes in a brutal question: has Hannah ever had any 'love-experiences'? Yes, she assures him, and proceeds to recount three rather seamy episodes; they climax in the account of an Australian salesman she met in the orient, who begged and received from her an item of her clothing to perform the act in which the sexual fetichist finds his lonely satisfaction. Shannon is genuinely shocked: 'That, that . . . sad, dirty little episode', he splutters: does she call that a 'love experience'? 'You mean it didn't disgust you?'

Why 'dirty'? Hannah questions mildly. And no, not disgusting either. Though 'sad' it certainly was: 'I'd known about loneliness, but not that degree or . . . depth of it'. Her values run on quite different lines from Shannon's: 'Nothing human disgusts me unless it's unkind, violent'.¹

Yet the play's resolution shows William's keen awareness that such apparently untroubled serenity is in fact a constantly threatened thing: Hannah must still fight against a reflex of revulsion at touching or being touched by Shannon. Sensing this, Shannon mocks her slightly: he had thought she was an 'emancipated puritan'! No, she admits; but then, after all, 'Which of us ever is?'

The acceptance of the body and all that embodiment comports is never achieved once and for all. It is a continuing life-task, a task

¹ Williams, Tennessee, *The Night of the Iguana*, act 3.

of growth. But central to that growth is the acceptance of the central christian view that the 'kindness' meant by the virtue of charity is the real touchstone of what is right and wrong. Terms like 'dirty' and 'disgusting', therefore, cannot serve to label acts we would reject as morally objectionable.

Our traditional inheritance

And it must be candidly admitted that some of the most authorized representatives of christian tradition have not always safely skirted the dangers of that sort of language. St Ignatius himself, in his Exercise on Sin, counsels us to imagine and consider 'my soul imprisoned in its corruptible body, and my entire being in this vale of tears as an exile among brute beasts'.¹ And later, when confronting us with our personal sinfulness, he urges us to consider all our 'corruption and foulness of body', and immediately adds, 'Let me see myself as a sore and an abscess from whence have come forth so many sins, so many evils, and the most vile poison'.² Such phraseology may be subject to the 'generous interpretation' Ignatius pleads for in the prenote to his little masterpiece, but the point is that it emerges from a long tradition. And key figures in that tradition too often succumbed to the temptation of considering the body as the 'prison' of the soul, and this 'vale of tears' as the wider prison of the body-soul amalgam; they frequently complicated the whole matter by alluding to those aspects of our bodily functions that more readily excite the reflex of disgust: the smells and sliminess of mucus, pus, and excrement. *Inter faeces et urinam nascimur*, Freud loved to say, and then remind us piquantly that the quote was from St Augustine.

That tradition, then, is a long one. Indeed, it may go back to Eden, where we are told that their sinfulness awakened Adam and Eve to the first sudden pang of shame at their nakedness. The primordial sin of humankind's religious affectivity, it has been claimed, is some form of manichaeism. As individuals and as a race we have been, and still remain, always only partially emancipated puritans, even when protesting as volubly as John that our emancipation is total. Inveterately there is a corner of our being where we tend to imagine ourselves, our 'real' or 'interior' selves, as some kind of lightsome angelic being (write: 'soul') upward-reaching on

¹ *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius*, trans. Anthony Mottola (New York, 1964), p 54.

² *Ibid.*, p 57.

the lines of the gothic cathedral, caught somehow in the murky toils of body, weighted down with fleshiness, but yearning to fly free of our prison like some soaring bird the colour of sky. The popular image of heaven, where we would float about on fleecy clouds, all clad in nighties rinso-white, has too often been derided for us to deride it here: but it is not superfluous to point again to its connection with the spirituality of a lysolized 'purity' that looks upon sin as 'soiling' the stainless garment we were clothed with at baptism. Both images ultimately imply that 'man' – real, authentic man, – is 'soul' untainted by body; that the body is a tomb, a prison, or at very least, an alien and unfriendly host to its heavenly guest.

The head and the heart

It has become fashionable in this connection to proclaim the contemporary need for a return to the 'biblical' image of man, and to a 'hebrew metaphysic' that implicitly rejects the allegedly hellenic distinction of soul and body to which we have become victims. For all the merit there is to that claim (and it is considerable) there can be a deceptive facility involved in it. One wonders, for example, whether the unitary vision of man expressed in certain hebrew language-forms was really a 'metaphysic', or just an unreflected 'mentality'. Nor is this mentality consistent through the bible itself: the Book of Wisdom speaks of the 'corruptible body' that 'weighs down the soul':¹ and the inner conflict every man experiences (between what St Paul spoke of as the 'law of my mind' and the 'law of my members')² poses a perennial problem to the reflective human being, and it cannot be written off in a few deprecatory phrases about hellenic influence on those places in scripture where it occurs. It is tempting to make Plato, the manichees, and St Augustine the villains of the piece; but facility is not always the highest recommendation for solutions to lasting spiritual problems.

For while it is true that we have inherited much of our dualistic language and imagery from these thinkers; true, as well, that tradition's view of the soul as imprisoned in the body owes much to them, and that tradition's view, presented to us at a tender age, may strongly have influenced our affectivity; it may nonetheless be true that had the manichees, Plato and Augustine never lived or written a word on these matters, we might have invented them,

¹ Wis 9, 15.

² Rom 7, 23.

or at least been solicited by views very like theirs. For the fact of tensions, rifts, conflicts in the developing human being, is one that any reflective man has eventually to deal with in conceptual terms. And the conceptualizations of dualism possess a strange and lasting fascination for us.

One corollary of all this is that for the contemporary christian evaluating tradition's message, it may be dangerous to consider this a problem exclusively of 'what *they* said and thought, those chaps, back there in *history*': our own self-image is on trial here. Another danger would be this: to think of this as a problem either exclusively or most importantly in the intellectual order: once solved on that level, then our worries are over. Once we manage to elaborate a more liveable self-image than the inherited one, than the business of 'living', it is so much clear sailing. There could be no more touching naiveté than this; and Williams' portrayal of Hannah Jelkes contains a deep wisdom; for knowing that she retained some puritan reflexes, and that they were incoherent with her new self-image, did not empower her to shuck those offending reflexes. Her problem, she saw, was now one of growth; life, and the time it takes to live it, had to be trusted to collaborate in that gradual integration of the self that leads one slowly to accept the embodied character of human existence; and accept it, paradoxically, at the end of a life when the body is (to all intents and purposes) at its least attractive, least resilient.

Ideas and their consequences

But even if the problem be not primarily an intellectual one, it remains true that intellectual conceptualizations are an important ingredient of the problem. Inherited manners of viewing the human situation can exacerbate the affective split that gave rise to those very conceptualizations; explanations of our humanity in dualistic terms can provide continuing assurance that the Alma-versus-John debate each one of us must carry on is hopeless, doomed from the first to tragedy. Ideas have affective consequences, and a dichotomized view of human nature can help to perpetuate a psychic conflict, whereas a sounder view of ourselves can be an important first step on the path toward resolution of the conflict. If the heart can influence the head, so can the head, over time, help to pacify the illegitimate promptings of the heart.

So it does help somewhat to revisit Plato's *Phaedo*, subjecting it to a therapeutically critical reading. For therapeutic it can be to

catch that instinctive leap of the heart when Socrates speaks of death as the soul's longed-for 'release from the body', consummation of the wise-man's tireless quest for a vision of the beauty and truth from which the errors of sense and the fierce promptings of fear and desire have blocked him. All of us still find some corner of our affectivity responding to the somewhat simplistic view that all evils can be laid at the doorstep of the body with its tumultuous desires for 'eating, drinking, and sex', – and something within us tells us that only by 'purification', the separation of the soul 'as much as possible from the body, accustoming it to withdraw from all contact with the body', can we find 'wisdom, goodness, beauty, in all their purity'¹

One can bring that therapy much closer to home by re-reading (in context) those classic phrases of the early St Augustine that so often thread their way into retreats and spiritual literature: 'To know God, and my own soul: this I want, and nothing more besides';² or, 'Our hearts are restless till they rest in thee'.³ The context of those utterances is important, for a great part of their force is drawn from Augustine's having borrowed much, overmuch, from a plotinian view of the human situation (itself heavily indebted to Plato's *Phaedo*) that regards man as crucially 'soul' fallen and immersed into an essentially alien world of sense and body. One need not admit, in this connection, that Augustine himself was fully subscribing to Plotinus' theory of the soul's pre-existence and 'fall' into the body;⁴ it stands beyond question that much of his affect toward the human situation was deflected by that theory, and that is quite enough to justify a certain suspicion of the inheritance he has bequeathed us in this regard. It gives one to think that Augustine may have been converted from the manichee dualism with all its remorseless hatred of the body, to a plotinian understanding of the christian faith that, at crucial junctures, only too closely resembled its manichee adversary.

Portrait of the alienated soul

This leads us to inspect, at its root, the constellation of emphases that long held sway in a certain line of christian spirituality. If man be truly soul, then his real business is to capture (or re-capture?)

¹ *Phaedo* 64A-68B. Quoted from *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New York, 1961), pp 46-50.

² *Soliloquies* I, 7.

³ *Confessions* I, 1.

⁴ Though I have tried to argue that he does subscribe to that view; see *St Augustine's Early Theory of Man* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968).

the ecstatic 'vision' of divine Truth and Wisdom in all their beauty, – the platonic and plotinian view of what the 'restless heart' yearns for, but now in christian dress. This implies a radical detachment from the body and from 'bodily desires', from the world of sense, and from all the concerns of the hurly-burly world of human action. We must, if we are thoroughly consequent with this view, be prepared to break with the world of human involvements and fly to some haven, regularly a 'rural' rather than an 'urban' setting, to live in a pervading atmosphere of contemplative peace. We must flee the toils of sex, even of sex in christian marriage, not only because the duties of supporting a wife and family would distract us from our contemplative aim by drawing us back into the world of getting and spending, but more fundamentally because sex represents the most intense immersion that can be imagined in the world of body, sense, and 'animal' desire, the sources of that 'restlessness' of heart Augustine longs to replace with the 'rest and peace' of contemplative union with his God.

Here we have in summary, then, the traditional root of the Alma-type spirituality. It is largely responsible for the meaning and emphases attached to those frequent utterances about the christian's duty to 'save his *soul*'. But it also underlies the long-standing pre-occupation with the tormented question of the soul's natural 'immortality'. Suffice it, in this latter connection, to remind ourselves that, centuries later, St Thomas' own arguments for the soul's immortality are largely drawn from St. Augustine's early treatise on *The Immortality of the Soul*, a work that itself borrows liberally from Plotinus' *Ennead* (IV, 7) of the same name. And it is not entirely clear that the thesis of 'immortality', even in St Thomas' writings, have ever cleanly broken with the idea of the soul as some quasi-angelic being, painfully (and shamefully) enveloped (to use the earlier Augustine's language) in the filth, birdlime – yes, literally the excrement – of body. Such a body every Alma must always strive to oppose, or at very least, study to ignore, and attribute all the soaring aspiration of her being to the 'soul'. In doing so, she sets up the conditions for her own inevitable tragedy: the human composite that would live like an angel inevitably courts the revenge of that side of her humanity she is fighting to deny. More than that, she naturally generates the dialectical antithesis of her own inadequate view, the spirituality of a John who rightly protests she has left something out, and insists on restoring its rights to this bag of biological needs, lusts and tubing

to which his own unilateral vision reduces the human animal. And that antithetic vision, it must be noted, is generated not only in others who disagree: it takes rise in the very heart of the one who was trying to combat it. It is the view to which Alma herself eventually surrenders.

Christianity, the body, and 'sacrament'

Such an angelistic evaluation of the human condition, then, is psychologically disastrous. More to the point here, it is manifestly unchristian. And this, to do him credit, the later Augustine came more clearly to see, and in a manner that still remains instructive to the Almas and the Johns of our own day.

For the christian view of man is built squarely on a view of God as 'creator of things both visible and invisible': this entire sensible, bodily world that is the environment for our living, was created as the expression of God's love, created 'good'; indeed, when it reaches its natural summit in man, 'very good'.

Moreover, the first song we have in the bible is Adam's enraptured acclamation of Eve, the only helpmate like to himself, — not 'soul like to mine' but rather 'bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh'.¹ But nothing more disturbed whatever manichaeian residues still clung to Augustine's heart, than his painful effort to take seriously (and literally!) the first words God addresses to this masterpiece-couple he has created: a blessing on their nuptial union. Visible crown of the visible creation, then, man and woman, both in 'body' and 'soul', were to be God's 'image': the sacramental presence of his dominion and creative power in our still unfinished world. As such, they must not only 'increase and multiply', their commission includes the progressive domination of our earth, the very 'labour' and involvement in bodily, temporal (and yes, why not? technological and scientific!) activity that an angelistic spirituality would urge them to flee in favour of contemplation.

Even their sexual activity, therefore, was to be sacramental: the sign and continuance of that union of love and creative power that gave birth to creation itself; but more than that, the 'great sacrament', pointing ahead to the 'sacrament' Augustine later admits it took him a certain time to understand and assimilate into his thinking: the mystery of Word-made-flesh.

The Incarnation has rightly been termed the climactically unique

¹ Gen 2, 23.

'sacrament' of man's encounter with the God of love: the presencing of his saving, unifying love to a world torn apart by sinfulness. The body of Christ was real flesh, his hands and feet real hands, real feet: how, then, can matter and body be looked upon as 'soiling' or 'staining' the soul, when the very Son of God has taken it into intimate union with his own being, made it the medium in and through which human ears and eyes and hands could make contact with divinity, and divine Love manifest itself as active in our world?

The revaluation of matter that stems from the christian doctrine of creation, that is called for even more peremptorily by the mystery of incarnation, was demanded as well, Augustine eventually came to see, by what christianity taught about the end-term of our salvation: not the 'escape' of soul from the shackles of body, but the resurrection of that very body. The athenians smiled with urbane scepticism at the itinerant preacher from Tarsus: but they knew, at least, that a revolution was being effected in humankind's thinking and feeling about the body and about the bodily universe, when this sacramental principle was carried to its logical conclusion: the man whom God had created as a sacramental being, he would save and keep eternally safe in the fulness of that sacramental being. It was no longer permitted that man despise the modest elements that went to make up his body: water, oil, bread and wine had now, in their humblest form, been assumed into the sacramental economy of redemptive love: how much more, then, the hand that blessed and greeted and supported, the face and eye that looked on one's brother with love, the very organs that came into play to translate the creative fecundity of love in the sacramental encounter of marriage?

The axis has shifted

What Paul was preaching, the athenians dimly understood, was that the very axis of our universe had shifted: no longer souls yearning for the purification of escape from the bodily world, men were being asked to believe that they were sacramental beings, and that the centre of their concern must now become the sacramental embodying of love. And this, to be historically just, was the first of christianity's central emphases the great Augustine came to grapple with: that the main business of christian living was not to find some pedagogy of purification in pursuit of a disincarnate vision; the main business of the christian is quite simply to love the brethren, to body forth among them the love of God active in our

midst: a love that first took bodied form for us in all creation, that at the last took bodied form in Christ, and now works patiently to build his body to its fulness. One may be permitted doubts as to whether the bishop of Hippo, even at the last, successfully elaborated the thought-ways adequate to deal with this emphasis on charity; but that is a secondary matter here. What counts is that he came to see where the central problem for christian reflection lay, and that he left to history, and now to us, the task of wrestling with it.

Spiritualizing the 'body'

And wrestled with, it must be; even if the bout is inspected on the intellectual plane of conceptualization. For how is one to express this unity-in-tension, this cluster of polarities man comes upon the moment he investigates himself in any depth? To label man's constitution as 'essentially sacramental', as we have here, is only to hint at the solution. It means that man cannot be viewed as essentially some angelic being, quite accidentally (or embarrassedly) 'expressing' both the aspirations and the riches of his inner, spiritual being through the body as an 'instrument'. For however adapted to his use, however docile to his command the instrument, the very fact of viewing it as merely an instrument sets up an initial alienation between our 'real' and 'inner' selves and our bodies. And yet, while rejecting such alienation, thinkers of every persuasion have been forced to acknowledge a certain 'distance' (to use that metaphor) between the selves we would be and the selves we are: for the 'evil that I would not, that I do'.¹ Expressions for this polar relationship may vary: an Aristotle makes the soul 'form' of the body; Marcel speaks of the body as something I at one and the same time 'am' and yet 'have'; Merleau-Ponty wields a vital hyphen to designate man a 'body-subject'; Teilhard insists on unity-in-distinction by speaking of 'matter-spirit', 'within and without'. And so on, it would seem, to our increasing confusion . . .

And yet we need not be confused; or rather, we need not take this endless battle of words and concepts as a sign that Alma and John will argue to the end of the world. It is enough for the christian to note the central tendency in all these thinkers: the healthy acknowledgement of polarity in the human constitution, along with an equally healthy rejection of dualism. We recognize that matter and body, in-formed by spirit, is itself partner to all the upward-

¹ Rom 7, 19.

reaching aspiration Alma spoke of. We are, in fact, helped to look on 'flesh' in the properly biblical sense: as designating the whole man, not body merely but body and soul; but designating that whole man precisely, inasmuch as he sets himself against the divine design. What, then, is that divine design: to draw the soul upward and outward till it flee the body entirely? No: but rather, to body-forth God's redeeming love, active at every turning of our pilgrimage.

In this, the christian view, it suddenly becomes plain that even the 'soul' Augustine loved to speak of can be 'fleshly': its other-worldly aspiration can, for instance, turn into an individualistic, egocentric quest for spiritual consolation, turning it away (as effectively as any bodily 'desire') from the field of concern with our human brothers, from the sacramental 'labour' of charity. At the same time we are given the hope that the body can be 'spiritualized', its physical and biological drives assumed into the field of spirit, made responsive to the giant groaning of all creation. For prompted by the 'first-fruits of the spirit', creation both 'visible and invisible' thrills with 'the hope of being freed, like us, from its slavery to decadence, to enjoy the same freedom and glory as the shildren of God'.¹

Freeing the body

Sustained by the hope that the resurrection is at work in us even now, that even now 'he who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to (our) own mortal bodies through his Spirit living in (us)',² the christian shares that friendly and amused respect that prompted Francis of Assisi to address his 'Brother Ass' as 'brother'. He is armed, as well, with patience: patience with that slow pedagogy whereby the pruning labour of mutual love gradually emancipates us from the puritanism that finds the body 'dirty' or 'disgusting'. He looks forward to a life that more and more (though always incompletely) attunes him for the task that Hannah Jelkes had come to see as central: 'opening gates between people' who are isolated in their 'separate cubicles' of self-concern: making our whole being, body and soul, an instrument of loving contact.

Then, perhaps, that unitary being can become, even in the simplest, humblest acts of 'kindness', a sacrament to help others glimpse, embodied, God's love working to 'set our bodies free'.³

¹ Rom 8, 21-23.

² Rom 8, 11.

³ Rom 8, 24.