

Frances Stark

A Craft too Small

“Alas, this black sorrowful sea below me.” -- Zarathustra

I remember very distinctly at the age of 14, a friend, who was verging on adulthood announced to me that she was suicidal. I simply could not grasp the notion of ceasing to exist. I asked if maybe instead of killing herself she could just drastically change her identity and begin a different life -- just say to yourself I'm no longer me, I'll "kill" me and just start living in some different way. It seemed to me very plausible and logical. Based on my optimistic and/or pragmatist approach to her suicidal urge, I never could have foreseen my own melancholic tendency toward listlessness, but I do have one.

So what do I do when I'm listless? I kind of am now, and what if I said I'm too sad to tell you? OK, that's a little forced, however, ask anyone who knows me and they will tell you I tend to get depressed, and bogged down and sometimes even cry when my work is undone. That is when I start to think about following my old advice and start considering abandoning my identity. That would entail forgetting my past and all my handy anecdotes that reside there. More importantly in order to abandon my identity I would have to quit being an artist, quit doing art.

I'd have to quit my job -- and my job is my life.

One hundred years ago, my favorite artist, author Robert Musil, wrote this in a letter to a friend: “Art, for me is only a means of reaching a higher level of the self.”

One day ago, a friend of mine wrote, in a letter to me: “I think I am addicted to my identity as an artist which is probably detrimental to the idea of art making itself, I think you realize this.” I wrote back: “When I think about eradicating the identity, short of killing oneself --incidentally or on purpose-- the artist-ego always elbows in, making it all seem like a staged burning of the paintings, only to be followed by an exhibition of their ashes.” And Zarathustra spoke thus: “I love him who makes his virtue his addiction and his catastrophe: for his virtue's sake he wants to live on and live no longer.”

Years ago when I was moving out of town to go to art school, it came time to clean house and unload a bunch of junk. I started putting labels on my things that I wanted to give away so that I could then leave it all behind somewhere and anyone who would come across it would have annotated junk, certainly better than just plain junk. The downfall of that ridiculous tactic was that I got slightly attached to my own commentary and wound up in a quandary as to whether or not what I was doing was art; if it was, shouldn't I be making some kind of record of it. If my memory serves me, I wound up holding onto at least one box of expired keepsakes because my efforts at relieving myself of my past had backfired. You see even now I am knee deep in my past so of course there's another

old story that's coming into my mind and I just have to tell it because it's very similar, but better. My life was overflowing with clothes, all hand-me-downs and thrift store items. Just to clear a path in the apartment, I filled a huge garbage bag full of clothing. I left the bag out on the street. A week or so later I walked into the subway station and there sat an insane person wearing all my clothes.

I never actually read In Search of the Miraculous but I once had a copy, but gave it away around the time of the keepsake-labeling episode. It is an unwieldy book of cosmological principles and detailed diagrams of energy transactions within individual human organisms. It was written by a pupil of the spiritual teacher G. I. Gurdjieff, P. D. Ouspensky. Recently my mother lent me another Ouspensky book, The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution, a series of lectures. In the introduction he states he was motivated to give lectures because people would always ask him what he was working on and he found it too difficult to consolidate the information; only a lengthy series of lectures could begin to do the job of explaining his work. I like the generosity in this, probably because I always find it particularly impossible to give an answer when people ask me "what is your work like?" upon my recklessly having revealed to them that I'm an artist. I feel like my non-answer is often misinterpreted as "I'm too deep to tell you," but usually I'm just thinking that a description of what I do is going to make what I do sound really un-worth doing. As for Ouspensky's lectures, I don't like them, I think the substance must have been in the delivery. On paper they are a passionless and detail-free complaint of man asleep, followed by numerous divisions and portioning of man into numerated levels. One thing's for sure, if you go in search of the miraculous, or attempt to evolve, you are committing yourself to The Work. Work, for Gurdjieff and his followers, meant self-work, a profoundly more rigorous commitment than self-help. While worrying whether something sounds as if it weren't worth doing, as I mentioned above, I must also hold inside me the belief that not only is it worth doing, but the knowledge that it's also worth at least a thousand dollars to someone else who thinks so too. This hidden agreement-to-believe is even more difficult to explain to people than the "actual" art, but it might just be the thing that convinces me I'm doing self-work and not self-help. This is how you snap out of listlessness. My first college philosophy professor, the one who taught me about Plato's cave, summarizes Gurdjieff's notion of identification: "Man identifies – that is, squanders his conscious energy, with every passing thought... This state of affairs takes the form of a continuous self-deception and a continuous procession of egoistic emotions, sentimentality, and fear which are of such a pervasively painful nature that man is constantly driven to ameliorate this condition through the endless pursuit of social recognition, sensory pleasure, or the vague and unrealizable goal of 'happiness'."

Sometimes I wish I had a job that wasn't all about me. Sometimes I hate myself and so I hate this life of thinking constantly of the style of my thinking and always wishing I had better captured my thinking so that my thinking could then capture someone else besides myself. In the letter of Musil I quoted above, he talks a great deal of idleness; he writes down a quote and paces the room until the sun sets, or reads a line from a

book and lies around smoking cigarettes, quietly forgetting his ideas because he doesn't write them down. "Thus I often lay on my divan and slave away at this kind of self-annihilation."

I am like Musil, except I don't smoke and I never wrote a 1700 pages book of scintillating genius, but I do lie around doing nothing, self-annihilating, for not turning all my nothing into something. I might even say I identify with Zarathustra too, and don't you? Identify constantly, that is. It's a funny story how Zarathustra entered this particular picture at all. I had this title "a craft too small" floating around in my head, and then I started reading about evolution, and it stuck. I came across an article by Julian Huxley titled "What is an Individual?" It opens with Nietzsche's Zarathustra proclaiming "Accidents cannot happen to me," a statement Huxley takes to task for its assertion of the perfection of the individual. Huxley assures the reader that in nature it is quite difficult to define the boundaries of the individual, and even points out that the U.S. Supreme Court recognizes social organizations --corporations-- as individuals. I only had to flip a few pages in the same book to learn that contemporary microbiologists are theorizing that cells themselves are the product of more than one entity working together in symbiosis. A thing that couldn't move got together with a thing that could and that is all I can tell you, in layman's terms, about what I read under the heading "Whence Come the Tails of Sperm?" Then I went straight back to Zarathustra to find the context of the quote. Instinctively, I looked for it in the chapter called "The Wanderer," and there it was. Why can't accidents happen to him? Because, he says, Nietzsche writes, "All that could now happen to me would be my own."

A friend who works as a translator in a courthouse told me about a hearing coming up and it caught my interest. I thought, why not take a break from my studio and take a fieldtrip out into the civic realm. I went to my local courthouse and watched some public proceedings. I expected to write about what I saw there in public, but I never did. It dawned on me that perhaps the public is enough of an unfathomable ocean for an artist like myself to try to disappear into more often.

Someone once told me "Frances, you tend to excuse, rather than express." It is a brutal criticism, yes, but also somewhat of a positive description of even my most articulated accomplishments. To utter, "I'm too sad to tell you" is to excuse oneself from not telling whatever it is one could tell if only one weren't so incapacitated by the emotion accompanying the temporarily untellable; to tell does so much more.

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