

Léo Bronstein. Kaballah and Art.

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...as ibn Latif, the Spanish poet-Kabbalist of the early thirteenth century saw it, [Kaballah is] will and thought joined together, in a poet's prayer, "like a kiss." [p. 52]

On rare occasions a visitor to a museum or gallery will report an unusual or unexpected experience. While standing before an object created at an earlier time in human history, the force or essence of the aura of that object appears to be becoming so intense that the thing itself seems to take on the quality of a being. In an earlier work Léo Bronstein wrote:

And what was given to me was that from things I could learn about beings themselves. So that not only could the life of a mountain, a road, a sky, a tree, a face, a window, a picture, or any other astonishing and always new thing of sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste become a guide for my understanding of the life of human beings...but also these things were revealed as living and working beings. [Bronstein 1953:ix-x]

...beyond or beneath any object emerging sudden and erotic I might seize a metaphysical certitude....A myth; the prophetic, primordial and childish beyond of things!... I learned from my childhood...how beings live beyond things and how things are made of beings. [ibid.:xi]

In the process of "surrender" to the art object, there is a profound empathy with the known or unknown human being who created the object. Through a visceral understanding of the creative process as seen in what Léo Bronstein called the "what of the how level," there is a new experience of identification with the human subject who created the work.

This same process can occur with the experience of history itself for those who read the books of Léo Bronstein. Since World War II, scholars as diverse as Hannah Arendt and Theodor W. Adorno have spoken of the increasing inaccessibility of history, the reduction of usable, graspable history to the realm of fragments. Bronstein helps us to regain these fragments, regasp access to history itself. In our time, the value and nature of the historical imagination are so rare. Historical imagination has become lost or nonexistent for so many. Léo Bronstein's work serves as a vehicle of tender reentry

to history; his writing, a pathway to a new set of doors into a living, visual history of ideas.

Kabbalah and Art is an achievement of Léo Bronstein's maturity. Earlier he had written:

Maturity is the discovery of childhood's prophecy. History is the discovery of prehistory's prophecy. Freedom or integrity of expression in maturity depends upon the degree of loyalty to this prophecy. [ibid.:ix]

Kabbalah and Art begins with Léo Bronstein's inviting the reader to recognize that our rare meetings with "an object of life and creation" are our meeting with friendship. Such an encounter is "the meeting with your spirituality" (p. 3). Bronstein evokes a continuum of friendship, prophecy, and spirituality. The first example of this continuum is "the Giaconda-like erect half-figure of St. John the Baptist...painted with magic intentions...by the sixteenth-century Ferrarese, Dosso Dossi." The meeting with this artist brings forth from Bronstein "Degas' convinced and obsessive motto: *Le Beau est un mystère*" (p. 5). Dosso Dossi's mystery is seen as music and the being of Woman *via* music.

In explicating the mystery of Dosso Dossi's paintings, Léo Bronstein acknowledges the problem of communication with words, the limitations and insufficiency of words, even poetry. Can there be a use of words that can plunge a reader directly "into the plenitude of touch-smell-taste-vision-sound-gesture-idea, *The Total Word?*" (p. 10). Here Léo Bronstein explores the Hindu and Kabbalist understanding of the affinity between the beginning of the word, of sound, and of the genesis of creation. This search for a sufficient mode of verbal communication brings him to a close scrutiny of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's discussion of the complex limitations of language is emphasized by Bertrand Russell, who writes:

...every language has a structure concerning which in the language, nothing can be said...but there may be another language dealing with the structure of the first language, and having itself a new structure, and...to this hierarchy of languages there may be no limit. [Wittgenstein 1922:23]

From Wittgenstein and Russell, Bronstein draws an understanding that there are hierarchies and plenitudes of languages with each inter-transferable. The languages emerging from the different senses are inter-transferable and inter-translatable among themselves and with the languages of the tongue. For Bronstein, mystery is the secret of a secret, and the nature of a hierarchy of languages helps him to understand the mystery of painting.

The secret of Dosso Dossi's painting is the word *music* "via" the word *Man* "via" the word *Woman*.

There is an inter-translatability of languages and forms of life through the visual imagination. Through a meditation on the limitations of words and language, Bronstein finds an unfolding of a new hope for the power of languages. This enables him to find the being in the thing, the nature of Woman in the creation of the Dosso Dossi paintings.

Through a review of Woman's multiple meanings in history — "giving and bearing of life...plenitude, continuity; the White Goddess, male's existential plenitude, Faustian descent into the Mother's abode, Goethe's Helen, Woman liberated..." — Léo Bronstein arrives at another understanding of Woman through Kabbalah — "the Metaphysical Woman — the Secret Woman: this most concealed word in the concealed Jewish language-game: the *Shekhinah*. To her is dedicated what follows, to the end" (p. 13).

In Chapter 2, "Shekhinah or the Road of Purity," Léo Bronstein takes the reader on a long walk through the song and space of Hindu and Buddhist myths. Describing the changing relationships between male and female, Bronstein develops his sociology of art, what he called "the history of ideas through the visual," in which human action in culture, human perception, and the making of forms are homologous. He writes:

...the way great human historical collectives or tiny human-creative-individuals com-pose their productive and distributive deeds, their exchanges and changes — their life — is the very way they com-pose their way of seeing, hearing, touching, creating things — their art? [pp. 15-26]

Through a brief, sparkling history of the art of India, Bronstein demonstrates the dialectic of his visual history of ideas concerning the Woman as "the multiple Oneness, plenitude, continuum, the Woman-*via*-Man, the Man-*via*-Woman." He sees the salvation of creation, portrayed in the art and myth of India, as a result of these powers of metamorphoses between man and woman (p. 26).

An image of a rose takes the reader through the geography of the author's many wanderings from India to Spain, to America's New England, to "unhappy Poland-Lithuania of the early nineteenth century" (p. 30). In a "purity or loyalty to the origins of man's never tarnished, never exhausted or made banal nostalgia of lost paradise!" (ibid.), the author is returned to the humble *Shtetle*, "the home of a Hassidic community leader, which was also a house of study, of prayer, and of assembly" (p. 107, footnote 5). Here Bronstein begins a penetrating inquiry into Kabbalah and its potential understanding of art. This journey can be characterized by the author's own earlier words:

...what is started is what belongs to the end...what is achieved is what is to be started. [Bronstein 1953:ix]

Through the words of the prophet Jeremiah, "God is in the things farther from him" (31:2), spoken by Rabbi Nachman of Bratislaw, the author brings us into the universe of the Hassidim. The joy of the Hassid was in following the Law through their everyday actions and through that which was seizable: the dance! "Serve the Lord with gladness; come before His presence with singing" (Ps. 100:2).

For Léo Bronstein the Kabbalah is the discovery of "the certitude of infinity" as the "stage of the Secret Woman. The plenitude, the return, the rebirth, the redemption *Without-redeemer*, the Woman" (p. 34). From Siva-Sákti of India to Kabbalah's Shekhinah of the *Zohar*: *Sefer Ha Zohar: The Book of Radiance, or of Splendor* to Pablo Picasso's drawing of "cosmic creation," *La danse des banderilles*, to the story of Portugal's Dom Pedro I and his love of Inés de Castro, Léo Bronstein discovers "the man-*via*-woman, the woman-*via*-man, supreme, supernal mother-father-daughter, Light, Light of the Presence, Shekhinah" (p. 35).

In the *Zohar* man is said to be unified when male and female are unity. Sanctification can occur only during such unity.

At the close of Chapter 2, Léo Bronstein describes the first secret meeting between the Besht, Baal Shem Tov, and his wife-to-be, Hannah, who sensed in him the ancient, majestic feeling:

the presence of Tenderness...Tenderness in which the poignant solitude of being and man is united with the poignant solidarity of being and man. The Secret Woman present at the origins of creation; the solitude/solidarity united as one at the creation. Tenderness...

Tenderness: Solitude-Solidarity: Shekhinah. [p. 38]

Chapter 3, "The Road of Meditation," begins with Paul Klee's (1953:53) notion of the spiral as a "question of life and death." Bronstein reemphasizes the position of the Shekhinah — the Secret Woman in Jewish thought. Kabbalah renewed the ancient creed of the "descent on behalf of the ascent," while Hassidism is described as "the healing, saving-without-saviour...creed of salvation *via* correction. A healing creed in its in-depth purpose, it was also...the self-liberating creed" (pp. 39-40).

Léo Bronstein summarizes:

Kabbalah's doctrine of the mystery of "the descent on behalf of the ascent" *via* the Presence-the Shekhinah-the Light, the Secret, Metaphysical Woman, a doctrine made one with Kabbalah's still more mysterious doctrine of the cosmic initial Error caused by the severity and rigor of "pure" Father-judgement, the Error corrected — redeemed by the "fiat" of the Secret Woman's Mother — mercy — this is what in-depth expression and in-depth diffusion the *Shtetle* gave us. [p. 41]

At this point Bronstein notes a parallel between Kabbalah's "passionate belief in the concreteness, the *fleshiness* of abstraction" and the art of the twentieth century, the "visual-manual thought" and the art of Picasso, Miro, and Klee in which cosmos and mind are equated as "pure" creation, as the unexpected and new, the first and therefore the "monstrous"; without "respectability."

This thought and this art were joined by the thought and art that equated soul with male-and-female, with judgement-and-mercy...the thought and art of Jewish twentieth-century soul laborers, Chaim Soutine, Max Weber, Levine, Ben Shahn, Chagall, Lipschitz, Epstein and so many others.... [pp. 41-42]

On the road of meditation "speculative thought or *interrogation about reality is made one with reality itself*" (p. 42). In examining the creative processes through which Picasso and Matisse bring a drawing into existence, in finding what is common to both as visual artists, Léo Bronstein finds the same principle at work in the thought of Jewish Kabbalah: "*Avodak be Gashmiyar*—worship through corporeality" (p. 46). Throughout this entire work, Bronstein understands Kabbalah as "the transfer of the world of medieval sacral cosmogonies into our world of profane epistemologies" (p. 49).

The great absolute of Kabbalah, its *Eyn-Sof*, its unseizable infinity undergoes an act of self-contraction. The act of infinity's self-reduction and self-contraction to an infinitesimal point of corporeal finity is called *zimzum*. This daring vision of substitution is the central vision of the mature Lurianic Kabbalah. *Eyn-Sof* (no end, the infinite, nothingness) manifests itself as self-contraction and self-concealment. This is *zimzum*. And *zimzum* is an act of both substitution and correspondence. In Kabbalah, correspondence and its opposite, substitution, are made one. This is the Lurianic Kabbalah's vision of Creation. Infinity (*Eyn-Sof*) self-manifests and withdraws into itself through *zimzum* (the act of concealment and contraction). The Lurianic doctrine also posits a daring understanding of

the Primeval Error...and error in the very act of creation to be corrected and redeemed.

And this Error is Adam Kadmon's, the Primeval Man's, the Ancient One's Error of not yet being male-and-female, male-*via*-female, female-*via*-male, still being judgement (*din*) and mercy (*rahamim*) and not judgement-*via*-mercy, mercy-*via*-judgement. [pp. 48-49]

This is a Primeval Error, not an Original Sin. Bronstein understands that for the Kabbalah, the Primeval Error was brought about through the separation from each other, the discontinuity, splitting, and interruption of the ten *Sefirot*, the powers of the Divine. The *Sefirot* culminate in the Presence, Shekhinah.

Within Kabbalah, "the descent on behalf of the ascent" is "The Redemption of the Error." Each *Sefirah* descends "into itself as concealed infinity (nothingness)...as self-reflection of creation's first act:...a dynamic continuum." The plenitude of Redemption is already present in the *zimzum*. This plenitude is to be achieved through loyalty to the Presence within the Shekhinah, the "Secret Woman's Presence" (p. 50).

Léo Bronstein holds that the Kabbalah reveals the interior processes whereby the Universe conceals and manifests itself. In the same way, Kabbalah reveals and conceals the aspects of human mind. In the individuality of our simple sensations lie the childhood and origins "of all universal concepts or ideas" (Bronstein 1953:ix). Kabbalah explains "the birth of a sensation, of a perception, of an idea" (p. 55).

In Kabbalah, the profound Error, and perhaps even sin, is *interruption*, the splitting of two-oneness. In the "great maternal sea" of Kabbalah, *din*—judgment—is not separated from, but is united with the "redeeming, restituting, restoring" *rahamim*—mercy. Shekhinah's very being is mercy and "the Judaic passion of Justice,..."

din-rahamin, finity-infinity,
man-woman, the Presence. [pp. 56-57]

The vision of Justice in Kabbalah presents idea and action as an identity. Idea and action are also one with sensation and the workings of the human mind (p. 57). From the Judaic "justice-beyond-justice" there is a continuum to idea, action, sensation, and mind. In an earlier book, Léo Bronstein had understood that:

The sensation-blue and the idea-blue are reversible in the depth of our visual labour. The entire poetry of our world, visible and invisible as yet...is there; all the meaning of beauty, therefore, of history, of thought and meditation is there. [Bronstein 1969:189]

Thus the continuum between the meditation of Kabbalah, Bronstein's visual history of ideas and art itself.

Kabbalah contains a primeval tension that covers two opposing directions that are nevertheless internally connected. One direction was the expansion of the *Sefirot* into a perfect circle of stability. The other direction was the explosion of the *Sefirot* into multiple manifestations. Bronstein comments:

And so, exactly so, are mind's two ways of penetration and search: the way that leads to the *immediacy of touch*, and the way to the *mediacy of concept*....Nothing in a man is one, everything is two from the start to the end. Man is two-oneness. [p. 59]

Man's "normalcy" results from the "creative opposition" and "creative interlace" going on uninterrupted between these two human ways of understanding and communicating. One way is characterized by intuition, relationship, and concept; the other, by immediacy, "a presence of adherence," a sense of image and touch. Léo Bronstein ponders these two ways in both cognition and creation. We have a "visionary" or visual mode of human consciousness that is image-based, and we have a mode of thought based on concepts and symbols. In Western history, the latter has called itself "normal" and has tended to brand the former "abnormal."

In our knowing, we receive the image first. Its presence is immediate and possesses our consciousness. While the image comes first in our experience, it is quickly replaced by the form and schemata of verbal meaning. The abstraction and schemata of the image are substituted for the image itself. Normalcy and sanity are the verbal possession of form and abstraction. The image is visually given to us. We do not create the image. The mind immediately acts upon the directly given image-imposing form, schemata and lucidity. This "schema-lucidity" is what we see in the art of Picasso, Klee, Miro, Giacometti, and Dubuffet. It is also the perception of Kabbalah (p. 61).

We can now partially understand why mysticism has so often been rejected and denied. Mysticism is based upon image and visual experience. It is visionary. The verbal world finds it threatening, if not insane. The world that is based upon verbal order "normally uses the help of imagination, of visions narrated, but not actually embodied" (Bronstein 1969:40).

In Kabbalah, the relationship between image, concept, and touch is a fusion. It is Judgment via Mercy

"*Din-via-rahamim, rahamim-via-din, man-via-woman, woman-via-man, Shekhinah, the Presence of Righteousness.*" This applies to the nature of sensations and perceptions as well as to the human community; and to all levels of human experience and creativity. This "moral imperative" is present in Torah, in creation, in the human mind, and in any object or artifact created by a human being (p. 62).

In both the words of his diaries and the corporeality of his art, Paul Klee knows what Kabbalah knows. Paul Klee's art is one with Kabbalah in "infinity's withdrawal into itself—the no-thingness—and the memory of the 'pure' Presence there—the first spark, the Shekhinah!" The road of Kabbalah and the road of Paul Klee are "both the perfect finite circle (man's solitude in the cosmos) and the never final multidirected line (man's solidarity in the cosmos)" (p. 68).

Léo Bronstein, the journeyer, enters upon the sharp turn of a new road in Chapter 4, "The Road of Companions." He has Rabbi Nachman of Bratislaw recapitulate the journey up to that point:

The Lord, blessed be He, has created the world as an absolute solitude and the man in it as an absolute solitude. And He created this solitude of the world as an absolute solidarity, and the solitude of man as an absolute solidarity. And he gave to this absolute, the only absolute, and to this union, the only union, a name. He called it Tenderness. For tenderness is solitude-solidarity. . . .

He made Tenderness the last, the tenth *Sefirah*, . . . the Secret Woman's, the Shekhinah's home. . . . the secret, metaphysical Tenderness. . . . is the primeval force, the "root of roots" . . . that made the pre-creation's "judgement alone" bend toward "mercy alone" and bind them together, judgement-*via*-mercy, mercy-*via*-judgement now. . . .

Tenderness is the primeval divine Error already-to-be-redeemed by itself. For Tenderness is the solitude-solidarity, the plenitude-vagueness in and of the world, in and of the man, that made the incorporeal judgement-*via* mercy, mercy-*via* judgement to be the corporeality—the body—of the man-*via*-woman of the woman-*via*-man.

Righteousness, thus ended the zaddik Nachman, is Tenderness: the "moral imperative," the spirit made body—the Shekhinah. [p. 70]

In Jewish meditation, Justice, the "moral imperative," is at "the very root of the 'beginning of being.'" The "moral imperative" is the "non-mysterious mystery" of the Torah; it is in the creations of mind and in any artifact or object created by a human being *ex nihilo* (pp. 70-71). This book, *Kabbalah and Art*, explicates what Léo Bronstein had written over two decades earlier, "Art is the shelter of justice" (Bronstein 1953:52). The point and the spark of Kabbalah's meditation, the circle and the line of art's genesis are "one and the same 'root of roots.'" "

Art is the secret metaphysical Woman, the Shekhinah; the Shekhinah, the secret metaphysical Woman is art: "...a frail, delicate, distant erect and tenacious argument..." (p. 71).

At this moment of fulfilled insight-vision on The Road of Companions, Léo Bronstein meets the fifteenth-century Sienese painter Giovanni di Paolo. They enter into a dialogue along the Road. Giovanni di Paolo describes the formation of his vision and art through processes similar to the understanding achieved by Kabbalah. The tension, explosion, and contraction of the unseizable results in the seizable "unity and finality of a crystal" (ibid.). Bronstein

senses Giovanni di Paolo's discussion of the crystallization of the gemstone to be the "beginning of being" of *zimzum*. He had written earlier that "a painter paints what he does not paint" (Bronstein 1953:133) and "that what a painting wants to say—precisely that what is the beautiful is at once what is the true and what is the good—is not expressed in and by its line's conduct, its colour's structure, its composition's promise, but in the very line itself, in the composition itself" (pp. 72–75).

Giovanni di Paolo painted the "beginning of being... Creation's divine Error—of tension and confusion... and...redemption-correction: tension's release and liberation, the crystal-clear gem....in pious, tormented icons" (p. 76). In painting the creation of the crystal, Giovanni di Paolo painted the release and redemption of the tormented original Error. The testimony of the gemstone is the birth of Tenderness and in this, the "tragic sense of history" (p. 81).

For Giovanni di Paolo, the gemstone in its finiteness was the substituted fragment of the "thingless infinity-nothingness." For Léo Bronstein and Giovanni di Paolo, there is a shared obsession for "the Secret Presence," the "metaphysical tenderness," the "Secret Woman *Shekhinah*" (p. 90). Bronstein recovers this in himself and in the artist:

In everyone's creation *ex nihilo*—the secret of poetry: this precise, concrete witness-thing of child's unforgettable unrepeatable experience, an object-idea, an object-feeling, the ripe grape, its translucent, juicy taste and smell, the obsession-substitution in Rubens; the birth of a dark pearl in Rembrandt; the miraculous birth of a porcelain in the earlier Goya; the rainbow in Renoir, the birth of the white in a Winslow Homer, of the red in an Eakins; the simple, "banal" and ponderous weight, Cézanne's secret of correspondence-substitution; your precious gemstone Giovanni; the birth of sonority, of music in Dosso Dossi. [ibid.]

Each language remains mute in its ability to explain the inherent meaning in its own very structure. But each language is transferable to another language through which we understand and experience what we could not in the first. There is a process whereby each language metamorphoses into another through a seizable fragment substituted for the unseizable whole. As forms of verbal and visual language transfer and metamorphose, so we human beings, in contact with art, undergo metamorphosis.

Then, "among Kabbalah's road companions" Léo Bronstein hears "*L'Art ne s'élargit pas, il se résume*—art is not expansion, it is reduction" (p. 91). It is the voice of Edgar Degas, who, in his scenes of Paris life "was the painter of the secret, silent, invisible Presence," despite his hatred of Jews. Degas concealed and revealed this Presence in a "moral irradiation, Torah's 'moral imperative,' aureoling a person's action." For

Degas the will was secret, oblique, and moral. Degas painted the witness of the oblique, concealed-revealed Presence (ibid.).

Monsieur Degas, you, the Jew-hater, you were the painter of the Jewish mystical vision of the creation *ex-nihilo*—the creation through the act of Reduction supreme—the mystery of *zimzum*, the mystery of all creation on all levels of existence...you painted...the primal divine Error and its redemption-correction by the all-containing will of Tenderness, your secret tenderness, your secret, metaphysical Woman, Monsieur Degas. [p. 93]

Léo Bronstein knew "all the secret, ancient tenderness" in the heart of Degas and in the "Paris of greatest and smallest intimacy, Paris at dusk, luminescent pearl, dissolved" (p. 103). Léo invites Degas to join him along the road, to rest and wait for the next artist-companion to pass and greet. *Kabbalah and Art* ends with Léo's telling us, "I will wait...."

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