

DANIELE DEL GIUDICE

Shipwreck with Painting

Translated from Italian by Anne Milano Appel

COULD I HAVE KNOWN it was a painting? And even if I had known it, that moment was certainly no time for reflection. It was floating, that's all, bobbing along like all the other bits of wreckage, including a wicker basket and a hatbox, and what a hatbox veiled in wisps of fog was doing skimming along the flat waters of that leaden sea was no more surprising than what a painting might be doing there, except that the hatbox would not have supported me and the painting would; so long and narrow as it was, it might just hold me. I grabbed it and it sank a little, then I rolled onto it and, though slightly submerged, it kept me afloat. I didn't know it was a painting, nor could I have cared less just then, all I knew was that there was nothing left around me: no ship, no friends, and no night anymore either.

The sky gradually grew light, even the fog cleared, and low, imposing clouds scudded by. The icy water was numbing my back, I turned over, my cheek touching the white, porous, translucent surface on which I was lying. My eye was so close to the fabric that I could follow its rough contours, craters and reliefs and deep channels that the sea, each time it swelled, filled with droplets that slid into my eye, tears coming in. I lay that way I don't know how much longer, at least enough time to regain my strength, then I pushed myself up, tensing my arms, the way you sometimes raise yourself up over a lover to see every part of her. There was no doubt about it; it actually was a painting. But not white, not entirely white as I had thought; emerging from beneath the white were brown and orange streaks and yellowish patches like moss. How long had I been in the water? Had the painting rusted? Perhaps those colors weren't coming to the surface, but were instead the depths of the painting, its past, having aged, white-haired, into white. It was an apparent white, a terminal white; concealed in its depths, as in the depths of the sea that kept me on its surface, was a fact, a fact of color, progressively faded by a white film of glaze. But what fact? And why on earth, in such a precarious situation with everything else to think about, was I so interested

in that white, which was not white after all? I had a vague feeling that if I were able to decipher the story of that white I would also know who I was and why I was there. Since as important as the painting was, indeed the only means of survival available to me, I still had to figure out what I was doing there in the sea, atop a painting, and more importantly how I would come out of it alive.

Looking at the horizon of that glowering sea filled me with horror. I started from the beginning again: the veil of glaze was not actually coating what lay beneath it, there was no mystery, either veiled or unveiled, rather that white was a result, it was the terminus for a voyage of colors, recounting a journey full of scoriae and pigments during which the colors, as they progressed, blended with one another, until finally becoming white. So there were no depths and no surface either, no before and after, better yet they were one and the same thing, perfectly coexistent in their story. In the end light too is made that way, resulting from the superimposition of different colored waves that the eye does not separate, but homogeneously perceives as white, a warm white of blended colors. What light, what waves? The light and waves around me were a uniform grayness, leaden and ominous, better not to look, better to hold onto the painting, which was holding me. I turned onto my back; among the clouds in the sky there was one clearly outlined with a smokestack and decks and bow, maybe that was my ship, but how had it ended up way up there, and why was it continuing on without me, sailing through the sky, amid the heavy traffic of gray cloud-ships, battle clouds? I closed my eyes, I thought of the white, under my back, that I could feel was muddied with brine and the dampness of my clothes, white had always represented the fundamental principle of light in the presence of darkness, since antiquity, yet light does not exist but for fire, as a consequence of fire, and based on that fact ancient symbolism recognized only two primary colors, white and red, from which the others sprang, red was divine love, white divine wisdom, the divinity was therefore also color, and from those two colors, white and red, creation emanated, and by combining with each other, secondary colors emanated; still, white was the divine unity, and in addition white was knowledge, hence knowledge was also color, in many languages white and knowledge had the same root, I myself said *Weiss* for white and *Wissen* for knowledge (but how come I knew German?), and besides that white had been for many the vestments of death, not death as an end, death as transformation, passage to another state, and I too would surely pass on, oh how quickly I would

pass on if I didn't do something right away!

I sat up with a jolt: how did I know these things about light? Was I perhaps an electrician? No, I was not an electrician, and besides I knew more about white than about light, but how come I knew all those things about white? I got up on my hands and knees, causing the painting to lurch sideways, nearly tipping me into the water; I clung to its edges and it was as if I were clinging to myself, that thing came from me, it was part of me, and suddenly I recognized it, I knew about white because that white was mine, with all its intents and obsessions, I myself had conceived that white and painted it, I was someone who conceived and produced colors the way certain animals secrete viscous filaments of saliva, that painting was mine and I was the painter. I was a painter lost in tenebrous waters sitting astride one of his paintings.

Then I remembered other waters, a city of water where I'd grown up, water with houses, mine among them, that was where I lived and worked, yet was it possible that I had been shipwrecked on the way home from the studio, shipwrecked in a canal in Venice? Or that someone had pulled the plug – surely Venice had a plug – and I and the paintings and the entire city had been sucked into the vortex, swallowed down the drain and flushed into the sea? Could be. No, I wasn't close to home, I had actually left home, it was all terribly true, I remembered the ship and the voyage I'd embarked on, I was on my way to an exhibition in South America, I had loaded the paintings in the hold, I remembered that night and my friends and a loud boom, that's why I was there. I tried to get to my feet, with my knees bent and one hand trailing in the water to keep from falling, not quite as elegant as a surfer inside the belly of a wave; a short distance away, between a crate of empty bottles and a chandelier, I saw my other paintings floating, they were somewhat smaller and had not been damaged in the wreck, they were moving in the same direction I was, carried along by the current, I was on the largest one, I was standing on the flagship of my fleet of paintings, my eyes searching for the horizon.

After all, it was only a matter of making it to Buenos Aires.