

God's secret room:

If you believe it until you die it was true.

By David Dixon

I.

From the point of view of the peak-experiencer, each person has his own private religion, which he develops out of his own private revelations in which are revealed to him his own private myths and symbols, rituals and ceremonials, which may be of the profoundest meaning to him personally and yet completely idiosyncratic, i.e., of no meaning to anyone else.

—Abraham H. Maslow

Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences



Wailing Wall, Onement (Painters Painting)
paint, canvas, wood, thread

David Dixon, 2009

The Wailing Wall in Jerusalem is the last remaining wall (the western wall) of the Herodian temple built in 19 BCE and destroyed almost a hundred years later by the Romans. The wall itself is massive, the exposed sections measuring 187 feet wide by 62 feet high, and composed of 28 courses of solid rock, most of which weigh between two and eight tons. Behind this wall is the Holy of Holies, the room that contained, in its original manifestation, the Ark of the Covenant, but in the later Herodian version was left empty; this empty room was the monotheistic God Himself's most special place on earth. After the temple, and its inner most sanctum, was destroyed, an interesting theological/architectural question ensues: Now that the room is gone, is God still there? At the time of the temple, Jewish belief had already, in theory, moved away from idol worship through the prohibition of graven images, Moses destroying the golden calf. Yet, the temple itself was really a large architectural (rather than sculptural) idol meant to contain and locate the power and mystery of God. Like the Pagans, the temple required annual rites and sacrifices, and once a year on Yom Kippur a properly sanctified Rabbi entered into the Holy of Holies and into the presence of God, keeping open the cyclical and reciprocal relationship between God and His people.

In contrast, today, the destroyed temple and its remaining Wailing Wall stand as a powerful symbol of separation between God and humanity. No believing Jew will go behind the Wailing Wall for fear of stepping into the space, unsanctified, that was (and still is, although not precisely locatable) the Holy of Holies. One might describe most religious holy sites as welcoming, as *attractive*, yet the Wailing Wall does all it can to turn one away, to push one back into the world. The cracks in the wall the only meager hope that one might squeeze through some slip of paper with a prayer, a new ritual based on separation rather than a coming-into-the-presence-of. A hard existential truth: You are on your own. This new truth is discovered with the temple's destruction, in essence the Romans helping the Jews move closer to their own monotheistic ideal, a removed God that only exists in His believer's belief. The Wailing Wall, then, is a *functioning*

“broken” idol that has power because it speaks of lack, loss, and disappointment, of a god that can only be known in absence, His believer’s belief filling His void.

This destruction by the Romans in 70 CE gives rise to the Diaspora, the spreading outwards of the Jewish people from the center located in the absence of the Holy of Holies. Contemporary with this destruction and dispersion is the birth of (Jewish) Christianity, and its *catholic* notion of inclusion. In the absence of the Holy of Holies, both actions disseminate a new de-centered belief in spirit and community, the temple for believing Jews is now located in the rituals of home and hearth, for Christians it is in the heart of a personal god made man, in the body as the new temple.

II.

My lover is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look! There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattice.

—Song of Solomon, 2:9



Madonna del Parto
fresco
Piero della Francesca, 1460

With God no longer locatable—released and unbound by his broken idol, the temple—His spirit now one and the same (indistinguishable from) matter, how to locate His guiding truth? How to seduce Him out? How to measure perfection and harness its power for guidance in human community? If God is made flesh, spilled out by the temple’s entropy into matter, how do we reverse the effect, opening up, once again, the reciprocal, cyclical relationship between *noumena* and *phenomena*? Or is this desire quixotic, do we just quit searching (give up hope) and simply agree that the noumenal is (and always was) a fiction embedded in phenomena?

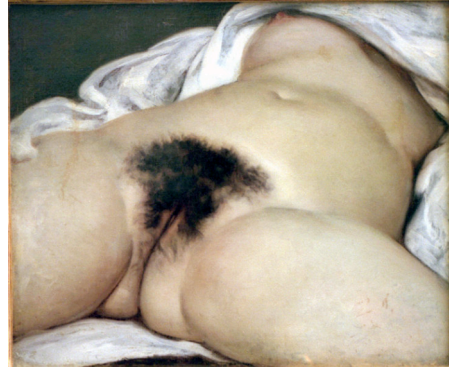
Within the methodologies of art and philosophy how one approaches these questions may differ. For Art, its purpose is accomplished when it has successfully touched, moved, or transformed a subjective other: A singular subject (an artist) creates an object (poem, novel, painting) that sits objectively in the material world. Another singular subject (the reader) encounters this object and is transformed by some notion of the artist’s subjectivity that remains in the object. The truth (and validity) of this transaction is in the

reader's response, and if accomplished the artist has achieved her goal. It is understood that for this transference to occur the art object cannot be arbitrary, it has to be in some relation to a shared truth of experience to make sense to another. Truth is drawn out (delimited) through the shared experience. This is, it may be argued, an effective means of communication; yet, with philosophy, which also purports to communicate truths, this equation is different.

Philosophy is accomplished when a subjective writer writes a text/object that sits in the material world in order to describe, map, or model that same material world. The subjective reader is left out of the equation of veracity. In fact, the reader comes to the text to confirm some truth outside of herself, one that both she and the writer explore together, both equally excluded from, and curious about, the truth they attempt to understand (come in contact with) through describing, mapping, and modeling. The final distance left between the map/model/description and the thing it describes is one of contemporary philosophies primary problematics. The methodological history of logistical argumentation, as inherited from Aquinas, seems to have failed its goal. Ultimately, with Aquinas's method, a reader places her faith in logic more than in the god that the logic is attempting to prove, leaving a gap between the logic and god. As a result of this failure, and to close the gap, philosophy has turned to the poetic. This poetic approach to truth is more aptly represented by Augustine's text *Confessions*. With this book the reader believes as Augustine believes not because of proof, but rather because of Augustine's seductive and persuasive voice; one wants to believe as Augustine believes because of Augustine's loving example, a validating subjective exchange more like that of art than philosophy (indeed, [annoyingly] the last three "philosophical" chapters of *Confessions* are often left out of publications, these no longer being considered philosophically relevant, whereas the autobiographical body of the text persists). This move toward the poetic on philosophy's part has seriously complicated notions of truth. To make matters worse, art has deferred to the philosophical; for example, a major movement in the 1990's was that of 'model making' (good friend, Michael Ashkin, being a major proponent), where art stepped down from its special status as object in, and equal to, phenomena (where a reader comes in contact with a unified subject/object), to say that art, like philosophy, only models experience, it is not experience itself.

III.
Spirit is a bone.

—Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel



L'Origine du Monde,
oil on canvas
Gustave Courbet, 1866

The pop singer Prince was an early influence of mine; one might even say that he was, if not a *salvation*, at least a *release* from my Southern Baptist fundamentalist home. Prince's struggle to unfetter *agape* through the strains of *eros* was a struggle a young pubescent Christian boy could relate to. Many hours were spent trying to resolve, intellectually and physically, seemingly contradictory songs like "The Cross" and "Darling Nikki." Nikki, as portrayed by Prince, is pornographic flesh *en route* to the divine—in his lyric, she is caught "masturbating with a magazine." Pornography, like the Christian icon, has obligatory formal properties that are drawn out only so far as to achieve their affect in the mind/body of the viewer, nothing more or less, no embellishments beyond divine necessity. In both, phenomena are only a conduit to noumena, and it is for the *affect* that the icon exists, otherwise it is nothing more than meaningless material. Indeed, the cross is a display for Nikki's nasty materiality, and in Prince's songs he repeatedly depicts *agape* as attainable through the flesh—backward masked at the end of "Darling Nikki" is "The lord is coming soon, coming, coming soon": the orgasmic dissolving of opposites in the dialectic of "gbiorly," boy inside girl, a common (and biologically convenient) celebration of pleasure toward genetic reproduction. But having had prolonged contact with people who "believe," actually and with commitment, in ways that mark them as other and condition their behavior and life choices, the fleeting pleasures of the flesh never seemed to quite measure up to the demands of eternal *agape*. Besides, being Protestant, ours was the cross of the risen Christ, so there was never any body on it. For us the body was disappeared, made spirit, it had escaped from phenomenon; therefore, one focused on belief in the spirit over and against the body, resulting in many (unfortunate) prohibitions. Yet, over the years, I have concluded, there is much to be learned from Baptist fundamentalists, in that, at their best, fundamentalists do not locate "the pursuit of happiness" in phenomena, rather, they locate it in duty and commitment to noumena. They actively sacrifice phenomena, and its temporal pleasures, to noumena; in the process generating (sometimes perverse) noumenal pleasures that contradict all reason and locate happiness in places that, to all appearance, seem equivalent with despair.

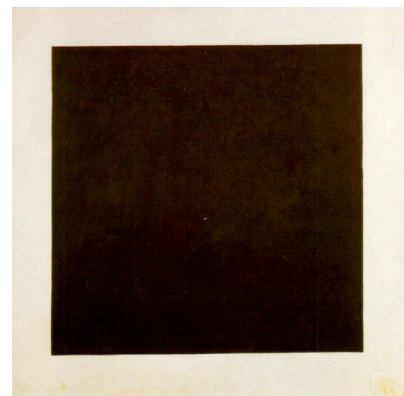
The movie *Hunger*, by the artist Steve McQueen, should be instructional in this regard. *Hunger* is a film about the struggle in Northern Ireland between the Catholics and

Protestants, a political film that is embedded in theological valuation. The film follows several prisoners, who are behind bars for political crimes, and their guards. It graphically depicts the appalling conditions of their incarceration, and how, given the choice for gentler accommodations, the prisoners choose the horrendous, even going beyond the degradations imposed by the prison to degrade their situation further to spite, resist, and confuse, beyond all reason, their captors. Yet, their seeming madness is a higher form of reason, in that it goes through and beyond the (mortal) body and its vicissitudes to a more powerful (immortal) spirit that cannot be touched, incarcerated or destroyed. The film's ultimate focus is on Bobby Sands, whose hunger strike to the death in 1981 has since become legendary. It has become so, not only because of his politics, but because Sands succeeds in showing, in the most graphic way possible, that happiness is more than having a good time; rather, that it is living, until the death, in line with a defining belief.

IV.

If you believe it until you die it was true.

—David Dixon



Black Square
oil on canvas
Kazimir Malevich, 1915

The space behind today's Wailing Wall, whether empty or filled with God's invisible presence, amounts to the same thing, an icon of separation. This separation pushes the modern subject back into herself, creating the internal solipsistic space that Abraham Maslow describes so well in the above quotation. Similarly, on the road to Damascus, Paul has his own highly personal visionary experience, one that causes him to reverse his life course and follow the teachings of Christ. Paul never met Jesus the person, his mission is solely validated by his transformative vision. Paul (formerly Saul) is transformed by his vision and is remade in the image of Christ (the godhead). Paul is the same physical man as Saul, but he is now infiltrated with a transformative spirit. The spirit fills the man, is one and the same as the man, and cannot be separated from the man. (This filling up of the body with spirit is a result of God being released from His containing secret room, the Holy of Holies, and becoming one and the same with phenomena.) Therefore, the only proof of the presence of spirit is in the life lived through the spirit, and if the validating proof of the transformation of spirit is evident only in the life lived, the meaning of the life transformed can only be assessed once the life lived has ceased. It follows, then, that one cannot fully enter the truth of one's own life because it is only determined in retrospect. In this sense the truth of one's life only exists as a remembered event read by others as a fiction. The life of Jesus can certainly

be understood in this regard: he is a fiction read and experienced by his believers in the present. (Properly speaking, when discussing a novel or film, characters should be referred to in the present; one does not say Jay Gatsby *loved* Daisy Buchanan, one says Jay Gatsby *loves* Daisy Buchanan.) Jesus is then eternally present, his fiction built on the destroyed, entropic, and disseminated temple's empty Holy of Holies. Following in this tradition, truth is a fiction that is not quixotic; rather, it is a fiction that we enter into the presence of in the present (like the Rabbis of old) by ritually, cyclically and reciprocally *reinventing the wheel* of hope: Belief in belief is belief enough.

- October 2009