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Broken Truth on the Ocean Floor

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Broken Truth on the Ocean Floor

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The following paper will confuse you; there are several seemingly unrelated themes starkly juxtaposed throughout. The topics are thrown together in seemingly random order to mimic what we see on television everyday - coverage of genocide in Rwanda immediately followed by Michael Jordan in Hanes boxers. The world is far more confusing than this paper."

ORIGINAL ESSAY



*** Prize for Original Essay provided by Catherine Agar

Broken Truth on the Ocean Floor

By Jeff Fate

Introduction

The following paper will confuse you; there are several seemingly unrelated themes starkly juxtaposed throughout. The topics are thrown together in seemingly random order to mimic what we see on television everyday - coverage of genocide in Rwanda immediately followed by Michael Jordan in Hanes boxers. The world is far more confusing than this paper.

It will be helpful for the reader to know that Kursk refers to a tragic submarine accident that occurred several years ago. Most reports agree that it was some sort of missile exercise that went wrong. Many men were trapped in the submarine on the ocean floor, living for several hours after the explosion. During that time Dmitri Kolesnikov wrote a short note to his wife before the emergency lights went out. There is also an interview of his wife that is included in the paper.

All of the work throughout is heavily indebted to the writings of Hannah Arendt, and Simone Weil.

Kursk 1: None of us can get to the surface

An explosion, an earthquake underwater, an exercise gone wrong, the mundane turned horrific, flooded cabins, floating corpses, and “Dmitri Kolesnikov writing, ‘None of us can get to the surface’ before carefully wrapping the note in plastic and placing it in his pocket. There it remained, 354 feet underwater, for 2 _ months.” (LaFraniere, 24)

Is this a recurrence of Cupid and Psyche? Is it the soul that is trapped here in a blue/black cathedral tomb, with the lethal incense of carbon monoxide rising from a fire in the belly of the ocean? How far, how deep, has the soul sunk, and where is her love, her

redeemer? Where is she wandering now?

“Russian deputy Prime Minister Ilya Klebanov said today that although the note shows that a group of men survived at least a few hours at the back of the submarine, ‘there was no way to save the sailors.’” (LaFraniere,) Political hand wringing, insincere apologies all around. Are we sorry that it was an accident? That they didn’t die in a real war? Are we crying because the soul was lost for something so trivial? What must it have been like to be eaten by the ocean? Who on earth was ever more alone, or distant, who was more detached than a small group of men dying in a steel tube on the ocean floor?

Perhaps this tragedy could serve as a metaphor for the current state of philosophy, or humanity in general. In the course of these few pages I want to meditate on the life of the soul in the body, and the body in the soul, in order to question the divide between contemplation and action, in hopes of finding a way to act as we think, and think while we act, to find a way to live in eternity, or as eschatology.

“It is only if we are no longer going to regard the flesh as the exclusive claimant to every satisfaction and an enemy of the soul, only if we reconcile it with the soul, that we shall be able, thus reintegrated, to recover peace with God and our fellow, helped by the example and power of Christ.” (Staniloea, 34)

We must dismantle Plato’s myth, the Manichaeic myth, where the soul is cast as something that must be freed from matter in order to dwell in a blissful world of abstractions, a realm of light where thought can move without friction, never slowing or growing tired, but only after it is freed from the body.

“Everything that is, is meant to be perceived.” (Arendt, 19) “We appear and disappear from a pre-existent world.” (Arendt, 21) I am not necessary, which excludes the possibility of my being caused by necessity, but I exist in a body, a body that needs to be seen; it is meant to have interrelation with others, even with God.

I have skin, a face, a mask of 'seeming' or 'semblance,' that hides what is behind it, and at the same time it makes what is behind it meaningful. As I remember reading in a book by Annie Dillard, "You only have a face when other people are around." I appear to be one thing but in reality I am something else, or maybe just something more. But how can what is within me, which by its very nature is invisible, be expressed without?

The life inside of the mind is a life of language, and therefore it is metaphorical and allegorical. We describe what is within by making comparisons with what is without, what we experience through the senses. These metaphors and analogies are not required by existence. All animals can communicate well enough without words. So it is only natural, with the advent of language, to begin to assume that thinking belongs to a different or higher order, and that metaphor is a means of detachment from the world; in the same way we could assume that an itch for religion is the same as an itch for drugs or pornography; it is a retreat into a private and unreal world.

This "two world theory," as Arendt puts it, pits the soul against the body in an eternal polemic as though the one can and should exist without the other. According to this view the body is little more than a prison even though everything in reality seems to say otherwise. For instance, our inner organs support our outer appearance and life. The body cannot exist, cannot appear, without their largely silent and anonymous work. Like the temple enclosing the holy of holies within, or the bread of Holy Communion, what we appear to be encloses, enfolds, and makes present what we are. 'I' cannot exist without a body. Truly, to withdraw into the mind for contemplation, far from being a retreat, is to enter fully into active life; and to participate actively in life, in appearing knowingly, is to act in contemplation. What is the body without a skeleton? What is a skeleton without a body?

The Dove: Fixed signs through time.

Porcelain: shaped earth, petrified, made translucent by heat, worked into an intentional form, like a word. “It can enable us to think, that is, to have traffic with non-sensory matters, because it permits a carrying over, metapherein, of our sense experiences.” (Arendt, 110) What is in the mind crosses over the bridge of the body. The form can also fall into the wrong hands; it can be stolen; it is incapable of resistance or protest. Like words, it possesses a “majestic silence”, which perhaps gives the thoughts that led to its creation more credibility than they deserve. (Arendt, 112) In its innumerable shapes, so open to expression, it has an unending and ever growing vocabulary. When a piece of porcelain is fixed by heat it becomes a single word, to be seen but never read aloud, never making a sound. It takes on the form of a metaphor, analogous to a word. The thought is known in the Greek sense, it is seen, and it can only be heard when it is broken. The Logos is heard, when the Ikon is broken.

A Christmas ornament. My wife had a thin, delicate, porcelain dove, a sign of the descent of the dove, the Spirit of fire and peace coming down. It was a word made image, a gift that attached to itself so much more than the artist’s intent, so much more even than the sign itself. Think of the proliferation, the wealth of meaning and significance that the Sistine Chapel has accrued over the centuries, and with it the glowing smoky patina from ever burning oil lamps; or think of the worn away faces of saints, that have been kissed away from icons over the centuries. The meanings converge on the object, pushing against it until they break it and find a way through. That ornament that my wife had was a fixed, fired, convergence of many roads. One day it fell, and spoke when it hit the ground; it made a singular shrill sound, and lay in pieces. My wife started to cry.

How can we appear truly and authentically, and not merely as semblances? The world appears in the mode of “It seems to me”. (Arendt, 38) The sun will always appear to

rise and set, no matter how much science tells us otherwise. But is it entirely an illusion? Empirically we know that the sun doesn't move, and yet we watch it move every day. The scientific truth and the senses are in conflict. One could become comfortable with the fact that the sun is still, and deny the senses their prominence in judgment, or one could assume that the sun is moving and still depend on how one likes to look at it or come at it from a different point and ask, "What does it mean?" Oddly, there seems to be no answer to this question, but it is the role of thought to ask it.

"Thinking annihilates temporal as well as spatial differences." (Arendt,) It is the opt-out of the man pushed by Arendt's metaphorical past and future, or the man pushed in two directions by the evidence - the sun moves, but it is still. It is the jump into metaphor and analogy that comprises all of language which is a system of signs. The sun appears to rise but we know that it doesn't move. Thinking goes to a different plane altogether and asks, 'Why is it so beautiful?' In other words, things like truth beauty love... can never appear in the realm of the senses. They can only be visualized as signs, as descriptions, that point to something beyond themselves. If we love the sign itself, the metaphor itself, the means by which we carry these immaterial entities into a world of appearance, sense, and bodily function, we commit idolatry, we worship words and things, and we sacrifice our children to the sun. Beauty is not made by language; it is carried over by language. So the real question is, how do these objects cross the threshold between silence and speaking, between invisible and visible? Only by being broken. An ideal speaks by being hit, broken, and mended.

Many things were broken in that tiny porcelain dove. The will breaks with the object of intent; at once there is a loss of many things in the bird's shattered form, and yet porcelain can be glued back together. The almost imperceptible scars along its surface that can barely be seen but perhaps felt, can only lend the gracious dove more meaning. Like

when our marriage vows were broken, but were renewed again; and like when our Lord retained his scars but stood again alive in front of his disciples and Thomas fell down before him and said, "My Lord, and My God." The true word is offended by breaking it, but it can be broken all the same. Can it be mended? It is truer if it can be mended? The truth appears when words are broken into actuality, when they offend or are offended, when they are smashed and obliterated. The truth is revealed in an apocalypse - the Logos breaking and mending. The wound of the porcelain dove, the wounded truth, is an unfolding disclosure of what is. When we refuse healing, meaning remains with the stone rolled over the tomb, dead and in pieces.

Poetry reveals an image through words.

"Poetry therefore even if read aloud, will affect the hearer optically; he will not stick to the words he hears but to the sign he remembers and with it the sights to which the sign clearly points." (Arendt, 101) In the end, we think in signs, language is a system of signs. We "...turn the mind back to the sensory world in order to illuminate the mind's non-sensory experiences for which there are no words in any language." (Arendt, 106) Something happens deep within the body that is alien to the world but at the same time is at home within it, and existent because of it, because of the Spirit of God within it. We are animated earth - to borrow a phrase from St. Augustine. "It is clear that... it is not human reason or cognitive capacity that constitutes endowment from God, that gives humans life and makes them more than mere bits of dirt." (Sapp, 55) The formation of the pain at the heart of this being (my self) into words is fundamentally an attempt to control and become the supreme arbiter of existence; cognition makes relativity the only unquestionable law. It is only at the level of groaning that cannot be uttered that we whimper the truth, at the level of the reactive question - "Why am I being hurt?" (Weil, 315)- that we are born into.

Kursk 2: Widowed

“She recited from memory a poem he wrote her: “When the death hour comes/though I’m shooing these thoughts away/ I want to have time to whisper one thing: Darling, I love you.” He had also left his dog tags and a cross that he always wore, with her. When you know that you are going to die, what do you do? In the ninth chamber of a nuclear submarine exploded on its own in a battle against no one, with 23 other men and just enough dim emergency light to write within the lines and think of home, what do words mean? What does anything mean when we have wandered so far, so deep, so unquestioningly, into a blackness where we die for no reason or because we are too costly, or too much of an embarrassment to save, while later notes pile up and reveal that we suffocated hoping for escape?

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So, “Why am I being hurt?” Perhaps this is the meaning of the first cry of a newborn. Language is entirely analogous images; letters are like dead metaphors - they used to be pictures. Each thought is linked with a sign that refers to something beyond itself, but the soul communicates without these signs. “Why am I being hurt?” is a pure perception that comes from within, it needs no external reference in the world of things. Remove the language, and the feeling still remains - Eli, Eli, Lama sabachthani? One needs no language to weep on the cross. The history of the despised body, the violent politic, the indifferent and unjust, is a history of idolizing the system of allegory, the relative law-made-god.

The highest truth or beauty is one that has been stripped of allegory and of authorship; it exists independently because it existed before its creator. The artist’s “personality has vanished.” (Weil, 318) As personality vanishes, so do words, and

something that is beyond words, which cannot be formulated in the mind because it lacks external sensory reference, emerges in action as soon as it is seen that action is linked to the soul as the body is to its internal organs.

“The tree is really rooted in the sky.” (Weil, 318) It is rooted in the source of its life, the object of adoration. The soul is rooted in meaning and the soul is without limit, therefore it desires an object without limit; it desires God. (Staniloae, 30) It desires to give worth, to worship an object beyond itself.

Man is not a rational animal, man is a worshipping animal.

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