

Eva SZARKOWSKA

What a Body Desires

What does a body desire? The answer seems very simple. A body has some elementary needs that must be fulfilled. The problem is that nowadays hardly anyone limits themselves to satisfying those elementary needs. A body of today wants to be well groomed (up to the tips of the nails), tanned (regardless of the season) and hyperactive (24 hours a day). The following needs (are they really needs?) grow up like branches of a sprouting plant. The better the position of the individual and the more modern the civilisation, the more those needs become sophisticated and removed from the original requirements.

The fact that people create a higher living standard in the material dimension is not bad. However, it would be good to remember that not all of our caprices are equally important. Not all of them will give you a higher spiritual standard of living. Therefore it is worth distancing yourself from your caprices to evaluate their genuine value and to define which of them are necessary and creative and which are purely consuming. Creating a hierarchial system of evaluation is necessary to avoid allowing your body to force you into a corner.

THE PRIVILEGES AND THE DUTIES

In the modern civilisation the body has greater privileges than the soul. The body is the main audience of all consumer offers from foodstuffs, to cosmetics, to clothes, and innumerable objects of daily use. At the same time the body is an effective means of promoting these goods. Chewing gum is advertised by the whiteness of somebody's teeth, face cream by smooth skin of a model and beer by women's slim legs. Next to the privileges the body has numerous duties. The most severe one is to be up to the standards of physical attractiveness created by the media. The cult of the slim figure keeps many young people awake at night because they use it to measure their value as an individual. This cult also requires sacrifices, persistence and even spirituality in treatment of the body.

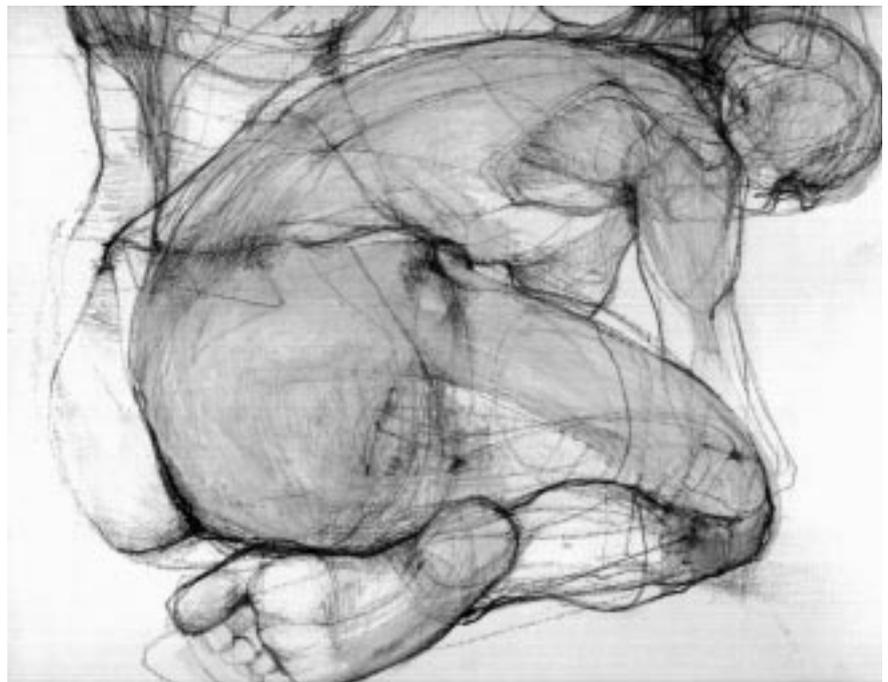
Every coin has two sides. The body that consents to everything can overindulge by falling into extremes, i.e. excessive gluttony. It is easier now in the age of consumption, when temptations are in abundance. Yet gluttony has consequences beyond health detriments. For the believer it also carries moral consequences – it is a sin against yourself. The most important thing is to learn to listen to your body, to understand its rhythm and its needs, to learn to read the signals it sends, to answer accurately, and to answer in time. For average persons in the

streets who cannot renounce their bodies like monks or saints, balance is the desirable state.

FROM A STATUE TO A HAIR SHIRT

The ancients mastered the balance between the physical and the spiritual. They could reconcile the world of senses with spiritual development, the joys of the body with intellectual activity. Famous antique feasts can be a good example of that: philosophical disputations with wine-cup-in-your-hand. Ancient Greeks were consciously striving for an ideal connection of both spheres of life. Therefore they put an emphasis on simultaneously developing the body through fitness and the mind through intellectual activities. "Kalokagatia", based on the belief that physical virtues should go hand in hand with moral virtues (beautiful, flexible body and beautiful soul), was a popular maxim. Harmony is but the right connection of different elements and balanced proportions.

The principle of moderation advocated by the Stoics can be interpreted in a similar way. In the context of the element of the body, this principle means centring between debauchery and asceticism and approaching your wants and limits with common sense. "We should behave as if we did not have to live for the body but as if we could not live without the body," says SENECA. Antiquity is characterized by an affirmative attitude towards the body. They worshipped the body's beauty and perfect shapes without insincere shame, erecting statues to celebrate this beauty. In contrast, the next ages pushed the body into the depths of contempt and humiliation. They clothed the body in a hair shirt. Whipping replaced applying fragrances and laudatory songs were



replaced by severe sermons condemning the body as a hotbed of lust and the source of all evil.

BODY TRANSFORMED

The Christian West broke the unity of an individual by contrasting the sinful body with a pure soul, imprisoned in flesh. The outer human form became the favourite target of rhetorical crusades. The most severe ones attacked a woman's body, accusing it of causing the first downfall and exile from paradise. The woman's body was considered to be more deeply immersed, physiologically, in the flesh and therefore more impure. Paradoxically, these same critics ignored the fact that the woman's body gives birth.

Because the woman's body belongs to a divine creature, Orthodox treatment of the body does not consider it to be a less desirable part of human nature. The essence of Christianity is the incarnation of the Word. The Divine Logos adopts human form and reduces Its eternal nature to the limiting walls of mortal flesh. Thanks to this, the flesh becomes sanctified. Similar glorification happened earlier, in the act of creation, when the Holy Spirit descended into matter, reviving the flesh that was formed of clay. The human body became the temple of the Ghost. Exposed to hostile powers, the walls of this temple crumble and are constantly in need of strengthening and support. It might be the quintessence of human shape.

The Mystery of Incarnation and the Transformation bear hope that, despite its earthly, lethal nature, the body can participate in what is immortal and eternal. While overcoming its weaknesses and limits, the body ascends to a higher plane of existence. It becomes more transparent, i.e. it does not head towards earthly occupations and pleasures that divert one's attention from reality but it rises towards heaven.

BODY AND IDENTITY

The body establishes our individuality. It separates us from others and isolates us from the environment by marking the individual's physical borders. To a certain degree, it determines our identity. In another body we would be somebody else or rather we would feel ourselves differently. The feeling that myself is myself consists of an awareness of my body, i.e. the rhythm of its physiological activities and outward appearance. It is not true that we should deny the body as a worse part of a being. Despite the whole imperfection, it deserves proper treatment, at least by virtue of being the first stage of meeting with another person; it is like a business card heralding a hidden interior.

In this respect clothing should become the object of our concern. This concern should be expressed on one hand in one's efforts to match their dress to their personality, on the other hand assuming a critical view of current fashion. Not everything that is regarded as fashionable (in the meaning – 'I must have it') matches my nature. In an age focusing on the individual, imposing general standards smothers individual uniqueness. The fact that we live in an age of goods causes our activity to be directed outwards, towards these things that you can get, have or (at least) wear. Identity-seeking often ends on the outside layer, which is where it should start. Yet discovery of your self requires inward direction and focus within yourself.

Despite the verisimilitudes, clothing does not play an unimportant role here. It is undeniable that what we wear influences our behaviour. We feel differently in a tight T-shirt, featuring the body's curves, than we do in a loose sweatshirt, which conceals them. As Umberto Eco notices: "The thought does not tolerate a close-fitting under-vest". Dress, and the hampering of our body, absorbs our attention too much and therefore is not conducive to inner life development. This development, according to what Oliver CLEMENT writes, is the condition of 'gaining' a praiseworthy body and transforming impermanent reality into eternal existence.

RECONCILIATION

Establishing and keeping a proper relation with your own body requires a dialogue. This dialogue denies the instrumental treatment of the body imposed by modern civilisation and assumes an attempt to read body language and an effort to accept its needs. It is a minimum that is necessary to achieve balance – a balance in which the body is neither excessively worshipped nor undeservedly neglected. From the balance, from the agreement between the soul and the body, something new will be born – an understanding and a tender outlook towards body as a being which has been promised the chance of transformation and grace of being the part of the future glory of Resurrection. The outlook will be full of respect, containing the awareness of suffering and physical imperfection.

(Translated by Dorota ROMĄNCZUK)

Suggested Readings:

CLEMENT Oliver, *Corps de mort et de gloire. Petite introduction a une theopoetique du corps.*

EVDOKIMOV Paul, *La femme et le salut du monde.*

Eco Umberto, *Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio.*

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