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Thinking on Thinking

In Plato's *Phaedo*, after the arguments for the immortality of the soul have been seen through, and while the hemlock waits, Socrates recounts a fabulous journey in which he imagines himself soaring upward, leaving behind the earth of our common experience, even rising beyond what he calls 'the true earth' and looking down at it. Seen from above it is multicolored, its hues brighter than any our painters know, its whites whiter than our whites; all its stones are jaspers, emeralds, cornelians and the like; precious metals adorn it everywhere. To the surface of this splendid place, he tells us, pious souls who have lived aright ascend, *post mortem*, to reside; and those who have purified themselves sufficiently with philosophy go there to dwell forever, altogether without the body, in mansions pure and fair.

As often happens after such a transport, Socrates is quick to state that he cannot vouch for the reality of such a place, but he does believe there is a lesson in the tale he tells. His story is meant to make vivid and compelling the ostensible teaching of the dialogue, the need to free oneself from the body and its desires. It is a little surprising, perhaps, that the images he employs are heightened imitations of earthly things and appeal so directly to our senses, although this is not without precedent when Socrates waylays the muse and begins to mythologize.

Something still more surprising about the teaching of this soaring vision strikes us when we recall an episode that takes place before the discussion of immortality begins. As Phaedo tells us, he enters Socrates' cell on the morning of his death to find him recently released from his chains and Xanthippe, his wife, sitting beside him—*holding their baby*. It might be wondered whether the seventy year old prisoner, with a wife still young enough to be the mother of the child in her arms, has always cared to transcend the body and its urges.

But never mind that now.

Thinking, inspired by this tale and gaining levity apace, may rise and soar yet higher still, continuing its ascent beyond the fancied palaces of Socrates, surpassing them and him and every mortal thing until it arrives at last where nothing can be found for which even the resplendent jewels of the true earth, or anything on it, could provide an image. Here nothing is fixed, there is nothing to be reasoned about, nothing to be conceived. Here thinking is so pure it vanishes into its own repose and abides, formless, undecaying and everlasting, as “the unseen seer, the unheard hearer, the unthought thinker, the ununderstood understander.” [*Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad*, 3.7.23, p.117 in the Oxford India Paperbacks Edition, Fifth Impression, 2000, translated by R.E. Hume.] Here, thinking is incomprehensible and indescribable; it is void, space, ether, pure vacuity. Here emptiness is all.

It is a wondrous thing to ascend in thinking to this realm. There seems to be a natural tendency for thought to move out and up forever. “I am a thing which aspires without limit to ever greater and better things,” says Descartes in the third of his *Meditations*. [p. 51] Here is a more ordinary instance taken from a moment in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*:

Away and away the aeroplane shot, till it was nothing but a bright spark; an aspiration; a concentration; a symbol (so it seemed to Mr. Bentley vigorously rolling his strip of turf at Greenwich) of man's soul; of his determination...to get outside his body, beyond his house, by means of thought, Einstein, speculation, mathematics, the Mendelian Theory—away the aeroplane shot. [Virginia Woolf. *Mrs. Dalloway*, Harcourt Brace paperback edition, p.28]

Any of us may lift our thinking from its strip of turf now and then and let it soar; we may become the exalted knower and enjoy the perspective from on high. In the view being surveyed here, taken from the *Upanishads*, this is said to be possible because each of us is always one with the ultimate thinker and part of it whether we realize it or not. The Great Self, the Self of Selves, as it is anciently called, is said to be one and the same as the personal self. It dwells in the heart of all, separate from the senses, yet reflecting the qualities of the senses. It is within all beings, but not heard, not reached, not thought, not subdued, not seen, not classed, but hearing thinking seeing, classing, sounding, understanding. Here, in words closer to home, is Emerson's version of it. There is "that unity, that Over-Soul, in which everyman's particular being is contained and made one with all other...[W]ithin man is the soul of the whole...to which every part and particle is equally related, the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist...is...self-sufficing and perfect in every hour..."["The Over-Soul," in *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Modern Library Giant Edition, New York, 1992, p. 237]

One reason I have put this view in play is the identity that it affirms between the great self and all other selves, between the ultimate thinker and our own thinking. By virtue of it I believe we may examine the one and inform ourselves about the other. This recalls a device recommended by Socrates in *The Republic*. There an effort is being made to see what justice is, and when it appears that its characteristics are too small for easy

reading in the individual soul, he proposes to look for it writ large in the city where it will be easier to see. So too, expanded to its utmost, thinking may serve as its own parable and reveal more fully what and how it is.

As a term ‘thinking,’ is wide in its reach. It may be used in its broadest sense—as Joe Sachs tells us Aristotle uses the term *noein*—to include every kind of thinking from sensing to pure contemplating. This is much the way Descartes employs it in his Second Meditation when he characterizes himself as a thinking thing who “doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, unwilling and also imagines and has sensory perceptions.”

[p.28] Generally my usage follows theirs, but for the moment, it is the aspect of thinking attributed to the Most High in its primary and paramount mode that excites my interest. There it is said to be a pure receptivity without distinction or difference, purpose or impulse. It is beyond desire, urge or animas and rests in its own continuance without longing or regret. It does not judge things or hanker to improve them. It turns neither toward nor from. It is without business of any sort.

Here is a presence which cannot entertain its own absence or watch itself disappear, therefore it always is. Yet it cannot see itself, think itself, understand itself; it can only see that it is not the things it sees or understands. It is present in its purity only as a void, a space, an emptiness, an absence. It is nothing to itself. How then can it be? This issue arises now and then in the *Upanishads*. Sometimes its non-being is stressed, and it is even equated with death, but at other times, this view is expressly countered. “In the beginning,” goes one account, “this world...was just Being, one only, without a second. To be sure, some people say: ‘In the beginning this world was just Non-being,

one only without a second; from that Non-being Being was produced.' But...whence could this be? How from Non-being could Being be produced?" [Chandogya 6.2.1-2]

We may still wonder if this present absence or absent presence is a something or a nothing. If it cannot be thought, if nothing can be thought about it, how does it differ from nothing? To think the difference between it and nothing would seem to be impossible. Tempting though it might be to remain indefinitely in this nursery of metaphysical conundrums and play with the unruly offspring of thought, that is not the point of the present excursion into thinking's heights; and, strange to say, features of this featureless void still remain to be noted. Vacancy rules as that which is highest and best, but this abiding emptiness, difficult though it may be to conceive, does not remain barren forever. It is said to be a witness, a seer of other things. Yet, in its primal state, there is nothing for it to see. That pure repose, indistinguishable from nothing and empty as death, with no beings in it, must give rise to something other than itself if there is to be anything for the unseen seer to see.

Somehow this happens. There are different versions of the story and not all of them agree, but in the main it goes like this. In the beginning there was the self, one alone and there was no other being. It thought to itself: 'Let me create the worlds.' It sent forth all that is. Having sent it forth it entered into it. Having entered into it, it became what is manifest and what is not manifest. It was in the highest and moved by the highest and has become the lord of all beings.

The Great Self then is always and everywhere, like the ether, and from that ether it wakes all the world, which consists of thought only, and by it alone is all this meditated on, and in this it is dissolved. All things take their rise from it and return to it. It is their

nest. Heaven and earth are contained within in it; fire and air, sun and moon, lightning and stars, whatever there is in the world or has been or will be is contained within it. It is what is manifest and unmanifest, defined and undefined, supported and not supported, endowed with knowledge and without knowledge, real and unreal, existent and non-existent, bodiless within bodies, unchanging amid changing things, one eternal thinker, thinking non-eternal thoughts; one who, though one, fulfills the desires of many; one who is farther than what is far, yet nearer than what is near, greater than the great, smaller than the small. [I am paraphrasing and combining several sources here. As Hume notes in the introduction to his translation, "...the Upanishads are no homogeneous products, cogently presenting a philosophic theory, but...are compilations from different sources recording 'the guesses at truth' of the early Indians. A single, well articulated system cannot be deduced from them; but underlying all their expatiations, apparent inconsistencies, and unordered matter there is a general basis of a developing monism..." It is this tendency to pantheistic monism that I have sketched here by bringing together characteristic expressions that are scattered throughout the Upanishads. Some have been restated in my own words, some paraphrased from the various translations I have consulted, and some quoted directly. Passages from which I have drawn for the preceding paragraphs include: Maitri 6.17, Chandayoga 8.13, Taittiriya 2.6, Katha 2. 18-22. Mundaka 3.7]

Therefore, although it is ultimately said to be one, the Great Self by some uncanny power distinguishes itself from itself and comes to exist in two modes: an onlooker and an actor; a being apart and a maker of things. As that which is always already there it is immaterial, immortal, fluid and indefinite; as that which is produced out of itself it is material, mortal, definite, solid.

So we might say: in the beginning there was void, nothing, emptiness—then it moved. It moved and everything began. Out of itself it gave rise to everything that is. Problematic as such an account may be, this inexplicable fecundity brings forth a world with things in it for the unseen seer to see and think about, to enter into and to understand, although it dwells apart from them, supernal and detached.

One of the things we can see even from this hasty sketch is the warrant for asserting a real kinship between our own thinking and that of the Most High: we, too, are sometimes the detached seer and sometimes the active doer and maker.

In one of the early novels of Graham Greene, its hero, Andrews, is asked by another character, "Is there anything you care for or want?" "To be null and void," he said. "Dead?" "No, no," he said...When music plays one does not see or think; one hardly hears. A bowl—and music is poured in until there is no 'I,' I *am* the music." [*The Man Within*, Part I, Ch. IV, p. 72]

Such a moment, when we are one with the music, is known to all of us. But in another moment, equally well known, we realize we are hearing the music, that we are apart from it and other than it. We were there, sensing and feeling and aware, before it began and will still be there when it ends. There is, it may seem to us then, an encompassing awareness which persists while the things that appear to it come and go. If we try to examine the enduring aspect of the experience, the hearer of hearing as it is styled in this account, it is nowhere to be found. It can notice only what is present to it. If it hears or sees anything else it becomes something other than what it truly is: some feeling, thought, or sensation takes its place, and as before, we can attend to whatever is there and observe ourselves observing it, but that noticer of sounds, sights, feelings and thoughts seems to vanish as soon as attention is paid to it. Thus it might be said of us as well as of the Great Self: we cannot hear the hearer of our hearing, we cannot see the seer of our seeing, we cannot think the thinker of our thinking.

Yet that distanced thinker, the observer standing always apart, is a real feature of our experience and there is something about this standpoint of detachment that invites us. When we let everything go and empty our thoughts as completely as possible, it may bring us respite, healing and repose. There is no greater repletion, we have been told, than pure contemplation and according to many reports it is possible, with long practice and the proper discipline, to empty our thinking of anything outside it, reach total nescience and attain the highest bliss.

But if such detachment is the primal mode of the Most High, it is not so for us as lesser thinkers. The relative balance of tranquillity and activity in it and us is reversed, to say the least. Repose is not the usual state of our thinking; quiescence is difficult to achieve and hard to maintain for long. Needs arise, cares press, urges move us, action calls; thinking enters into things other than itself and becomes absorbed in them.

We know how variable thinking is, how easily and frequently it changes. Using a spatial metaphor we speak of the motions of thinking, and what we are talking about is its power to be other than it is at any moment. Countless times a day our attention is withdrawn from what we are doing. We look up from what we are experiencing and see the activity as if from outside it. We may do this for relief and rest. We may fall out of what we are doing because we have been distracted and have lost our place so that it is necessary to survey what lies before us and reestablish ourselves in it. Or we may deliberately stand apart in an appraising mood, to collect ourselves and improve our efforts, so that afterwards our manner of proceeding may be shaped by the insight and understanding distance gives.

This alternation of engagement and detachment, of acting and gazing on the actions from without, is a distinctive feature of our thinking and is definitive for us. By means of it we can see where we are and where we want to be, what we have at hand and what we want to make of it, what we know and what might be beyond it. Without this power we would not be the kind of beings that we are.

If our capacity for repose falls short of the highest, so too does our power of making things. Out of the aboriginal thinking of the Most High all things emerge. We cannot make such a claim about our own thinking: there are things it finds, apart from and other than itself, that it has not brought into being. Yet thinking, as we know, enjoy, and practice it, is a never-ending source of things, even if it is not the ground and cause of all. The world we inhabit is, to a remarkable extent, one that our thinking has made for us.

To produce something that doesn't exist, or to alter something that does, we often stand aside from what is at hand and let some plan, pattern, notion, idea, or intimation, guide our shaping and reshaping of the things about us. A possibility occurs to us. Vague as a feeling, indefinite as a hunch, or detailed as a blueprint it may be, but by envisaging it and bringing it into being, the order of things is changed. In this way we come to be surrounded by, swaddled in, aided and impeded by, the products of our thinking.

From the moment I throw off my comforter in the morning and rise from my feather bed until I plump up my pillow at night, turn out the light and wait for sleep to come, I live in a world that thinking has contrived. Nature—whatever that may be, and

whatever may be left of it; the part of the world not made by human thoughts—has receded into backdrop and scenery. I feed my face with utensils made for the purpose, brush my teeth with an appliance, cover my body with stitches of this and that to make it presentable and ride to work in a powerful machine over pathways shaped and smoothed to accommodate its whizzing treads. These artifacts and countless others like them are but elements of the earth scooped up by the power of thinking and the body's might and molded into useful things. Less concretely, the address from which I begin my journey and the one where I end it, the rules of the road, the state in which my car is registered, the laws of the land, the economic, social and political structures that propel, uphold and contain my coming and going, are likewise products of human thinking. None of these, I am prepared to say, could exist but for the fact that in us thinking has grown capable of becoming its own double and being aware of itself.

One thing that is clear about our own thinking is that it seeks expression and for this it requires a vehicle. If it is to become something rather than nothing, and if it is to endure at all, it must be bodied forth and lodged somehow somewhere. Its embodiment may be as nearly insubstantial as possible, it may be only words, but it must be put into something. According to tradition the ancient Vedas came into being by speaking themselves, but if they did, they did not abide forever by virtue of their utterance alone; they endured to inspire the *Upanishads* only because they were memorized and passed on by countless generations of Brahmans, and if they had not at last been written down they would never have come to the attention of most of us. The thinking of Socrates would be nothing to us and his character unknown if Xenophon, Aristophanes, and especially

Plato, had not put him into words. And there, in a body both more and less than mortal, he continues to dwell.

I am much inclined to doubt whether thinking has any power of endurance without some means of embodiment. In the ultimate case, that of the Most High, the fundamental claim that is made for it is that it has just such a power: it is believed to be capable of resting forever without body of any sort. Yet body, as we can see if we pause to look at the view of breathing and breath that accompanies this conviction, is there, but out of sight, from the start.

“Now the formless [soul] is the wind and the atmosphere,” says one account. “This is immortal.... Now the formless [soul] is the space and the breath which is within the self. This is immortal.” [Brihad. 2.3.3 and 2.3.5] “He who breathes in with your breathing in is the Soul of yours which is in all things. He who breathes out with your breathing out is the Soul of yours which is in all things....” [Brihad. 3.4.1] Breath, and the ether within the body are immortal, are unformed, fluid, indefinite. Thus breath, like thinking, belongs to the enduring, the uncreated and the all-pervasive. By this reckoning both thinking and breathing are self-substantiating and require nothing to support them. They are prior to any particular organs and have no need of them. In neither case is a body required.

The notion that breathing, like thinking, belongs to the immaterial and the immortal, is surprising, but it is not impossible to imagine grounds for it. The two can be brought into a kind of experiential unity by sitting or lying still, relaxing, attending closely to the breath as it rises and falls and letting everything else recede from awareness until the two seem to merge into one. As all interests, excitements and clamors cease, as thinking rests and all other sensations die away, only the in-breath and the out-breath are

there to be noticed. Then breath and the awareness of it seem to belong to the same order of being, to depend on nothing, to be equally incorporeal and self-originating. At such a moment it almost seems possible to believe that breath does have a life of its own; that it did not come into being with material and mortal things but has always been.

There are other respects as well in which breathing and thinking show similarities. A breath can be drawn deliberately, but it usually occurs without any consideration at all. Much of the time a breath arises and subsides on its own without a marked beginning or a definite end. Yet it can be noticed; it can be slowed down or speeded up; it can be held, arrested, stilled. In these respects it resembles thinking. But if, in moments of deep repose, breathing and thinking seem to occur without the need of a body, we have only to bestir ourselves, and run a mile or so, to see that breathing is the body's work.

But thinking, no matter how hard we do it, does not display a bodily connection in this obvious way. Much of the time, thinking just goes on, in one or more of its multiple moods or modes, without any apparent effort to bring it about or alter it or bid it to subside. A thought can be deliberately invoked, of course; thinking about something can begin as a matter of decision and choice. So, too, by choice a thought or a sequence of thoughts may be brought to an end, although not always in a timely fashion as every would-be sleeper tossing and turning in the early morning hours knows well enough. But even when we work hard at thinking, when we concentrate our attention, develop a long sequence of thoughts and arrange them in ordered patterns, this takes place without the sweat and heavy breathing that so often accompany our labors.

Although the locus of our breathing manifests itself definitively enough, this is not the case with our thinking. Habit and convention now incline us to suppose that

thinking takes place in the head, but it was long believed to occur in the breast, since any sensations that do attend the process, as when our feelings are aroused, are manifest there if anywhere. Fortunately for us, thoughts come and go without distracting symptoms and no definite indications characterize their production. Here is how the neurologist Arthur Sacks puts it:

The fact that forty or fifty different systems at least are involved [in yielding the apparently seamless visual world] is not something you can know. All you know is that you see the world. [The systems] involved in this wonderful synthesis or integration are completely inaccessible to introspection.

[I]n the same way, you cannot know how you move your hand or how you form a sentence....

If you had to think, if you had to have conscious knowledge of how you wipe your nose, you could not do it...[Oliver Sacks, Transcript of inaugural lecture, 'Creativity, Imagination and Perception', Centre for the Mind, Australian Academy of Science, Canberra (1998). As quoted in *The Book of the Mind*, pp.31 -32]

The absence of sensation as thoughts are produced and the lack of a felt location for them makes it seem that thinking might take place without any organs of production or support. When it turns to examine itself this possibility seems to be affirmed. In its self-regard it finds itself always already there, yet free to move about, explore and roam; and because its physical workings are invisible to it and it cannot see its own grounds directly, it supposes it has none. It takes itself to be self-originating and self-sustained, detached and essentially bodiless, free of matter and independent and of it.

This, in part, is what makes the notion of a disembodied thinker seem possible, and yet we have to wonder if it is. One consequence, for me at least, of the claim that thinking and breathing belong together on the high side of a great metaphysical divide where they require no physical support to sustain them, is to deepen my doubts about the existence of this exalted realm. Just as it is hard to imagine that a breath was ever drawn

without a body to draw it, so too it must be wondered whether there was ever a thought without a body to think it. Is a disembodied thought any more likely than a disembodied breath? To me it doesn't seem so. Thinking and breathing are not alike because both are prior to the body and beyond it, as the *Upanishads* would have it, but because both are bodily activities.

This suggests that the attempt to found thinking in the heights is upside down. There is something to the view that the Great Self is ultimately identical with the individual selves scattered hither and yon, and our own experience of thinking displays a capacity for detachment that is akin to that of the unseen seer. So the likeness is real. The question, though, is whether the little self belonging to each of us is only a local manifestation of the great, or is actually the model for it, as I feel sure it is.

The permanence of thinking in its highest form can be proclaimed, pointed to, intimated and extolled. We know that an individual thinker can posit a power of thinking that is unchanging, unlimited and ever-enduring. Many have done it. What we do not know is whether such a posited power has any real being. In contrast to this we know from our own experience that an active thinker can, for a time at least, withdraw from the flux, attain detachment and stand apart in moments of suspended intellection. To me it seems plausible to suppose that this capacity in us is the original basis for the idea that there is a supreme mode of thought abiding always apart from all things.

The question comes before us again if we consider the unchanging aspect of thinking in its ultimate mode and allow ourselves to wonder how anything could come of it. The Great Self has no need or occasion to do anything. There is nothing more to which it might aspire or toward which it might move. It can have no motives and cannot

be a cause. Thus, unless it violates its own being and becomes other than itself, nothing can come from the fixity of this eternal One but fixity, ever and forever the same.

If thinking is to make things move, its other mode must do the job, as our own experience teaches us. It is in its interested, motivated, seldom-the-same-for-many-moments-at-a-stretch, disturbed and active character that thinking is world-making. This is the kind of thinking we experience most often. We can see that it lives and moves and much can come of it. Alternatively, it is hard to see how a completely detached intelligence could be the origin of activity of any sort, including active thinking.

I am persuaded by this that the detached, unchanging seer, the ununderstood understander, is a moment of our own thinking re-situated in the heights and there eternalized. Thinking is born on earth, carried aloft by the imagination and anointed lord of all. Through this grand translation it appears to have secured itself—and us as its derivatives and dependents—eternally, but this attested supereminence, is only an appearance.

This brings us back, perhaps with a thump, to our mortal realm, but before we see what might be kicking around here at our feet, there is another teaching of the *Upanishads* to be revisited: the mortal body, it says there, is the abode of that Self which is immortal and without body. “[V]erily this body is mortal. It has been appropriated by death. [But] it is the standing-ground of that deathless, bodiless Self. [H]e who is incorporate has been appropriated by pleasure and pain. [T]here is no freedom from pleasure and pain for one while he is incorporate.” Only when he knows himself as different from the body can he get free from pleasure and pain. “Verily, while one is bodiless, pleasure and pain do not touch him. [Chandogya 8. 12. 1] Or as it is elsewhere

expressed: in the human body there dwells an immortal being, self-existent and self-sufficient, freed from desire, delighting in its own sweet savor. Knowing this being, wise, ageless and ever young, one has no fear of death.” [Atharva-Veda 10.8 (not included in the Hume volume)]

This view is not unknown to us. Only a little while ago this airy expedition to the farthest reaches of thinking seemed to overleap Socrates, leaving him and his imagined mansions far below, but here before us again is something like what he seemed to be teaching in the *Phaedo*: the soul brings life to the body, but the soul’s association with it is unwelcome; the body is an impediment; attachment to it and its unceasing alternation of pleasure and pain is bondage; we come into our true estate only when we are free of it; the way a man can be freed from all anxiety about the state of his soul is to become deeply dissatisfied with all bodily pleasures and adornments and devote himself to the pleasures of acquiring knowledge. Then he need have no fear of death.

It is not so clear how literally he meant all this. Socrates often seems to have a fable ready when his preferred practice of question and answer does not seem apt and it is not always obvious how he wants these tales to be understood. But I think we can be sure he intended to convey his conviction that the soul’s power of thinking can take us beyond our mortal and bodily concerns and open up to us a realm where more life-informing and enduring attachments might be lodged. Although it may not seem so to those who have not tried it, a life devoted to the exploration of that realm is better and has more reality than any other. There is no doubt he wishes his friends to share this vision and to pursue it after he is gone, and no doubt that he believes they will be the better for it if they do.

Whether he believes a soul—his or theirs—properly devoted to philosophy really ensures itself eternal habitation in another place is more open to doubt. It is clear that he

doesn't regard any of the arguments taken up in the dialogue as actually proving it, and there is no reason to suppose he believed it was something that could be proved. He spoke what must be taken to be his definitive word about it at his trial, a few days before the events recounted in the *Phaedo*. Nobody knows what death is, he said, but we are mistaken if we suppose it to be an evil. It must be one of two things: "Either it is annihilation...or a migration of the soul from this place to another." [*Apology* 40d] He declared it to be a gain in either case. If he had known more and could have proven it we can be sure he would have said so.

In the *Phaedo*, letting his imagination play, he entertains the second of these two possibilities and makes it his theme. He consoles his friends by insisting he is not his body and by helping them imagine he is going to a better place. He does not see his end as tragic and does not wish his friends to see it so: in dying he is only being freed from his body and nothing real is lost. "But how shall we bury you?" Crito asks. "Anyway you like...if you can catch me and I don't slip through your fingers," is his reply. He chides Crito for thinking the body they will be burying is really Socrates, and at the last, as his body is growing numb and cold, tells him to offer to Asclepius, the god of healing, a sacrifice of thanks for his release from it.

This view of body and soul, commonplace in our life and literature, has found innumerable expressions. One came to my attention by chance while I was preparing this. Reading Charlotte Brontë's novel, *Villette*, I reached the point at the end of Volume I where the heroine, Lucy Snowe faints away. She awakens to begin Volume II in this style:

Where my soul went during that swoon I cannot tell. Whatever she saw, or wherever she traveled in her trance on that strange night, she kept her own secret; never whispering a word to Memory, and baffling Imagination by an indissoluble silence. She may have gone upward, and come in sight of her eternal home, hoping for leave to rest now, and deeming that her painful union with matter was at last dissolved. While she so deemed, an angel may have warned her away from heaven's threshold, and guiding her weeping down, have bound her, once more, all shuddering and unwilling, to that poor frame, cold and wasted, of whose companionship she was grown more than weary. [pg 165 in the Oxford World's Classics edition]

That such a union need not be seen as simply painful, a bitter burden to an unwilling soul, is attested by May Swenson, who takes up the matter in a different mood in a poem entitled "Question."

Body my house
my horse my hound
what will I do
when you are fallen

Where will I sleep
How will I ride
What will I hunt

Where can I go
without my mount
all eager and quick
How will I know
in thicket ahead
a danger or treasure
when Body my good
bright dog is dead

How will it be
to lie in the sky
without roof or door
and wind for an eye

With cloud for shift
how will I hide?

The note struck here is not relief but lamentation. The body serves: it is shelter, transport, lookout, raiment; it has vital functions and its loss is foreseen with great poignancy. The relation of the 'I,' the person of the poem, to the body is intimate and yet it is also that of something apart and other. This reflects the ordinary view we have of it. It is how we see the relationship of our body to our person when we are not actually thinking about it. We may not have a creed, a doctrine, a metaphysical position, a belief or a hope that requires us to see our body as belonging to a different order and having a different standing, but we do it anyway.

It is more than a coincidence that almost all of us regard our own personal being as something distinct from the body and other than it. In part, this is the distant echo of ancient teachings like those expressed by the authors of the *Upanishads* and by Socrates; in part it is a linguistic convention, a manner of speaking; but it is more than any of these. Our experience as thinkers seems to confirm it as a fact, and while we might not elaborate it as a doctrine or posit it as metaphysical truth, as some of those who have reflected on it have done, we take it for granted because of the way our bodies manifest themselves to us.

As already noted and remarked upon, thinking in one of its modes, the one often taken to be primary and most definitive, seems always to be there as the seer, the understander, the enduring being to which thoughts and things appear to be seen and known. We think and feel and can see that we think and feel. We are aware of passions, urges, excitements that we recognize as having a bodily origin. These perturbations threaten the composure of the detached observer; they require intervention, direction,

appraisal; thinking must descend into the transient to contend with them and its purity is lost. Therefore they do not seem to be proper to itself, but alien and other. And this is only the half of it. It is not only as emotions, impulses, desires, fears, pleasures or pains welling up in our thoughts that we experience the body. It is an object for our senses as well. It can be seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled like many another thing.

Experienced in this way it does not seem intrinsic to the observing self or essentially one with it but something that belongs to a different order of being. Added to this is the fact that many of the body's habits and actions affront the senses and offend the observing eye. From these the thinking self recoils: 'I am not that or that or that,' it prefers to think.

The passages of thinking are accomplished with such ease and are so swift; it moves so rapidly and readily about, zooming to far places and distant times, then back again; and all of this with scarce a murmur or a twinge that might implicate the flesh in any way in its production. The body, though, is seen to be mortally slow, so confined by time and space that even to move about is work for it; it is subject to fatigue, to risks, to wounds, to wear and tear, to sordid deeds and gross discharges. What real affinity, what kinship could there be between these two? Asking this question, thinking looks at itself and finds none.

This is thinking's prime illusion. In its lesser form—"I think, therefore I am," to give the Cartesian formulation of it—it purports to ground and secure our individual being; in its grander version, it does this and more. As Emerson puts it, there is "that Unity, that Over-Soul, within which everyman's particular being is contained and made one with all others." [Mod Libr Giant p. 237] And in the language of the *Upanishads* again, the limitless One, the supreme Soul, "unborn, not to be reasoned about, unthinkable—He

whose soul is space....From that space He...awakes this world which is a mass of thought. It is thought by Him and in Him it disappears.” [Maitri 6. 17] Even Aristotle, wary as he is of characterizing the soul as anything distinct from the body or separable from it, makes a pure intelligence, forever contemplating itself—thought thinking on thinking—the final cause of everything and all.

Thus we come to see ourselves, not as thinking bodies, but as embodied thinkers, cribbed, cabined and confined in flesh but not endowed by it. Even if an attempt is made to give the flesh its due the effort is usually problematic. In *Walden* Henry David Thoreau, an Aristotle to Emerson’s Plato, limning a transcendent vision incorporate in nature, begins his chapter on ‘Higher Laws,’ with this acknowledgment: “As I came home through the woods with my string of fish...I caught a glimpse of a woodchuck stealing across my path and felt a strange thrill of savage delight and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw; not that I was hungry then, except for that wildness which he represented.” He goes on to say that he finds in himself, “an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men; and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence both. I love the wild not less than the good,” he says. In the meditation that follows he tries to come to terms with these contrary instincts and ends by imagining a man he calls John Farmer who feels the call to a higher form of existence. “But how to come out of this condition and actually migrate thither?” the man asks himself. “All that he could think of,” Thoreau says, “was to practice some new austerity, to let his mind descend into his body and redeem it, and treat himself with ever-increasing respect.”

Thoreau's contemporary, Walt Whitman, seems to be doing something like this in his poem, "I Sing the Body Electric," where he begins by asking, "and if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?" and ends by singing

...all the shapeliness, all the belongings of my or your body
 or of any one's body, male or female,
 The lung-sponges, the stomach-sac, the bowels sweet and clean,
 The brain in its folds inside the skull-frame,
 Sympathies, heart-valves, palate-valves, sexuality, maternity,
 Womanhood, and all that is a woman's, and the man that comes
 from woman,
 The womb, the teats, nipples, breast-milk, tears, laughter, weeping,
 love-looks, love-perturbations and risings,
 The voice, articulation, language, whispering, shouting aloud,
 Food, drink, pulse, digestion, sweat, sleep, walking, swimming,
 Poise on the hips, leaping, reclining, embracing, arm-curving and
 tightening,
 The continual changes of the flex of the mouth, and around the
 eyes,
 The skin, the sunburnt shade, freckles, hair,
 The curious sympathy one feels when feeling with the hand the
 naked meat of the body,
 The circling rivers [of] the breath, and breathing in and out,
 The beauty of the waist, and thence of the hips, and thence
 downward toward the knees,
 The thin red jellies within you or within me, the bones and the
 marrow in the bones,
 The exquisite realization of health;
 O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only,
 but of the soul,
 O I say now these are the soul!

Here Whitman goes farther than Thoreau in articulating a vision that might bring us into accord with ourselves and allow the body to cease being haunted by its own ghost. His aim is not so much to descend into the body and redeem or purify it as Thoreau suggests, but to stand by the body unabashed and celebrate it as it is. I join with him in this but want to be even more emphatic and explicit. The body is not the

blind burden, wayward sidekick, or wild companion of the thinker. The body is the thinker.

This may seem to be a kind of paradox. If the body is the thinker then the view that thinking stands on its own is the body's error. The thinking body has misunderstood itself and mistaken the source of one its finest attributes. Much has been said already that might account for this mistaking, but one thing more might be added for emphasis.

The body has many possibilities and is ambitious to explore them. It tests its limits and does what it can to escape them; it sees its deficiencies and tries to overcome them; it seeks to live beyond its means. In order to be human it must do this. Thinking becomes the vehicle for its aspirations. As the anthropologist Loren Eiseley has noted, the human individual "has always possessed the ability to escape beyond naked reality into some other dimension, some place outside the realm of what might be called 'facts'" and to become "the creator of a phantom universe, the universe we call culture—a formidable realm of cloud shapes, ideas, potentialities, gods and cities..." [*The Invisible Pyramid*, p. 120, U. of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1998.] This world of phantoms, dreams and bold imaginings is real enough. It fully implicates our flesh and moves us here and there upon the earth as powerfully as wind or rushing water can. The nation, the world and the dollar are only ideas in which we are invested but their power to motivate, order and constrain our actions is nothing if not titanic.

It is here in this world of cloud shapes, ideas and potentialities that our everlasting tendency to misplace ourselves is born. Among these phantom realities, these real phantoms that surround the body, it supposes it descends another within itself, its immaterial double, a spectre beyond vicissitude, a superior entity more real and more

enduring than anything of blood and bone. This envisioned being purports to be—as in some ways it is—the body’s better half and helpmeet, a durable and invincible stand-in, seemingly able to go where the body cannot go, do things the body cannot do, and most important of all, to continue forever and ever. The body’s dross, by some obscure imaginative alchemy, is thus transformed into a bloodless apparition, a wraith more worthy of veneration and meriting an ultimate solicitude. It dwells within but it dreams of a higher destiny and longs to be free to soar in the winds aloft.

In preparing his friends for his death, Socrates has occasion to remark that “Ordinary people seem not to realize that those who really apply themselves in the right way to philosophy are directly and of their own accord preparing themselves for dying and death.” [64a] Simmias laughs, in spite of himself, at this remark and says that ordinary people would think it a good joke on philosophers to say that they are half dead already. Speaking as one of the half-dead, I must admit there is something about philosophic thinking that can remove us from life and diminish its intensity and I have sometimes felt this to be a terrible loss. But it can also be a great consolation. A pursuit that allows anyone to meet death with the calm dignity and perfect indifference of Socrates has something truly worthy about it, and that is one of the things that has recommended it most to me.

In my own case the recognition of death came early. I was scarcely aware that I was alive when I realized that I could just as easily not be, and I have never been able for long to lose sight of the fact that oblivion is only a blink away. For more than seventy years the task of my life has been to live with that dread of death and try to overcome it.

Philosophy has been my chief support in this. I am glad to have had before me, leading me on, the image of Socrates, Philosophy's great self-acknowledged seducer and comic mask of the Good; and I hope to achieve some measure of his equanimity when my hour comes.

Perhaps because I have not practiced philosophy aright I expect to find on the other side of that last event no mansions pure and fair in which to dwell. Beyond what I have already been given I look for nothing as a reward for a lifetime of thinking and I feel sure that is all that awaits me. As for *post mortem* adventures, the only one I contemplate was suggested to me by a poet I admire: I intend to have my ashes scattered in some fertile field and rise again in the corn.

But never mind that now. Since that moment is not here I have time, as Socrates did, for a swan song. In fact, mine is almost done and a brief coda to recap my theme will see me off.

We are the stuff of stars and that is cause for wonder. Just how, from those mute fires eons old, we came to be this tender, oozy, ever-wanting, lately articulate, self-regarding flesh, baffles the imagination and is beyond the power of anyone as yet to tell. In fact—and it is a fact that is far from easy to bear—the story may not be fully known while there are those left alive to tell it or to hear it told. But the outlines of such an account are clear enough, parts of it are sufficiently well documented to be compelling, and I think we must believe it.

The part of the story of greatest interest here, the part where thinking begins, is also unknown to us in its details. But it is, I am sure, a very short and recent chapter in

the saga as a whole. Thinking was not there from the beginning. It did not frame the cosmos, hang the moon and stars or breathe life into us. It is local and contingent. It is a late entrant in the great unfolding of things and arose only when animals physically capable of it came to be. To the extent that we, as members of the same species, share our patterns of awareness and our ways of thinking it is not because of an aetherial and extra-bodily kind of being that has a life of its own and is common to us all; it is because as bodies we are similarly constituted, our organs of sensing and thinking are similarly ordered and arranged, and they generate in each of us much that is shared by all.

Not the least amazing thing about this adventure is that we are alive and kicking in the midst of it, and recounting some version of it to ourselves. Aware of our own being as we are, and having made it our chief business to articulate it to ourselves as fully as may be, we seldom fail to feel its incompleteness. It is here that our powers of invention bring themselves into play. With hands and arms and tongues we muscle our thoughts into existence to complement, sustain and organize our ways of going to and fro and getting on. Our thinking shapes things, and then the things it shapes, shape us.

Thinking goes into all sorts of things; things as ordinary as tables and chairs; things as exotic and extravagant as space ships; but especially into words, so much so that thoughts and words seem almost to be the same, and a great deal of our thinking appears to be only a silent dialogue, carried on by each of us with our self. But it is the deliverance of thinking that matters, its capacity to present possibilities and expand our horizons, to leap ahead to actions not yet physically accomplishable and imagine them done, to contrive worlds out of words and make them into dwellings and a habitat. Their abundance is both opportunity and snare. In all the possible story lines forever rolling

from our tongues, how are we to figure out the real story and put our hearts into it?—that is what we most need to know. We do not lack for counsel. All possible forms of advice have been given, but in the end it is left to each of us to determine where we stand. And since we are the sort of beings that we are, it is in words, above all else, that we must work it out.

Words are a wonder much to be admired. Their power to build or ruin is great and terrible. As Wallace Stevens in “Men Made of Words” has put it, “The whole race is a poet that writes down the eccentric propositions of its fate.” But words do not speak themselves, although it seems sometimes they do; and despite their levitating proclivities they do not hold themselves in place. Their power is great but we should never fail to notice where they get it. Living energy is the wonder of wonders and it is the body, the body, the lifting body and the muscled tongue, that speaks and sings.