

David Le Breton

DUALISM AND RENAISSANCE: SOURCES FOR A MODERN REPRESENTATION OF THE BODY

Representations of the body depend on a social framework, a vision of the world and a definition of the person. The body is a symbolic construction and not a reality in its own right. *A priori*, its characterization seems to be self-evident, but ultimately nothing is less comprehensible. Far from being unanimously accepted by human societies, making the body stand out as a reality in some way distinct from man seems an uneasy effort, contradictory between one time and place and another. Many societies do not retain it as part of their vision of the world. They do not detach man from his body in the dualist fashion so common to Western man. We might recall here the incident recounted by Maurice Leenhardt, who asked an elderly Kanak what the West had contributed to Melanesia. The answer surprised him. “What you

Translated by R. Scott Walker.

Dualism and Renaissance

brought us is the body”.¹ With the intrusion of cultural and social values and forms from the Western world that tend to individualism, there came an awareness of the body as a barrier and a boundary distinguishing each person from every other person. In the societies to which we refer, the components of a person include the flesh without setting this off separately. The body itself is an abstraction. On the phenomenological level, only a person whose body gives him a face and establishes his presence in the world can exist. Man is indiscernible from the flesh that models him.

Here we must distinguish between dualism and duality. The fact that man is made of flesh often leads him to live moments of duality—in his relationship to disease, to fatigue, to a handicap, to old age or death, for example. Duality is a consubstantial experience of human life. Dualism, on the other hand, reflects a vision of the world that sets the body apart through an arbitrary value judgment, opposing it to the spirit or the soul or, even more simply as we shall see here, to man himself.

Western man, accustomed to a dualist perception that has even penetrated the most common expressions (“my body,” etc.), is astonished by a concept of the body that ends up not having one. Western man does consider that he has a body. Social representations equate this body with a possession. Medicine, for example, a sort of guardian of official knowledge about the body, makes of man a sort of relatively happy proprietor of a collection of organs that follow their own bio-logic. And the body, in modern times, represents a tremendous growth market (corporal therapy, body building, gym tonic, get-in-shape workshops, etc.). The times are no longer turned to salvation for the soul but to health for the body. Let us note here that biblical anthropology also did not distinguish man from his body. The dualism typical of Western *episteme* cannot be found. “Hebrew is a concrete language that names only what exists,” says Claude Tresmontant. “This is why it has no word to signify ‘matter’, nor ‘body’ since these concepts are not directed at empirical realities, contrary to what our old

¹ Cf. Maurice Leenhardt, *Do Kamo*, Paris Gallimard 1947, p. 263.

dualist and Cartesian customs lead us to believe. No one has ever seen 'matter' nor a 'body' in the sense that substantial dualism understands this."²

The dividing line between these differing perceptions of the relationship of man to his body is the one that distinguishes communitarian societies from individualist societies.³

Here we propose a study of the modern premises for the dualism by now quite commonly accepted, although in the Renaissance it still met with much resistance. Anatomists were the first modern persons to distinguish man from his body. They dissected cadavers and studied "beautiful examples of the human machine" (Marguerite Yourcenar), the personal identity of which was totally unimportant to them. The epistemological basis for medicine rests on a rigorous study of the body, but of a dissected human body, weightless, seen as a receptacle for disease. The publication of *Fabrica* by Vesalius in 1543 marks the turning point. The representation of the body is no longer a holistic view of the person. Medicine then began its challenging work on the body, and over the centuries it acquired ever more knowledge. But man had no place in it. Medicine is based on a residual anthropology. It is knowledge about the body that does not increase knowledge about man. This is why we can say medicine treats a disease but not the diseased, an organ or a function but not a sick person. Freud, in *Studies of Hysteria* and later in his other works, was the first to show the limits of such medical knowledge that abstracted from its subject in order to look after the body. Today unofficial medicine and homeopathy are based on a total approach to the person. They restore the anthropological dimension neglected by medicine. And this is the reason for their success. Medicine heals a sick body and makes man a sort of phantom ruling over a mass of organs. But the shift to such knowledge of the flesh that overlooks man, through the work of the early anatomists, did not take place

² Cf. Claude Tresmontant, *Essai sur la pensée hébraïque*, Paris, Cerf 1953, p. 53. See also Michel Legrain, *Le Corps humain, du soupçon à l'évangélisation*, Paris, le Centurion 1978.

³ Here we extend a reflection begun in a previous issue. D. Le Breton, "Corps et individualism," *Diogène*. No. 131, 1985.

Dualism and Renaissance

without difficulties, significant traces of which can be found in the masterpiece by Vesalius, particularly in his iconography. This is what we wish to analyze here, first recalling the social and cultural situation that provided such a fertile field to anatomists, in particular the individualism that was born in the Western Renaissance world.

RISE OF INDIVIDUALISM

The premises for the appearance of the individual on a significant social scale can be found in the Italian mosaic of the *Trecento* and *Quattrocento* where commerce and banks played a highly important economic and social role. The merchant is the archetype of the modern individual, the man whose ambitions go beyond established categories, the ultimate cosmopolitan man, making his own personal interests the motive for his actions, even if this be to the detriment of the “general good”. The Church was not wrong in trying to oppose his growing influence before yielding ground as the social necessity of trade gradually became more salient. Despite certain oversights, J. Burckhardt described the arrival of this new notion of the individual that, for certain economically and socially privileged levels, manifested the beginning of a distension of the *continuum* of values and links between agents. At the heart of these groups, the individual tended to become the autonomous seat of his choices and his values. He was no longer marked by a concern for the community and respect for traditions. Certainly this awareness, which gave an almost unlimited margin of action to man, only touched a fraction of society, essentially people of the city, merchants and bankers. The precarious position of political power in these Italian states also led the prince to develop a calculating spirit, a spirit of insensitivity, of ambition, of voluntarism, quite appropriate for bringing out his own individuality. Louis Dumont rightly emphasized that Machiavelli’s thinking, the political expression of this nascent individualism, marked an “emancipation of the holistic network of human ends”.⁴

⁴ Louis Dumont, *Essais sur l’individualisme*. Paris, Seuil 1983, p. 79.

The modern image of solitude, in which the man of power lives in a fretful state, presents its most salient version in the fear that the prince may have at any time of the personal ambitions of those who surround him.⁵ In the shadow of the sovereign, under his protection, another great figure of nascent individualism sprang up, the artist. The feeling of belonging to the world, and no longer simply to one's original community, was intensified by the state of exile in which thousands of people found themselves as a result of political or economic vicissitudes in the various States. Important colonies of exiles were created in Italian cities, the Florentine colony in Ferrara, for example. Far from abandoning themselves to sadness, these men, who had been removed from their native cities and from their families, developed the new feeling that they belonged to an ever-larger world. The space of their community had, in their eyes, become too narrow to attempt to enclose their ambitions within its limits alone. The only boundary accepted by these Renaissance men was that of the world. They were already individuals, even though they continued, in many respects, to belong to a society where community bonds remained powerful. They achieved a degree of freedom from earlier bonds that previously would have been thought impossible.

Dante's *Divine Comedy* is contemporary with this still imperceptible loosening of the social sphere that made it possible for thousands of persons to feel themselves citizens of the world rather than of a city or of a State. Virgil's adventure in Hell is that of an individual; it presumes already that the poet, the artist is distinct. Dante, forced to live away from Florence, wrote this great work in the vernacular language as if to overcome his inner exile. But despite his frustration, he was able to say with joy, "My country is the entire world". The God of revelation and the community became formal references; they no longer controlled decisively the values and actions of men who were increasingly emancipated from the power of *Universitas*.

The *uomo universale* began to draw from his own personal convictions the quite relative orientation of his actions on the

⁵ Jacob Burckhardt, *La Civilisation de la Renaissance en Italie*, Vol. I, Paris, Denoël 1958, Col 1. Médiations, p. 9.

Dualism and Renaissance

world. He sensed his social importance. No longer was it the obscure ways of destiny that could make decisions about his own life or that of his society. From now on he knew that man himself could create his own destiny and decide the form and the meaning the social bond should take. The emancipation of the religious sphere also accentuated the awareness of personal responsibility; soon this was to lead to political emancipation as well with the birth of democracy.

As a corollary to this development of individualism in Western Europe, renown was attached to the names of an everincreasing number of men. Poets, in their lifetimes, enjoyed considerable fame, as Dante or Petrarch illustrate. Another indicative element is the appearance of artists' signatures on their paintings. The creators of the Middle Ages, like the builders of cathedrals, remained hidden in anonymity, lumped together in the community of men. On the other hand, Renaissance artists put their personal stamp on their works. André Chastel has noted that "in the second half of the 15th century, painters tended to present themselves with less modesty than before. This is the period when signatures were actually displayed in the form of a *cartellino* (a paper or plaque showing the name of the artist or other indications concerning the execution of the work). We also frequently find an insertion of the author's portrait in the right corner of the composition, as Botticelli did in the Medici *Adoration of the Magi* (around 1476). ...These new features, found abundantly after 1460, apparently reveal a clearer awareness of the person."⁶ Vasari took it upon himself to eulogize these men who had been suddenly promoted to a high level of social recognition. The artist was no longer the surface wave borne up by the spirituality of the masses, the anonymous artisan of great collective designs; he became an autonomous creator. The role of artist took on a social status that distinguished him from other craftsmen.

Italian Renaissance cities were honored to have sheltered famous men within their walls: saints, of course; but also political figures,

⁶ André Chastel, *Le Grand Atelier d'Italie (1500-1640)*, Paris, Gallimard 1965, p. 177 sq.

poets, scholars, philosophers, painters, etc. A corrective to the fame and ambitions that nothing more could limit was mockery, developed in an increasing number of forms from the *Quattrocento* on. This was a form of counterbalancing, but also group resistance to the fact that individuals were becoming autonomous to the detriment of the group itself. But mockery, a characteristic of bourgeois culture, is quite different from the laughter of popular culture, essentially communitarian. It is a sort of ideology of the face, a mime; it denotes a desire for moderation. It presumes an individual distance. Popular humor, on the other hand, comprises the carnivalesque aspect of a body constantly spilling over into nature, the cosmos, a man surrounded by the crowd, whose existence takes on meaning from his contact with others.⁷

THE BODY, BOUNDARY OF THE INDIVIDUAL

The community tissue that for centuries has held together the various orders of society under the aegis of Christian theology began to unravel. Individualist structuring slowly led to the universe of Renaissance practices and mentalities. At first limited, and for several centuries, to certain privileged social layers, to certain geographical areas, to cities, the individual set himself apart from his peers. Simultaneously the retreat and then the abandoning of the theological view of nature led to considering the surrounding world as a pure form, indifferent, an ontologically empty form that can now only be shaped by the hand of man. This change in the situation of man within the cosmos affected the same social levels. The individualization of man went along with the secularizing of nature. In this world of boundaries, the body became the boundary between one person and another. By loosening his roots in the community of men, by cutting himself off from the cosmos, Renaissance men of the cultured levels considered the fact of their

⁷ On popular humor see Mikhaïl Bakhtin, *L'Oeuvre de François Rabelais et la culture populaire au Moyen Age et à la Renaissance*, Paris, Gallimard 1970; on mockery see J. Burckhardt, *op. cit.*, p. 118 ff.

Dualism and Renaissance

incarnation from a contingent angle. They suddenly discovered themselves incumbered with a body, an ontologically empty form, depreciated and accidental. With mechanist philosophy, especially after Descartes, the truths of nature were no longer immediately accessible to sensorial evidence, nor to imagination. Sensorial nature cannot be reduced to intelligible nature. The senses are misleading. Like the imagination, the body is the source of error and ignorance in man. We shall see that the body is a remainder. It is no longer the sign of human presence, indiscernible from man. It is his accessory, an imposed form. The modern definition of the body implies that man is cut off from the cosmos, cut off from others, cut off from himself.⁸ The body is the residue, what is irreducibly left after these three separations.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE PORTRAIT: THE FACE, EPIPHANY OF THE INDIVIDUAL

In the 15th century the individual portrait, in a significant manner, became one of the primary sources of inspiration in painting, not only in Florence and Venice but also in Flanders and Germany, reversing in a few decades the until-then established trend of not representing human figures other than in the guise of a religious image. Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434) celebrates the domestic intimacy of the married couple without any religious overtones. A dog lies at their feet, reinforcing the temporal nature of the scene. The portrait becomes in itself the reason for the painting. To understand this fact we should remember that in this society where the individual was beginning to affirm himself, the face is the most individualized part of the body; the singularity of each person is condensed in the face. The historical promotion of the individual indicates as well promotion of the body, and especially of the face. The face was to take on a growing importance over the centuries (with photography replacing painting; we need only consider the number of identity cards we have today, each bearing a photograph

⁸ David Le Breton, *Corps et sociétés, essai de sociologie et d'anthropologie du corps*, Paris, Méridiens-Klincksieck 1985.

of the face alone). The individual was no longer a *member* of a community in the sense that medieval man had understood this. He became a *body* all to himself. Individualism, where it appeared, introduced the image of man enclosed in his body, his mark of difference, especially through the epiphany of the face.

TO BE INDESCERNIBLE FROM ONE'S BODY: AN IMPOSSIBLE ANATOMY

The formation of anatomical knowledge in *Quattrocento* Italy, especially at the University of Bologna, a central location for nascent modern thought, marks a striking anthropological mutation. With the first official dissections, at the beginning of the 15th century, and the spread of this practice in 16th and 17th century Europe,⁹ there came the key moment of Western individualism. In the order of knowledge, the distinction made between the body and the human person was simultaneously translated into a decisive ontological mutation. These various processes ultimately led to the invention of the body in Western *episteme*.

Previously the body was not differentiated from the subject to which it offered a face. Man was indissociable from his flesh; he was not yet subject to the unique paradox of having a body. In a world where Christian transcendence reigned, where man was a figure of the cosmos, to cause blood to flow, even for healing purposes, was an act that bordered on transgression. In his work on licit and illicit occupations in the Middle Ages, J. Le Goff emphasized the disgrace that was associated with surgeons, barbers, butchers and executioners.¹⁰ Such a strange combination of bedfellows attests to the fact that for a long time those who violated the limits of man (the limits of the body) did not enjoy a very favorable reputation. Like any persons whose responsibilities

⁹ Marked in particular by the construction of the first anatomy theatres. The one built by Rondelet at the University of Montpellier dates from 1556; the one in Padua also dates from the middle of the 16th century.

¹⁰ Jacques Le Goff, *Pour un autre Moyen Age*, Paris, Gallimard 1977, p. 93. Marie-Christine Pouchelle, *Corps et chirurgie à l'apogée du Moyen Age*, Paris, Flammarion 1983, p. 119 ff.

Dualism and Renaissance

place them in the presence of a particular taboo, surgeons were disturbing figures in the eyes of their contemporaries. The Council of Tours, in 1163, forbade monastic doctors to draw blood.

The medical profession changed in the 12th century.¹¹ It was divided into three categories. University doctors were scholars more adept at speculation than at therapeutic effectiveness, who only intervened for “external” diseases, without touching the patient’s body. Surgeons really began to organize themselves at the end of the 13th century, working within the body and infringing the blood taboo; often they were laymen, scorned by doctors because of their ignorance of scholastic knowledge. And finally there were the barbers, rivals to surgeons, who had to know how to use a comb and a razor, but who were also expected to know the various points for bloodletting. The doctor occupied the most privileged position of all, as one who possessed knowledge, but also as one who disdained base needs and who did not contaminate himself with the impurity of blood. The respective status of the three professions was formed by the 13th century. It was the remoteness from the body of the sick person that determined the best social position. The epistemological and ontological movement that led to the invention of the body was in motion.

Throughout the Middle Ages, dissections were forbidden and even unthinkable. To have an instrument penetrate the body would have been a violation of the human being, fruit of divine creation. It would also have meant violating the skin and flesh of the world. In the universe of medieval and even Renaissance values, man is in direct contact with the universe; he is a condensation of the cosmos. The body cannot be isolated from man or from the world; it is man and, on its own scale, it is the cosmos. It is not yet the residue that it will become in modern times, the result of its separation from man and from the cosmos. With the new feeling of being an individual, of being a self before being a member of a community, the body became the precise boundary marking the difference between one person and another. An “individuation

¹¹Cf. for example Danièle Jaquard, *Le Milieu médical du XII^e au XV^e siècle*. Geneva, Droz 1981.

factor”,¹² it became the target of specific interventions, the most salient being anatomical research through dissection. A methodical dualism then appeared that segments human unity and transforms man, who was indiscernible from his flesh, into the proprietor of his body.

TO HAVE A BODY: THE BEGINNINGS OF ANATOMY

The first dissections practiced by anatomists for purposes of education and knowledge bear witness to a considerable change in the history of Western mentalities. With anatomists the body ceased being limited completely to signifying a human presence. The body was rendered weightless, dissociated from man, in a dualist manner. It was studied for itself, as an autonomous reality. It ceased being the irreducible sign of the immanence of man and the ubiquity of the cosmos. If we define the modern body as the indicator of man’s break with himself, of a break between man and others and a break between man and the cosmos, we can find these different moments in the iconoclast operations of the first anatomists, especially with Vesalius. However, this distinction set up between a human presence and the body, that granted the latter the privilege of being scientifically interrogated in a specific manner, without the necessity of any other reference (to man, to nature, to society), was only in its initial stage, still to be plagued for a long time by prior images, as is pointed out so strangely by the illustrations in the great work of Vesalius, or by those of any number of anatomy treatises of the 16th-18th century. “Theoretically”, said Roger Caillois in this respect, “images that are not completely documentary should not exist, for in this realm any fancy or whim is dangerous and to be condemned.”¹³ However, for a long time the desired objectivity of the portrayed anatomical

¹² Emile Durkheim, *Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, Paris P.U.F., 1968, p. 368 ff.

¹³ Roger Caillois, “Au coeur du fantastique,” in *Cohérences aventureuses*. Paris, Gallimard 1965, coll. Idées No. 359, p. 166.

Dualism and Renaissance

image was heightened by elements drawn from an uneasy, and even tortured, imagination.

Dissection of human bodies was not unknown before the Renaissance. Rarely, no doubt, but it seems that it was practiced in Antiquity. Perhaps Galen opened up a few cadavers, but Vesalius ironically points out that corrections made in Galen's works as a result of a more regular practice of anatomy, "show us clearly that he himself never dissected a still fresh human cadaver. Led into error by his dissections of monkeys (let us presume that he took them to be dried human cadavers being made ready for a study of bones), he often falsely accused of error earlier doctors who had practiced the dissection of human beings".¹⁴ Until the 16th century, knowledge of the invisible interior of the body was supplied by commentaries on Galen's work. Even Vesalius, on certain points, remained influenced by his illustrious predecessor. Anatomy treatises prior to the 16th century were based above all on the anatomy of pigs, then considered structurally little different from human anatomy. If the human body was untouchable, it is because man, fragment of the community and of the universe, was untouchable. In 1300 Pope Boniface VIII was still condemning Crusaders who boiled the flesh of important persons who had died in foreign lands in order to carry the skeleton back to its native land more easily. This is another sign that for contemporaries man was still not dissociated from his body. But Boniface VIII, in his bull *De Sepulturis*, vigorously condemned reducing a cadaver to the skeletal state citing the dogma of the Resurrection. Here too is proof, but of a different kind, that the body is still the figure of the person and that its alteration risks mutilating man at the moment of resurrection. Cutting the flesh into pieces would be to destroy man's sacred unity.

But under the aegis of a tangle of factors—social, economic, political, demographic—the cultural framework was transformed; little by little theology's control over minds was loosened, opening

¹⁴ A. Vesalius, *La Fabrique du corps humain*. Arles, Actes Sud-INSERM 1987. This little two-language book (Latin-French) unfortunately presents only the preface to Vesalius' great work. The preface, however, is fascinating for a history of anatomy and of ideas concerning the body in the Western world.

the way to a secularized view of the world. Beginning with Galileo, the intellectual logic that was struggling in a variety of areas in the 15th and 16th centuries could no longer be halted. And opening up the body played a very important role in the dynamics of mental civilization.

VESALIUS AND LEONARDO

The paths of modern anatomy were blazed by two quite dissimilar men. Even though history tends to record above all the work of Vesalius (1514-1564), Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) preceded him in this adventure by dissecting some thirty cadavers, taking numerous notes and writing many comments on human anatomy. But Leonardo da Vinci's manuscripts had only limited influence in their time, and an almost secret one at that, because of the negligence of his heir, Francesco Melzi, who over a fifty year period recopied only a few fragments of the manuscript on painting. Leonardo da Vinci never published his ideas or his drawings. A man without peer in his own times for the extent of his curiosity and his talent, he is no less outstanding among researchers of later ages. As Georges Sarton points out, Leonardo scorned the two major inventions of his day, printing and engraving,¹⁵ which could have brought his work to light in his age and spread it, instead of allowing it to be dispersed and scattered. The treatises Leonardo da Vinci planned on painting and anatomy were never written, just like a number of his inventions noted only in his *Notebooks*. On Melzi's death, the notebooks passed from hand to hand until they became more widely known, especially after 1796 when Chamberlaine reproduced some of the anatomical drawings in a book. It was especially the capability of printing facsimile editions of the manuscripts, in the late 19th century, that finally made famous the extent and the quality of Leonardo da

¹⁵ Georges Sarton, "Léonard de Vinci, ingénieur et savant," in *Colloque du C.N.R.S., Léonard de Vinci et l'expérience scientifique du XVI^e*, P.U.F. 1953; see also in the same volume Elmer Belt, "Les dissections anatomiques de Léonard de Vinci," p. 189-224.

Dualism and Renaissance

Vinci's work in the area of anatomy. Vesalius certainly never knew these drawings and commentaries, and it fell to him to introduce knowledge of anatomy into the corpus of modern science.

THE FIRST OFFICIAL DISSECTIONS

The first official dissections took place in Italian universities at the beginning of the 14th century, using corpses of executed criminals. These dissections continued at regular intervals, under the control of the Church who carefully monitored the permissions granted. This explains the solemnity of these early dissections: slow ceremonies spread out over several days, performed for pedagogical purposes and aimed at an audience of surgeons, barbers, doctors and students. They became more widespread in the 16th century and then went beyond their original scope, expanded, like a show, to respond to the curiosity of a composite audience. The mentalities of this century were open to facts that would have horrified men of previous eras, including the disciples of Galen who were engaged in the healing profession. The body no longer spoke for the man whose face it bore; the two had become distinct. Anatomists set out to conquer the secret of the flesh; unconcerned by traditions and prohibitions, relatively free with regard to religion, they penetrated the microcosm with the same independence of spirit that Galileo had manifested in overcoming the eons-old space of Revelation with a single mathematical formula. M.-C. Pouchelle is right in suggesting that "by opening the human body, anatomists blazed a trail for other discoverers, breaking down the boundaries of the body as well as those of the earthly world and the microcosm."¹⁶ The first anatomy lessons given with a cadaver were arranged like a commentary on Galen, and the distance from the dissected body betrays a subtle social hierarchy. A miniature from the treatise of Guy de Chauliac (1363) admirably expresses this symbolic topography, completely articulated around the relation to the body. The scene takes place at the University of

¹⁶ Marie-Christine Pouchelle, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

Montpellier, where dissection had been practiced, exceptionally, since 1315. Standing slightly away from the table where the body lies, the *magister*, with Galen's book in hand, merely reads aloud from the hallowed text. In his other hand, from a distance, he points out the organs he mentions. Those who are cutting up the cadaver belong to two different categories of barbers. The one who cuts the flesh is illiterate; the second, who removes the organs to illustrate the master's remarks, is more educated. Several ecclesiastics are present in this miniature. Ever since the bull by Boniface VIII, the Church controlled authorizations permitting anatomical dissection. Here a nun, hands joined in prayer, and a priest are present to watch over the salvation of the woman so exposed to public curiosity. We can also note the seriousness of the faces. Another plate, taken from the *Anatomie de Mondo de Luzzi* (1532) by Latrian and Janot, illustrates even better the distance maintained by the *magister*. High up in his lectern, he reads from Galen while vaguely gesturing with his hand toward the organs a barber is trying to locate, following the instructions of a clerk who repeats the words of the master. The religious figures have disappeared from this illustration; a change of mentality has been initiated between these two treatises.

DE HUMANI CORPORIS FABRICA

In 1543 Vesalius's *De humani corporis fabrica* was published in Basel: an enormous 700-page treatise containing 300 engraved illustrations, no doubt by Jean de Calcar, a student of Titian. Immediately Vesalius established his independence with regard to the Galenic tradition. The frontispiece of his work (perhaps designed by Titian) symbolically shows Vesalius himself working on a cadaver. The following engraving shows him once again, inviting the reader to learn from his work. He holds a flayed arm, with a quill and paper at hand to note down his observations. With Vesalius anatomy was freed of its allegiance to Galen. The publication of *Fabrica*, in the same year as *De Revolutionibus* by Copernicus, marks an important date in this process that led to the invention of the body in Western thinking. And yet, *Fabrica*

Dualism and Renaissance

speaks volumes of the mental obstacles that were still to be overcome in order for the body to be seen definitively as virtually distinct from man.

Vesalius was born in Brussels in 1514. His parents' house was not far from the site where executions took place. Historically, moreover, a part of this nascent anatomical science took shape in the shadow of gallows (or the nocturnal solitude of cemeteries) where cadavers remained until the flesh fell away. Vesalius's first observations of human anatomy took place from this detached point of view where man is methodically forgotten and only the body considered. Vesalius studied in Louvain and then Paris where, according to legend, he often frequented cemeteries and gallows to obtain the cadavers he needed for his clandestine dissections. He then went to northern Italy, at that time disposed to iconoclastic experimentation. In 1537 he became doctor of medicine at the University of Padua.

The illustrations from *Fabrica* indicate an epistemological change that had serious consequences, but they also pay significant tribute to prior representations of man and the cosmos. In these illustrations, the anatomist and artist did not trace an objective observation of the interior of the human body, simply made visible. The transposition of the body's volume into the two-dimensional space of the page made absolute duplication impossible. The artist, who drew the anatomical figures under the watchful and demanding eye of Vesalius, placed himself within a convention, was part of a style. He achieved a symbolic transposition where concern for exactitude and fidelity to the object is intertwined with the tangled play of desire, death, anguish.

Depicting flayed corpses was far from being an affectively neutral action at this time when it was but a hesitant product of the artist's hand. The sub-consciousness of the artist, and that of the anatomist who monitors the fidelity to detail, makes itself felt in the drawing of the figures, the postures selected for them and the setting in which they are shown. Beyond this individual aspect, and controlling it, there is the negative influence of the socio-cultural framework, that is the sum of prohibitions of and resistance to anatomical dissection so deeply rooted in the mind

of the public. Anguish and guilt hovered over dissections and brought on a number of objections to this violation of human integrity and this morbid voyeurism of the interior of the body. For a long time, up until the 18th century and even beyond, every anatomy treatise was a particular resolution of the internal debate in which the anatomist's thirst for knowledge was set in opposition to his own subconscious and to the affective resonances of values implicit to that age and embedded in him.

The illustrations of *Fabrica* and those of many other treatises up to the 18th century show tortured corpses, or alternate images filled with anguish or tranquil horror.¹⁷ Throughout their pages they present extraordinary scenes from an imaginary torture museum, a nightmarish catalogue of the unbearable. The anatomist's task is not free of blame, and this shows through in the figures. The body—opened and lacerated—thus symbolically gives witness to the man it represented and recalls his past inviolability. “In these documents, where precision is of primary importance, there is more real mystery than in the wildest delusions of Jerome Bosch”, remarked Roger Caillois. Vesalius represents his flayed bodies or his skeletons in a humanized form, with a certain attitude, not inert, not deprived of signs of life. The body is hidden by the human presence that appears in the stylization of the cadaver's gestures. For Vesalius, and many others as well, the body epistemologically dissociated from man and rendered autonomous is countered by the depicted body, flayed but still a man above all else. The anatomist's concern for exactitude is overcome by a

¹⁷ Seeking an unusual definition of fantastic, one that would go beyond the intentional research of writers or artists, Roger Caillois devoted fine pages to these anatomy treatises. R. Caillois, “Au coeur du fantastique,” *op. cit.*, p. 165-174. Mentioning above images filled with anguish, we are thinking of certain illustrations of Vesalius, of T. Bertholin (the frontispiece of his *Anatomia Reformata* (1651) is a model of this type), of G. Bidlos, of Albinus (with his meditating skeletons, suddenly confronted by hippopotamuses in his *Tabulae sceleti et musculorum corporis humani*); as for tranquil horror, there are numerous examples: Gauthier d'Agauty, for example, with his famous “Angel of Anatomy”, quite loved by the Surrealists, or still other illustrations in which he “opens wide the back or the chest of smiling young women, admirably coiffed and painted, in order to expose the inner tissues of their bodies” (R. Caillois, *op. cit.*, p. 172) or Juan Valverde (1563), Charles Estienne (1546), etc. For a survey of anatomy treatises, see Jacques-Louis Binet and Pierre Descargues, *Dessins et traités d'anatomie*, Paris, Chêne 1980.

Dualism and Renaissance

cultural rejection of his research. Certain illustrations speak infinitely more about this than their authors would have imagined. The flesh protests against the act that isolates it from the human presence. Through its insistence on being, it testifies that it is still the flesh of someone. The body actually dissected by the anatomist takes its symbolic revenge in the “figured body” that affirms its condition of being a “*disfigured man*.”

Contrary to appearances, Vesalius does not break the seal on a cadaver; but what remains is a man indissociable from his body, a man who screams under the thrust of the scalpel, meditates on his own death and reveals in his tortured little gestures a refusal (condemned to failure since the dissection has already taken place) of this ontological shift that makes the body a purely artificial creation of the person. This person is condemned to a solitary destiny, cut off from the world, cut off from others, an orphan to itself, afflicted as it is with this appendage of flesh that shapes its face. “Vesalius’s man remains a subject who is responsible for his attitudes”, remarks G. Canguilhem. “The posture he assumes to present himself for examination is one of his choosing and not that of the viewer”.¹⁸

The ancient insertion of man as figure of the universe now only appears as a negative in Vesalius’s figures. Reduced to the state of a flayed skeleton, man symbolically takes leave of the cosmos. The significance of the body refers to nothing else. The microcosm has become, for Vesalius, a useless hypothesis; the body is nothing more than body, that is, a precise assembly of bones and flesh, a collection of organs well-coordinated with one another. And yet, as before, a transition is needed in the personal and cultural subconsciousness of the anatomist. Detached from the human body, the cosmos is casually relegated to the background; it becomes simply a landscape meant to soften the too crude display of flayed flesh. Then appear the plowed fields, church steeples, tiny villages, rolling hills. A socialized universe surrounds the figures and tempers their solitude; but the presence of other men, like that of the cosmos, is reduced to these few signs. With Vesalius the

¹⁸ Georges Canguilhem, “L’homme de Vésale dans le monde de Copernic, 1543,” in *Etudes d’histoire et de philosophie des sciences*, Paris, Vrin 1983.

cosmological man of the previous era is no longer but a caricature of himself. A tattered cosmos stands in the background behind anatomized man; it has become pure decoration.

INVENTION OF THE MODERN CONCEPT OF THE BODY

Vesalius opened the way, but he remained on the threshold. He bears witness to a period of anatomical practice and representation when persons daring to engage in dissection were not fully liberated from earlier representations, rooted not only in consciousness where they could be combatted, but also and especially in the cultural sub-conscious of the researcher where they continued to exercise their influence for a long time.

Objectively cut off from himself, reduced to the state of body, the flayed Vesalian subject continues to manifest his refusal of this condition through the humanity of his postures. Objectively distinguished from other men, become an individual, the stylization of his attitudes nevertheless manifests an intact social anchor. He remains a man upon examination. And objectively cut off from the cosmos, he is surrounded by a natural landscape, a caricature of the microcosm, but proof that Vesalius cannot yet do away with it.¹⁹

The Vesalian man announces the birth of a modern concept, that of the body, but he remains in many respects dependent on the prior concept of man as microcosm. By opening up the flesh, by isolating the body, by distinguishing man, he also distances himself from tradition. But he is still on the edge of individualism, in a pre-Copernican universe. In spite of everything, the groundwork laid by Vesalius was essential so that man could learn to close the chapter on the cosmos and on his community and that he soon discovered himself subsumed by the *cogito*, precisely the *cogito* that underlies the legitimacy of the individual, of the man whose own authority is established above all by himself. From Vesalius to Descartes, from the *Fabrica* (1543) to the *Discourse on Method*

¹⁹ Georges Canguilhem notes that the Vesalian man appears to belong to a world that, in many respects, is pre-Copernican. G. Canguilhem, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

(1637), this chapter was closed in Western thought. At a certain level the body was purified of all reference to nature and to the person it incarnates. With Descartes, the body became subject to a mechanical metaphor, a revealing indicator of the change that had intervened. In the same manner the organic metaphor was used increasingly rarely to designate the social sphere. Individualism became considerably more widespread; the body, "an excellent model for every finite system," according to Mary Douglas's apt comment,²⁰ was no longer appropriate to represent a human group whose communitarian dimensions were beginning to be distended.

Between the 16th and the 17th centuries modern man was born: a man cut off from himself (here under the auspices of an ontological separation between the body and man), cut off from others (*cogito* is not *cogitamus*), and cut off from the cosmos (from now on the body argues only in favor of itself, uprooted from the rest of the universe, it finds its end in itself; it is no longer the echo of a humanized cosmos).

The invention of the body as an autonomous concept implies a transformation in the status of man. The rationalist anthropology projected by certain Renaissance currents that was realized during the following centuries was no longer included within a cosmology; it posited the singularity of man, his solitude, and alongside this it brought to light a remainder called the body. Anatomical knowledge certified the autonomy of the body and the sort of weightlessness achieved by the man it nevertheless incarnated. The hyperspecialization of present-day medicine with regard to certain functions or certain organs follows the same logic today. This is the major contradiction of modern medicine—that it is not a medicine of the person. Is it a person who is sick or one or the other of his organs or functions? What should be treated, the sick person or the disease? By frequently considering man to be an epiphenomenon of an alteration that only regards his body, a large part of present-day medicine proclaims its fidelity to the division which Vesalius had announced. The usual argument thrown up

²⁰ Mary Douglas, *De la souillure* (French translation), Paris, Maspéro p. 131.

against modern medicine is in fact that it is interested in the disease (in a body with a diseased organ) more than in the sick person himself. The personal history of the patient is considered unimportant. New medical imaging technology pushes such dualism to its ultimate degree.²¹

In *Oeuvre au noir*, Marguerite Yourcenar tells the story of Zenon, a fictional but perfectly plausible character—doctor, alchemist and philosopher—born in 1510. During his peregrinations, he engages in clandestine dissections, on one occasion with a colleague whose son has just died. Zenon recalls: “In the room, smelling of vinegar, where we were dissecting, this corpse was no longer the son or the friend, but only a perfect example of the human machine...”²² Modern medicine was born of this ontological break, and its image of the human body had the source of its anatomical representations in these lifeless bodies where there is no longer a human person. A striking image of this detachment, this ontological deprivation, occurred in 1560 when the Spaniard Juan Valverde published his *Anatomia del cuerpo humano* inspired by the works of Vesalius. One of the engravings in the treatise shows a flayed figure brandishing his skin, like a rag at the end of his arm, where the features of his face can be discerned. His left hand still firmly grasps the knife used for his torture. But another artist had already opened this path. On the wall of the *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel (1536-1541), Michelangelo represents himself as flayed. He painted his own face on the hide of St. Bartholomew the martyr held by an important figure located not far from Christ the Judge.

The path was opened for depriving man of the popular bases for the legitimacy of his knowledge of the body by having it become the official privilege of a group of specialists set apart by the complexity of their language and the legal guarantee of the exercise of their healing profession. The popular traditions of healers were subjected to the ridicule of official therapists, or even their brutal

²¹ Cf. David Le Breton, “Les yeux du dedans: imagerie médicale et imaginaire,” in *Au doigt et à l’oeil, l’imaginaire des nouvelles technologies*, (under the direction of Alain Gras and Sophie Poirot-Delpech, to be published by L’Harmattan).

²² Marguerite Yourcenar, *L’Oeuvre au noir*, Paris, Gallimard, p. 118.

Dualism and Renaissance

opposition,²³ but they continued to exercise their influence by remaining anchored in tradition, even in our own times, where they still are hardy. The scholarly culture that developed around the 17th century involved only a tiny minority of the inhabitants of Europe, but it was influential. It gradually transformed socio-cultural structures even though it could not overcome all resistance. Popular healing traditions symbolically retain man under the tutelage of the cosmos through a complex tissue of relationships.²⁴ But it is clear that this knowledge is rooted in the communitarian dimensions that continue to exist in rural areas. Today this community dimension is tending to disappear because of the rural exodus, increasing urbanization, the “disappearance of peasants,” etc. However, rural healers still are present. Urbanization, on the other hand, causes a number of “healers” to come and live in the city and to seek their clientele through advertisements in the press more than by word of mouth, the traditional form of legitimacy for rural healers. These are two radically distinct populations. The city healers, whatever may be their therapeutic effectiveness, are the first to express the individualist nature of the modern world and the diminishing of cultural significance.

Anatomical knowledge reduces the body to the literal elements that can be extracted with a scalpel. The relationship between man’s flesh and the flesh of the world has been broken. The body no longer refers to anything but itself. Man is ontologically separated from his own body, which seems to follow its own particular adventure, even though tethered to man. It is not without importance that the philosopher of the *cogito* confessed his fascination for anatomy. An anecdote even recounts that when a visitor asked Descartes what he read, Descartes answered by pointing to a flayed calf on a table. “There is my library”. And let

²³ It should be noted that the struggle between these different *Weltanschauungen* continue even in our own days. Proof of this can be found in legal proceedings against “illegal practice of medicine” that are brought against even those healers whose abilities to heal are unanimously recognized. The “official” vision of the body, based on anatomy-physiology, is far from having achieved a consensus.

²⁴ Cf. David Le Breton, *Corps et Sociétés*, *op. cit.*, chap. 5: “Images du corps et sociétés”.

us recall this amazing passage from the *Méditations*: “I think of myself primarily as having a face, hands, arms, and the entire machine made up of flesh and bones, just as it appears in a cadaver, which I designate with the word body”. The image of the cadaver comes naturally in the writing of Descartes, designating reification, the absence of any value for the body. Descartes continues with his description. “Moreover, I would consider that I feed myself, that I walk, that I feel and I think, and I refer all these actions to the soul”. The axiology of Descartes elevates thinking at the same time as it denigrates the body. In this sense his philosophy is truly an echo of anatomical dissection; it distinguishes the body and the soul in man, granting to the soul alone the privilege of being of value. The affirmation of the *cogito* as an individual awareness goes together with the depreciation of the body. It denotes the increasing autonomy of the agents of certain social groups with regard to the traditional values that link them firmly to the cosmos and to other men. By affirming *cogito* rather than *cogitamus*, Descartes presents himself as an individual. The cleavage he brings about between himself and his body is typical of a type of social structure in which the individual is more important than the group. Typical also is the absence of any value for the body, which becomes the boundary line marking off one person from another, the object of the minute examinations of anatomists. In sum the body is nothing more than a leftover.

David Le Breton
(Angers)