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**‘THANKS FOR THE COOKIE...BUT NEXT
YEAR GIVE ME RATHER A GOOD BOOK’**

**Essay on the Metaphoric Meaning of Book as
Food for the Soul**

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Introduction

Philosophers and preachers have always distinguished the physical body and the invisible soul/mind as two components of any human being. Some even go further to establish a sort of hierarchy with the soul assigned to command and the body to execute the soul’s instructions. This work is inspired by Johannes Thysius’ childish New Year letter dated 1 January 1629 to his uncle Anthonie Thysius. This letter explicitly made reference to the body-soul distinction.

This essay is an inquiry into the use of books as containing indispensable food for the soul the way ordinary food is indispensable to any human being. It is divided into four parts dealing respectively with similarities between reading and eating, the necessity of ‘feeding’ the soul/mind, the quality of the soul’s food and the soul-body primacy debate.

I. Reading Is Eating

Before plunging deeply into the subject, I would like first to explain the words of Thysius (1621-1653), because the whole essay is both built on and inspired by them. To thank his uncle for the cookie he had offered him, seven-year old orphan Thysius seized the New Year occasion to write the following (only excerpts):

While presenting you my best wishes for the New Year... I would like to hereby thank you very much for the cookie...And with God’s help, I like to learn so well that my dear uncle will deem it best next year to honour me with a Good Book instead of a cookie..¹

At least two points are to be highlighted, especially the rhyming monosyllabic words (*koeck*, *boeck*) and the striking philosophical reference to the necessity of feeding both the body and the soul/mind.

Gaius Sallustius Crispus (c. 86–34 BC) is among the authors who explored extensively the body-soul distinction. In his *De Conjuratone Catilinae*, he suggested that this distinction was the most important aspect making humans different from beasts (which have no mind). He wrote:

¹ Archief Thysius 112 H, brief van Johannes Thysius vanuit Amsterdam aan zijn oudoom Anthonie Thysius te Leiden d.d. 1 januari 1629; (Free translation: ‘Naer wenscinge van een gelucsalich nieuwe Jaer aen UE... ben ick hier mede UE hertelijck seer bedanckende voor den koeck... Ende met Godes hulpe soo wel te leeren dat mijn lieve Oom tegens toecomende Jaer best sal vinden mij te vereeren met een Goede Boeck in plaets van een koeck’

*All our power is situated in the mind and in the body. Of the mind we rather employ the government; of the body, the service. The one is common to us with the gods; the other with the brutes.*²

Now that the soul-body distinction is clear, I would like to consider how the feeding of the mind strikingly resembles ordinary eating. While reading, the reader “eats” letters, words, sentences, paragraphs, pages,.. from the book which serves as a dish. In his essay *Quotation and Originality*, 19th century American transcendentalist philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson draws a parallel between insects eating their food and library-goers devouring books:

*Whoever looks at the insect world, at flies, aphides, gnats, and innumerable parasites, and even at the infant mammals, must have remarked the extreme content they take in suction, which constitutes the main business of their life. If we go into a library or news-room, we see the same function on a higher plane, performed with like ardor, with equal impatience of interruption, indicating the sweetness of the act.*³

More illustrative is the description of the mind by Walter Ong comparing it to a box from which information is taken, encoded and put into a pipe conveying it to another similar box.⁴ To go on with the paraphrasing of Ong’s idea, the pipe which serves as a medium is referred to in this essay as the dish (book) on which food (information) is served (conveyed) from one soul/mind (box) to another. The aim of reading is thus to avoid having an empty box which would be as dangerous and harmful as having an empty stomach.

From the above, the similarities between eating and reading becomes more palpable and Thysius’ *koeck-boeck* combination more meaningful. As the following part shows, this combination is crucial and vital since both the body and the soul need to be fed to grow soundly.

II. Feeding the Soul Is a Necessity

The need to have a sound soul in a sound body (*mens sana in corpore sano*) is so evident that it needs not pages and books to be understood. However, this section will shed more light on this necessity, especially the one of not neglecting the soul's vital needs.

I will illustrate my point with a biblical example, where Jesus was telling Satan that ‘...man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God’ (Matth.4:4). Beside the religious meaning of this verse, it also shows how humans need both to feed their bodies (with bread among others) but also their

² Gaius Sallustius Crispus, *De Conjuracione Catilinae*, <http://www.forumromanum.org/literature/sallust/catilina.html> (accessed on 30 October 2005) ‘*Sed nostra omnis vis in animo et corpore sita est; animi imperio, corporis servitio magis utimur; alterum nobis cum dis, alterum cum beluis commune est*’.

³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Quotation and Originality in Letters and Social Aims*, (Cambridge, 1904), p. 177.

⁴ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Techniologizing of the Word*, (New York, 1982), p. 176.

soul (with texts among others). One way of feeding the soul that Jesus suggested, was the listening to and reading of God's written Word.

Moreover, if we consider children's up-bringing, we realise that parents are strongly advised not only to feed their children properly but also to familiarise them with books from the early age. Dutch municipal libraries are even helping in this respect. For instance, the Haarlemmermeer Public Library (Openbare Bibliotheek Haarlemmermeer) organises every Wednesday a 45-minute story-reading session for children from one month of age onwards. Also at home, most parents read for their children to keep the necessary balance in their body-soul development. Stressing the necessity of both eating and reading in American society especially for women who were second class citizens, 19th century feminist and emancipationist writer Margaret Fuller wrote that 'a house is no home unless it contains food and fire for the mind as well as for the body'.⁵

Therefore, for a balanced development of any human being, both the soul and the body have to be fed. To come back to Sallustius' philosophy, whatever the physical strength and ability of the body to carry out the directives from the soul, the latter needs to be moulded, instructed, sharpened and cultivated in order to give intelligent orders and control their execution. The necessity to read books is thus self-evident since they are one of the best sources of intellect, instruction and culture. To borrow the words of 17th century English writer Joseph Addison, we should keep our mind alive, cherished and confirmed through reading.⁶ However, one has to be careful in the choice of readings as the coming section attempts to demonstrate.

III. Beware of Indigestion

The quality and worth of books, just like the ones of food, is also to be considered. Some food items have no nutrients or a few or are even toxic or not easy to digest. The same holds for books. Indigestible and toxic books harm the mind and are to be avoided.

Thysius himself stressed that his uncle should give him a "Good Book" as opposed to a "bad book". This infers that he wanted a book that would instruct him rather than the one that would corrupt and intoxicate his mind.

This brings us to the issue of quality that determines how fast, often and passionately a book is read or food eaten. When food is tasty, it is fast devoured until the dish is empty. If, on the contrary, the food is not what the eater likes, he will yet eat a portion or perhaps the entire dish, but the speed and enthusiasm will be different from the one in the above-mentioned case. Some books too, to quote Sir Francis Bacon, 'are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be

⁵ Margaret Fuller, *Women in the Nineteenth Century*, in *The Essential Margaret Fuller*, Edited by Jeffrey Steele, (New Brunswick, 1992), p.260

⁶ Joseph Addison, . *The Tatle* no. 147 http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Joseph_Addison (accessed on 25 October 2005)

chewed on and digested; that is, some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but not curiously; and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention'.⁷

In many other cases, the eater, especially children but not only they, swallows a considerable quantity of food without chewing and have stomach ache or diarrhoea at the end of the day. The job that was supposed to be done by teeth with the help of saliva is then done by the stomach, which has its own different job to complete. The result is strikingly the same for readers who do not take time to analyse the contents of the books they read. 18th century British statesman and orator Edmund Burke described reading without reflecting as being like 'eating without digesting'.⁸

The conclusion is that while providing both the body and the soul with their respective food, one has to take into account the toxicity and the digestibility of the food. Thus, people should not only read books but also take time to reflect about their contents, which is the best way to suck the maximal and optimal nutrients out of them and discard toxic substances. Thus, as Bacon suggested, one should 'read not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider'.⁹

IV. Hierarchy

The necessity of feeding both the body and the soul being largely explained, I would like to briefly consider the primacy debate. While a number of thinkers and even ordinary people advocate that the soul comes first, many others suggest the reverse while others remain indifferent. Without deeply engaging into the debate, I will rather give an overview of a number of opinions which contribute to my subject.

To start with Thysius, his letter sheds light on his opinion on this subject. For him, a "Good Book" comes before a "cookie". This can be seen from two angles: First, he explicitly wrote that he wanted a "Good Book" instead of a "cookie", which is unambiguous. Second, he wrote his choice (*Goede Boeck*) with capital 'G' and 'B' to show his particular emphasis and the importance attached to his preference, and "koeck" with a small "k" to show that he considered it as having no particular importance.

Likewise, Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536), the man said to be the most learned ever, had a clear preference of the soul over the body. For him, like for Sallustius - who says the soul is what is common between humans and gods- the soul comes first and has to be accorded priority. In his letter to Jacob Batt in 1500, Erasmus made his preference unequivocal:

⁷ Francis Bacon, *Of Studies in Essays*, (London, 1978), p. 150

⁸ Quote attributed to Edmund Burke, <http://www.deblogan.com/quo2.html>. (accessed on 01 November 2005)

⁹ Francis Bacon, *Of Studies*, p. 150

*I have turned my entire attention to Greek. The first thing I shall do, as soon as the money arrives, is to buy some Greek authors; after that, I shall buy clothes.*¹⁰

It is very interesting to note how Amazon.com, the global online bookselling company, has transformed Erasmus' words into a marketing slogan: 'When I get a little money I buy books; and if any is left I buy food and clothes'.¹¹ This misquotation-based slogan is now better known than the original words. Few are those who remember or simply know Erasmus' words and many those who ignorantly and innocently attribute the misquotation to him.

The opposite of the above is the category of people whose prime preoccupation is their physical living. These, together with the indifferent masses, constitute certainly a very large majority of human beings. They would first make sure that all their material needs are met before engaging in instructive intellectual leisure (including books) and their motto is *primum vivere, deinde philosophari*

If I should take a position in this debate, I would be somewhere in the middle. Otherwise there would be no equilibrium. Preferring the one to the other would mean neglecting the not-chosen one and would result into a misbalanced development of the *mens* and the *corpus*, which should simultaneously, commensurately and soundly grow together. In this respect, La Mettrie suggested that the body and the soul were inter-dependent. He wrote that 'one is sometimes inclined to say that the soul is situated in the stomach...' and that 'the soul follows the progress of the body'.¹²

This brings me to the conclusion that the soul in a hungry or poorly fed body would suffer and vice-versa. Thus, both the body and the soul should be given equal and balanced treatment.

Conclusion

It is quite exciting to open this reflection with a seven-year-old Dutch child (Thysius) who grew into an unrivalled book-lover and close it with another Dutch (Erasmus). Both attained a certain level of immortality -the former on the city (Leiden) and national (The Netherlands) level, the latter on the global level- through books. Even though only very little or nothing is known about their physical eating habits, one can confidently assert that they were aware of the soul-body distinction and the need to take good care of both of them.

It should also be noted that nowadays, though printed books are yielding their predominant position as source of intellect to electronic media, the same principle

¹⁰ Erasmus' Letter to Jacob Batt dated April 12, 1500 in P.S Allen, *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami, Tom I (1484-1514)*, (Oxford, 1906), p.288 'Ad Graecas literas totum animum applicui; statimque ut pecuniam accepero, Graecos primum autores, deinde vestes emam'.

¹¹ http://www.erasmatazz.com/library/Erasmus_the_Hero/Quotations.html (accessed on 30 October 2005)

¹² Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *L'homme machine*, (Leiden, 1748), p.16 ; p.17

' On dirait en certains momens que l'Ame habite dans l'estomac..' ; ' L'Ame suit les progrès du corps ...'

still holds. Television, radio, the World Wide Web, to mention these, are valuable dishes on which valuable food is served for the soul. Like books or ordinary food, they too can be toxic and indigestible and can even be worse because they are hardly controllable. Thus, since they have most of the book's characteristics, they too have to be submitted to the same toxicity-checking rules and reflection-for-better-digestion principles.

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