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WORD AND BODY

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Alison Jasper

He is my helper and my enemy, my assistant and my opponent, a protector and a traitor.  
(John Climacus)

### **1 Introduction: The Word became flesh**

In the twenty-first century scholars increasingly approach body and embodiment as a critical theme or discursive category and in this context it is clear that Christianity is not the first or only ideology to use, shape and exploit the perceived pleasures, needs and shortcomings of the body and embodiment to its own ends. Nevertheless Christianity appears to have been the source of some very powerful ideas about the body in European societies, at least since Constantine adopted it as the ‘official’ religion of the Roman Empire at the beginning of the fourth century.

There is today something of a common assumption that Christianity has always been implacably hostile in respect of the body or human embodiment. But theological sources reveal a story with a different, and perhaps more predictable emphasis. The evidence suggests that the prevailing theological attitude to the body throughout this long period has been one, not so much of unrelieved negativity, as of equivocation. In words attributed to John Climacus, the seventh century Syrian Abbot of Mt Sinai, for example, the body is viewed as both a helper and an enemy, an assistant and an opponent, a protector and a traitor. And this Christian equivocation about sexual enjoyment, health

and fitness, longevity, beauty, adornment, physical cruelty, gender, sexuality and the training of the body is clearly also reflected in the work of writers of English poetry drama and literature to a significant degree for well over a thousand years. Even in its earliest debates, in formulating the extraordinary doctrines of incarnation and bodily resurrection, Christian leaders and theologians have been strongly divided on the subject of body and embodiment, moved by both extreme reverence and by an equally notable anxiety. They have provided innumerable authors since that period with a palette of very strong colours with which to enrich their own varied texts and narratives about embodied, human existence, revealing a characteristic ambivalence about the value of human incarnation in the context of longings and hopes that often appear to transcend it.

In the Christian ‘Old Testament’, God’s disembodied words (Genesis 1:1) bring into being all the features of the material world including embodied women and men, and yet God Himself remains excluded or ‘protected’. God is the source, but the ineffability of His divinity is not risked by being brought any closer into contact with materiality as it is linked – as a sort of contaminant – with human embodiment. It was then, hugely significant that Christianity should make the frankly sacrilegious connection and claim, going further than the Hebrew invocation of divine creativity<sup>1</sup> and order had ever done, that ‘the Word became flesh’ (John 1:14). Thereafter, human embodiment can no longer be dismissed as mere materiality or creatureliness since God was Jesus, in the vulnerability and extreme limitation of his historical, human embodiment just as much as He is Creator or indwelling yet immaterial Spirit. Within the Christian dispensation,

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<sup>1</sup> The Johannine formulation of this fundamental Christian doctrine makes connections between the creative word of God as it is described in Genesis and also personified in Hebrew and Greek Wisdom literature as the female figure of Wisdom, with the Greek word ‘λογος’ meaning word as the inward thought or the principle of order and reason itself (Liddell & Scott, 1899).

God's divine Word has not simply formed and breathed life into material being from a safely disembodied position, screened off from its risks – but, expressing the highest validation of that human embodiment, generated very flesh Himself.

Yet it makes little sense to deny that in seventeen centuries, across the whole of Europe into Asia Minor, and in the wake of massive colonial exploration and expansion, Christianity's views of body and embodiment have sometimes been less than positive. Even though it is a state of existence created, sanctified and more than this, shared by God in divine incarnation, Christianity has also always assumed that we need a bodily resurrection (1 Corinthians 15: 12-19). Through their symbolic incorporation into the community of Christ's followers in baptism, Christians are invited to escape from the finality of death, that otherwise defining bodily event, and to live and flourish in the distinctive resurrection body (See 1 Corinthians 15: 35-58). By describing the Church as the sacramental body of Christ in the world, Christianity has clearly placed a very high value on embodiment as the defining form of God's involvement in creation and in the ordering of human society (see 1 Corinthians 12: 12-31; Romans 12:4-8). Yet even within that body of the Church, human life is, in fact, still subject to poverty, disease, ignorance, physical pain the violence of desire and particularly the finality of death. Even for the wealthy and fortunate, embodied existence is never entirely or consistently blissful. Even the wealthy and fortunate must die. To have appealed so widely and for so long, it is arguable that Christian theologians have always needed to acknowledge this darker side of embodiment and, crucially, to account for the persistence of death within the realm of material flesh<sup>2</sup> in God's paradisaal creation.

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<sup>2</sup> Christianity makes the demarcation between Word and flesh more extreme than either the creation story of Plato's *Timaeus* for example, or the Genesis account, both of which presuppose that before anything

The answer to which they typically resorted was, of course, that this blissful creation has been marred by human sinfulness and that this is what has brought suffering and death into an original paradise of unreflective innocence and what now maintains it there, even though their ultimate eradication may not, by virtue of Christ's own sacrificial death, be in doubt. Negativity about the body and embodiment finds its key expression in the term 'flesh' (σάρξ) which appears in the Johannine formulation of 'The Word became flesh' (John 1:14). 'Flesh' is the loaded term which refers to the body's supposedly intractable connection with wilful disobedience or unregulated desire, most powerfully configured in the narratives of creation as Christians inherit them from the Hebrew book of Genesis: when the bodily senses and appetites of the first man and woman were engaged in the service of their desire for forbidden knowledge (Genesis 3: 6), then disaster followed including the 'disaster' of their fall into a knowledge of sexuality, of the difference between clothed and naked (Genesis 3:11), and of the misery of sexual desire (Genesis 3:16). This 'flesh' then is not the created body *per se*, but, at the end of Genesis 3, the equivocal embodiment of creatures expelled from the garden and from the presence of God into the realm characterised by knowledge, growth and procreation, but also by thankless labour, patriarchal oppression, pain and, most of all, death.

The use of the term 'flesh' does not then absolutely conflict with a principle of bodily goodness since God's original creation and intention for humankind's increase is good (Genesis 1:26-31). But the link made between sin, embodiment with strong sexual overtones and death within the Genesis narrative of creation and fall, and reproduced

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took shape there was formless but nevertheless pre-existing materiality. In the Johannine account, 'Word' comes first, pre-exists any material, and calls being out of nothing.

within Christian theology (for example, Romans 5: 12-14; 1 Corinthians 15: 12-19; Hebrews 2: 14-18), makes ‘flesh’ sometimes seems synonymous with sinfulness, especially in its sexuality<sup>3</sup>. And the purity of body or embodiment is idealised beyond realisation except in eschatological and asexual terms. As a result, even if the body is not understood to be the root of the problem, it becomes necessarily subject to strict discipline and regulation in order to mitigate the consequences of body-bound, ‘fleshly’ thinking and motivations.

In consequence, men and women of the Christian era have been taught to be generally very circumspect or indeed downright suspicious around their bodies. They have been taught to distrust their feelings and bodily impulses as guides to wisdom and well-being because, in their connection to death, these too are thought to bear the traces of an ineradicable tendency to sinfulness. Augustine (CE 354-430), for example, saw sexual desire leading to genital sex as the mechanism whereby this tendency to sin, and thus death, is actually passed on from generation to generation. He didn’t believe that this meant sex had to be avoided entirely. He even argued that sexual pleasure could be a ‘pardonable indulgence’ (De Bono Coniugali, 2001, xviii) in marriage but he still makes it quite clear that the purpose of sanctified sexual intercourse – that is, within heterosexual marriage – should be the ‘productive’ business of procreation and that the

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<sup>3</sup> It is notable, of course, that although the Word became ‘flesh’, the picture of Jesus in the New Testament is entirely uninformative about his sexuality. There is no mention of marriage or of a wife. Some of the so-called ‘apocryphal Gospels’ unearthed in the 1940s at Nag Hammadi – established as mostly 2<sup>nd</sup> century documents strongly influenced by various forms of dualistic Gnosticism – give the figure of Mary Magdalene a larger role as one of the important followers of Jesus. In some cases – for example the Gospel of Philip – there is reference to Jesus kissing her. This has led to some fictional speculation at least that she might have been Jesus’ wife or partner (see for example Roberts, 1984). However, it is also possible that this intimacy is more symbolic than real, with Magdalene taking on, in some form, the personified role of Divine Sophia – God’s creative Word in action – as represented in various traditions of Wisdom literature. See Pagels, 1979.

best marriages were those in which there is as little sex as possible outside that definitive purpose. Sexuality is not, for Augustine, a good in itself. Even better than pleasurable intercourse leading to conception is bodily continence and holy virginity (De Sancta Virginitate, 2001, I; see also Irigaray, 2004). Sex is a problematic bodily activity with a godly purpose, framed in terms of the complementarity of women and men, but bearing a shameful stigma.

## 2 **The Ancrene Wisse/ Guide for Anchoresses<sup>4</sup> and the delights of discipline**

A relatively early example of the sort of literary equivocation about body and embodiment to which I am referring can be identified in the Ancrene Wisse or Guide for Anchoresses – a manual read in both Middle English and Anglo Norman<sup>5</sup> from the early 13th Century and written by an unknown author for three well-born women who were about to dedicate their lives to God<sup>6</sup>. On the face of it, the Guide for Anchoresses (hereafter the Guide) reflects a deep distrust and anxiety about the circumstances of embodied human existence that is transient and vulnerable to war, disease and death and which, in terms of a Christian narrative, has already been corrupted by the actions of Eve ‘our first mother’ (AR, 2001, 23) and needs firm control and regulation if it is not to lead us astray all over again. Already we seem to be steeped in the misogyny that associates women with a corrupted and corrupting materialism and leads both men and women

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<sup>4</sup> I follow Bella Millett’s usage of ‘Wisse’ rather than ‘Riwle’ as explained in Wada, 2003. The edition referred to here, however, was translated from the Early Middle English, Corpus MS: Ancrene Wisse, by M B Salu and published in 1955 under the title Ancrene Riwle. I have therefore referred to this edition throughout as Ancrene Riwle or ‘AR’.

<sup>5</sup> Anglo-Norman versions of this text remain in use into the fifteenth century. See Wogan-Browne, 2001, 13.

<sup>6</sup> This was a largely solitary religious vocation in which the anchoress or anchorite typically spent the rest of their life in prayerful contemplation often installed in a single room or cell attached to a church. Sometimes, they could be approached for advice or counsel.

away from engagement with their own embodiment as a source of positive physical or spiritual pleasure and energy. In the Guide the body's senses provide the aspiring anchoress with nothing but troublesome distraction and temptation. Just as Eve's eyes led her inexorably to taste the forbidden apple, it is the sight of someone of the opposite sex that inflames both and leads them into mortal sin. Just as 'cackling Eve' let the devil know her weakness through her chattering tongue, like a hen whose noise draws the egg thief to her eggs (AR, 2001, 29), so it is the tongue that leads the anchoress into pride in her own accomplishments (AR, 2001, 28). Her ears let in gossip and backbiting which poison her repose and tempt her to indulgence of other sins. The advice is to shut out the outside world and distrust these bodily senses. Yet, interwoven with this manifest hostility and distrust, the joys of her spiritual path and its rewards are couched for the anchoress in consistently sensuous language that absolutely parallels the perils of her calling. There is no better way to describe the joys of heaven, it appears, than precisely in terms of what must, here and now, be censored or renounced:

But anchoresses, here enclosed, shall there have even more lightness and swiftness than others, if any can, and shall be as little shackled as they play in the wide pastures of heaven that the body shall be wherever the soul desires, in an instant..... and anchoresses see God's hidden mysteries and decrees the more clearly who now, through the custody of their eyes and ear, give small attention to outward things.

(AR, 2001, 41)

And references abound in the Guide to the biblical Song of Songs, an ancient Hebrew poetic text featuring extremely sensuous language and erotic images. Both Jewish and Christian traditions witness to the Song of Songs as a metaphorical description of God's

love for his people, or of Christ's love for the Church (Brenner, 1993, 30). Yet, it is notable, in the work of St Bernard (1090-1153) – whose writing was clearly influential for the author of the Guide – that there is no absolute distinction between souls and bodies such that bodies and their material conditions can be safely disregarded or dismissed in the next life. Bernard sometimes refers to the body as 'miserable flesh' or 'foul and fetid flesh' ('Sed unde hoc tibi, o misera caro, o foeda, o foetida unde tibi hoc?' – Sancti Bernardi Opera, 1957-1977, Vol. 5, Para. 2) but he also sees persons as souls together with bodies. For this reason, the resurrection of the body is essential and the soul is joyfully reunited with the body:

Do not be surprised if the glorified body seems to give the spirit something, for it was a real help when man was sick and mortal ... Truly the soul does not want to be perfected without that from whose good services it feels it has benefited in every way.

(The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux, 1974, Sect. 11, Para. 30-33.)

Clearly whatever the limitations and troubles of the mortal life or the anxieties accorded by the body, resurrection without the body is not on the cards, and the sensual language of the Guide gains in nuance by this intertextual reference to Bernard's commentary.

Certainly in the Guide, the anchoress is encouraged to envisage her relationship with God in the most flagrantly erotic terms. Our Lord's kiss is 'a sweetness and a delight of heart so immeasurably sweet that every worldly savour is bitter in comparison' (AR, 2001, 44), and Jesus Christ chooses her for his beloved, her sweet voice and fair face being prized by him and him alone (AR, 2001, 42-44). Of course, it is also clear in this text that 'the animal man who gives no thought to God' (AR, 2001, 25) is body ruled by appetite and self-interest and must be controlled. This comparison with dark brutishness even implies



a certain appreciation of its strength and vitality, but the very evident anxiety about control still confirms the idea that the author puts little confidence in human senses as the means to do the job. And yet it is the sensuous, rather than the self-sacrificing nature of human love, that provides the model for divine love just as Bernard, once again making reference to the body's powerful appetites, describes resurrected embodied souls as 'drunk with love' (The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux, 1974, Vol. 5, Treatises Vol. 2). In any event, equivocation is seen in this example not as any kind of lukewarm antipathy to the body in general but as a powerful coincidence of sometimes quite passionately contradictory approaches to embodiment.

### **3 John Donne and the delights of bondage**

The 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries describe a period when Renaissance philosophy and art were beginning to allow a renewed and expanded engagement with classical Greek and Latin readings of the physical body in Western Europe. In the attention it devoted to the aesthetic values of the body<sup>7</sup>, for example, and even more explicitly, in its various well-developed senses of hierarchy<sup>8</sup>, these classical literary and philosophical intertexts have undoubtedly also contributed significantly to views of the body expressed in English literature. At this time, the body appears newly dressed as an object of scientific or medical enquiry and as a bearer of value, a revelation of divine beauty, goodness and truth. Nevertheless, embodied existence is still characterised by unavoidable transience

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<sup>7</sup> Artists and architects like Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519) and Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) referred to the work of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE Roman architect and engineer, Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, whose architectural values expressed in De Architectura, reflected a perceived connection between values in architecture and the idealised proportions of the human body.

<sup>8</sup> Writing about Plato's Timaeus as one of the foundational stories for Christian Europe, Rosemary Radford Ruether comments "... the just and ordered society corresponds to the hierarchy of the well-ordered self, with mind in control, the will under the lead of reason, and the appetites controlled by both" (Ruether, 1992, 24).

and vulnerability. This use of sensuality which pays homage to the powerful appeal of embodied, emotive and sexual existence whilst also expressing fear of its potential to endanger a soul whose destiny, by God's grace, transcends the present moment, continues to be reflected for many centuries within the English language and not least in the writing of the so-called metaphysical poets of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, including John Donne.

Of course Donne (1572-1631) is a man of his age, living in a climate of different spiritual and intellectual change and challenge from that of the Guide for Anchoresses. A contemporary of both Descartes and Hobbes, he is writing poetry in an age of intellectual and colonial exploration, in which printed books on an ever-widening field of experience and information are available to a university educated man such as himself. He clearly has a personal history outside the clerical profession on which he does not scruple to draw. His youthful sexual adventures are immortalised in such poems as 'The Good Morrow' and 'The Flea', and the contrasts he later makes between this 'profane love' (Holy Sonnets, vi; Gardner, 1972, 99) and his love for God represent a disruption of traditional values and attitudes informed by taste and experience that go some way outside the purview of Christian theology or spirituality. Yet we also hear within Donne's poetry, a very Christian theological concern for the communal 'body' of Christ's Church on earth within which the individual Christian must recognise his or her 'mutual duties' ('Good Lord, Deliver us!' Gardner, 1972, 95). This Christian voice challenges the smoothing out, depletion or reduction incipient in views of the body determined by the energies of the emergent capitalist ideology of the age, for example, in so far as it reaffirms a view of body as a set of complex relationships determined as much by the

Christian theological context of spiritual and communal values as by the freer play of material considerations. In the sensuality of language and the revealing imagery, especially of imprisonment – which reflects its framing in terms of both the Platonic view of embodiment (see Spelman, 1999, 36) and Christian notions of atonement and redemption – Donne resists all attempts to dilute the fundamental irony and equivocation of Christian incarnation. In his poetry, the Christian is characterised as an anchorite, imprisoned in his own filth, or the unborn child, inhabiting prison/religious cells which are both body and womb ('The Progress of the Soul'; Gardner, 1972, 100-101). Yet though eventually 'we must wake eternally when death shall be no more' (Holy Sonnets iii; Gardner, 1972, 97), exulting in our liberation, the very thought that 'this earth/ Is only for our prison framed' ('Good Lord, Deliver Us; Gardner, 1972, 95) is itself a prison from which Donne seeks deliverance. And what ultimately delivers Donne is God's own 'wellbelov'd imprisonment' which is to say 'Immensitie cloyster'd' in the dear womb of his mother (Holy Sonnets, 'La Corona'; Jasper and Prickett, 1999, 209) and the mystery of God's own 'becoming body'.

#### **4 Wollstonecraft and the body of women as a gilt cage**

As English poets, writers and literary figures move into the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries is there still the same degree of 'drawing on' Christian understanding of body and embodiment as in earlier centuries? Attitudes are undoubtedly changing but a vocabulary of concepts, ideas and ideological concerns from the past, albeit increasingly confused and at odds with each other, still remain current or at least significant. Mary Wollstonecraft, was born in 1759 and lived at a time when respect for human rationality,

viewed largely or completely apart from its Divine creator, viewed with an equally powerful but very different Romantic sensibility that favoured emotion and feeling over reason and other traditional hegemonies or forms of power, including established religion. Against this combination of adversaries, evangelical Christianity in particular still sought to maintain its hold on an ever more slippery surface, sometimes by returning to the seeming certainties of a patriarchal Reformation faith in divine revelation through scripture and the implicit social regulation of a fundamentally Calvinist economy. Yet over all, greater freedom from the authority of the Church in political and social affairs gave scope and space for reviewing established categories, including the canons of Christian incarnational theology and, of course, its striking equivocations about body and embodiment.

Wollstonecraft appears to have had no quarrel with the idea of a providential God for most of her life, yet she did not hesitate to criticise attitudes which she believed to degrade women even when these coincided with conventional Christian opinion. It was undoubtedly her concern for the values of liberty and equality in the mode of Enlightenment rationality and revolutionary politics rather than a concern for, for example, the proper exercise of Christian responsibility or the better modelling of some notion of spiritual womanhood<sup>9</sup> that framed her concern for the issues of women's embodiment. Insofar as she considered human beings subject to divine authority, she believed that men and women best cooperated with the Supreme Being by cultivating their reason as far as they could (Wollstonecraft [1792] 1992, 102). This made her more

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<sup>9</sup> An interesting comparison might be made here with the work of Wollstonecraft's contemporary, Hannah More. For example, More's novel, Coelebs in Search of a Wife (1809), while presenting a much more glowing account of Milton's Eve, also voices some disapprobation of Milton's tendency to sentimentalise her character in stereotypical terms (Vol. 2, 289).

than a little critical of influential contemporary views of womanhood which drew, for example, on the biblical figure of Eve and had perhaps been given their most iconic expression in Milton's epic poem, Paradise Lost (1667 – see e.g. Gilbert and Gubar, 1984, 30-33; Daggars, 2002, 4-6). Wollstonecraft suggested that Milton at least was demanding to eat his cake and have it too in the figure of Eve he created. He appeared to intimate, she suggested, that the ideal woman (Eve) conforms to what are sensually rooted (male) fantasies (Wollstonecraft [1792] 1992, 102) of soft and beautiful feminine embodiment – in which women behave as gently brutish, undemanding creatures, within an idyll of domestic orderliness and regulated reproduction – while at the same time expecting her to be the perfect companion and friend, intellectually and morally capable of sharing her husband's burdens and entering into all his practical and spiritual concerns. Wollstonecraft wants to persuade her readers that an education focused on maintaining in girls an undemanding softness is unlikely to yield much in the way of intellectual or spiritual companionship! She, of course, argues strongly that women and men both need to be educated to think and use their reason.

Her critique of contemporary manners and education neither draws on nor is it a critique of Christian theology in a direct sense. However, insofar as the stereotypical roles of men and women current at the time – which she largely deplores<sup>10</sup> – draw on Christian equivocation about body and women's bodies in particular, she could be said to be responding to it indirectly. Arguably what she is addressing is the sense in which Christian references to the sexualised body as a sign of human fleshliness or carnality in general have been subtly grafted onto a series of female stereotypes establishing, overall,

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<sup>10</sup> Wollstonecraft argues for example against the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau's argument (1762), that girls should be educated merely to please men in a physical and sexual sense (Wollstonecraft [1792] 1992, 107-108).

a gendered view of bodily fragility, weakness and moral inferiority and helping to provide a rationale for female objectification in terms of male desire. In general terms justifications provided for practices limiting or belittling to women at this period appear – as with Milton’s Eve – to be controlling forms of idealisation. A slightly later and similar idealisation was the Victorian ‘angel in the house’<sup>11</sup>. This conceptual trope within Victorian literature and thought traded in the reverential mystification of women yet undoubtedly also imprisoned them within the idealisation of certain sorts of female body and behaviour, an alienating symbol for men as well as women in the vibrant variety of their actual lived experiences of human embodied relationships. Taking her stand on the principles of equality and liberty, Wollstonecraft, presaging later arguments within feminist theory, challenges the stereotyping, holding on to the argument that our views of womanhood are not so ‘naturally’ constituted but, to an important extent, formed by conventional practice that can be changed through education: “Men and women must be educated, in a great degree by the opinions and manners of the society they live in” (Wollstonecraft, [1792] 1992, 102).

Nevertheless with respect to the body in general Wollstonecraft clearly demonstrates a familiar equivocation echoing prevailing views on the subject. She adopts the hierarchical view of (male) Enlightenment thinkers – that sits quite comfortably at some points with traditional Christian teaching – that the body had to be transcended and that the power of reason was to be preferred to unregulated passion or untutored feeling. This is perhaps understandable since it was by pursuing a rational

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<sup>11</sup> For a description of this Victorian figure of desirable womanhood by the writer Virginia Woolf, see Pamela Sue Anderson’s essay in this collection, ‘Feminism and Patriarchy’. Anderson describes the modern philosopher Michele Le Doeuff’s view of the feminist as someone who never lets others do her thinking for her, a kind of subversive ‘angel’.

subjectivity that women of Wollstonecraft's class and period in history could most successfully provide themselves – by writing and publishing – with some culturally sanctioned and legitimated means of escape from a suffocating conformity to the cultural stereotypes described by Wollstonecraft as a distortion into 'useless members of society' (Wollstonecraft, [1792] 1992, 103). She wrote that the alternative view – that reason and rationality were not of primary significance for women – was a terribly dangerous illusion. And it is intriguing to note Mary Wollstonecraft's (1759-1797) brief but revealing reference, specifically regarding the bodies of women, to that familiar image of imprisonment: 'Taught from infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage only seeks to adorn its prison' (Wollstonecraft, [1792] 1992, 103).

Wollstonecraft clearly accepts the hierarchical and hegemonic framework of body thinking that she had inherited – notable not least, of course, in her reference to the Platonic trope of embodiment as mind's imprisonment (Wollstonecraft, [1792] 1992, 103) that has already figured in this essay in reference to the poetry of John Donne. But unlike Donne, Wollstonecraft is not so much concerned with the notion of embodiment as individual human limitation but with the much more concrete political limitations imposed on women by existing patterns of education and conformity that were only exacerbated by a particular form of obsession with their bodies. She saw how easily women could become entrapped in a cage not essentially of their own making. At the same time, in response, rather than advocate that her readers turn their backs still further on the claims of body, she began, implicitly, to redefine some of those claims. She wanted her readers to liberate their daughters from existing controls that condemned

them, as she believed, to poor appetites, weak health and disappointing lives. As an educationalist, she was strongly convinced of a connection between vigour of body and keenness of intellect (Wollstonecraft, [1792] 1992, 131). Emancipation was not just an intellectual category but included the body. In the end, it has to be said that she clearly could not fight all the presuppositions of a privileged masculinity, associated as it was with both the ‘disciplining’ of little girls to adopt their role as soft and delicate sexual bodies and the valorising of a disembodied, ‘masculine’ reason. Even as it was, Wollstonecraft’s essay was received with scorn and derision by the literary and political establishment of the time and she was branded by Horace Walpole as a ‘hyena in petticoats’ (Wollstonecraft, [1792] 1992, 13)!

## **5 Charlotte Brontë - rattling the doors of the gilt cage**

Victorian Britain represents another period of considerable spiritual and intellectual upheaval in which the ascendancy of science and capitalism driven by the machinery of imperial and industrial expansion intensified the challenge to Christian theological structures already stressed in a different sense by the counter-hegemonic and rebellious tendencies of intellectual, literary and artistic Romanticism. Writing at this period of crisis and challenge, Charlotte Brontë’s own Evangelical Christian upbringing and education in many ways brings into focus the complexity of the age in respect of questions about body and embodiment. Although Christianity may have been challenged, it, so to speak, still packed a punch for many people in this respect. Brontë was the child of an Anglican clergyman of Evangelical churchmanship, who wished, according to her first biographer, Elizabeth Gaskell, ‘to make his children hardy, and indifferent to the



pleasures of eating and dress' (Gaskell, 1857, Part One, Chapter III). In line with centuries of Christian theology, the connection of sin and mortality with bodily appetites and feelings still plays strongly into the lives of Brontë's family as, presumably, into many others like it. In Jane Eyre (1847), we could perhaps say that Brontë tries out and tests a number of Christian Evangelical tenets relating to these 'lusts of the flesh', seeking the limits of their compatibility with what is acceptable to a still devoutly Christian author or her readers. While Mr Brocklehurst's thunderous condemnation of a little girl at Lowood school for having naturally curly red hair, for example, is clearly portrayed as excessive, unjust and, moreover, humorously ineffectual<sup>12</sup>, Jane Eyre is a deeply serious character, far from indifferent to counsels against vanity and calls for sobriety. When Jane rejects St John Rivers' proposal of marriage, for example, it is not because she fails to appreciate the value – or the heroism - of sacrificing safety, domestic contentment, physical well-being or life itself to a higher or more enduring cause than her own physical well-being and comfort. Though the figure of St John Rivers is judged hard and despotic by Jane (452) when he tries to bully her into marrying him in the name of duty and principle, she finds it hard to detach herself entirely from a need for his approval or to disagree absolutely with him. Yet at the same time, given the limitations and sheer geographical, physical and social marginality of her life, as a relatively poor clergyman's daughter, Brontë's aspiration, whatever the obstacles, to robust, fulfilling, embodied presence in her world – expressed not least in her unceasing efforts to write and publish

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<sup>12</sup> When Mr Brocklehurst tells all the girls to turn their faces to the wall so that he can inspect and condemn the 'excrescences' of their hair styles, Jane recalls, with an unmistakable reference to Matthew 23: 25-26, "[l]eaning a little back on my bench, I could see the looks and grimaces with which they commented on this manoeuvre; it was a pity Mr Brocklehurst could not see them too; he would perhaps have felt that, whatever he might do with the outside of the cup and platter, the inside was further beyond his interference than he imagined" (Brontë [1847] 2003, 76).

her work – speaks to her desire to be far removed from the almost comic Puritanism of a Mr Brocklehurst or the zealous evangelism of a St John Rivers. Brontë had every reason to be aware of the body's frailty and vulnerability to death and an understandable need for the comfort of her religion in its promise of resurrection (see Brontë [1847] 2003, xxxii). Only four of the six Brontë children, whose mother died painfully of stomach cancer in 1821 when Charlotte was five, survived into adulthood. Two older sisters died at home at the ages of ten and eleven. She was only aged 30 herself when she died of tuberculosis, survived by none but her aging father. Yet Jane Eyre at least ends on a complex and equivocal note: the final words of the novel reflect the conviction of Christian faith in the defeat of death and it is the rejected suitor described in thoroughly world-denying terms who receives an unmistakable apotheosis. Jane and St John's abortive relationship mirror Jane and Edward Rochester's contented marriage. This relationship, described in terms of budding woodbine covering a chestnut-tree that has been struck by lightning (493) - is resonant with Jane's earthy and earthly aspirations for physical intimacy and fruitful domesticity. Yet although Jane Eyre takes up her place in independence and contentment at Thornfield Hall, the book ends in expectations of a less worldly, 'fleshly' kind: "Amen; even so come, Lord Jesus" (502).

## **6 D. H. Lawrence: Opening the closet door?**

D. H. Lawrence, writing in the early twentieth century, works in the shadow cast by the Great War (1914-1918), with its terrible legacy of bodily maiming, death and bereavement. However, Lawrence's writing shows little formal interest in the theology of the Christian church as a means either to explain or offer consolation for this suffering. It

rearranges the traditional association of death with the appetites of the body by linking desire – for touch, sex and bodily exertion or a sensuous immersion in the non-human world of trees, weather and water – with the real and proper life-giving energy of human lives. In opposition to traditional Christian theology, the body's instinctual life is a means of grace and not a hindrance to it. Yet a curiously familiar sense of equivocation remains. After their first sexual encounter, Mellors in the notorious Lady Chatterly's Lover, which shocked the public with its explicit approach to sex when it was first published, admits to Connie that he is almost sorry (Lawrence [1928] 1994, 118). Sex with Connie is, for Mellors, some kind of acknowledgement of a return to life he should not and cannot resist: "There's no keeping clear. And if you do keep clear you might almost as well die" (Lawrence [1928] 1994, 118). Yet this also brings on him a 'new cycle of pain and doom' (Lawrence [1928] 1994, 119). Death continues to feature as strongly as life in Lawrence's texts. There is, for example, constant reference to a deadness when there is refusal to acknowledge the claims of the body or the truth of embodied human natures. Like the Creator, walking in the garden in the cool of the evening (Genesis 3:8-12), the narrative returns, again and again, to the ideal of the truthful, unalloyed man or woman who does not hide away or cover themselves in conventional manners, politics or false feeling, deceiving themselves and others about their real desires. The poignant possibility remains of resisting the corruptions of the modern mechanised world obsessed with possessing, having or knowing in small-minded or diminishing ways and 'acting in singleness' (Lawrence [1921] 1974, 36). And yet Lawrence's characters are 'fallen', 'subtly demoniacal' (Lawrence [1921] 1974, 24), complex and vulnerable. If Christian theology in its earliest days grappled with the

problematics of embodiment – how to reconcile the goodness of material creation, including our human embodiment with the suffering and pain of our actual embodied lives – these twentieth century narratives are preoccupied with the same themes. It is as if the Christian mythic tale of creation remains a palimpsest on which Lawrence rewrites timeless preoccupations with the nature of embodied human subjectivity for a new age:

– Set the mind and the reason to cock it over the rest, and all they can do is to criticise and make a deadness. I say all they can do. It is vastly important. My God, the world needs criticising today – criticising to death. Therefore let's live the mental life and glory in our spite, and strip the rotten old show. But mind you, it's like this. While you live your life, you are in some way an organic whole with all life. But once you start the mental life, you pluck the apple. You've severed the connection between the apple and the tree: the organic connection. and if you've got nothing in your life but the mental life, then you yourself are a plucked apple, you've fallen off the tree.

(Lawrence, [1928], 1994, 37).

Yet Lawrence's readers are certainly urged to reassess their priorities by a powerful critique of existing cultural and religious dualities; the body is consistently presented as a route and means to human freedom and spiritual nourishment. Strength comes from acknowledging its claims and engaging wholeheartedly with its wisdom and sense whatever religious or social convention dictates. The human body has significance, moving beyond the superficiality of an ungrounded interest in sex, which invokes nostalgia for a past – an Edenic and idealised vision of human integration and bodily fulfilment:

Her tormented modern woman's brain still had no rest. Was it real? – And she knew, if she gave herself to the man, it was real. But if she kept herself for herself, it was nothing. She was old: millions of years old, she felt. And at last

she could bear the burden of herself no more. She was to be had for the taking.  
To be had for the taking.  
(Lawrence, [1928], 1994, 117).

Of course, as the quotation illustrates, this Edenic vision is framed in terms of a frank and unapologetic heterosexuality. And it is not surprising that these narratives have drawn strong criticism from feminist critics. Kate Millet in Sexual Politics, for example, claimed that Lawrence transformed masculine ascendancy into a mystical religion that celebrated the penis (Millet, 1971, 316-317). Certainly embodied sexual relationships in Lady Chatterly's Lover, for example, are clothed in terms that would do full justice to the heterosexism of some modern Roman Catholic notions of gender complementarity (cf. Isherwood and Stuart, 1998, 73-74). Connie is stripped for our inspection and readers may well flinch at the tone:

She was not a little pilchard sort of fish, like a boy, with a boy's flat breasts and little buttocks. She was too feminine to be quite smart. (Lawrence, [1928], 1994, 19)

Yet at the same time this is not mere sexism. We are not told that Connie has not right or capacity to explore her own sexuality or that her body and pleasure is of less value or importance than her partner's. It is her initiative, her search, her discontent and her escape that frame the novel. It is rather that the authorial voice – which we know to be male – seems entirely confident in asserting the nature of her concerns and desires as an embodied woman. Sometimes these narratives are extremely sensitive to the 'thousand obstacles a woman has in front of her' (Lawrence [1921] 1974, 52) in a man's world, and Lawrence is certainly prepared to criticise specific faults and peccadilloes viewed as

typically masculine just as much as those viewed as peculiar to the female (Lawrence [1928] 1994, 35). But the whole corpus of his work tends toward broad generalisations which re-emphasise stereotypical differences. For example, in an essay written in 1928, the same year as Lady Chatterly's Lover appeared, Lawrence characterises a proper femininity – one that does not ape the masculine – as decidedly not of the mental life, characterised by a certain, physical timidity and numbness that recognises the male as boss. The essay describes the ‘cocksure’ modern woman as tragic (Lawrence [1950] 1969, 33) and strives to reassert the heroic vision of the male striking an attitude in defiance of ‘challenge, danger and death on the clear air’ (Lawrence [1950] 1969, 33). Meanwhile, perhaps, the picture of what really strikes fear into the author’s heart emerges, predictable in its expressive ambiguities about the body as alien, feminine and in need of control:

If women to-day are cocksure, men are hensure. Men are timid, tremulous, rather soft and submissive, easy in their ery henlike tremulousness. They only want to be spoken to gently. (Lawrence [1950] 1969, 33)

In spite of all the invocations to men and women to be just themselves as individuals, there is here perhaps more about the attempt to move men and women around the texts like rather over-determined mythic symbols. In Women in Love, for example, Hermione Roddice is introduced to readers as a ‘masculine’ woman, too preoccupied with the intellect to the detriment of her womanly self.

And all the while the pensive, tortured woman piled up her own defences of aesthetic knowledge, and culture, and world-visions, and disinterestness. Yet she could never stop up the terrible gap of insufficiency. (Lawrence [1921] 1974, 18)

Embodied heterosexuality seems an almost sacred principle within Lawrence's novels, but yet the familiar sense of equivocation finds expression in a constant anxiety or uncertainty about the connection between male and female characters that goes along with this principle (Lawrence [1928] 1994, 118 – "Almost with bitterness he watched her go. She had connected him up again when he had wanted to be alone"). Characters may talk about love between men and women as if it could be some kind of absolute (Lawrence [1921] 1974, 63) yet in Terry Eagleton's words, Lawrence seems to write as if he feels woman "is forever trying to violate the man's proud singleness of being" (Eagleton, 2005, 266). Eagleton goes so far as to say Lawrence hates women because they stand for 'the sensuous flesh which inhibits one's (male) drive to freedom and self-realization' (Eagleton, 2005, 271). In this way we seem to fall back into ways of thinking that, without explicit reference, reflect something of the original connection between sin, sex, women and death so particularly characteristic of patriarchal Christianity. At the very least, in its struggle to maintain both the connection and the separateness between the male and female Lawrence's writing appears to be a preoccupation that has about it something of the intensity of the equivocation familiar from centuries of Christian reflection.

## **7 Alison Kennedy .... Back to Original Bliss**

The novella Original Bliss by contemporary Scottish writer Alison Kennedy takes us back much more explicitly to the efforts of Christianity to control the body as dangerously 'fleshly', a troublesome, irrational necessity within God's unfathomable wisdom and providence that is the means both to the continuance of the race and of its

sinfulness apart from God. In this work Kennedy is much more overtly preoccupied with the Christian subtext of our on-going concern with body and embodiment, than was D.H. Lawrence, for example. The novella seeks to challenge the problematic implications of at least one important strain within Christian reflection on the body and embodiment by clearly linking domestic violence against women and the violence inherent in the production and procurement of pornography, to a reading of body theology that is identifiably Christian. Rejecting that interpretation of the Genesis narratives that sees it as an unproblematic demand for obedience, Kennedy's character, Helen Brindle, explicitly challenges obedience (Genesis 3:11) in favour of sexual knowledge, implicitly accepting the authority of the body's desires – Mr Brocklehurst's "lusts of the flesh" – as a better route to God than their denial. The original bliss of the title refers to Helen Brindle's relationship with God before her husband's violence and abuse destroy her comfort and confidence. Kennedy suggests that Helen's loss of faith is a symptom of this toxic relationship, but that her original bliss is also, in some sense, part of the problem. Her love of God who 'had given her everything, lifted her, rocked her, drawn off unease and left her beautiful' (Kennedy, 1998,162) is also equivocal in its implications. It is the best sense she has at the start of what bliss might be, but it has a dark side. She appears also to be trapped by a notion of God's love that demands unending, unconditional, agapaic self-sacrifice, all of which becomes hopelessly confused with her need to exercise an impossibly vigilant self-control in order to satisfy the arbitrary demands of her violently unpredictable and abusive husband. At the same time she is driven by a shockingly contradictory, and ultimately saving awareness of the erotic, linked to her authentic desire for a different embodied relationship that allows her self-expression and comfort. When



she falls in love, Helen is drawn, irresistibly, to resist the path of least resistance that has confined her to lifeless conformity and physical oppression, in the rebirth of her own vitality, resistance and will. It is against her view of the correctness of her actions, against the still present, if shadowy oppressive sense of God's love/will for her, that she is drawn physically, sexually and emotionally towards another man, and an adulterous affair with a pornography junky. Helen's 'fall' into love is her return ticket to bliss, precisely in so far as she learns to reverse the Edenic patriarchal system of value or priority in such matters – putting her embodied desires before the need to control them through conventional obligations to God viewed as Loving.

## **8 Conclusion:**

I have use the term 'equivocation' to describe the sense in which Christian incarnational theology appears to have provided a resource or way for thinking about our embodied human condition for British literary works produced across a period of over a thousand years that is not wholly negative. Christian convictions about God's investment in the materiality of human existence bear witness to our perception of infinite human longings and seemingly endless possibilities as well as our fearful limitations. British artists and commentators during this period have not all accepted the authority of a Christian approach and in the last two or three centuries, many have aspired to challenge the more negative or limiting emphases of its teaching including the exclusions implicit in its most patriarchal and colonial formulations. Arguably, the paradigm remains significant however, continuing to provide both impetus and challenge to on going reflections on the nature of unavoidable human incarnation.

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