

Everett's Eidolon: The Story of an Eye

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“Poetry leads to the same place as all forms of eroticism—to the blending and fusion of separate objects. It leads us to eternity, it leads us to death, and through death to continuity. Poetry is eternity; the sun matched with the sea.”¹

Georges Bataille

The Orb and the Web

An eidolon is an image, a phantasm, a ghostly remnant. It is what remains of the seen minus the seeing. It is what is seen that is not there. It streams impressions through time and time through impressions. It is also the Greek root of the word “ideal.”

The word, “Poetry” comes from the Greek “to make.” To make an eidolon, ideally. To speak of a seeing once seen, to pass through, for a fleeting moment, the vanishing point, whose point is to dissipate in place of its after-image, words and sounds evoking, the poem leaves a phantasm, a ghostly remnant. Words. An image eidolon, not of an image but of the glance, of the looking. The image of seeing is never the seen, but is instead the being seen: a gaze, itself an eidolon, the ghostly remainder of a seeing oneself see.

A poem, Percival Everett's “Of Seeing,” describes itself as a seeing seeing². “The vanishing point is never the same/for me ever, my never occupying the/ same point in space, only, maybe the same/ point in time. But words give me that.” The words, too, sliding through points in space, meeting again in the eidolon of the eidolon.

“Of Seeing” offers the eidolon of a seeing seeing itself seeing; it enacts seeing's orb-like self-enwrapped shape: “... le regard, le regard,/ a cruel dialectic, a benign reciprocity,” it says. Seeing's self-reflexivity as well as its “cruel” dialectical trade is a turning loose from any mooring; it whirls an orb orbiting: “Reports of what was seen/ mean little or nothing without what was seen,/ there being no standard for veracity without what was seen,/only appeals to words representing the act.” The poem as a vanishing seeing of what was seen now vanished, displaced into the eidolon image, made of signifiers that themselves only stand in the place of, re-presenting not the seen, but the seeing itself. Like the after-image of the sun in the eye, the seen can never be caught.

The sun is an orb whose seeing sees itself being seen long after. The sun, the orb whose vanishing point in that other orb, the eye, plays with time and space, catalyzes an entrainment of energy and molecules that mark it not as a re-presentation, but as the impress of its being seen. The solar after-image is the eidolon of the eidolon—the ideal

¹ Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, 25.

² *Swimming Swimmers Swimming*, 23

image, the persistent phantasm of a chemical reaction. There is neither orb nor sun in Everett's "Of Seeing." The poem enacts the paradox of the image by re-presenting the image of the seeing of the image that, once seen, can never be seen again, except as the memory of a seeing. "Of Seeing" is about words and time and the impossibility of the former ever returning to the latter except as an idyllic criss-cross, the web by which some shards of the seeing of seeing are trapped.

Many of Everett's paintings feature orbs: full orbs on the hot end of the spectrum, red, yellow, ochre. Partial orbs, escaping off the canvas, flirting, testing a hot toe in the water. There are orbs suggestively situated as eyes or like eyes or eyeing. Or not. Orbs in the making, bulbous orbs that gleam, orbs stretching into torsos, orbs etched from the future to the past. The palette is primarily hot, as the Hudson River school would say. Even the shadows are hot browns or black. The grounds are ochres, yellow greens, Indian yellows, cadmiums. The paintings with blue are a cruel dialectic. The orbs are decentered, off the side of center, evading any fovic alignment. They catch the side of the eye first. Like Dupin's astral bodies in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," the paintings are to be "view[ed]... in a side-long way," not by our "turning toward it the exterior portions of the retina (more susceptible of feeble impressions of light than the interior)," but by their offering us initially something to the side³. A seen, the paintings retain their orbic luster to the extent to which we hold to the fovic center; they retain a "luster which grows dim just in proportion as we turn our vision fully upon" them.

These are the paintings in *There Are No Names for Red*, a collection of poetry by Chris Abani with paintings by Percival Everett⁴. The poems reflect the paintings to the extent to which rippling water shines light aslant, pocked and dappled. The paintings reflect the poems to the extent to which words may leave an after-image that fades from a tone to its complement. The echoes are chora, sound waves through light.

The echo, choral. A story from Jacques Lacan. Sort of. "Fovea" a poem from Everett's *Swimming Swimmers* *Swimming* enacts in itself the title of the collection. Partly.

A true story
of course a true story
young
intellectual
desperate.
Involves a small boat,
a few people, a small port, a frail craft, risk
of course risk,
distancing,
nets,
waves,
a dead gull
floating, tangled.
See him? See him?
He said.
Well, he doesn't

³ Edgar Allen Poe, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," **

⁴ Chris Abani and Percival Everett, *There Are No Names for Red: Poetry and Paintings*.

see you,
 he said,
 he doesn't see you.⁵

Everett's poem "Fovea" is a seeing of the seer seeing the swimming seen/seer, the seen transformed from Lacan's sardine can to a "dead gull," but it makes no difference, this thing to the side, this thing beyond the fovea. "See him? See him?" the poem recounts the young, desperate intellectual saying. "See him? ... well, he doesn't / see you" / he said, / he doesn't see you." What is seen, the swimmer dead/live to consciousness, may not look back but often what is not seen seeing is looking anyway. The swimmer that does not look back enacts the odd appearance of something like Object Oriented Ontology. What is looking anyway offers Lacan's notion of the gaze, the sense of being seen⁶. In repeating "he doesn't see you," the poem produces a sense of the gaze as that which, in neither looking nor seeing sees anyway, not as the object, but as the imaginary point that might emanate, momentarily, a sense of being seen. This seen-ness comes from the side, from the dead floating in the waves, or from an empty can. The moment the young intellectual spots it—the moment the fovea focuses, the side-site (sight) no longer operates. The gaze, being no where, comes from no spot, no point of irradiation, can no longer be the gaze when spotted, even though it can never be spotted, such spottings as mistakenly occur radiate the uncanny before we recognize their familiarity. The fovea, the pit in the retina that consists only of cones, is the point of clearest vision. It is also the scotoma: the blind spot from which one cannot see that one is the blind spot of the dead gull. The fovea has a lower sensitivity to blue light.

Paintings are the Stains of the Seen; We Are the Stains of the Painting

The light that strikes the fovea delivers the impression of seeing, but the orb works best from the periphery. Peripheral vision, as Dupin suggests, sees better in low light than the fovea. The peripheral also more quickly discerns patterns, backgrounds, and operates as the field for gestaltic apperception. The seen, however, is not this programmatically simple. Why does one shape, one color appear to be in front of another instead of edging into its field? Why are the orbs orbs and the background background? How does the seen fool the optic? If paintings inevitably, by their very being, swallow the viewer, where is the hearer of the poem?

⁵ *Swimming Swimmers Swimming*, p. 29.

⁶ See, for example, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, particularly chapters 6-9.



The orb, descending, pushes/is followed by red plantains, boomerangs, orbs elongated by an illusion of speed in that orange-hot, yellow-hot plain of light⁷. Red, in the foreground, is the hottest color, but the hottest point is the top right corner, a hinted orb barely outlined, barely crossed with cadmium orange or Indian yellow over cadmium yellow light or nickel yellow barely scratched over white. The orbs in the painting are kinetic, move, tumble like any number of imaginary objects with their edges etched: bacteria, fruit, sea creatures, amphipods, dancing after-images, following other such orbs whose traces remain in the bottom left corner, or poised emergent in the top right. The gestalt is movement and heat. The center of the painting--its fovea--is a dark point, a scotoma of absence that figures as a figure only in its contrast to the rest. It is a concentrated edge as the red orbs, too, are edged in darkness. Hints of this darkness peer in the orb in the upper right, shade the orbs into tricky roundness. This is the scene of a seen. But it is too bright to be an after-image.

The painting inscribes the viewer in the illusion of an emanating vanishing in the interplay between the scotomic black point and the layered squares hovering peripherally just above and to the right. Focus on the dark spot and the squares dance, the upper right orb glows. A focal point, they say, or the point from which the viewer emerges as its own stain of seeing. The stain, as the remainder of a seeing, is, as Lacan suggests, "the dimension by which the subject is to be inserted into the picture" (99). The subject as illusory point is camouflaged as the dark spot that produces the sense of a center point--the point from which we imagine viewers see and from which the painting "sees" its viewers, the point of centering traditional to images inscribed in a renaissance perspective. But, too, this point is a blind spot, the place which does not see that the viewers also do not see the point of their own inscription, not as subjects but as subject to. The scotoma represents the nothing to see that is the subject in so far as the subject sees nothing of itself in the painting that offers itself to view, even if its being seen is the effect of this scotomic dark spot, this Barthesian "punctum."⁸ What if, for example, the painting has no perspective--is flat, its sense of movement produced not by the illusions of speed or gravity or the tricks of depth, or even the design of objects laid on a canvas, but by means of dynamic simultaneity, all colors, lines flat in relation to one another, depthless, glowing or darkening in the play of wavelengths, in the entrainments of light waves striking rods and cones that send messages through the optic nerve? The dark point stain, then, the illusion by which the subject imagines its inscription as a part mimicking the seeing of the whole, is a defense against the possibility that the painting does not see the subject at all. You may see it, but it does not see you.

At the same time, however, the picture does look back in the guise of the gaze--in the sense the viewer has of being seen by the painted scene (seen). Just as⁸ the picture is there, the viewer senses a being seen by it, just as the intellectually curious boater, in seeing the dead gull swimmer, senses a being-seen-ness. This is not some manifestation of optical reciprocity, but the failure of an imaginary--the imaginary of not being apprehended at all, of not being recognized as a subject who sees. After all, we assume, as Lacan suggests,

⁷ From *There Are No Names For Red*, p. 31.

⁸ See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 26-27.

“that the painter gives something to the person who must stand in front of his painting which, in part, at least, of the painting, might be summed up thus—You want to see? Well, take a look at this! He gives something for the eye to feed on, but he invites the person to whom this picture is presented to lay down his gaze there as one lays down one’s weapons” (101). But what does it mean to “lay down a gaze”? Is this gaze merely the subject’s look at a painting, or is it something more akin to the reciprocal whirl enlisted by the gaze as a sense of being seen? How does a subject lay down a sense of being seen? Subjects relinquish this sense of being seen—the gaze—in exchange for the sense of seeing themselves seeing themselves—the self-enwrapped orb of imaginary self-regard. Just as the dark spot pulls the eye, inscribing the viewer as already seeing both painting and itself inscribed in the painting, so the whirl short circuits the gaze—the sense of being seen—by supplanting the unlocatable with a blind spot stain that inscribes the viewer in the picture as already a part. If the painting invites a looking, what the viewer sees is the viewer looking at himself looking.

Back Through “Indian Yellow”



Indian Yellow⁹

Indian Yellow is actually closer to what a non-painter would call “orange.” A translucent oil, Indian yellow does not obscure the surface; if painted over another pigment, the other pigment will show through. To show through is less a species of penetration or the lack thereof than a process producing a sense of depth, even in a unidimensional layer. Layering one pigment, one shape, on top of another on a flat plane offers an arrangement, a multi-scalar webbing by which shapes and lines appear to recede or come forward. The

⁹ This is simply a sample of the pigment on canvas.

interplay of intimate pigments, stroke, and cuts, or darks and lights, is the trompe-l'oeil travesty of progress through time—of a then and then a then¹⁰.



Dark lines cross-hatch Indian yellows, yellow lights, ochres. The micro scale on a macro-scale, the webbing seems to make the background recede, makes the background a background in the first place. But the overlap is not so definitive as the dark value and thick lines might suggest. The yellow just left of center overlaps the black line ever so slightly. The black line is itself etched over by another, smaller criss-crossing, the definitive

¹⁰ Painting, Percival Everett, *There Are No Names For Red*, p. 12.

appearance of a ghostly inscription. Eidolon. The traces of an undoing. The trompe-l'oeil is that there is a trompe l'oeil at all, the sense of receding—and hence of temporality—undone by overlaps and etchings, webbings that instead of producing a sense of depth and retirement bring it out. Indian yellow occupies the focal point subtending, overlaying the crossing point, not as its ground, but as the translucence that in making the trompe-l'oeil, also destroys it.

“At stake here,” reminds the voice of Everett’s poem “Indian Yellow,” “something other than a quest / repetition and reflexivity / a breakdown in meditation / affirmation discourse / a narrow logical sense/ grounds reasons / conditions of possibility / neither beginning / nor a beginning / yes a nonspecular relation affirmed self-mirrored.”¹¹ Webbed, the Indian yellow focal point, already crossed, unaffirms the “affirmed self-mirrored” in so far as the painting’s trompe-l'oeil of depth, crossing the Indian yellow field yet specked by it, itself etched back to the Indian yellow, circles, “neither beginning / nor a beginning.” In what, then, does the viewer see itself viewing, in what point does it see itself being inscribed seeing itself other than as an interloper in an interrupted field that nonetheless offers the same point of non-point in its inveiglings? The joy of trompe-l'oeil, as Lacan suggests (and how he got back in here, well ...) is not in the being fooled—not in the apprehension of this central crossing as any real depth—but in seeing the mechanisms of the fooling itself. In hatching its hatchings, in its overlappeds’ overlappings, Indian yellow looks through, is seen through, the illusion of an interruption that makes Indian yellow visible as such in the first place. Its trompe-l'oeil is a trompe-l'oeil of a trompe-l'oeil manqué. “The selfsame is a walk through nonidentity / a walk through non-reflexive and expansive release”

The poem “Indian Yellow” ends with three lines: “The child is laid out. / So many ways to save the baby. / So many ways.”¹²

¹¹ In *Swimming Swimmers Swimming*, p. 34.

¹² Painting by Percival Everett, *There Are No Names for Red*, p. 14.



The semi-translucent orb covers the ambitious linings, the fovea/vanishing point itself in the process of being vanished, laid out. This painting is red, hints of enchainement lining the left side, holes revealing orbs in relief, passive oration, making orbs out of nothing. Laid out. The linings underlined by the emphases of orbitings, perceptible cacophony, rioting so many ways. The striations only emphasize the wash.

The striations appear to signify, to mean. Inscribed in hatches, the black jots manuscripted: “cover what can / be covered /setting the stage / in stages / staged by some / stagy stage / ridden from / ridden through / riddled through / and through / and thoroughly ...” The words, from Everett’s poem, “Averages,” refer to words, “mean words,”

but like the striations in the painting, they riddle through “in so many ways.”¹³ The lines—the webbing, hatchings, criss-crossings, etched circlings—mark on and bring out the colors that produce the eye in the text. The eye, which is not there, is produced by the sense of a marking that leaves in its erasing wake the eye by which it was marked. “The child is laid out.”

If the eye in the painting is the self-enwrapped orb that sees itself addressed under the guise of seeing itself being seen seeing itself, then where is the eye in the text¹⁴? The eye emerges when the web meets the orb. We only see its illusion when the orb has been crossed. Partial, an illusion of light accents, the eye is the orb that glints in the darkness. Uncanny, the eye peers as a *trompe-l'oeil* staring behind within through the painting with blue: “... le regard, le regard,/ a cruel dialectic.” White dot on black in a field of red webbed by blue-black lines edged in blue white, the glint shifts the foveic center. Instead of a black that disappears into an unknown interior, the focal point is now a tiny spot of white below center, weighed down by a tangle of lines topped by yellow. Its field Indian yellow perhaps or a cadmium red light, the glint is a hot cruelty, animal or human, it makes no difference. Its vanishing point stares back at the viewer, vanishing. Blue is the coldest color.

¹³ From *Swimming Swimmers Swimming*, p. 22.

¹⁴ Painting from *There Are No Names for Red*, p. 28.



The eye is the text, words, pigments, lines. The orbic avatar is an optic ground, the habitation staining the camouflage. The thing about the eye is that there is no "I," no place from which to see or be seen, or as always, both together. The eye is removed; we chase, craving its regard, plying it to ease the weight of the gaze by which we are seen not seeing. And this is language: the tracking after the impression – the eidolon – that has gone. Its

revocation evokes something else yet again. “The vanishing point is never the same for me ever, my never occupying the same point in space, only the same point in time. But words give me that.”

And the painting? More than image, the painting is a once-wetness, a temporal consideration.

The Last Canvas¹⁵
 If and when
 The paint remains wet
 Longer than the notion remains
 Stretched like the canvas and
 Fresh, I will put down my knife.
 Working wet scares the spiders,
 Leans tree into shadow,
 Folds fair winds into troubled
 Seas full of greens and blues
 And the reds that are there
 But unseen like the yellows.
 The knife still glistens
 With the Indian yellow, translucent
 And rich gold light, under
 The layers on layers on
 Layers of bad dreams
 And good dreams, bad
 Intentions and found peace,
 A little sleep and a nightmare
 Here and there.
 How many eyes we
 Meet squinting above moving
 Lips, shifting alliances, odd
 Motives, but the eyes are enough,
 Aren't they?
 Aren't they?

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¹⁵ From *Swimming Swimmers Swimming*, p. 52.

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