RECOLLECTION AS HARMONY IN THE SOUL -
notes on the maxim ‘Let the person and the spirit walk together’ in
Treatise One of The Third Alphabet by Francisco de Osuna

The problem of a divided soul and the need for teaching.
Osuna begins his teaching on recollection with his description of the basic human condition - the divided soul - how different parts of human person are moving away from, or disconnected and at a distance from or even on a collision path with each other. He offers a maxim which has implicit in it a possibility of harmony of recollection: ‘May the person and spirit always walk together’. Osuna employs this metaphor to explore the themes of inner disharmony, and the harmonising of all aspects of the human person that is a consequence of God’s recollecting, gathering up activity in the soul.

Disharmony rising from a mistaken sense of identity separate from God.
Osuna considers that the fundamental cause of inner disharmony to be the mistakenly perceived separation between the true self that images and loves God, and the distorted sense of a separate self that is inevitably shaped by human relationships. He says that this prior communion with God in the soul is a friendship that is ‘not remote but more sure and more intimate than ever existed between brothers or even between mother and child. This friendship or communion between God and man is no less significant or certain because it is called spiritual. Is no more certain than anything in the world, and nothing is more joyous, more valuable, or more precious.’ (1.1.45) ii

This inability to recognise this basic unity has direct and severe consequences. Firstly he says, this sense of disconnection creates a lack of confidence in realising this relationship of friendship with God - ‘I imagine you still maintain that your age or position, temperament, illness, or talent excuses or precludes you from communion. ‘ but , De Osuna insists very firmly, ‘I do not quite believe you, for nothing can eradicate your capacity to love.’ (1.1.48) The second consequence of this erroneous thinking is apathy of spiritual desire. Our continuing belief in this fundamental disunity in the human soul leads to a kind of disease of the will so there is no motivation to persevere in prayer. In a lively way he describes this apathy as a slowed down will that, like a lazy ox in the field, is needing to be prodded by the Spirit into what he calls an urgent fervour of 'divine rage'! (1..1.49)
**Disharmony rising from separating sensuality and reason.**

Another related aspect of this error is to see the physical sensing body as disconnected from the reasoning mind. He urges - ‘wherever you go carry your mind along for none should go divided unto himself. For do not allow the body to travel one path, the heart another’ (1:2:50) This mistakenly perceived separation abandons the sensual nature to the fate of experiencing its own limitations - it becomes 'gross and carnal, lacking in judgment and reason.' The sensual mind cannot on its own grasp spiritual wisdom - ‘the heart of a fool is like a broken vessel which cannot hold all wisdom’ - as any real insight is simply overwhelmed and displaced by the daily preoccupations of the sensual nature. Without some ability to discipline thought through reason and judgements we become spiritually imprudent.

This imprudence takes the form of harming prayer habits of worry, neglect, of appeasing, of compliance, of misplaced pleasure and inflated esteem. Another consequence of disharmony between sense and reason is that the mind, unrestrained by the body to ground it in physical reality, exhausts itself in ungrounded fantasy that constantly feeds on itself. He describes the problem of mind constantly chasing after itself in prayer. He says - 'The soul is ruined and dissolute when it allows the mind and thoughts to flit about wantonly, running off wherever they wish. When they finally do wander home, worn out, dying of hunger, they come dragging behind an even heavier load of desire and greed.' (1.2.53-54)

**Disharmony arising from an ignored conscience.**

Osuna looks at the consequences of this perceived disunity of the human person from yet another angle - very relevant in his context. The spiritual conscience and sensuality are joined together - sensuality conformed to the conscience and subject to it. That is their potential harmony – to walk in the same direction chosen by the conscience. So Osuna insists that a sensitive and acted on conscience is essential not only for external relationships, but also for the vitality and health of our sensual nature. The practice of recollection does not lessen the importance of the role of the conscience, it awakens it. A sensitive conscience is also essential for a life of prayer. It is a person’s conscience that ‘scarcely rests but constantly endeavours to direct and counsel them to greater perfection and prayer, and orders them to renounce no only inane an less good vanities and habits of the world but also useless ones and to commit themselves to what can benefit them spiritually.’ (1.4.58) It is therefore that moral capacity for constantly
making fine tuned discernments about what habits are really helpful to recollection and what will disturb and hold back progress in recollection.

**Osuna’s matrix of internal harmonies possible in recollection.**

Osuna elaborates with a matrix of relationship metaphors to explore the potential harmony - the relationship of ‘walking together’ between spiritual conscience and sensuality, or spiritual mind and body that comes about in the reconciling impact of the prayer of recollection. Firstly, the relationship is likened to mind being older brother to the younger brother body who listens and follows the lead of his elder sibling, and yet shares in the same inheritance and divine lineage. Secondly the sense/spirit ( or sense/mind ) relationship is likened to the Good Samaritan in the gospel parable who takes care of the body when it is injured. And thirdly, Osuna sees the mind to be in harmonious agreement with the sensual nature - like a loving husband wedded to his bride, - a fruitful unity that generates new life. Osuna offers this matrix of three different symbolic relationships which he suggests are helpful for recognising movement of recollection that gathers what has been out of accord into harmony. (1.5.61-66)

For clarity - when Osuna thinks about mind and body he uses the word ‘mind’ to refer to that part of the human nature that has the potential (in the recollected soul) to apprehend or know spiritual things. Reasoning mind is not simply a cognitive ability to logically deduce and analyse, but implies potential for the intellect to make spiritual judgments or discernments when illumined by God. What is of the bodily, sensual nature Osuna includes not only the physical senses but also the 'sense' of imagination, and 'sense ' of memory - as these psychological abilities mirror the sensual nature. In this way Osuna’s more exterior sensual nature is what in contemporary parlance might be a holistic body-mind. He is exploring the disharmony and harmony between this body-mind and the illumined reasoning intellect.

**The first harmony - a filial relationship in the soul**
The first is the filial relationship between the spiritual 'mind' and sensing body - the relationship is like that between brothers - mind and sensuality have the same parent, connected irrevocably because they come from the same source. This fits with our contemporary inclination to recover from an artificial and unhelpful separation in our thinking between body and mind.
But Osuna also wants to keep the difference clear. He says that it is as if the mind is the elder brother of the sensing body - that each has a spiritual birthright that is due to it, - but that they are different parts of this shared, spiritual heritage. And what is more there is a hierarchical relationship that preserves both the order and uniqueness - the younger being sensual nature which serves the higher spiritual nature, and the latter serves the body through taking jurisdiction - simply because that is its birthright.

In an earlier chapter Osuna has already described the consequence of disassociaton and disconnection of mind that without the ‘service’ of the body. The mind is prey to unrealistic fantasy - it ‘circles the earth in the meandering of your vain thoughts and wandered over all of it, an you barred no vanity from your mind.’ (1.2.51) He here uses the old testament story of the relationship between Jacob and Esau to illustrate the reverse disorder - where ‘the older will serve the younger’ that is, where reason is completely co-opted to serve sensuality. (1.5.62) Here the mind has abdicated its birthright of jurisdiction - and the person lives controlled by and harassed by compulsive sensual needs. Here, because of the abdication of reason, no distinction can be made between an anxious need and the self - because there is no harmonious working together of the sensual nature and spiritual mind.

**The second harmony - an inner friendship in the soul**
The second social metaphor he uses is that the spiritual mind is to sensing body like two neighbours living in loving friendship with each other. He is in tune here with the current preoccupation to ‘befriend’ the body. Both body and mind are subject to the 'golden rule' : love thy neighbour as thyself. Osuna elaborates on the theme of this mutual mind loving the body and body loving the mind - and the implications in the spiritual life. Osuna was speaking into a context where the sins of the flesh were greatly feared and punishing attitudes and practices were rife. He urges the mind to love sensuality and all 'its movements for happiness', but retain its discerning judgment about any ways that the sensual nature misplaces its desires. What that means is that mind endures with patience the ravages of temptations and appetites - with the forgiving love of St Stephen's prayer - ‘O my God, do not count this sin against them. They do not know what they are doing for their reason has failed, but truly it only desires and searches for you.’ (1.5.63) Or the mind needs to be like the Good Samaratin when the bodily mind is beset upon by destructive forces that are not, he reminds us, the fault of the person - taking care of it, binding it, guarding it. (1.5.64)
The third harmony - a marriage of two natures
And the third metaphor he evokes is a harmonious marriage relationship which potentially at least, produces children. ‘The house is the body in whose corners and parts sensuality dwells. Being subject to reason and joined with it, as it is said, sensuality is a vine abundant with the fruit of her children, which are good works. ’( 1.5.65)

Here he is making the point - the graced relationship between body and mind is not going in the direction of the physical being sloughed off in the spiritual life - in fact just the opposite. The direction this movement of gathering up and collecting up of recollection is towards a creative and productive union which naturally will produce the energy for accomplishing 'good' things. This oneness of body will give rise to behaviour - the desire and the physical energy moves naturally into compassionate action, relationship in the world. The inner recollection does disembody the spiritually minded person but harmonises the spiritual and sensual nature within the heart.

So we have not just one metaphor for a helpful relationship between body and mind - but the three together - holding together the themes of how each part of our nature serves the other, how the dynamic of love shapes our relationship within our self, and how this opens and connect with the external relationships in one large movement of recollection. We bring our disharmony into the practice of recollection where gradually the graceful walking together of body and mind begins. It is a harmonising that is accomplished not so much by our own efforts but by the spiritual stirring of virtues infused to temper the passions of the body and to reconcile the body and mind.

(V S 06/08)


ii Treatise 1.chapter 1. Page 25. This form of reference will be used throughout.