

Trine Riel is a writer and translator. Her essays on cosmic pessimism, body horror and the end of the world have been published in various Danish newspapers and magazines.

Riel holds a BA in Fine Art from Goldsmiths College London. In 2019 she completed her PhD on Nietzsche and asceticism at the National University of Ireland Galway.

www.trineriel.journoportfolio.com

GALLERY

Trine Riel
Eternity for Men

Commissioned by **Tamsin Snow** to accompany her exhibition *On Ice* at Temple Bar Gallery + Studios, January 18 - February 26, 2022

Temple Bar Gallery + Studios is supported by:



Comhairle Cathrach
Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City Council

In times of early Christianity, blood was thought to hold generative power. It was believed that during sexual intercourse a certain portion of the blood, consisting of something like liquid bone, would gather from all over the body and rush through the veins. As the whole human system heated up and began to shake, the blood would be curdled into whitened semen. The genital regions were, in this sense, no more than a point of passage - the "outlet of a human espresso machine", as Peter Brown puts it. At the moment of emission when the body, much like in an epileptic fit, starts to "foam", the "damp humour of the body is joined to the hot substance of the spirit", explains Tertullian, the reputed father of Latin Christianity. "And then, (I speak of this at the risk of seeming improper), in that last breaking wave of delight, do we not feel something of our very soul go out from us?"

This idea is closely related to the appraisal of male continence. Since loss of semen, like loss of blood, involves the loss of hot spirit substance, part of our very soul, ejaculation equals the spilling of a man's vital life force. Greek physicians like Galen and Soranus warned about this danger, suggesting that chaste men grew bigger and stronger, their health superior to other males. In fact, were it not for the procedure's other inconvenient effects, castration would no doubt make an athlete perform better, claimed Galen. These medical reflections were based more on a pragmatic attitude of self-care than a proscriptive sexual morality. Continence was not an ideal or end in itself - the concern was not so much with desire as with fatigue. Although sexual activity, and especially excessive

sexual activity, was seen to deplete the male body's intrinsic heat and energy reserve, heterosexual coitus was still, in its procreative finality, both necessary and desirable -- not least because it offered the individual a route to immortality. Via the succession of offspring, those who procreated were seen as renewed and, in a sense, raised from the dead, walking among the living by virtue of an eternity offered by the continuous flow of generations.

With the Christian ideal of celibacy, this would change drastically. Ascetic monks in the desert dreamed of castration and of a total shutdown of all damp transmissions within their bodies. Eternity could no longer be attained via discharge - rather, by retention. "Those who have been judged worthy of a place in the other world and of the resurrection from the dead", as described in Luke, did not make copies of themselves as a means of attaining life after death. Nor did they need to -- "for they are not subject to death any longer." Such men are, Luke goes on, "like angels; they are sons of God, because they share in the resurrection". In order to bring themselves closer to this angelic state, ascetics put themselves through remarkable performances of self-mortification, intended to repress not only sexual desires but all the earthly needs of the body organism. The monk would adopt a potentially lethal diet that was meant to keep metabolic processes at an absolute minimum. Through extensive training in deprivation, the body's production of all things hot and wet, including sweat, tears, sperm, urine and faeces, was thought to cool and dry up, while the blood would flow at reduced speed. This was believed

to alter the shape and function of the monk's inner organs. His stomach would eventually reduce in size, his veins grow narrower. The kidneys would not demand much warmth, Philoxenus of Mabbug tells us, as they would have acquired "their natural health". Also, "the slime" would be driven out of all the bones. All in all, the body would contract, would become dry and "small". This austere practice in what may be called body minimalism was carried out in imitation of Jesus Christ himself, the image of perfection, who was said to never have defecated.

The desired state for the desert ascetic was, objectively speaking, one of near biological death. Some monks built their cells like tomb houses. Here they lay, semi-conscious, in self-made graves, and imagined their body as an *autarkic* system: fully self-reliant, capable of running its own generator, needing only a minimum of external fuel to sustain itself. Still, it would be a mistake to see in this seemingly life-denying ideal nothing more than an unequivocal hatred of the body. Rather, what is at stake is an attempt to radically rewire the body's constitution, changing its very nature. Believing the essence, the real origin of his being to be other-worldly, the desert monk carries out his strict regime in order to align his body with what he believes to be its true nature. To return his body to its original, uncorrupted state, by delivering it from the demands of the mortal flesh into which man had fallen. The dream body for the ascetic was, in other words, a totally emancipated body, cleansed of its lowly and 'unnatural' dependencies. The goal is not a life without a body but to prep the body for a final fantasy: the

coming resurrection that will give the body new life and deliver it to eternity.

For the pagans, whose path to immortality began with orgasm, this must have seemed a quite astounding, and certainly less pleasurable, way to achieve the same thing.