

# FROM LEVIATHAN TO LEVITAN: MICHAIL GROBMAN WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF RUSSIAN CONCEPTUALISM'S METAMORPHOSES

LOLA KANTOR-KAZOVSKY

The usual character of canvases and gouaches painted by Michail Grobman in the recent period has a face with a protruding nose, a protuberant, emphatically "contemplative" forehead, and a mouth slightly open as in surprise. The artist defines this character as a nitwit" - whose statements, such as "Let the flower be!", or "Don't kill cats!", appear on the paintings. He says many other things too, things which, in fact, are not at all foolish. It is just that his speech habits are those of a simpleton, who is unaware of proper ways to express his ideas, nor is he able to select the appropriate objects of speech and modes of expression. One must admit, however, that the entirely correct mode is not known to anybody, and hence any human speech is, to a certain extent, a nitwit speech. In fact, this character who by definition can be considered an "everyman", or the author's alter ego, has also written Grobman's verses. These tell us about life in the Promised Land, about war, love, poetry, and death. This character shares his sensations with us candidly: "I know this harmful sign,/The pain under the shoulder blade/ When you cannot move your arm/ And it is difficult to breathe/ And you start thinking/ Of the transient nature of human beings/ And all your optimistic ideas/ Sink into a terrible abyss/ And all your gains/ Become totally worthless,/ And man, the King of Nature,/ Loses all his possessions." These feelings are sincere and genuine. And they give rise to thoughts which can hardly be called silly. Yet something still elicits this odd disturbing sensation, and this something is the very phenomenon of speech represented here. The grounds for anxiety are obvious: "a nitwit" is not a bad person, yet he clearly demonstrates that the realm of speech is the realm of subordination. No external non-freedom exists which can compare to the total non-freedom brought about by language, since in all languages everything has already taken its shape, long before our time, and in all languages the imprints of the collective experience and the collective oppression speak via the subject, who believes it is he who uses the language. However, the subject participating in the process of speaking is, in fact, oppressed and, at the same time, takes part in the act of oppression on a par with other participants.

This well-known fact, which is one of the fundamental ideas of modern art, was discovered, reconsidered and transformed into artistic strategy within the framework of Moscow Conceptualism (from the late 60's to the early 70s). Michail Grobman's artistic activity was, from the outset, connected with this artistic perception of the world. Thus the general notion of this artistic trend helps us understand Grobman's

recent works which are, in fact, multi-layered structures retaining the "memory" of their previous transformations.

The trend subsequently called Conceptualism was, to my mind, a unique phenomenon among other non-official artistic ideas in Russia of those days. It was not a secondary reconsideration of trends that had already been experienced either in Western or in Russian history; neither was it an attempt to escape from the odious world of violence into artistic exotica. Here we grope again for the once lost authentic problem of Russian art which can be defined - in a synoptic perspective and with certain generalization - as the aspiration for realism (of course, if we treat this notion existentialistically, i.e. as the aspiration to establish contact with reality, while revolting against its total falsification; in this very sense Malevich called his system "new pictorial realism"). However, putting this archetype into practice was a problem in Moscow of the 60's since there were neither traditions (all of them having been interrupted or discredited), nor a contemporary philosophical discourse. Furthermore, the specific milieu which was characterized by an overabundance of realistic artistic styles engaged more or less entirely in official propaganda, exposing its artificiality and rhetoric.

Under such circumstances the reflection, so typical of Russian artists and directed at the correlation between art and reality, resulted in a paradoxical inference: the direct correlation between the artist and reality and the direct vision of reality are not possible. It was apprehended that when initially comprehending the universe, a person submits himself unwittingly to a certain ready-made mode of its description (either verbal or visual), and among these modes are realistic styles in art and literature; thus a person lives not in "the world of reality as such", but in the world of ready-made expressive languages and sets of symbols, which they and only they are capable of presenting the object of attention and depiction for a realistic artist. Outside such a world, reality itself still remains invisible and imperceptible.

Thus, by virtue of one and the same contemplation, not only was the linguistic nature of comprehension discovered, but also the world of the imperceptible or incognizable. Language was immediately defined as one of the major issues preoccupying the Russian conceptualists; thus this trend gave rise to many purely textual accomplishments: not only simulative "writers", "poets" (like Grobman or Prigov), but even a pop-group. Depictions began to be filled with texts. Grobman's "nitwit" is probably a unique attempt to extract the subject of conceptual utterance from the text, and visualize this subject, the creature experiencing the dictatorship of language. (In the art of other conceptualists, e.g. I. Kabakov, this subject - the owner and name-giver of consumer goods, the compiler of texts and inventories - was visible, and therefore, even more suggestive, or omnipresent, so to speak.)

But the very revelation that the dictatorship of the ubiquitous language penetrates into all aspects of everyday life and into the innermost parts of the human heart had an even more stirring perspective. The assertion that reality is given to a man not directly through his sensations, but through ready-made false sign constructions that are imposed by the aggressive environment was equipollent to the revelation of an "incognizable" world existing beyond this dubious picture, and the metaphysical connotations of such a world were implicated, though not specified.

These metaphysical and realistic constituents in the philosophy of Moscow Conceptualism were indivisible and interdependent. Discovering the smallest and most typical details of everyday life, of the "naked" reality which begins right here, at one's toe; exposing them and dissecting them as a world of signs characterized by their definite and compulsory interrelation - this was the strategy of discovering "the incognizable", and that had the effect of the metaphysical abyss yawned amidst the regular course of life. A metaphysical echo accompanied each word uttered in the kitchen, and being compared to this sensation of "the incognizable" in each point of space all other previous approaches seemed to be just innocent Christmas ghost stories.

During his Moscow period, Michail Grobman was close to many Moscow conceptualists, though he was never like any of them. His spirit of inventiveness, his tactics of "repercussion perception" within various experiments on realia - all these allowed him to make several breakthroughs whose significance became evident later on. Thus he happened to be one of the first artists to introduce political iconography into the artistic context ( *TheGenerallissimo*, 1964). This was long before the times when, to quote I. Kabakov, "...the period of Sots-art came like a bolt out of the blue"<sup>1</sup>, and this so called Sots-art began to master the social-political sign reality. This emergence of Sots-art was in all probability the beginning of conceptualism's collapse due to a gradually growing tendency to demonstrate the possibilities of plays with political signs while ignoring the metaphysical perspective.



**Michail Grobman and his wife Irena Vruble-Golubkina in their Moscow flat June 13, 1966**

That is why Grobman, despite his (broadly cited by many experts) priority in this area, never became the founder nor a participant of Sots-art. Rather, during this period he was (more than others) concerned with the metaphysical perspective and metaphysical goal of his art. Moreover, he would implement this goal by pictorial means, while other conceptualists expressed their emotional experience by a lack of depiction, relying upon such means as story-telling, actions, or performances.

Grobman expressed the sign/metaphysical dichotomy of conceptualism in his own way. He, too, strove to emphasize the visual language, but his approach to this problem (both in Moscow and later in Israel) was stylistically and methodically different from that of the others. He was trying to speak "the universal" language (which the majority of the audience were not really familiar with). He wanted to reconstruct the visual language of the archaic Jewish tradition and use it for constructing the text on the principal concepts of the entity -Life, Death, God, People. It was a simulative language which did not closely follow specific historical prototypes, though it possessed some methods which were supposed to characterize the visual tradition "under the reconstruction" exactly as a language. Among these methods were (a) geometricized conventionality of forms, reduced to elementary signs, (b) archaic zoomorphism of principal syncretic notions in the text, and (c) the very arrangement of the depiction as a text, i.e. as a chain of symbols including iconic signs, geometrical graphics, and verbalized fragments. Visual speech of this type, whose structure indicated its linguistic conventionality, could translate the principal concepts of the entity, without putting forward claims on the dictatorship over the spectator (thus differing from the majority of similar utterances). Instead of blunt visionary pathos, the artist offered a sign construction which did not describe the topic, but only denoted it; beyond the visual suggestivity of the sign (worked up by the artist with admiration) the metaphysical background remained "incognizable" and was not described by means of depiction, while the visual symbols offered, and were reminiscent of, the most general traditional and simple models of its description.

In other words, Grobman's approach was a peculiar combination of conceptualism and symbolism - systems which proved to be rather close since they both deal with signs, and their utterances originally exist on two planes. The complexity and refinement of the strategy lay, however, not in the combination itself; the secret lay in maintaining a delicate balance, otherwise the system might have become plain and commonplace. The artist himself then defined his system as "magical symbolism", and indeed, his own speculations on this method (published in The Leviathan Newspaper) look like the symbolic system of thinking, e.g., "The circle is the sign of Nature. The triangle is stasis and movement simultaneously. The Fish

- Leviathan is the symbol of Heaven, Earth, Water, Sea, Wind, Movement, Direction. The symbol of people, the dual symbol of Animal and Stone".<sup>2</sup>

"The Fish - Leviathan" is by no means another "speech of a nitwit" obsessed by logorrhea, but the precise verbal depiction of his artistic method. These words comprise the peculiar formula of the conceptual correlation

between the depiction and the word. Leviathan is one of the somewhat obscure mythological images in Judaism which emerged from archaic mythology. It is an aquatic monster of unknown shape mentioned in Psalms (74:14) as an example of the incomprehensibility and mystery of the Lord's creation. Apocrypha asserts that at the end of the world, the Lord will prepare a feast where He will nourish the righteous on the flesh of Leviathan. This image is so ancient that written Jewish tradition kept only the word itself as a designatum, the word practically devoid of the denotatum - or, probably, with the denotatum which broadened its semantic field up to infinite indefiniteness. Having associated the visual image - the fish - with the word which lost its denotatum, the artist bestows all the infinite emptiness and incomprehensibility of the word's obliterated meaning upon the image. "Incomprehensibility" becomes the new denotatum of the fish.

Grobman's depictions of fish (monstrous, incredible, sprawled in the air, with glistening scale, winged, and multi-eyed) are not symbols in the traditional sense because they do not go back to any specific idea - only to a word. And the word implicitly contains everything that we do not even know: concepts, both existing and forgotten ones, which could have been crammed into this word. Thus the major elements of the language of "magical symbolism" took shape: zoomorphic monsters (sometimes with anthropomorphic features) associated with words.

The advantage of this strategy was the attitude towards "the 'incomprehensible'" which in conceptualism was achieved through the correct indications, instead of Utopian attempts of quasi- religious visionarism. Conceptualists eliminated from this attitude all the unreal, retaining only the capacity to denote, considering it as a significant achievement of theirs. They often tackled the concept of death directly, since they had their own, definite, non- pretentious, discrete ability to touch the world of the incomprehensible. Death as a sign or an indication is one of the major topics in works by Grobman and other Moscow conceptualists.

It is no wonder that hope was expressed to use this approach in order to take the human soul across the bridge which connects material with spiritual as maintained in one of Grobman's Manifestoes of the 70s.<sup>3</sup>

Today it is evoked by his painting "The Victory of the Spirit Over the Body" (done ironically in the manner of pointillism) where the zoomorphic

monster (reminiscent of metaphysical signs of magical symbolism) gently and compassionately pushes the human sack of bone and flesh. It is interesting to note, for the sake of comparison, that the same victory of the spirit" in the purely symbolical system of images (taken without any connection with conceptualism) could have been just the other way round, to wit, a depiction of a beautiful strong hero striking a monstrous hydra.

Grobman's magical symbolism in Israel of the 70s was implemented not only as depictions but also as actions, performances, and projects. These events were peculiar due to the fact that, unlike many other contemporary Israeli artists who tend to shun Jewish tradition, Grobman expressed the intention to act within this framework.

Grobman's works of the mid-'80s – early '90s, exhibited here, belong by no means to an entirely new artist. But at the same time, one cannot find in them any importunate repetitions of previous breakthroughs, or attempts to conserve his own style which is typical of some maitres. His works (gouaches on large sheets of cardboard) even look different: the once dominating "orderliness" and geometric precision gave way to a free picturesqueness and a fluid facture; surfaces of deep local color gave way to thick free strokes and sometimes surprisingly tender tonal juxtapositions. It is worth mentioning that an analogous freedom is also felt in his approach. The works of this period are very different: a Sots-art text against an abstract background adjoins the portrait or landscape, and the cartoon is next to the mystical picture. If there is an external principle which unites all these works, it is the color vision; each work is characterized by its own color design which is implemented either based on symbols, or without the symbols, or even in defiance of them. The images of monstrous animals and birds (as if remnants of "magical symbolism") can still be found in some works ("Mediterranean, On the Bank of the Jordan River", etc.), but the conception itself seems to have been decomposed and reconsidered from within, being turned into an element of a new, more flexible and open system. One can assume that the shift was inspired by the regular search for "contact with reality"; in any case, this can be confirmed with Grobman's verses of this period which became by then an important and specific aspect of his creative activity. In his verses, as well as in the gouaches, the insistent presence of reality is more than obvious. This reality is contemporary, everyday life in one of the Mediterranean countries, permeated with symbols of millennia and perceived through a "nitwit's" eyes. The dominating metaphysical aspect becomes the notion of death per se. The consequence (more evident in the verses) is the "nitwit's" resistance to the idea of death, the philosophical reconsideration of a real or imaginary threat to existence, this threat being uttered whether from the inside or from the outside, concealed in "human guts" or total aggressiveness of humanity.

This "turn to reality" had specific overtones in Grobman's artistic method. In his paintings, Grobman returns to a typically conceptual reflection upon the correlation between art and reality. It is worth noting that within the framework of these reflections, Grobman achieves such rare and powerful insights into reality which seem to be pure pictorial inspiration, e.g., "The Rain in Jerusalem Mountains", "Tel-Aviv Airport", or "Dunes near Tel-Aviv".



**At home by Grobman's** May 7, 1971

from right: Irena Vruble-Golubkina, Michail Grobman,

Lev Nusberg, Mishel Ragon, Fransuaz Ragon,

Aleksandr Grigorjev Photo: Vladimir Grabenko

However, the light and space in these works are so symbolic that it seems hardly possible to treat them as landscapes; rather, we can say that Grobman reached such a level of conceptual work where the image needs no dramatic plot and can in itself tell the spectator about both the absolute, and the "layers" which conceal it and can be removed by cognitive efforts. Some reflective "moves" which control Grobman's artistic thinking can be traced. One of the most obvious moves is the dialogue with Sots-art. The specificity of Grobman's approach now, in this new period, is connected to the investigation of possibilities provided by combinations of various systems based on visual signs. In his magical symbolism he combined the strategies of conceptualism and symbolism, and in the 80's magical symbolism began to build up the dialogue with Sots-art as the latter became increasingly widespread in the modern artistic environment.

Sots-art is a trend which stimulates and reflects the language of symbolic "realia" associated with the Soviet system; the metaphysical purposes of such an analysis are lost. This trend originated within Conceptualism, but in the tidal wave of politicization that overwhelmed Russia at the time, Sots-art overgrew its original status of conceptualism's "affiliate", beginning to claim the role of the epoch's mouthpiece, and even beyond the Russian borders.

Magical symbolism and Sots-art are conceptually distant trends, but they have a common source, and hence are compatible in principle. The return of Sots-art in the bosom of conceptualism and its reflection within Magical Symbolism (which is the most metaphysical branch of the main trend) was to produce the unexpected incestuous" result.

Indeed (and it was easy to envisage), being highly ideologized, the Zionist reality proved to be an extraordinarily convenient substratum for the development of Sots-art simulations ("Zionism is Our Future", "Long Live the United and Indivisible Israel"). The reflection of this reality in the perception of the Russian "nitwit" provided extra opportunities for this game. The real motivation to mirror one ideology in another was the so-called "Great Aliyah" (massrepatriation of the 90's from the ex-Soviet Union) which connected the two worlds; this topic is revealed in "Greetings from Israel" and in some other works. Another experiment was much more fruitful and spiritually independent: the artist used the elements of metaphysics which Sots-art rejected when formulating his own tasks in a different manner than conceptualism, and included them "back" in Sots-art.

Thus, "Lenin's Mausoleum" (Grobman's series started in 1988) proved to be not only, nor exclusively the distinctive fiction of the Soviet mode of thinking, but also a peculiar temple of death placed into the metaphysical landscape. Grobman's Tomb is precisely a tomb, i.e. the place, or sanctuary of the obsequies cult; the rites are performed there permanently judging by its windows which are lit with a steady dim light; and the well-known slogan "Lenin is alive" in this context recalls the mysterious nature of such actions, which through their mythological idea connect life and death. Other elements of the depiction too correspond to this concept: the trees symmetrically flanking the tomb bend toward it like saints to the cross in orthodox icons, and the role of the tomb's pyramidal geometrical silhouette is similar to the role of the Tree of Life in archaic images. Stars, zoomorphic elements and various inscriptions assign various "tombs" of this series to various associative fields, without deviating from the principle topic - the theme of death.

This theme unifies practically all other aspects of the artist's outlook; we find this motif in other works - e.g. in the direct (as if from under the ground) depiction of a grave "I do not want". This theme can be found in many verses where lethal foreboding and philosophical generalizations are retold by the same "nitwit" who also peeped into the grave: "The death is sown in your back/ In your horse/ In a cat (PS: "Don't kill the cats!"), in a crabby/ In your guts/ ...These are the Lord's laws/ Neither complaints nor moans can help/ And your homeless soul rushes about/ Starting to breathe in some other way." The soul, this metaphysical psyche (to use the symbolic code) can be personified by a bird sitting on the roof of one of the tombs bearing the inscription "Solzhenitzin". The zoomorphic language of archaic images is not lost at this new



stage; it exists along with political and popular rhetoric. One can mention zoomorphic symbols in such works as "The Birds Death in the Grass", "Mediterranean", "On the Bank of the Jordan River".

One of the artistic chefs-doeuvre of this "zoomorphic" group is the Snake-Leviathan, with a cross on its head, the scale of shining pictorial pointillism, dimly flickering eyes en face on the dark nosedominated profile He (such eyes in Grobman's monsters seem to be the sign of evil). In this case, its demonic hybridity is directly related to the theme of the paradoxical conjunction of Russian and Jewish worlds, only on the "metaphysical" level, as the theme of correlation between Judaism and Christianity: "A baptized kike is like a forsworn snake". The traditional (in the spirit of the Jewish tradition) visual symbol both contrasts and corresponds to the simulation of the traditional (in Russian vulgar folklore style) verbal formula of this correlation.

The second idea manifested in this new period of Grobman, and shared by many contemporary artists, can be formulated as the analysis of painting's linguistic nature by means of its conceptual simulation. The idea of this strategy consists in transferring the reflection of the artistic gesture from the realm of actions and texts back to the canvas. Considering this gesture as if through a magnifying glass, the artist not only paints but also cogitates on his actions, playing with denotations, decomposing and again synthesizing his way from denotatum to designatum, thus allowing viewers to see the results of both processes.

The most "convenient" system for such a simulation is expressionism, which demonstrates how the depiction is created, and allows us to watch the independent development of the pictorial structure. That is why the majority of post-avant-garde paintings are expressionist, and Grobman's gouaches of the 80's are also done mostly in the expressionistic mode. But it is interesting to mention a couple of nuances.

Firstly, trans-avant-garde rarely pursued purely pictorial goals, using a painting technique for its own purposes only, whereas Grobman seems to use the trans-avant-garde situation for the real painting - maybe, though not a regular one, reflective and enriched by the conceptualist experience. Secondly, expressionism interests Grobman not in its entirety, and definitely not as a system which releases elementary and sometimes primitive emotions of an artist regarding the object of painting, but rather as a specific stage in the decomposition of realistic painting, since analysis of the latter (or even squaring up with it) remains his inveterate topic. Likewise, Grobman shows interest in other techniques that allow a conceptual reduction of the idea of painting to elementary gestures.

One of these techniques is pointillism, the impressionist style of painting with strokes-points. Grobman too utilizes this technique in an "analytical" way; he succeeds in separating the denotatum and designatum even within the framework of this truism. He deliberately separates and even opposes the pictorial method to its original outlook, while the world is apprehended as a total illusion of the spectator (claiming even on

the scientifically-grounded naturalism). Pointillism is used mostly in fragments of these works which are strictly confined and even outlined. In "Tel-Aviv Airport" outlines of the trees are filled with pointille which makes them the only fantastic, "monstrous" element of this (seemingly) realistic landscape. Being liberated from its ideology ("scientifically grounded means of depicting **the** world"), Pointillism becomes an abstract texture with a rich decorative and expressive potential.

There is another method used by Grobman to analyze the pictorial texture: in his gouaches, he regularly allows for damp patches which form another, natural texture over the texture built by the artist - i.e., a vertical net of lines. This confrontation of the artificial and the natural obviously works in "The Portrait of Volodya Yakovlev", in the painting depicting the name of "Yakovlev", in "Dunes near Tel-Aviv", in "The Sea Shore", and in other works. And last but not least: the original attempt "to depict" the texture by means of a regular net of lines that became a semblance of a wall, with another pictorial gesture - graffiti "Vrubel, Larionov, Grobman" ("Three Michaels").

These three names remind us of the role of Russian tradition in Grobman's approach to the phenomenon of painting. Indeed, the expressionistic element which forms the simulative "style" of his works is closer to Larionov and Goncharova or Burlyuk (sometimes being openly reminiscent of rayonism), than to the idol of world's trans-avant-garde, Kirchner. Interestingly, Russian expressionism with its primitivistic tendencies was inclined to the zoomorphic symbolism borrowed from Lubok, which used to nourish the imagination of Russian avant-garde artists with its picturesque roosters and firebirds.

This mutual love and inner solidarity are openly reflected in Grobman's "In Memory of David Burlyuk" which depicts in an almost "rayonistic" manner the marvelous lively garden, with a bird of paradise sitting in the greenery. As in the case of pointillism, Grobman draws from the rayonistic system its principal ideological aspect, i.e. the association with the light, thus paralyzing any attempt to interpret his work as a development of rayonism. The deep-red coloring of the picture contradicts the light rays of rayonism, referring us, as typical of Grobman, to the word: in Russian phraseology, "red" also means "beautiful", and thus the painting's coloring corresponds to the mythical idea of paradisaal beauty.

The entire story of Russian futurism and expressionism is latently presented in these works: Burlyuk, Larionov, Kruchonykh, and Vladimir Yakovlev of the younger generation. Some of these Russian artists are mentioned (or hinted at) in the paintings titles, others bring up stylistic associations; some appear in the works like imaginary portraits or in the form of words (artists names). A prominent place in this world is occupied by Kazimir Malevich. Though Malevich was never an expressionist in the strict sense of the word, he expressed the metaphysical, philosophical nature of Russian futurism in the strongest way. That is why Grobman regularly returns to him or to his visual symbols. Thus, Grobman adopts the suprematist cross,

transforming it into the bird-plane, a flying zoomorphic monster reminiscent of Malevich's favorite dream about abiding in the free space. The painting "Malevich-Sea" elevates the notion of Malevich up to the status of a specific milieu, in-between the metaphysical intuition of the incognizable and the real sensation of a free flight. The metaphysical character of the suprematist quest in the field of pure geometrical forms (as opposed to the artistic pragmatism of constructivist geometry) brought Grobman to assert, in one of his articles, that: "Suprematism is a sort of artistic Judais" <sup>4</sup>. This statement, as well as the quest for a visual "bridge" between suprematism and magical symbolism, between the suprematist element and the monster, proves how deeply Malevich's system and approach have been internalized in Grobman's creative activity.

Another Russian artist to whom Grobman dedicated several works as well as a special essay is Isaac Levitan, and it was not in vain. In Grobman's artistic universe, Levitan is a mirror image of, and an antipode to Malevich. The latter, with his "pictorial realism", resolutely broke through all layers of habitual vision, while the former created and weaves these layers so well that several generations of Soviet people considered his realistic landscapes a standard of the artistic principle.

One of Grobman's first approaches to this phenomenon was the attempt to convert, by means of minimal transformations, the reproductions of Levitan's good and "correct" paintings (model Russian landscapes which were published in Russian language text books) into "Jewish" and incorrect ones. Broken graphical lines of strange constellations were now crossing the oily air of Levitan's canvasses with floating churches and horses. Fundamentally, the experiment worked. It turned out that practically no force had to be applied: the outer interference only assisted in the revelation of hidden inner lines and mystical spatial dynamics typical of Levitan's best works. As a matter of fact, Levitan proved to be a mysterious Leviathan, and his Eternal Peace, with its abstract light and nearly Grobmanian monsters in the clouds, happened to be the most sincere utterance of a Russian Jew.

One of the most distinct formulas for the aesthetic correlation between art and reality was given by Grobman in his gouache "Good Day, Comrade Levitan" This work seems to be a direct reference to the image of another prominent European realist, G. Courbet. However, the composition is dose not to „Bonjour, monsieur Courbet!" (as the title implies), but rather is reminiscent of "A Burial at Oman", with the dark yawned grave in the foreground, the vertical line of the cross (above and on the left of the crowd), and the melancholy foreboding of eternity. The rickety and ramshackle fence in the middle of Grobman's gouache can probably be associated at first sight with Levitan's lyrical tender emotions about Russian meager nature, but - over the yawned darkness of the grave and against the background of the scarlet glow - it is rather read as the symbol of death and chaos. To meet Levitan at that very place clearly means that

the quiet realistic idyll of Russian landscape created on his canvasses does not soothe at all, but rather, unwittingly, half opens the door to the incognizable which is symbolized by the metaphysical horror of death.

Speaking of realism, Grobman, like Courbet, can be seen walking around his "village" (a prestigious Tel-Aviv area, near the sea-side), while everyone greets him, "Shalom, Mar Grobman!". Courbet used to walk with a stick, while Grobman's customary companion is a dog.

I go for a walk

And to take out Timur, the dog.

And meet Nily,

A quiet fool.

Our yard is edged With oleander bushes.

A cats' gang is sneaking Behind the bushes.

Here goes an Arab,

With his bucket.

He closely watches My dog.

Hi, Abdallah, How's the kids?

Abdallah scratches His sweaty armpits.

Squint-eyed Yossi

Is looking out of his window.

He is a drug-fiend And always begs for something.

I see that the sewer Is blocked, And all shit Is afloat.

I bring My special device And clear The shitpipe.

The better part of the afternoon Is over,

And I feel A healthy fatigue.

And return home To take a nap,

Me, the classic Of international reputation.

During this ritual walk, the natives can greet the artist, bowing and taking off their hats. And as far as this picture is concerned, the picture existing only in our imagination and not yet painted by the artist, the picture where he unstops the sewer pipe and washes off the excrements... well, it is the traditional social mission of a real realistic artist, isn't it?

Notes:

1 Ilya Kabakov. "The Seventies". From Memoirs. Iskusstvo (Art), 1 (1990), 9.

2 Leviathan, 2(1979), 6.

3 Ibid.

4 "Michail Grobman.The Biblical Structure of the Square". Zerkalo ("The Mirror"), 3-4 (1996), 175.