

Sky

Wisława Szymborska

I should have begun with this: the sky,
A window minus sill, frame, and pane.
An aperture, nothing more,
but wide open.

I don't have to wait for a starry night
I don't have to crane my neck
to get to look at it.
I've got the sky behind my back, at hand,
and on my eyelids.
The sky binds me tight
and sweeps me off my feet.

Even the highest mountains
are no closer to the sky
than the deepest valleys.
There's no more of it in one place
than another.
A mole is no less in seventh heaven
than the owl spreading her wings.
The object that falls in an abyss
falls from sky to sky.

Grainy, gritty, liquid,
inflamed, or volatile
patches of sky, specks of sky,
gusts and heaps of sky.
The sky is everywhere,
even in the dark beneath your skin.

I eat the sky, I excrete the sky,
I'm a trap within a trap,
an inhabited inhabitant,
an embrace embraced,
a question answering a question.

Division into sky and earth —
it's not the proper way
to contemplate this wholeness.
It simply lets me go on living
at a more exact address
where I can be reached promptly
if I'm sought.
My identifying features
are rapture and despair.

— Translated by Stanislaw Brańczak and Clare
Cavanagh.

Let There Be

Mordechai Goldman

One may relate to the works by Maya Cohen Levy presented in the exhibition before us from several perspectives. A perspective that examines her affinity to the art of the Far East, would see one thing in them, while a perspective that associates them with Monet's water gardens would see something else, and so on. It seems that the demand for a multiplicity of perspectives constitutes the work of art more than any other form of expression. Nonetheless, I intend to relate to the works presented here mainly from one perspective which in my view is central to them and also very unique in the local art field. In my opinion, the works presented here were primarily intended to create a meditative space. If this is so, we must ask ourselves how the artist sought to achieve her aim.

On the face of it, she does this mainly by making us participate in her meditative approach to her subject. As she habitually does, Cohen Levy takes hold of a certain painterly subject, and does not let go of it until she has exhausted it and used it to attain achievements she is satisfied with. In most cases, these achievements also impress the viewer very much. The subject before us — ponds and leaves — is a kind of infinite series, and the works presented at the exhibition are its most crystallized pinnacles. Now, repetition of a fixed practice is one of the fundamentals of meditation. People who seek to

attain the level of consciousness characteristic of it generally repeat a mantra, an asana, a tea ceremony, archery, repetitively paint a yantra or a mandala, and so on.

Meditative repetition has two goals. One is to divert consciousness from the noises of the habitual ego, and the other — to attain a pure state of consciousness that focuses entirely on its subject. This subject may be anything the person meditating chooses as the subject of his contemplation, or the Supreme Subject, such as God, Absolute Reality, or Cosmic Consciousness. In certain meditation theories, the very state of being in pure consciousness is identified with being in Absolute Reality or in the Divine Being.

The works before us have been made with much concentration, and they also demand much concentration from those who contemplate them. They contain hues and sub-hues, and it appears that every viewer has to approach them with very open and focused senses in order to fathom their innermost life. They offer the eye that focuses on them delicate hues and sub-hues, which have an aural parallel in the prolonged overtones of meditation bells or of gongs that are used for the same purpose.

But it seems that the works were designed to create a meditative state through the images they present as well. They are all emphatically containers

— Mordechai Goldman is a psychotherapist, poet and art critic.

for the movement of light, and light, as we know, is one of the main symbols of divinity and of consciousness. A constant stream of sharp light particles constantly penetrates into the water of the Ponds — or perhaps we should actually say this in the singular, the pond — where there are also additional lights — lights that seem to burst out of the depths and lights that stem from the reflection of the sky. The sky too, as we know, is one of the principal images for the deity.

Wilfred Bion, a mystical psychoanalyst, claims that relations between Container and Contained are a necessary condition for all consciousness.¹ Unless an idea, an event or a thing is adequately contained in the mind, it is impossible to develop understanding or knowledge about them. In situations where the containing does not take place, a “stimulus-response” mechanism operates: the responses are immediate reactions to internal and external stimuli. But when a psychic or mental containing takes place, there is a delay between the stimulus and the response — a containing of the stimulus and of the impulse to respond to it occurs — and in this way consciousness comes about. People who fear the truth — and there are more than a few such people — destroy the mental Container and consequently become mechanical, blind, or subject to illusions and the Imaginary. They are incapable of proper self-consciousness.

In Cohen Levy’s works the relation between the Container and the Contained is not simple, perhaps even pained. Consciousness is threatening and is perceived as persecutory, dissective, peeling and wounding. Yet despite the truth’s threats, the artist prepares a new Container in every painting. Bion thought that the basic relations between Container and Contained may be seen as relations between the

masculine and the feminine, and it would seem that this division is also appropriate for Cohen Levy’s images. The penetrative light is masculine and the dark containers are feminine. Thus each of the paintings in the series is a field of couplings.

Moreover, it would seem that the artist’s meditative attitude has constantly taken her subject to a much more primeval and dramatic scene — to the picture of the Creation as it appears in our sources. More and more, her pond becomes the abyss or “deep” of Genesis from which the Creation begins, and the light that penetrates into the water appears like the first thing that was created by the command “Let there be” — the primeval light. In this way her scene uproots us from our own reality and from the habitual ego to the point of the most primal beginning, to the cosmic night in which God began to shape His forms out of the abyss of primordial matter.

Yet the meditative quality is activated not only by all these things, but also by the flow, which is characteristic both of light and of water. Habitual consciousness is always fixated. The ego is fixated in itself and does not understand the world and its truth, except through its own needs. It appears to be moving, but it moves only around itself. Again and again it repeats its basic patterns — its primal traumas continually shape its world. In a certain sense this is an ego that is an embryonic “living dead”, drowned in a womb of fantasies — something like the figure drowned in the water displayed in the exhibition. Meditative consciousness, however, aims to revive the Self by extricating the ego from its fixations and its patterns by shifting it into the flow. The Self that is liberated from its fixations, from what fixates it, becomes God-like — I shall be what I shall beⁱ — an entity that reveals itself out of its

becoming, out of its future and not out of the causality that pushes it from its past. This entity, like the paintings themselves, is simultaneously an infinite multiplicity and a unique unity, and in this too it is God-like. The God Who Creates is everything that has been created and also the Unique One.

Cohen Levy’s meditation therefore seeks the creative moment, the processuality in which the painting and the Self are reborn, and its point of beginning is made out of nothingness, death, the night and the abyss. The presence of nothingness and of death is reinforced not only by the drowned figure but also by the light, which is made like leaves. The autumnal falling of the leaves designates the death of the tree in winter, or at least the death of the leaves. This presence of nothingness and of death incorporates a violent element, and perhaps this is why many of the leaves were made by means of peeling the paper, and their form is reminiscent of knives. In Hebrew the words for “violent” and “leaves” are almost homophones, and in Cohen Levy’s paintings the leaves are violent.

Concurrently, the sharp, peeled and peeling light is also the aspect of power and of wrath that is involved in the Creation and in artistic creation. The Creator God of our sources is certainly a God whose wrathful rages are unbridled, who is capable of terrible destruction just as He is capable of bringing about the miracle of His Creation. Much has already been written on the role of destructiveness in artistic creation, especially by the British psychoanalyst Melanie Klein and her followers. Klein thought that artistic creation is a process in which, over and over again, the mother and the nucleus of the Self, which are inseparably connected in the depths of the unconscious, are rebuilt and reorganized after much

destructiveness has brought about their disintegration, fragmentation, and dissection in the unconscious fantasy.

In the writings of David Winnicott, in contrast, we can find the idea that destructiveness towards an indestructible mother is a necessary condition for the development of the Self as adequately autonomous and specific. Following Winnicott, Christopher Bollas claims that the artist always acts out of destructiveness towards the mother image from his early childhood. In his opinion, the tension between destruction and creation, so prevalent in modernist art, stems mainly from the artist’s intention to recreate his selfhood in the artistic medium.²

At any rate, the longing for a creative abundance that will overflow all destructiveness is implicit in the works before us, both in the capacity of the dead leaves to be simultaneously an abundance of light particles, shimmering schools of tiny fish, and showers of seeds — a boundless and uninhibited fertility.

From all that has been said it would seem that in the works presented to us we can see not only repeated meditations, designed to create a meditative state in the viewer, but also ceremonies of prayer which addresses itself again and again to God the Creator in order to presence Him in the art creation, and to awaken Him to the decisive word of power — Let there be.ⁱⁱ

The psychoanalytical perspective sees compulsive repetition as a defense mechanism against a formless psychic chaos — and I think that this view can contribute something important to our understanding of these works, in which repetition is an essential component. From this perspective, the artist has banished from her picture of the Creation the formless chaosⁱⁱⁱ that belong to her immanently.

It would therefore be correct to say that in the margins of her works there exists a chaos which the high organization of the works can overcome. But on the other hand, it is possible that the very containing of this chaos may open up those creative possibilities that all the works pray for, almost by way of incantation.

Notes

1. Wilfred Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, Karnak, London, 1970.
2. A more comprehensive discussion of the role of destructiveness in artistic creation appears in my book *Literature and Psychoanalysis* [in Hebrew], Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, Tel Aviv, 1998, in the chapters on Melanie Klein and her followers, and on Winnicott and Bollas.

Translator's Notes

- i. This is the correct translation of the phrase with which God answers Moses when the latter asks Him what His name is (Exodus 3:12 [3:14 in the King James version]), which in English and other European languages has long been mistranslated as "I AM THAT I AM".
- ii. In Hebrew this command [Genesis 1:2] is expressed in one word: *yehi*.
- iii. The term "formless chaos" renders the meaning of the Hebrew words *tohu vavohu* (Genesis 1:1) employed here by the author (which the King James version translates adjectivally as "formless and void").

Chronology

Born in Tel Aviv, 1955

Works and lives in Tel Aviv

Selected One-Artist Exhibitions

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| 1999 | "From the 'Palm-Tree Trunks' series", Art Center Rehovot; Memorial Center, Tivon |
| 1998 | " <i>Dvarim</i> ", Sara Levi Gallery, Tel Aviv |
| 1996 | "Palm-Tree Trunks", Chelouche Gallery, Tel Aviv |
| 1994 | Installation, Office in Tel Aviv, Tel Aviv |
| — | "Thatch and Honeycomb", The Israel Museum, Jerusalem |
| 1993 | "Sunflower Heart", Chelouche Gallery, Tel Aviv |
| 1989 | "Paintings", Sara Levi Gallery, Tel Aviv |
| 1988 | "Paintings", Rap Gallery, Tel Aviv |
| 1985 | Ehad Ha'am 90 Gallery, Tel Aviv |
| 1983 | Horace Richter Gallery, Jaffa |
| 1982 | "Rock", Debel Gallery, Jerusalem |

Selected Group Exhibitions

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| 1998 | Kulturzentrum den Minoriten, Graz, Austria |
| — | "A Vision of Light: 10 Years of Watercolor in Israeli Art", The Israel Museum, Jerusalem |
| — | "Women Artists in Israeli Art", Haifa |
| — | "Friendly Triangle", Kalisher Gallery, Tel Aviv |
| — | "Paper Equals Paper", Museum of Israeli Art, Ramat Gan |
| 1995 | "Small Sculpture", Chelouche Gallery, Tel Aviv |
| 1994 | "Unity", Artists House, Tel Aviv |
| — | "Paintings", The Abraham Goodman Art Gallery, New York |
| 1993 | "Determined Image", Haifa Museum |
| 1991 | "Recipients of the Young Artists' Award", Tel Aviv Museum of Art |

— "The Presence of the Absent: The Empty Chair", The Genia Schreiber University Art Gallery, Tel Aviv University

— "Recipients of the America-Israel Cultural Foundation Awards", Haifa Museum

1990 "Metropolis", Bat-Yam Museum; Arad Museum

— "Curators' Choice", Kalisher Gallery, Tel Aviv Sculpture Biennial, Ein Hod

— "The Column in Contemporary Israeli Sculpture", The Genia Schreiber University Art Gallery, Tel Aviv University

1989 "The Venice Biennale 1990/ The Israeli Proposal", Museum of Israeli Art, Ramat Gan

— "An Objective - Three Dimensions", Museum of Israeli Art, Ramat Gan

— Young Artists Exhibition, Tel Aviv Museum of Art

— "Israeli Art", traveling exhibit in the U.S.A.

1987 "Large Format", Museum of Israeli Art, Ramat Gan

1985 "Drawings", Ehad Ha'am 90 Gallery, Tel Aviv

1983 "Young Artists Biennial", Haifa Museum

Scholarships & Awards

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| 1999 | Residence Scholarship, Villa Waldberta, Munich |
| 1993 | Sharett Foundation Foreign Study Grant (China) |
| 1991 | Young Artist Award |
| 1988-91 | Sharett Foundation Scholarship |

Public Collections

The Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Tel Aviv Museum of Art; The Jewish Museum, New York; *Ha'aretz* Newspaper, Tel Aviv; O.R.S., Tel Aviv; Private collections