



Divinations down the drain

Early-morning bath leads to ruminations on the existence of a soul

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*Well I woke up this morning with my mind –
Where was your mind?
Centered on Jesus.*

— devotional song

Before dawn I slip, still sleepy, into the tepid bath. I soak for an hour, reading Cocteau in translation, lolling in the gray water. The light coming up through the window falls on the door, slides toward the floor.

Cocteau, with his obsession, I should say insistence, on the invisible, with what this most public figure (author, playwright, filmmaker, artist) would call his own invisibility, leads me, through beautiful labyrinths, back to my own invisibility, my own unknown soul.

If my personal hygiene is impeccable (water washes away the dirt and grime, the softened scabs of yesterday) Cocteau reminds me of that other ablation, the baptism of the inner man.

Not that I (nor Cocteau in his sophistication, his worldliness – but I shouldn't speak for him) swallow that parable, spit so often from pulpits, of the bookkeeper god and his terrible ledger of

wrongs accumulated, debts owed, interest to be paid.

No, but there is yet a soul, of the world, of a moment, of a man bathing as the sun comes up in his heart – of the sun's rising. A soul nonetheless fragile for being indestructible.

Point to it, with your knowing finger; you'll find it eludes you but that doesn't make it unreal. Point to the dance while a dancer is dancing and you'll find it equally elusive – still, you don't storm the box office demanding a refund on your ticket.

The dance is there, an event, a field of activity, so present as to draw you into its presence.

The soul, my soul, is like that, I think: plainly invisible.

"And what does it profit a man, if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" Some rhetorical apostle asks as I pull the plug, letting the water ebb around me in the tub.

Lose your soul? What can that mean to a soul?

But it can happen, happens all too easily.

Like the slip of soap in wet hands, the soul disappears beneath the flood, sinks like a stone and is lost, is broken, is darkened, troubled, drowned.

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"

Or it can be left behind, like a briefcase at a bus stop, thrown out like the baby with the bathwater. It can be abandoned to the dogs of worry, gluttony or guilty vice.

I have seen men and women, squeaky clean, go toddling off to work of a morning like Dagwood without his trousers, having left their souls behind – perhaps in the cushions of the

couch with the TV remote.

Worse, through inattention, to starve the soul.

Nourished only on beautiful acts and calm reflection the soul goes too often crammed with the junk food of a busybody media, empty calories of days spent "earning a living" – as if a moment's lassitude forfeits the right to live.

Amid the noise, the stale ugliness of another stripmall, another day-in-the-life of a too-loud America, the soul's quiet notes go unheard. Even in the attempt to get back to the soul, some run pell-mell off the precipice of consumerism, charging prayer mats and yoga postures on credit cards already overloaded with responsibility in the death of the soul.

And yet here is Cocteau, or his ghost, vanishing before me as I stand, shivering, dripping on the carpet, my hair on end.

In the world, he retained his own elusive-ness. Neither critic nor ardent fan ever grasped what he was when he was among them.

Like a pansy Christ he reveals now something other than what we expect of great artists or great men – the great immortal dead – whatever that may be. Pointing out his own invisibility to me as I dress and start the day.

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