



IRON GAME HISTORY



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SOME THOUGHTS ON THE BODY: “HOW IT MEANS” AND WHAT IT MEANS

Our friend, Al Thomas, sent the following thoughts to us some months back. He didn't intend for us to publish them; he only wanted to share with us what was on his mind. Even so, we have decided to share his thoughts with you. As some of you know, Al has made seminal contributions to our game—particularly in a series of articles in *Iron Man* concerning women, strength and physical development. He made these contributions simply by focusing his long experience and his agile intelligence on the issue. What follows is a fascinating display of unexpurgated Thomas confronting certain ultimate questions. What follows is not for the timid. What follows is a love song.

(This has its origin in three questions posed at the recent Old-timers' banquet. Since they echoed a similar one that I was asking myself, I wondered how many other banqueters would find their own feelings mirrored in these questions: “The only thing that hasn't changed in my life is the fun of working-out. My wife says it's a sign I'm lapsing into my second childhood. What do you think?” Another celebrant admitted that, after a long hiatus, he had returned to the gym and that this had brought him more happiness than he'd known since he was a kid in the gym: “What can you say about a guy, past seventy, who gets more fun from a workout than he did when he was a kid and feels more guilty about missing a workout than about missing mass?”

At some point in life, even the least introspective people feel the need to confront the pattern of preferences and habits that comprise their value systems. Such a confrontation was thrust upon me when, along with film-maker Curt Crane, I embarked upon the creation of a film documentary on some great old strength athletes: “Growing Old Strong, A Celebration of Strength in Old Age,” a tribute to men, aged seventy and above, who embody the

values that weight training confers.

The film, it seems, had created the need for explanation to so many people that it became a sort of emotional watershed for me. Or, more accurately, it was the film, plus the fact that, having passed through my fifties and the first year of my sixties, I was faced with retirement from my profession as a college teacher. With the ticking-down of the machine that is symbolized by such life-changes, I began to wonder what truly had become my “value system”: Was the new one that seemed to be a response to my film really as unworthy of a balding college professor with a Ph.D. as it seemed?

As recently as a year ago, I would have claimed my family and my profession (along with one or two other traditionally acceptable entities, perhaps) as my emotional and philosophical bases. Having undergone, however, the emotional wrenching occasioned by many months of contemplating the film's philosophical intention, not to mention the lives of its subjects, honesty demanded my admitting to a realization about myself much like the one undergone (suffered, really) by a faculty colleague who experienced a deep religious conversion and had to “go public” to his secular colleagues about this religious side to himself that, in self protection, he had never admitted. Smelling blood, his faculty mates, needless to say, lost no time in pouncing upon him.

I felt similarly exposed. The realization to which I had come, however, was more compromising, intellectually, than (mere) religious conversion

which, given the 90s' conservatism, is easily fobbed-off by the convert with some fast talking about metaphors and symbols. I didn't have such an expedient to fall back upon.

Once admitted, my realization would inevitably (and rightfully, I thought) earn the contempt of thirty-seven years' worth of academ-



ic colleagues. After all, what can be said in defense of the intellectual seriousness of an academic who, as the result of making a film, had come to see physical culture and the body (the life and cultivation of the body) as one of the main sources—next to family—of his value system (and his pleasure). How suspect, how shattering to an academic's image, such an admission had to be.

It is especially shattering, however, when what is referred to is not physical culture in the ancient Greek sense, which might carry with it the cachet of magnificent sculpture and temples, but in the narrower sense associated with our Iron Game, our body-and-strength-thing, an historically maligned subdivision of classically conceived physical culture. Indeed, decked-out in its Sunday clothes, is even dignified old physical culture, itself, sufficiently distinguished and credentialed to be accorded a placement in an academic's value system, above many of the hoary abstractions usually honored?

To me, it is. And all the more so as my (our) conception of the film on the strength greats evolved from just another Guinness Records

Show to a probing consideration of the real nature of strength and of the body-as-document and artifact.

It isn't overly self-conscious to observe that there is a spiritual danger built-in to the pursuit of physical culture (the cultivation of the body: its strength, health, and beauty), a danger that is not built-in, let's say, to baseball or tennis, which are, at best, merely distant cousins of classical physical culture. When one learns tennis or baseball, he learns how to *do* something. When he embarks upon the cultivation of the body's strength, health, and beauty, he doesn't learn how to do something: he *becomes* something. It is his fate, henceforth, never again to be that which he had been. He may *play* tennis or baseball, but he *is* a physical culturist.

The cultivation of the body is different, not in degree but in kind, from the cultivation of one's stroke. The body is not a sport. Except among tediously pompous "baseball religionists" (tennis-lovers are far too sophisticated to mythologize their sport), serious folks never misperceive baseball or tennis (or the players themselves) as temples

of God or the spirit. They're wonderful games (and players).

The body is created in the image of its Maker (not by its own claim, but by the Good Book's claim): it is the focus of the Divine in this earthly realm of shadows. The body, in short, is many things, but not a game (at least not merely a game, however much fun it provides the vehicle for, on occasion).

Even if the notion of the body's holiness or "temple-ness" is not one that proceeds easily from the self-contemplation of our own broken-down bodies, the notion is, and always has been, an inevitable one, to wise man and fool alike, whenever the body is contemplated more profoundly than as just another problem in biceps or latissimus building.

In this matter of values-placement, the criterion of "holiness," above, come-s down to blood. As the vehicle for passing generations down the stream-of-blood, from our first parents to our biological ones, the family is inarguably "holy." Can the same value judgment be accorded that "infinitely hurttable column of blood" known as body (the body)?

It is neither tedious nor pompous to suggest, at least, that, if any earthly "artifact" is "holy," it is the human body. Family, then, and the human body. Body lies at the center of the mystery of Christian incarnation (from the Latin root meaning flesh or meat): the giving of flesh to the spirit of love so that it possesses substance and can, as a consequence of its substance, live in our midst as a force that is immediately available to us.

Family and body. One as the vehicle and the other as the fleshing-forth of the Divine or Eternal in us. We are left, then, with the felt-sense of the primacy of body (no longer a matter for embarrassment to right-thinking people). The sovereignty of body (concretion, thing-ness, shadow-castingness: designate it whatever one might) is inarguable. Just as inarguable, by extension, is the sovereignty of THE body, the human body. In the real sense of the word, it is palpable, "touchable."

Despite all this, we in the Game (the quintessential body-conscious Aristotelians, if anyone ever should be) have capitulated to the abstraction & in our midst: white bread apostles of a watered-down Plato, who inveigh against what seems the voluptuous animal pleasure that we take in body. They see such pleasure as occupying a lower moral and aesthetic order than the (ostensibly) higher pleasure to be taken, let's say, not in the "mere" bodies of the athletes, but in the geometries of the athletes' bodies' movements: the geometries of the "doing" required by sports. All of this applies, of course, only when these abstractionists permit themselves to pay attention of any sort to such low-level matters as sports, preferring as they do to occupy themselves with the more rarefied delights afforded by philosophy and mathematics, to name two of the many "higher-level" exchanges between the abstractionist and his abstract fare.

We in the Game are the keepers of the body. We are its Levites, its priests. How ironic it is that the Force Behind the Universe has consigned a heightened sense of the body's special reverence to us, as unsophisticated, unlettered, and uncouth as we are so often perceived (not to mention innocent, child-like, and holy) devoted to laboring under crushing work-loads in dirty gyms for many decades, all in the quest of strength and hypertrophied flesh (the acquisition of which, in His very own image) the Lord occasionally and whim-

sically permits His favored few).

Try as they do, even the best (read: "most venal") market manipulators can't really reduce the body-as-body into many of those ultimate abstractionist tokens: dollar bills. That the body doesn't lend itself to this sort of big-time promotionalism is a blessing. Thank God. And as for those abstractionists in our very own camp, the so-called professional bodybuilders, a master plumber in a big city makes more in a year than all but a half-dozen of these professionals, and he makes it for a lifetime, not for a bodybuilder's brief life in the limelight.

The understanding of the body is not achieved by the mediation of the conceptual faculties. The body is best understood by those who can apprehend, even if not always truly comprehend, it as the working-out in man of the phyletic (the notion that, in this term's usage, conception has more to do with phylum and with matters of race than with the mere sexual congress of a father and mother). One's understanding of the body, then, is rooted at levels of our unconscious as deep as the terrain mediated by archetype. It is rooted in that part of our human continent which is the domain of sexual process and procreation, that part which resonates, not to idea, but to the particular and the concrete: the Sacrum (so appropriately named by the ancients who knew that the sexual process is precisely that, Sacred). The mediation process that occurs in the Sacrum, the realm of sexuality with its resonance to body, is still suspect to the abstractionist, still not acceptable in polite society. (Does this sound familiar to those who have sought to make our (oh, so) visceral, concrete, and body-centered sport acceptable to the polite world?)

The other mediation process—the one occurring in the mind, with its resonance to fleshless abstraction—is (Oh, so) very "salable," as currency, backed by infinitely malleable idea, the vacant wind. The currency of the body, of our body-sport and all such matters-of-body, on the other hand, is backed by flesh, bone, and muscle: the ingredients of the good Mulligan stew which is our Iron Game: topics and a comestible not "at home" in the paneled dining rooms of Society.

Is it difficult then to understand the deep feeling and even the self-doubt and worry that are implicit in the comments of the three men quoted at the beginning? If their element of worry is cultural and not worthy of truly adult men, their deep feeling (for this visceral game of ours) is rooted in our evolution from the pre-man state and still resonates to the pre-man residing in us today. The call *of* body, the call *to* body, is the Deep's, the unconscious', call to us. Rather than such a call's being something to worry or be embarrassed about (the sign of a "lapse into second childhood"), the real worry should be reserved for those systems so layered-over by convention and culture as to have muffled body's call beyond hearing.

If one of our Game's seniors is embarrassed by the depth of his enthusiasm for an activity more often associated in the public's mind with youngsters than with seventy-year-olds, he shouldn't be. For the senior involved in the heavy training associated with the iron game, as well as for the old man who returns to it after an absence, there is the always-healthy connection with the evergreen psychic and emotional systems of his youth, a stirring connection, unlike that which attends a return to the sports or athletics of one's youth.

A return to such sports and to an approximation of the skills we

had attained in our youthful involvement in these activities is, at best, fun: quickening our hearts making us feel good, and helping us lose an inch or two off our bellies. But the Old-timer's involvement in, or return to, heavy body-work bespeaks the existence in him of a life that can't be mistaken for any other: He walks like a strength athlete. He looks different from the old tennis player, marathoner, or swimmer. Seen on the street, at whatever age, he is clearly what he is. Unlike the old tennis player who can be mistaken for a haberdasher, he carries his ironman lifestyle with him. He embodies it. He is it. He is never mistaken for a haberdasher. He is never mistaken for anything but that which he is.

All this comes to more than the mere surprise that we feel at seeing a wrinkled old codger hit a golf ball for a country mile. The old iron-gamer, however wrinkled, is not an old codger in anything like the same sense. He may have wrinkles aplenty, and with age *they* may sag, but *he* does not. Propped-up with a profound muscle system (which comprises an essential difference between him as an old strength athlete who *IS* something and an old game-player who *DOES* something), he does not sag. More importantly, plugged-in to the psychic and emotional systems of youth — he glows.

Like a painting or a sculpture, the human body provides a perceptive (an onlooker) with an insight into the very private and personal mythology of its possessor/creator. That mythology is embodied (Listen to that word: “embodied”—incarnated, given meat) *IN* and *BY* the human body. This truth operates at levels deeper than mere understanding, (I think) in most true initiates into the mystery (the “almost-religion”) of our Game. This probably sounds unconscionably precious and high-faluting, but so be it. A cliché is no less true for being a cliché, or for being tedious or precious or high-faluting. Again, so be it.)

A baseball player “acts out,” and is absolutely a creature of, the highly abstract rules of an infinitely formalized and ritualized game, to the achievement of whose abstract purposes he is at best a mere counter (or token) in a commercialized, hence abstract, business venture, masquerading as something hovering uncertainly between entertainment and sport. The argument would be as tortuous as it was tedious which sought to “validate” modern baseball (or any game) — or a baseball player (or any game player) — as providing an insight into a private, personal mythology (lest it be the “mythology” of the entrepreneurial capitalist). Baseball is, needless to say, a game which has wonderful evocations associated with it. Despite these and the near-mythic import they have assumed for many, it is only a game, if the most deeply felt of American games (and hence not needful of validation as anything but a grand game). Baseball's evocations, however, touch only a few keys in the pipe organ diapason of mythic evocations called-forth by the body, which has been an artifact in the process of consciousness from as far back as the first man, an artifact that is destined to be the sounding board for the “deep” in us until the last gong of life tolls across our dead planet.

More than any bodily endeavor, the cultivation of profound degrees of strength and muscle is an interior process. If the baseball player is capitulative to the abstract rules of baseball, the iron man (locked-in to the corpuscular inner kingdom of his caveman self) is pure artist: The inspiration and also the stuff of his creation is the stuff of all art: body (*the* body). In what sense, “body”? Body as the opposite

of “mere” idea and spirit, but (ironically if not perversely) body, also, as the only means of the release in an audience of the deep feeling that is triggered by the insinuation of an incarnation into an audience's “force field of consciousness.”

In the sense of the religionist who seeks ascension, not into spirit, but into body (as the City of God): the iron man, as seen above, is the ultimate Aristotelian (albeit, of course, unknowingly). If he wills to be “known” at all, he must be (and will be) “known” only by the efflorescence, the flowering-forth, of his Deep, the Eternal in him as embodied in his testifying-flesh. This flesh and muscle are the creation of the artist in him: this flesh and muscle are the only He that can truly be shared and known in the deep way peculiar to the art construct. This poetic (this “made,” crafted, created) flesh, in its very fleshness—if truly “read”—provides the final bodying-forth-of and, hence, insight-into the mystery not just of his human nature, but of all human nature.

As it is of so many other metaphors, life is the endless fleshing-out of the metaphoric conflict that was so important to the Medieval Scholastics: the conflict between body and soul: in their “infallible” resolution of which these Godly teachers came down on the side of teacher's pet: soul and spirit. Poor body. Downplayed. Bad-mouthed. Perennial second banana, even in life comedies orchestrated and produced by folks who should “know” better. I love him. “Him”? Yes, “him” (for our purposes here). To refer to body as “it” is playing into the hands of body's enemies, those who despise “him” and everything that “he” takes pleasure in, and, lest we forget, the Game he takes chief pleasure in is the same one that we do. ‘His’ despisers hate everything about body except, of course, that which “he” can be enlisted to do, and to suffer, on behalf of “his” betters,” the goodie-goodie soul-boys, top-buttoned to pop-eyed-ness in their sanctioned (sanctified) torment of body and contempt for “his” iron toys (so dear to all of).

Except for the sickly excessive concern for what body can be trained to earn and do (as in kicking and hitting balls and bashing chins), has any real insight into body-as-body or into Body's (and our) favorite game been achieved as we progress into out century's last decade? Very little if we persist in seeing body and body-work as the province of boys, rather than as the focus in muscle (and the working-of-muscle) of an argument that confounds the wisest philosophers.

The preceding lines aside, need there be the determination of a less important and a more important when it comes to body vs. soul (or spirit)? There is enough of the Sunday School (and Sabbath-Day School) boy in each of us to assure our “knowing” something of the (self-styled) primacy of soul (and spirit). We need not labor this point. It has been done to death for all of us. We all admit the fact that there are beautiful expanses of body (of human body especially) which remain unleavened by soul, the “heavenly commodity” which effects the body's leavening, its “rising” (with all the beauty to which body's stuff-ness is heir). The “beauty” of soul-less stuff sickens us like poisoned bait “laid to make the taker mad.” The empty “beauty,” in short, of soul-less body needs no further impeachment: a cliché that has provided many a mindless cleric with a spur-of-the-moment sermon. Enough already. The danger lies elsewhere, in the opposite camp.

If without the leavening of spirit or soul, the body is poisonous to

itself and others-without body, the “spirit” and “soul” are equally empty terms, without apprehensible referents and, indeed, without any real meanings either. . (I beg the indulgence of those with other religions—or no religion; I use the following example to make a point about the function of body, not as an argument in favor of a particular religion. A glance at the underlying Christian metaphor is instructive, however, in getting at “how body means.”)

The Christian apologist would claim that, without Jesus, a phrase such as “God is love” means nothing. (We “love” our mothers, our country, and chocolate ice cream. What does “love” mean?) The meaning of Christian love is contingent upon the existence of, and implicit in, Jesus, in His body which he willingly sacrificed for others. It is clear from the function of body, as metaphor here, that the word “love” to a Christian implies the concept: willing sacrifice, or gift, of self to others. But this meaning does not have to be announced or ‘taught.’ It is implicit in (tucked-away-in) the incarnation of (Christian) love: the man Jesus with His encompassing flesh-body, which he offers as a willing gift to others, just as the Christian’s gift of love must be willingly proffered, at whatever cost or pain. Unless the spirit or idea is beautiful in flesh, it cannot walk among us and, without the encompassing flesh, cannot be apprehended or fulfill its role in the economy of life’s grand plan. What is true of body in this religious-metaphoric context is no less true of it in any interactional context — including its role in bodying-forth the meaning of *the* body and of the Iron Game. The last thing to be ashamed about, the body provides the answer to the question “How?” when applied to any deep transfer and release of feeling-meaning at the very deepest of levels, as opposed to the shallower, merely conceptual, meanings communicated as ideas at the level of concept. Yet most of us, perversely, are more proud of success in the latter communication (of ideas, as such) than of success in the former “deep-level” transfer or release of feeling-meaning. (Strange: This triumph of abstraction over heart-touching body, over concretion generally.)

From whatever direction (aesthetic, philosophical, religious) that we come to it, there is a primacy to body-as-body that throws into bold relief the fool’s embarrassment at his self-confessed “obsessive” attention to body and its cultivation.

As suggested earlier, there is a spiritual danger built-in to body and one’s reverence for it: a danger not built-in to baseball and tennis. As he lies dying, at the very instant that the “King” (the Lord) is about appear to him the speaker in one of Emily Dickinson’s poems turns his failing attention away from the solacing arrival of his spirit’s King to the “blue uncertain stumbling buzz” of a fly. With all the urgency of the beauty inherent even in earthly corruption, the fly “interposes” itself between the dying man and the “light” (the coming of the Lord) — yet another display of body, of earth’s seductiveness. Even in the “Eternal Moment’s contention between body and soul, again the primacy of body.

During a beach walk decades ago, before my daughter could talk, she dashed back to me from a foray into the dunes: a stone held aloft in her little frog-of-a-hand. Exulting in the feel of the satiny stone against her skin, her round face fell when I applied to her gift the term for it in the geological world. Seeing the sudden fall in the precious face, I bit my tongue, knowing that I’d started my little animal upon a gray journey into abstraction (the de-bodying of bod-

ies into their names). This gray journey away from an open avowal of body’s primacy (because it wasn’t academically acceptable) was one that her old man had not yet abandoned at the moment he set-out on his film.

Now, however, like the skinny street fighter who bloodily pummels guys twice his size because (with no teeth and his nose a “busted shambles”) he has “nothing to lose,” I don’t give a damn anymore. How about you? The secret’s out. Is yours? I’ve joined the “broken faces” and admit to sharing more with Emily’s speaker than with those who harrumph at my (so-called) “preoccupation” with our (“silly”) Game and with body, itself, none of which I’ve employed my few powers to defend. Have you?

Some folks’ pleasure is in the arts. Others’, in social activities. More to the point here, for many the pleasure (even chief pleasure) is a sport or game. For us, it’s not really a game, but the body itself—not Irrespective (mind you) of what it can do, because the cultivated body outstrips the imagination—it’s just that our interest goes beyond the body’s (mere) *application* to what it *is* (beyond the “practical body,” that is, to the “pure body”), as well as to the only Game that both creates and tests its pure-body-ness.

In old age, a wonderful old baseball or tennis star moves from point A to point B, and we call it movement, sometimes even graceful movement (They’re athletes, after all, even if old ones). Old game players, graceful or otherwise, do not *mean* something; they are not statements: they merely *do* something.

In old age, a wonderful old Iron Gamer moves from point A to point B, and we call it a statement. (It’s a “statement,” indeed, even if there’s nobody there to “call” it anything.) It’s conceivable (if unlikely) to imagine such-a-one as ungraceful, but it’s no matter. With such folks, the issue is not their *doing* something, gracefully or otherwise. The issue is that they *are* something. (Again, the earlier distinction between people who DO wonderful things and people who ARE wonderful things by reason of body (its mystery) and body’s chief sport, our sport, our game, the Iron Game.)

The playing of a sport does not create an artifact that evokes mystery, that confounds the imagination; it creates a machine that can do something (something outside itself) superbly well. It creates a machine that we applaud for the geometries of movement that it describes against the backdrops of beautiful afternoons or brightly lit parks and arenas.

Do you notice? The irony here is that, despite the “second banana-ness” of all this, there is no known case of a baseball player (old or young) — or fan, however unathletic—who has ever betrayed so much as a scintilla of embarrassment about his *affaire d’amour* with baseball.

The mystery of body is insoluble, ineffable, a sword beneath our hearts, a test of our spirit and moral nerve: a continuing delight. Yet one confesses pleasure in body’s cultivation at considerable risk to his reputation and, because of this, often with considerable embarrassment.

To comprehend fully what we are heirs to when we UNembarrassedly acknowledge our veneration for body and its cultivation comprises an epiphany — an epiphany, however, in which the embarrassed and the embarrassable can never take pleasure.

—Al Thomas