

Destructive Creation

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In the course of the dozen or so years since graduating from "Bezalel", Sharon Poliakine (1964) has established a solid presence on the Israeli art scene. The paintings and etchings she exhibited in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem offered reiterated proof that the torch of the Israeli abstract had been passed on to a new generation of post-lyricism and post-action. Aryeh Aroch, Avigdor Stematzky, Moshe Kupferman and Aviva Uri had indeed found a successor: Sharon Poliakine. Having studied in the graphics department, she illustrates how painting can derive inspiration from etching. No less: after submitting a graduation project of etchings and sculptures based on the poems of Yona Wollach, she shows how visual art is capable of endowing form to poetic essence. However, in contrast with Western philosophy which has bequeathed us with the notion of imposing form upon formless matter (whether from matter or spirit) Sharon Poliakine's work proffers an unresolved conflict between form and chaos – chaos as the concealed root of existential agony. The etching being a primary medium in her work, it can be argued that Poliakine does not so much *print* her soul as *burn it with acid*. Burning corrodes and disinfects (i.e. purifies). Those who recall various mythical instances of burning from the Bible also know that whatsoever burns the flesh, anchors its other potential extremity in the sublime. Another conjecture: the affinity between the Hebrew words *tzorev* (burn) and *tzoref* (designing or fusing metalwork by means of fire).

I contemplate Poliakine's etchings, based upon the poetry of Ted Hughes (1999). In one of the works, I am sucked into an expanse of formlessness, replete with shadows and darkness. A universe imbued with terror and melancholy, an apocalyptic expanse of space and time, a primordial beginning that is simultaneously an ending. Here sky becomes earth, vein-like roots and vines populate the heavens as ensnaring thicket from which there is no escape. Arguably, the Tree of Life as Tree of Death. Paradise in reverse. Overall, a sense of storm and Judgement Day. "I imagine this midnight moment's forest; \ ...And this blank page where my fingers move. \ (...) Something more near \ Though deeper within darkness \ Is entering the loneliness: \ (...) warily a lame \ Shadow (...) \ It enters the dark hole of the head. \ (...) The page is printed." ("The Thought-Fox", Ted Hughes).

Poliakine's earlier prints had already stamped her powerful creative-destructive imprint in a multimedia blend of etching (dry and wet) with aquatint, employing lathes, disks, wax, sugar, acids etc. Those prints were broad in dimension, vigorous and forceful, richer in action than those we were to encounter subsequently. In progress here is a multi-strata struggle, replete with coincidental events, chaos constituting the active matter of which a world is to come to birth. Each page is a further heroic foray of art into the Hades of the unconscious. These abstracts are pre-Genesis Nature: organic forms float in the "magma", encountering dark and malignant bodies. The light, etched obsessively upon the deep (by the condemned sacrificial victim rather than by Divine creative dictum) is inscribed like an X-ray of schizoid psychic

emergence. If elemental "cells" are to be born here, it will surely be in defiance of the death urge that devours the sexual drive.

Dread and solitude speak for the most utterly intimate. These pages of the soul are a complex weave of negative and positive, doubt and reassurance in continual activity, scratching, attaching, and scrawling, in line, blotch and excision – but behold! Within the evasively exploding chaos, quasi-"tracks" or "bridges" summon up the courage to be constructed in lyrical audacity. However, this entire "architectural" structuralism makes bold to slide into moments of dynamic abstract poeticism, in capitulation to the tempest. And in contrast, "a withering flower", or ever more "flower-pots" subjected to this internal Judgement Day onslaught, a Walpurgis Night of life-in-death and death-in-life. Indeed, at the center of Poliakine's large prints are particles subdivided into black-and-white. Something resembling a cell, or capsule, or cocoon (projecting a remote affinity to Terry Winters of the eighties, and his organic abstractions populated with "cocoon"?), possibly a flower-pot, or a vaginal slit – ellipse, cone, circle; be that as it may, basic organic particles.

A duality of creation and destruction, a bio-cosmic struggle for survival, etchings of birth and death. Here, a diptych-like division of the etchings seeks to confirm a harmonious fertility coupling, but is equally given over to disharmony and disintegration. Commencing with the object, the domestic still-life (the flower-pot) evolves into an internal organism of distressed "cells", the personal unconscious encountering an overall unconscious of Nature, and from there the way is short to cosmic religiosity, with a glimpse of the taboo.

There is nothing facile about these pages. They demand of the artist (and of us) a rare courage for frank and tormented confrontation with herself-ourselves, and with the unknown; the courage to launch out upon a mission to the secret of affliction, to the very foundation of dolor, down to the basic "cells", the (encapsulated) capsules. A rare moment of intimacy between signifier and signified, even if the latter invariably slips away. On occasion, the "cell" is enlarged to gigantic dimensions, as though the artist were intent on delving into it, to discover the cell-within-the-cell, a concentric series of basic cells centered upon the vaginal source of life, which is surely secret-within-secret, an engima never to be resolved. "Nothing exists but traces" as Jacques Derrida has taught us. And on occasion, a dark dominance, massive and authoritative, lands like some ensnaring net upon the light so painstakingly scratched and scraped (like the wall scrawling of a disconsolate convict serving a life sentence) bearing the mysterious, internal, invisible message (simultaneously human and metaphysical): "The name of the father" (Jacques Lacan).

Agonizing births. A bitter Creation. Sharon Poliakine's coming-into-being etchings repeatedly tear at the umbilical cords (of the newborn infant!), the torment of coming-into-being or internal Creation (i.e. not the Creation by "external" Divine decree): substance, sperm, cell, cocoon, nowhere in the dark infinity, and they undergo a rite of passage rife with terror and anguish.

If Poliakine's etchings introduce us to the post-parturition of subconscious and cosmos, it is without comfort. In other words, a womb of no redemption.

If the "place" of these etchings is indeed the place of the subconscious, it is a place thrown into tumult by onsets of manic depression; a place where the dynamics of *yetzer* (passion) and *yetzira* (creation) – two words derived from a common root in Hebrew – are led turbulently by a death urge ignorant of timeless serenity; a place where paternity threatens and maternity offers no redemption; a place stripped of *jouissance*.

On now to the later etchings: they are smaller, duller, more elusive and mystical. Still there is the moment-before-Creation, as yet the spirit hovers over the deep, and the earth is without form. A contemplation of this "cloudy" event, cosmic conception, arguably a moment after the "Big Bang", the moment of primordial coagulation. Indeed, Creation, birth, Genesis, the transition from lifelessness to life and to creativity. But the process is ambivalent, unfathomable, bearing with it the dread of that worst of all calamities, the birth of a dead infant, the black child (see him marked in the etchings) his emergence in doubt; and if he does emerge, what is to become of him? Poliakine's etchings identify creativity with "the primary process" (Freud). Her "actual" is a state of "potential" which she couches forcefully.

The psychic regression – at the (neo-Platonic) level of the human soul, and the soul of the world – coming about in these etchings is oblivious to the homeostasis in the timeless tranquillity of the womb. Accordingly, the relative childishness evident in Poliakine's linearity does not recall her to a childhood of joy; rather, to a nightmare which nevertheless is careful to preserve tenderness, poetry and beauty. In other words, Sharon Poliakine preoccupies herself with sublimation of the nightmare, re-pressing it with the etching press, elevating (acid-) burning into purification.

Increasingly, she moves into the transcendental. Her language becomes more concise, "Nature" makes way for the "cosmic", the private is converted into the "sublime" (forever a modest, murmuring "sublime").

Consider the "*From dawn to sunrise*" series (2001): a glimmer of light congeals and flashes in the darkness, alongside a volcanic eruption heaving in the gloom. A luminary (major? minor?), a circle of light, a celestial body, either sun or moon (or possibly, an eye?); in fact, more moon than sun, preserving its estrangement, its remoteness and its unfathomable mystery, its circular (rational) perfection infuriating in its imperviousness. The artist assaults it with textures, horizontal pseudo-vistas, with flashes or blobs of light; but the sun does not rise. It (after all moon, not sun) is unchanging, stationary, encrypted, an everlasting solar eclipse, in fact, lunar eclipse. With these meditative etchings, Poliakine contemplates the cosmic eclipse of her existence through the sooty prism of her soul. "I used to come in the morning, pour out some acid and run for it," she relates, adding: "The corrosion erases an image, it doesn't generate an image."

There we have the artist: observing (and fleeing) the etching process (objective and subjective), creating by consuming, a (lunar) echo of that other great Creation, likewise a Creation out of devastation, purification by fire.

And finally, the six etchings of the "Book": the metallic etching plate has become crumpled paper whose creases ooze malignant ink stains, whose folds age the "Book" to extinction, overcoming any Platonic circle or any radiating ray of "And there was light". Poliakine's "Book" is overcome and overcoming. Having been nurtured on the redemptive divine "Book", we now regard the human book, innocent of any tidings of redemption. It is a book of desolation, whose twin binding is merely a further division, a fruitless disintegration. If you so wish, it is Sharon Poliakine's "Book of the Dead", a relic of "that" book. Is this not the binding of the missing pages, the entire body of Sharon Poliakine's work?