

I feel exposed by painting. I am not alone in this. The more one looks at paintings, learns about paintings, the more one realizes the extreme inadequacies of one's own studio practice. Dirty, sad secrets, and piles of misunderstandings accrue on unyielding rectangles. Marks are made, and once made, reveal weakness, ineptitude, mediocrity. Continuing to paint, once the act of painting has become a betrayal, is ethical behavior. It takes courage, humility and perseverance.

How can I account for this belief against the vast historical canvasses of Dana Schutz, or Saatchi's ongoing three-ring exhibition, "The Triumph of Painting," or the late, decadent drip paintings of Cy Twombly? I can begin by expressing some doubts about painting's potential. I do not think the stature of Michelangelo is possible today. We will not touch a great and powerful god through painting. Neither do I think the momentous neo-classicism of David could have an impact. Gericault as well, is bygone. The frontal representation of important social issues is performed with digital cameras and video documentation now. Depictions of triumph and vastness are clearly outmoded, and clinging to the old tropes is naïve. The largest landscape in the world is now the internet, and many humans face that gross abyss every day for as many as eight hours. Nietzsche wrote, in *Beyond Good and Evil*,

"Anyone who fights with monsters should make sure that he does not in the process become a monster himself. And when you look for a long time into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you."

The word *abyss* comes from the Greek *abussos*, or bottomless. Often referring to Hell or chaos, keeping the word at its literal meaning seems most useful for thinking about Nietzsche the philologist. Even in a literal sense, when we look into something, it is the bottom of that something that we are seeing. We look past its surface, to its bottom, or sometimes, with liquids, we look through the surface to the bottom. The ocean is very deep, in the depths, it is dark, and when we look into it we cannot see the bottom, but we know it is there. When we encounter the ocean we tend to stay at the edges, on the surface, or a few feet below. If we decide to go deeper, we carry heavy breathing apparatuses, and we seek the bottom.

A mirror is a sheet of glass with silver on the back. It is this silver, or *bottom*, that produces a reflection; that allows us to see ourselves, and by extension, to begin to know ourselves: Plato's dictum. "I'll Be Your Mirror" is a song by the Velvet Underground, relating the intersubjective experience we provide for one another when we listen, respond, laugh at another's jokes, kiss, mock and even torture one another. We understand ourselves first through our mother-mirror, and we provide these mirrors for others throughout our lives. There is also the awareness of looking at another human being and not seeing a mirror. This might be referred to as an encounter. The person seen

is experienced as an Other. But it is the bottom of this person, the intractability, the Other's ability to literally arrest our gaze, that creates a different exposure to self-knowledge.

But bottomlessness produces no reflection. We cannot see ourselves in bottomlessness. We cannot even properly see *into* bottomlessness, since it is the bottom that defines the vessel in some ways. By "the abyss also looks into you" Nietzsche is describing a situation where I am blind. I cannot see, and perhaps more importantly, I cannot see myself, and I am being seen. *Something* is watching me. This is either sacred experience or abject terror. Is this the experience of being on the internet? How does this experience differ from the one of painting I described at the beginning of this essay? The feeling of being exposed, possibly in an unflattering light, is shared by both, but in painting one is also provided with a mirror, which can generate growth.

*"With all the passion at my disposal I am trying to put aside certain paths and possibilities (e.g. career, success, a bourgeois existence etc) completely and forever... whenever the suspicious 'harmony' of my nature breaks through, I smell a rat and instinctively try to commit some foolish act, an error, an offense, to bring myself down again in my own eyes. I cannot let certain talents and abilities appear, my higher conscience and my understanding forbid it."*

*"'Know thyself.' as if it were so simple! As if only good will and introspection were needed. An individual can compare himself, see himself, and correct himself wherever an eternal ideal is firmly anchored in closely knit forms of education and culture, of literature and politics. But what if all norms are shaky and in a state of confusion? What if illusions dominate not only the present but also all generations? ...if all the reliable possessions of the past are all profaned, desecrated, and defaced? What if all the voices in the symphony are at variance with each other? Who will know himself then? Who will find himself then?" - Hugo Ball, 1915*

The need for instantaneous response dissolves the trust that the future will come to pass. The objective time of Modernity gradually gives way to a set of personalized, subjective times which are self-generated and involve people constantly recreating biographical narratives for them to make sense out their time and lives.