

Symbol, Letter, and Word in Michail Grobman's Art

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Michail Grobman formulated Magical Symbolism in Moscow, in September 1967, for the first time encapsulating his artistic approach, which had begun to crystallize in 1959. Perceiving it as "a system of (visual) signs decipherable through spiritual introspection,"¹ he strives "to transport the human psyche over the bridge that separates the material from the spiritual, so that the psyche may know the meaning of its earthly existence."² At that time, the twenty-year old artist was facing the vacuum of the post-Stalinist period, following forty years of art in the service of an establishment which denied artists creative freedom. He realized that his art had to be based on foundations entirely different from those of Soviet art. His only way was to return to the artistic sources of early twentieth century Modern art, and from it to draw inspiration for the creation of a new language. In the process he would also give explicit expression to his Jewish identity, and would be the first among the second avant-garde artists to dedicate numerous works to this concern since 1960.

Grobman connected to both the Jewish folk-art tradition and to Jewish philosophy, especially to Kabbalah and various remnants of Jewish life in Russia. He delved into the works of the early twentieth century Russian avant-garde, while trying to keep abreast of developments in Western Europe. The link to the past was partly intended to break free of the stifling dominant trend

of Socialist Realism. During that period Grobman and a small group of other young artists created a new artistic reality, which would, after many struggles, attain growing recognition in Russia itself as well as a widening interest from around the world. In *The First Manifesto of the Leviathan Group* Grobman would write: "Three foundations define our artistic position: 1. primitivism; 2. symbol; 3. letter."³

The concept of 'primitivism' played an important role in the development of modern art in Russia and the West. As early as 1913, A. Schewtschenko addressed the issue, writing: "We aim to find new ways for our art. At the same time, we do not reject the old art outright, permitting its early expressions, especially the primitive, the enchanted stories of the Far East, to continue to inspire us. The simple, unconcealed beauty of the *lubok*, the austere quality of the primitive, the mechanical precision of the construction, the nobility of style and beautiful color, are fused together thanks to the creative hand of a powerful artist – this is our slogan, and this is our solution. [...] We take the *lubok*, the primitive, the icon, for in them we find the precise, direct, and pure pictorial concept of life."⁴

Schewtschenko took part in the first exhibition, which Mikhail Larionov dedicated to 'primitive' art in 1913 Moscow. The exhibition spanned icons, manuscripts, and *luboks* (popular woodcut prints), mostly from Larionov's private collection, as well as art objects from the Far East. Starting in 1908, Larionov himself created paintings in neo-primitivist style. Below we will examine how 'primitivism' would become a central element in Grobman's

work, a permanent visual infrastructure nourished by diverse Russian sources, from icons to folk art.

This essay sets out to examine the significance of the symbol and the letter in Grobman's art, whose combination is an inseparable part of the Magical Symbolism system. Discussing the symbol, Grobman wrote: "The mystical language of prophets – the visual act of our unity with the Creator – the precise sign of the bond between body and spirit – *Kabbalah*."⁵ We will closely follow the integration of symbols in the fabric of his works and their multiple meanings in different visual contexts. As for the letter, Grobman regards it as "the magical embodiment of logic – the instrument of morality, truth, and purity – a mode of communication with the Creator – the Ten Commandments – the Talmud."⁶ We shall embark on a fascinating journey during which we will unearth the affinities between the primitive, the symbol, and the letter, as well as the stratified messages they convey in Grobman's work. Beyond the letter as symbol, Grobman employs words and texts in his art since he is a poet and a scholar, as well as due to his artistic perception. In this context it ought to be noted that many twentieth century artists employed letters and words in their art, starting with Picasso's and Braque's first collages in 1912. As a result of this development, the picture lost its exclusivity as a visual message. Carlo Carrà, for example, painted a street demonstration in 1914, where the text dominates the entire picture space. In his painting *This is not a pipe*, Surrealist artist René Magritte creates an incongruity between the object's visual depiction and its verbal definition, thus challenging the truth of what we see. In the early 1960s Italian Mimmo Rotella exhibited torn posters, where

segments of visual images and word fragments become pictures that express the chaos of urban life. During the same period, American Ed Ruscha made paintings of monumental billboards with text. In the 1990s, Chinese Xu-Bing painted full pages of imaginary ideograms. These few examples indicate to what extent script has become a central component in art.

During the 1950s Grobman had direct access to Russian avant-garde art that was still hidden in the basements of museums and in the homes of a few private collectors. Thus he became familiar with the Cubo-Futurist works of Kazimir Malevich and Natalia Goncharova, which featured various letters, words, symbols, and images. In the works of artists such as Vasilii Ermilov and Ivan Puni letters became a central, and sometimes the only element in the painting. Later on the avant-garde artists engaged in applied art and propagandist art, and combined text with picture for their posters and book covers. Typography and book design thrived in Moscow in the 1910s and 1920s. Grobman's private collections, which he began in the 1960s, contain many works by David Burliuk, Mikhail Larionov, El Lissitzky, Kazimir Malevich and Nikolai Kulbin based on the combination of letter and symbol. Grobman feels a particular affinity to Malevich, since "Malevich's line is not a sign of logic, it is a sign of spiritual purity. The *Black Square* of Malevich is a symbol of spiritual not physical construction. Malevich is a body with a spiritual flesh and blood of a Biblical prophet. The quest for Malevich is a search for God, far from the poesy of technological minds... but yearns, above all, for the reconstruction of the inner world of humanity."⁷ Grobman goes on to quote Malevich: "Through all his productions, man in the hope of arriving at God or

perfection seeks to attain the throne of thought as the absolute way in which he will act not as a man but as a God, because on it he is incarnated, becoming ideal."⁸ Grobman constructs a temporal bridge which takes him back to a forgotten period, renews severed ties, and like an echo of that period, he declares: "We can touch only a single thread of the transcendental veil, the absolute act, and, having touched it, to stop short before the most optimistic secret that has ever astounded us. The essence of our universal method is a gaze into the phenomena furnished by eternity... The goal is the magical release of the world from its fetters, and the symbol serves as its weapon."⁹

Still Life M1 from 1959 (fig. 1), which attests to a Futurist influence, portrays a large eye floating in space, a symbol of the divine essence and a source of light and wisdom. In that same space is the letter M, which possibly symbolizes the artist's name, Michail, but is not necessarily a signature, and is open to other interpretations. In another work from 1962 (fig. 2) the three objects have become symbols, a fact reinforced by their symbolic coloration: a black bottle, a brown glass, and a white fish floating in space. The signature and year are enclosed in a rectangle, and signify the artist's presence. The black bottle holds the mysterious knowledge that will be laid bare; the brown glass may symbolize the earth as the source of life; and the white fish – water, fertility, wisdom, purity, to give but a partial list of the fish symbolism.

Grobman leaves his symbols open to different interpretations, but their specific integration in the picture clearly lends them a singular meaning whose revelation demands delving into the artist's Magical Symbolism, thus bringing

us closer to a spiritual and artistic experience that is beyond the visual.

Another 1962 work (fig. 3) features a green square, with a small white circle in its upper right corner, and beside it – a white branch with three leaves. The square is one of the basic geometric shapes of the language of symbols, and many meanings have been ascribed to it. One is the eternal, celestial Jerusalem. The branch symbolizes the renewal of life, but in its specific form it signifies both the purity of man and the Menorah. Grobman is at the outset of his journey, and he composes a lexicon of symbols that in the future will allow him to formulate personal artistic messages with ever more intricate meanings.

In 1971 Grobman returned to the three elements: the bottle, the glass (circle), and the fish in *Evening Prayer* (fig. 4). The painting was executed while still in Moscow, and on its back it bears the words: 'Still Life – Departure for the Unknown.' The objects are concentrated in the middle, placed on the windowsill; the color blue beyond the sill indicates the infinite sky. The objects/symbols are flat, with hieroglyphs on them, signifying the transition from still life to spiritual nourishment. The title, *Evening Prayer*, also alludes to the direction of the Land of Israel. In the year of Grobman's immigration to Israel, the three objects could have symbolized the artist and his family, and their departure for the unknown, equipped with spiritual nourishment that held them together. In some instances Grobman's symbols are extracted from mythology. Although at one point he renounced depiction of the human figure, he returned to it as a symbolic mythological figure, as in *Winged Mermaid II* from 1963 (fig. 5), where he furnished the female figure with the tail and wings

of a bird, letting her move freely in the ocean depths and the infinity of the sky. With a Russian landscape in the background, she symbolizes the yearning for freedom. Grobman often depicts creatures floating in space, like the angels in the painting *To the End of the Earth II* (fig. 6), and *Eternal Journey* (fig. 7) painted a few years later. In the latter, the symbolic message is more complex. Grobman depicts the mythical Phoenix of unsurpassed beauty, that is granted longevity; if it bursts into flame, it will be reborn from the ashes. For Grobman, the Phoenix symbolizes the Jewish people, traveling back and forth across the earth (the spiral at top right), the ship symbolizes the eternal wanderings, and the vegetation – the momentum of renewed life. The work's title, *Eternal Journey*, now acquires its full symbolic meaning, especially if we recall that during the same year Grobman composed his text about Magical Symbolism. It refers to an eternal journey in pursuit of the spiritual and redemption.

Grobman's symbolic world is filled with animals, as in the painting *Triangle* (fig. 8), where every creature symbolizes one of life's basic elements: air, water, and earth. The animals represent the forces operating above us, and shaping life. Different cultures throughout history have attributed animals with a wide range of qualities, but on the whole, they have common elements, which lend them universal meaning. Grobman regards the *Rhino-Wolf* (fig. 9), for example, as an expression of negative, even threatening forces. The rhino-wolf dominates the painting's space, set against the backdrop of a fragile house. The struggle between positive and negative forces will come to hold an important place in Grobman's works. For the time being, however, he

goes on exploring the powers of mythological figures, and in the painting *Garden Goddess I* (fig. 10) depicts the figure of an imaginary goddess, surrounded by vegetation, holding a little house in her outstretched hand, with a sailboat in the background. Some of the plants are pulled upwards by their roots; they symbolize the yearning for light, while the house and the boat signify the contradiction between the desire for a stable center and the dream to sail away to distant realms. The artist invites us to interpret his work to the best of our understanding, and thereby supplement it with additional layers of meaning. *The Fisherman's Tree* (fig. 11) likewise brings together the natural elements: water, earth, and living creatures. The water is drawn from the earth through the tree trunk, reaching the branches that hold five fish. The figure of the Jew stands firm like the trunk; both symbolize the essence of spiritual life, which is nourished by vital energies buried deep and rising to the top, where they ripen like fruit on the Tree of Life.

In 1963 Grobman spent a few months in the border area between Tajikistan and Afghanistan as an artist participating in a scientific expedition. His letters to his wife, Ira, gave him a unique opportunity to draw imaginary creatures on the backs of the envelopes. In this Grobman preceded the 'mail artists' of the 1970s. This was the first time that he significantly combined visual images and script. Since the stamps were an integral part of the envelope 'compositions,' Grobman added the act of collage to the drawing and writing. One may discern a fish hovering above a legendary city (fig. 12a), or a fish with a human head over the desert (fig. 12b), and a fish symbolizing death, threatening the village below (fig. 12e). There are also animals symbolizing

the spirits of evil, such as *KingSnake* (fig. 12d) or *Dragon* (fig. 12c), that stand for political evil. This envelope also includes a special form of signature that Grobman started using around that time. Only a few envelopes have survived, but this experiment taught Grobman to employ different, unconventional materials as infrastructure for his paintings, a mode of operation with which he has persisted.

Jewish symbolism occasionally recurs in Grobman's paintings, as in *The Israeli Soldier's Grave* (fig. 14), depicting a grave with two markers bearing the Hebrew words *Amru* ("they said") and *le'Elohim* ("to God"), and next to them – a traditional seven-branched *menorah* shaped like an amputated tree. In the background is an imaginary landscape of the Judean hills, and in the sky – sun and moon that symbolize the passing time. Grobman observes from afar the existential struggle of Israel, to which he will arrive only eight years later. In 1964 the Leviathan emerges in his work for the first time, a monster which, according to tradition, one must not risk wakening. In the Book of Job it is said to have been vanquished by God in the beginning of time. A symbolical figure rich in meanings, the Leviathan surfaces on occasion in Grobman's work, who perceives it as "a symbol of heaven, earth, water, sea and wind, movement and direction, a symbol of the people as well: a dual symbol of an animate creature and an inanimate stone."¹⁰

In *Leviathan* (fig. 16) the mythological animal floats above a legendary vista of hills, water with boats, trees and animals. Its dominant presence does not seem to disturb the flow of daily life below. Grobman's symbolic figures often

hover in a celestial world, in realms of purity and spirituality, far from the earthly reality. They exist in the imagination and their power lies in their symbolism. They function as a key to understanding the world, and allow us to sense the invisible.

Light, fragile, and splendid, carried weightlessly by the power of its wings, the butterfly naturally joined the symbolic world of the artist who painted *Grobman's Butterfly* (fig. 15), granting it a gentle beauty and translucence. For the first time, Grobman turned writing into an integral part of the work's texture, writing inside the butterfly's wings 'Michail Grobman Jew.' The symbolism is clear. As a Jewish artist he wants to move freely as a butterfly; he identifies with the butterfly and declares his Jewishness, a brave position at the time. Furthermore, his signature completes the drawing of the butterfly's body, which seems to be floating in an infinite space. During the same year Grobman created another painting, *Dead Head Butterfly* (fig. 17), portraying a butterfly and above it, an imaginary head, part animal, part human, symbolizing Death. The butterfly's body bears a poem by Grobman titled *Dead Head*. It is the first time that one of his poems appeared as part of a painting. Grobman the poet met Grobman the painter, a fusion that henceforth would often reoccur in his visual art. His signature is also part of the painterly texture. It is confined within a circle like a stamp of sorts. The butterfly sometimes symbolizes death and sometimes life. Grobman presents this duality underlying the butterfly's wonderful yet short life, and the inevitable death looming over it. This duality is also discernible in another work, *Black Sun* (fig. 18). The black sun is the nighttime sun that abandons our world in

order to illuminate other worlds. The fish, emerging from the depths of the sea, is set free from its natural element and reaches upward; there it will discover a new world coming into being, a world that contains, concurrently, danger, suffering, and death as well. This was also the artist's desire, as he departed from the safe ground of tradition in order to explore new worlds and a different kind of light, knowing that the path was perilous and that he was going toward the unknown. Within just a few years Grobman succeeded in forming a new, unique artistic concept, based on a personal lexicon of symbols, whereby he constructed a visual world overflowing with personal and universal messages.

At this point I would like to turn to a completely different group of works from the second half of the 1960s, which originated in the early twentieth century Russian and European avant-garde tradition. These works are, in the main, connected to the technique of collage, in which Grobman has consistently engaged together with his painting. The themes are linked chiefly to Russian history, as in *The Year 1812* (fig. 19), depicting three Russian leaders who bravely confronted Napoleon's soldiers. The figures have become symbols, yet this time they are drawn from the world of earthly reality. In the collage *The Artillery Corps* (fig. 20) one observes, amongst other things, a portrait of General Suvarov, an old etching depicting a soldier and cannon, and a short text in French. It is a visual narrative, and the viewer is expected to build up the meaning of the picture from its various elements. Among the collages which I acquired in the 1990s for the Ludwig Museum in Cologne, there was one entitled *Russia Decorated with Medals* (fig. 21), which demonstrates the

Russian tradition of awarding medals to its heroes, and emphasizes the continuation of this phenomenon during the Soviet regime. Another collage, *Generalissimo* (fig. 22), clearly indicates the continuum of totalitarian rule in Russia, ending with the figure of Stalin. Grobman feels that he no longer wants to address only spiritual issues, and that he must enter the social-political arena. This need will grow over the years, becoming an important aspect of his future work.

Before his immigration to Israel in 1971, Grobman created two paintings: *Next Year in Jerusalem* (fig. 23) and *Let My People Go* (fig. 24). These feature many symbols of the Grobmanesque cosmos, and the work's titles are woven into the bodies of the works. Grobman was equipped with a consolidated artistic language and worldview, along with the knowledge that he could develop them only in the new place. In Israel he began to compose his 'aphorisms,' which formed a theoretic and programmatic infrastructure to his work, and would accompany him throughout the 1970s.¹¹ In January 1975 he published *Leviathan newspaper No. 1* (fig. 25), a broadsheet newspaper of his own design, entirely in Russian handwriting. The texts were accompanied by reproductions of works by Russian artists and Grobman himself. From here it would be a short journey to the exclusive use of texts as visual works. In the same year he painted/wrote *Aphorisms* (fig. 26), where writing fills the entire surface, and the symbol of the Leviathan is painted at the center. It is a declarative piece where symbol and text reinforce one another. Conceptual art was in blossom at this time. In addition to pictures reduced to symbols and handwritten texts, Grobman also conceived of several environmental projects,

such as *The Practice of Magical Symbolism*, *The Leviathan Theater* (fig.27). For the time being he would give up ornamentation and color, focusing on the transmission of the spiritual message of Magical Symbolism through visual text. If previously he had combined the letter and word in a painterly configuration, now the situation was reversed, and the script (usually accompanied by a symbol) became the painting. Grobman also painted works with his poems. In *Poems* (fig. 28), for example, a circle is outlined at the center of the sheet and in it a bird with spread wings, symbolizing the flight of the poet's imagination. The visual poem and the verbal picture form an artistic symbiosis, and whoever reads the poem also hears the sounds of the words rising from the painting. In *The Gates of Heaven* (fig. 29), Grobman wrote/painted his poems from the years 1971-75. In the upper section he painted a triangle inside a square, with the Hebrew letter *shin* (ש) at its center, denoting the word *Shaddai*, the Almighty. The bull in the lower part of the work symbolized God for the ancient Hebrews, and its wings transform it into an omnipotent mythological creature. One of the poems, *Death*, sheds light on the meaning of the title, *The Gates of Heaven*. To the left of the bull is a structure topped by a triangle, possibly a tomb, possibly a temple, possibly both, and to its right – a combination of a tree and a menorah. What at first appears as a mere illustration for the poems or a depiction of a beautiful, mysterious legend, turns out to be poignant meditation on human existence. In one of his poems Grobman wrote: "God, how heavy is your infinite caress."¹²

Once again Grobman felt the need to expand his oeuvre, introducing the spatial dimension. In *Made of Wood* (fig. 30) he wrote/painted his poems in black on a white-painted wooden pole floating in the air, which he defined as a 'messenger.' The stick and the viewer share the same space, and a new relationship is established between the spectator and the work, one that from 1978 on, would find its full expression in Grobman's performances in the Judean Desert with the Leviathan Group. In 1976 Grobman composed *The First Manifesto of the Leviathan Group* intended to introduce a new agenda into Israel's artistic discourse. Henceforth theoretical thought would intensively accompany his visual practice, and he would try to include other artists in joint actions in the manifesto spirit. In the same year he created a large series of self-portraits, whose purpose was to assemble his growing visual lexicon. He created a uniform outline, a profile of a human figure, and filled its contour with symbols, letters, texts, and images which together sketch a portrait of his work and of his spiritual perception. In this context one may recall Magritte's figure with its famous bowler hat, which the Surrealist painter filled with his typical blue skies and white clouds, among other things. Grobman on his part created the large series of self-portraits in the same year that the Leviathan Group was founded. In preparation for the coming battles he equipped himself with his entire range of symbols, as weapons for "the magical release of the world from its fetters." In *Self-Portrait, Porcelain Man* (fig. 31), he took an image from his earlier work, *Porcelain Man* (fig. 32), and used it as an archetype for the whole series. Drawn on his forehead are cosmic symbols, alluding to the universe inside each person's head. In his new work, he unfolds the richness of the symbols, which are "the purest and most direct

way of marking the world's phenomena... which returns (man's) spiritual gaze to the eternal secret of the creation of the world, that is to say – to the secret of Creation."¹³ The series of self-portraits includes familiar symbols, such as the triangle, cross, Star of David, or the Leviathan. They also include texts, poems, short statements, images from life and nature, and even abstract lines with symbolic meanings open to interpretation. Each portrait makes a unique statement, but looking at the whole series provides a focused glance into the artist's inner world, while the symbol, the letter, the writing, and the depiction all allude to his existence.

While the Leviathan is mainly depicted as a symbolic figure reaching upward, Satan represents the evil forces that threaten the earthly and the existential. In *Kaddish* (fig. 13) the line "א (Aleph)... And the earth was without form, and void..." appears on Satan's body. In the same year Grobman wrote: "Fear of the Angel of Death appears in direct relation to chaos, which exists in man's soul and to his selfishness. Our fear of the Angel of Death is the Angel of Death itself."¹⁴ Under this line Grobman painted a visual symbol from the Kabbalah comprising lines and letters, each letter has a meaning. Thus, for example, the letters *aleph* [א] and *shin* [ש] represent God, but when brought together, they create the Hebrew word *esh* (fire). Below it, the letter *vav* [ו] which symbolizes struggle, and two circles in silver and gold standing for Michael (*Hesed*, grace/) and Daniel (*Din*, judgment), namely, the equilibrium between earthly and celestial forces. In another work, *North* (fig. 33), the Hebrew words *Tsafon* (north), *Netzach* (eternity, victory) and *Hod* (glory), as well as the letter *daleth* [ד] surround a triangle, and are painted in

blue on Satan's body, while his legs bear the artist's name. The symbolic meaning is that in each of us the forces of above and the forces of below, good and evil, celestial and earthly, are in constant struggle, and that we exist in a continual quest for the path (*tsafon*), the glory (*Hod*), and the spiritual (*Netzach*). Grobman expressed these struggles in his poems as well, written in vibrant red around the figure of Satan, drawn in white against a black ground. In 1978 he painted three pictures on long, narrow wooden panels. In the black upper section of *Word* (fig. 34), he painted the symbol of the Leviathan, and on its body the letter *tsaddik* [צ], symbolizing the righteous. Both relate to a Hassidic tale, recounting the story of the Leviathan that at the end of time will swallow all the sinners, and of the righteous who will eat its flesh. The Leviathan, which appeared in Grobman's work as early as 1964 (see fig. 16), and became the name and symbol of the group founded by Grobman in 1975, represents, among other things, the terrifying power described in the Book of Job (chapter 41): "1 Behold, the hope of him is in vain; shall not one be cast down even at the sight of him? 2 None is so fierce that dare stir him up; who then is able to stand before Me? 3 Who hath given Me anything beforehand, that I should repay him? Whatsoever is under the whole heaven is Mine. 4 Would I keep silence concerning his boastings, or his proud talk, or his fair array of words? ... 25 Upon earth there is not his like, who is made to be fearless. 26 He looketh at all high things; he is king over all the proud beasts." In the upper section of the work the letter *shin* [ש] is painted in a triangle, both representing divine will. The lower portion is completely dedicated to the handwritten 'aphorisms.' There is, of course, a dialectic connection between the two parts of the work, since the 'aphorisms'

are an expression of existential anxiety and the desire to discover spiritual powers that will bring us closer to the righteous. In the second piece, *Jerusalem Construction* (fig. 35), the same dual division exists, but this time the black is at the bottom, crossed by a verse from Genesis 1 (4-5), inscribed vertically (from top to bottom) in white: "And God said: Let there be light. And there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness." What can an intellectual add to this absolutist statement? Grobman's poems, written on the upper right side of the picture, consist of the same letters as the biblical verse, and both lead to the occult. Grobman knows how hard it is for man to tell light from darkness, and that this is the very essence of his life on earth. The title *Jerusalem Construction* alludes to the eternal, heavenly Jerusalem, as opposed to the earthly Jerusalem. It brings to mind the endless war for the real Jerusalem, for the spirit, for the light that will differentiate it from the mundane Jerusalem. The last work in the series, *Aleph – Adama (Earth)* (fig. 36), is painted in earth tones that cover the entire surface, apart from the upper right corner where the letter *aleph* (God) is written on a white background. The symbolism is clear, and it is reduced to two elements: Earth, namely absolute darkness, and Light, which illuminates the earth and emanates from God. Once light appears, the dialectic of life begins – the struggle to enhance the light and repel the darkness, an eternal, existential struggle that demands man's faith in his ability to win the battle one day.

This faith also accompanied Grobman when he held a series of performances/installations in the Judean Desert under the overall title *Angel*

of *Death*. Apart from the participants themselves, these events were held without an audience, and the photographs documenting them attest that the dialogue was held mainly with the primordial landscape through a limited and succinct number of symbols. The first event was held at the Dead Sea on June 2, 1978. In *Angel of Death* (fig. 37) a figure is seen at sea, completely covered in white shrouds, representing the Angel of Death, and nearby – the 'messenger,' a white plank bearing a circle enclosed in a triangle, which will soon be cast upon the water and start its journey into the unknown. It is the first dramatic meeting between two symbolic poles: on the one hand, the lifeless sea dominated by the Angel of Death, and on the other – the 'messenger,' who uses the waters of the Dead Sea to bring the message of spiritual life. In another event held on November 10, 1978, *The Angel of Death 3* (fig. 38, 39), the same shrouded figure symbolizing the Angel of Death is seen at the sea's edge. Painted in black on a rock placed on the desert floor are the three hands of Satan that seem to grow out of the earth, each one bearing an eye. The interrelations of the Angel of Death and Satan with the desolate landscape are so strong and penetrating, that it seems as though the landscape is their permanent abode. In another event, *The Angel of Death 6* held in Qumran on June 5, 1981, a figure is seen in white shrouds with hands raised, and words in Russian from a poem by Grobman about death are inscribed on the cloth:

I, the private, service number 2750913

Today renounce my glory,

Renounce the seasons of the year,

Renounce birds and plants,

Renounce streets, winds, and words,
Renounce the Lord.

The Angel of Death will cover me
with his heavy wing.

Only the tears of farewell,

Only the tears of love

will be my consolation

In this eternal woebegone dream.¹⁵

The figure of the Angel of Death and the poem about death unite here in a dramatic symbiosis, becoming a memorial both eternal and ephemeral, dedicated to all the fallen, rising against the backdrop of the barren, hard stone of the mountain. The words, expressing the painful relinquishing of life, envelop the figure of the Angel of Death, and the poet senses that "Only the tears of love will be my consolation." The performances/installations in the desert comprise a unique and important chapter in 1970s Israeli art.

In *Satan* (fig. 40), the imaginary creature is reminiscent of the three hands of Satan that appeared on the rock in the desert. Grobman emphasizes the sense of evil by adding a shape that may be interpreted as half a swastika; in the background of the painting he defines the essence of Satan in words. Some two years earlier the artist had written: "Satan is the state of the human soul, a state devoid of love, when selfishness takes its place. In this way the human soul reaches total loneliness, detachment from its tribal roots, that is –

a state of the appearance of death and fear of it. Satan is the state of the human soul that leads to pain, fear, and despair. Satan dwells in every human soul; he amongst us who overcomes Satan is called righteous. The righteous is identified by the love that radiates from him."¹⁶ As mentioned above, the theme of the righteous had already appeared in *Word* (fig. 34), and it is clear that Grobman repeatedly introduced the figure of Satan because, in order to attain the title of righteous, he must overcome him.

In another painting of the figure of Satan, *Babel*, Grobman filled the figure's contour with his poems, thus defeating Satan from within, emptying him of all evil and turning the poet into a righteous man who brings love to the world. In *Inverted Skies* (fig. 41) the black Satan bears two symbols: an eye with the letter *aleph* (א – God) and a triangle with the words 'Oh Lord, My God' in Russian. A possible reading is that we can beat the Satan within us if we discover God and pray to him; if we abandon satanic darkness and discover the golden divine letter that appears in the center of the blue eye. Written in the upper section of the picture in Russian are the words 'Inverted Skies' in mirror image, with the last letter written on the folded corner of the page. The symbolic meaning is that the forces of the world may turn around at any moment: evil will bring good, darkness – light, matter – the sublime, falsity – the truth, and despair will bring faith.

Grobman succeeded in forming the language of Magical Symbolism that unites letter and symbol in a single structure; both come from the same mind, that strives to understand the world beyond its existential illusion and to

decipher its secrets through the layout of letters and symbols protecting them. It is no wonder that in the *Second Manifesto of the Leviathan Group*, published in 1979, Grobman opposes the various forms of realism, which in his opinion failed to find the true meaning of the world. In *Leviathan* issues 2 and 3, published in 1979 and 1981 respectively, over the 32 full four-columned pages of orderly, minute handwriting, Grobman continued in his efforts to create a cultural platform (in Russian) around him that would address chapters in Russian avant-garde art (visual art, literature, and poetry) from the beginning of the twentieth century and from the 1960s. Combined with his own artistic activities and those of the Leviathan group in Israel, the Russian roots were vital to the development of his art, even if it drew ever more elements from local life. *One* (fig. 42) features a mythological figure of a man with an animal's tail, above one of whose hands is a circle and the word 'kingdom,' symbolizing power. A word in Russian is inscribed on the figure's chest, whose double meaning is both 'alone' and the name of a Norse god. Lower down appears the word 'reverse,' written in mirror image, and further along the line – the words 'sinless heavens.' Next to one of its legs are a triangle and the letter *aleph*, and next to the other – a triangle with the word 'death.' It is an intricate array of symbols, letters, and words, and viewers are given the opportunity to find meaning in it. Man, like God, is lonely. On the one hand, he rules the world, but when sin takes over, the situation is liable to be reversed, and bring about death. The belief in God is the only way out of loneliness. This is, of course, but one possible reading of the work; any other interpretation will have to deal with the same system of symbols, letters, and words, and to produce an all-inclusive meaning from them. Another work in

the same series is entitled *Adam* (fig. 43), hence it clearly presents man and his inner conflicts through a system of symbols, letters, and words that manifest his way in the world: from his belief in his strength, through his loneliness, his fall from grace, his corporeal end, and his belief in eternity.

In the early 1980s, Grobman worked intensively in the collage medium, starting with a series of visual poems. This activity is on the indefinable line between verbal and visual creation, and is very different from those works where he blended his poems into the visual and material textures of his paintings, or even those where the handwritten poems were the only visual presence filling the entire space of the work. As preparation for the creation of his visual poems, Grobman cut up printed Russian words from the newspaper *America*, published in the 1960s and 1970s, creating a pool of words, each with a different typography and font. The task of creating the visual poem could then begin, and it would be based on numerous parameters, such as the words' meanings and sounds, typographical style, size, and position on the page. In contrast to 1920s Futurist poets, who settled for the formal effect in their visual poems, Grobman tried to infuse content into his poetic collages. The meaning of each word is emphasized by its unique typography, while the meaning of the whole poem is emphasized by the visual effect that changes from line to line. During this process the poem attains, simultaneously, its form, content, rhythm, and sound. One of the visual poems, entitled *Voice* (fig. 45), indicates the link between the visual and the vocal. The visual poems differ from Grobman's other poems due, amongst other things, to his decision to create them from the restricted bank of words previously cut from the

newspaper. The visual poems of this series were created on uniformly sized sheets; each with its own form and content, such as *Theater* or *Michail Grobman* (fig. 44). The artist managed to cancel the division between language and image deeply rooted in the history of Western culture. Moreover, he combined both to create a symbiosis so deep that they could not be told apart. As a painter and as a poet he was sometimes split between two worlds, and after countless experiments, he could finally complete their inner reconciliation.

Concurrent to the series of visual poems, Grobman created another series comprising approximately forty book covers in the 'polygrage' technique, a term coined by the artist to define works where he painted on printed pages (fig. 45 a, b, c). Grobman used book covers typical of the Stalinist period, with their propagandistic-kitsch design and hackneyed typography, and between the printed lines inserted his own painted text that visually blended in with the original design. From these two elements he created a poem, whose content radically altered that of the covers, and whose aim was to expose the false aesthetics and culture of the Stalinist period, which had not yet completely disappeared at the start of the 1980s. Grobman emptied the covers of messages that were no longer valid, infusing them with contemporary, relevant, and personal content. He used the covers as *objets trouvés*, and in the spirit of Duchamp bestowed them with a new artistic function.

Another series of collages, "Leniniada," made Grobman the first artist to fiercely attack and reveal the dark sides in Lenin's figure, which the Soviet

regime had turned into a myth and symbol of the Revolution; a figure which remained untouched even thirty years after Stalin's death. The works are based on typical photographs of Lenin, well-known for the most part, and on illustrations in naturalistic propagandistic style typical of the Soviet era, depicting naïve, optimistic scenes against the backdrop of Russian landscape. Below these visual elements Grobman wrote scathing texts that exposed Lenin's true character and introduced alternative interpretations contrary to the original intentions of the illustrations and photographs. Each work was given a title that is often vitriolic and insulting. Furthermore, the artist painted over certain parts of the reproductions in order to underscore the verbal message. The visual poems of *Leniniada* express the unequivocal political message of an artist, who during the 1960s fought against the conformism and oppression of a visionless regime, which had not yet succeeded in freeing itself from the Stalinist legacy. Grobman continued along the same line in the collage *The Soviet Moloch* (fig. 46), where he added a frightful, robotic body, made up of photographs of machine parts, to a portrait photograph of Stalin. The title, *The Soviet Moloch*, which forms an integral part of the work, connects the Canaanite divinity that demanded the sacrifice of children at the altar before throwing them into the flames, to the absolutist, cruel regime of Soviet Russia, which demanded the sacrifice of its subjects to further its goals.

In another work, *Epitaph for Brezhnev* (fig. 47), Grobman wrote two sentences across a photograph of the speaking leader. One – "This pig ruled over the great land," obviously refers to the Soviet Union; the other – "His body and

name putrefied in the small land," is a double clue, alluding to the place where, supposedly, Brezhnev heroically fought, as well as hinting at the small plot of land required for a man's burial. The photograph is glued to a piece of colorful, flowery wallpaper. At first glance one sees the figure of the potent leader covered with medals. Only after reading the written text and interpreting its critical meaning does it become clear that Grobman wishes to expose Brezhnev's true character and express his deep loathing of the man, but at the same time point out that the demise of the ruler of an empire is the same as that of any other man. In this work Grobman demonstrates the contradiction that sometimes exists between an image, which can present a false and deceptive façade, and the cruel truth of the reality behind it.

In the collage *The Last Kiss* (fig. 48) Grobman used a late nineteenth century Symbolist print, portraying a sailor kissing a nude nymph rising from a stormy sea, while he clings to his sinking ship. The nymph symbolizes, *inter alia*, man's attraction to crazy acts of heroism. The artist proffers his own interpretation to the scene in his words written below the print: "The Communist Party kissing the Soviet regime." He uses the scene depicted in the print as a metaphor for the madness of the regime, which will eventually be washed away, along with its adherents, by the stormy waves of history, and that it had reached its final hour.

Grobman was not only occupied with exposing the truth about the Soviet past. During this period he created a series of fourteen works entitled "Michail Grobman's Grave," which uniquely related to the Holocaust. He selected

photographs of entrance gates to houses built in the classical European style of the nineteenth century. On each one of them he drew a small black Star of David, and painted a few details of the gates in the color of the yellow patch. Under each photograph he wrote: 'Michail Grobman's Grave,' and adds fictitious, but meaningful details about the location of the gate/grave. The deep motive for this series possibly lies in the work *Michail Grobman's Grave in the Town of Dubasari* (fig. 49a), a Moldavian town where the Germans murdered and buried many Jews in a mass grave, including the artist's grandparents. Grobman places graves in other locations as well, such as on Wagnerstrasse in Munich or in Schewtschenko Square in Kiev (fig. 49b), both named for well-known anti-Semitic artists, thus tying his own fate with that of European culture and its internal contradictions. He mentions those composers, poets and intellectuals who were the kingpins of European culture, on the one hand, but on the other, were Jew-haters and prepared the ideological foundations for the Holocaust. His graves point to the internal contradiction that led a cultured society to total inhumanity and genocide. At the same time, these gates also lead to eternity and honor the memory of his people, those who have no graves, and whose contribution to human culture should not be forgotten.

In 2006 Grobman started a large series of polygraves based on two types of materials which he has gathered over the years. On the one hand, small drawings which addressed all the themes that had preoccupied him in the past decade, a mundane chronicle of his creative imagination, sketches for future works – a vast reservoir which he has guarded meticulously, an archive

of memory devoid of order, save the date in which each drawing was created. On the other hand, Grobman obsessively took clippings from old newspapers, magazines and books, reproductions of photographs, etchings and paintings on different, at times odd themes, among them many masterpieces from classical painting. From these two piles, the raw materials of his future work, he began picking pairs, each consisting of a photograph and a reproduction, until he managed to pinpoint new meanings in their encounter, in this forced dialogue, which were manifested in the title of the resulting work. The meanings of the drawing, beyond the ideas that generated it, were expanded by the photograph, and vice versa.

To date, Grobman has created some 250 such polygrages that deserve study in another context. For the current show we have selected three of them, which are only a hint of this growing body of work. In *Unbeatable* (fig. 52), the drawing of a vulture and an egg is attached to a photograph of a shape reminiscent of flint, yet also calls a leaf or tree profile to mind. All the polygrages bear two dates; one refers to the year in which the drawing was created, and the other – the year of the work before us. The work's reading and its possible interpretation oscillate between the two images, the inscription, the title, and sometimes the text as well. *The Black Stone* (fig. 50) portrays a black cube, planted against the backdrop of trees. A drawing from 1997 is attached to one of its sides, and the text appearing on it is dated 2006. The cube obviously calls to mind the Kaaba in Mecca, and at any event – Grobman is trying to unearth what mysterious, intricate structures are concealed within it. In this work Grobman returns to the secret of the invisible,

where the gist often lies. The naturalistic landscape is contrasted with the black color of the cube which is also reminiscent, of course, of Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (to which I shall refer below), but at the same time – the cube itself embeds a spiritual content pertaining to the true essence of the universe.

The series of collages discussed above dealt with the past and the historical memory. Concurrently, Grobman continued to confront the present and its existential issues. I have chosen to discuss a few works here in which Grobman powerfully and concisely utilized the combination of symbol, letter, and word in order to convey his message. In *Death* (fig. 55), the Angel of Death is painted in black. His appearance is imposing, and he is ready to take us under his wing at any moment. The yellow arrows point at him, and the word 'death' (מוֹת) is painted so that the middle letter, *vav* (ו), situated between his legs, becomes a cross – a symbol of human suffering. The artist feels the transience of human existence more than ever, expressing his fears vis-à-vis the events of our time in Israel and the world over. In *Our Time* from 2004 (fig. 53), the black figure symbolizes 'today's civilization,' words drawn in white on yellow ground. The rest virtually needs no explanation: the crescent moon and five-pointed star symbolize Islam, the white skulls – the shadow of death, and the green airplane exploding into flames call to mind 9/11. Grobman emphasizes that even though the Twin Towers were a symbol and target, the long term intention was the destruction of civilization itself. Some three years later he would revisit the subject more explicitly in *Last Skies* (fig. 54), where he used a singular white painted wooden headboard, an *objet trouvé* that he

found in the street on one of his daily walks with his dog, Timur. Over the years, Grobman has collected many objects (tables, beds, doors, and other items) from the streets of Tel Aviv that he used as props for his paintings. Sometimes they disappear under coats of paint, and at others they retain part of their identity. In this case, the object fully preserves its presence and identity. Grobman even uses the ball-topped strips decorating the head of the bed to symbolize a world of order, regarding them as the model of an imaginary molecule. On the bottom he paints a snake, the symbol of evil, with its body covered with Arabic-looking script. The Hebrew letter *aleph* [א] is outlined by its tail, and the letter *shin* [ש] by its head – both symbolic of the Divine entity. Between the world's prevailing order, in the upper section, and the struggle between the forces of good/light and evil/darkness depicted on the bottom part of the work, appears the word 'death.' Grobman uses language, leaving no ambiguity about the meaning of the visual symbols. He writes the title of the work on it, *Last Skies*, and its details, adding the sentence: "Islam is the stupidest religion, says Michel Houellebecq." By quoting the noted French novelist, he aims to move the discussion out of the local frame of reference and personal position. Grobman has never tried to be 'politically correct,' yet has always displayed an unusual ability to create combined visual and verbal messages that are precise, powerful, yet also complex and open to interpretation.

Let us conclude our quest after the symbol, letter, and word in Grobman's oeuvre with his recently completed *Black Square* (fig. 56). This large-scale work is wholly dedicated to the symbol that expresses the spirit of twentieth

century art more than any other – Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*, which was first exhibited in the exhibition "0.10" in Petrograd in 1915. We have already discussed Grobman's special affinity to Malevich, but it seems that this is the first time he dedicates an entire piece to the work of another artist. Grobman found a wooden panel the size of a double bed and used it as the physical prop for the work, suggesting that the square is also an expression of human existence. Just as Malevich deemed the connection between the material and the spiritual highly significant, so Grobman paints his black square with layers of paint that lend it an existential depth and intensity, while the white surrounding it represents the void of infinite space. It is on this background that the bottom line is inscribed, giving the work its full meaning. Grobman, who discovered Malevich more than fifty years ago, once again feels the need to declare, this time in a visual manifesto, that Malevich's Suprematism was the spiritual sustenance whose discovery provided him with the inspiration and the strength to develop a new art in a hostile environment, an environment that already in Malevich's time oppressed the forces of creativity and spirit. When the Black Square was first exhibited, Malevich positioned it in the upper corner of the room, the place usually reserved for an icon, and indeed the painting has become an icon of the modern period. In the same exhibition Malevich also showed *Red square (Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions)*, and through the title created a connection between the human and the spiritual, between visible and invisible, the physical reality and the metaphysical reality.

In a 1922 article Malevich addressed the subject at length, and I will quote only his conclusion: "It is possible to relate to the fact that man himself discovered the proof that nothing disappears from the Universe, but only gets a new form of expression, as to the perfection of universal movement of the world or of God. In a similar manner, visible disappearance does not mean that everything has disappeared. Visible things are made extinct, but not the experience. The experience, according to man's own definition, is God, and nothing can be made extinct since the experience can not be eradicated, for God cannot be eradicated. Therefore, God cannot be dethroned."¹⁷

Grobman analyzes and encapsulates Malevich's approach in the following words: "Malevich is both spiritual and material: an idea that is unique; two principles that do not clash one with the other, that are not born hostile but exist in wholeness and indivisibility. He deciphers the observed and tangible world, the code of the spiritual and eternal problem of existence."¹⁸ These words also express the essence of Grobman's artistic worldview, which was formulated over the years, a perception that in 1967 he called 'Magical Symbolism.' Grobman's square proves that at any time a symbol belongs to whoever identifies with it, to the one who succeeds in giving it new life and use it as an instrument for conveying artistic, spiritual, and universal messages.

Notes

1. *Zerkalo: Contemporary Russian Literature in Israeli Discourse*, eds.: Ira Vruble-Golubkina and Nir Baram (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2005), p. 218 [Hebrew].
2. Ibid., p. 214. The English version was quoted from: Mordechai Omer, "Tikkun: Shamanism in Art – The Israeli Option," in cat. *Tikkun: Perspectives on Israeli Art of the Seventies*, p. 461.
3. Cat. *The Leviathan Group: From Symbol to Technology – Form – Object – Plan* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Theater, 1982) [Hebrew]; see also *Tikkun* (n. 2), p. 458.
4. A. Schewtschenko, *Der Neoprimitivismus: Seine Theorie, Seine Möglichkeiten, Seine Erfolge* (Moscow, 1913), p. 9.
5. Cat. *The Leviathan Group* (n. 3), ibid; see also *Tikkun* (n. 2), p. 456.
6. Ibid.
7. Michail Grobman, "On Malevich," in cat. *Avant-Garde Revolution Avant-Garde: Russian Art from the Collection of Michail Grobman*, trans. Jack Hirschman (Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1988), p. 108.
8. Ibid., p. 106.
9. *Zerkalo* (n. 1), p. 232.
10. Ibid., pp. 211-231.
11. Ibid.
12. Michail Grobman, *In a Black, Black Land* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2005), p. 47 [Hebrew].
13. *Zerkalo* (n. 1), p. 226.
14. Ibid., p. 224.
15. Grobman, *In a Black, Black Land* (n. 12), p. 22; see also *Tikkun* (n. 2), pp. 286-285.

16. *Zerkalo* (n. 1), pp. 223-224.

17. Kazimir Malevich, "Dieu n'est pas détrôné. L'Art, L'Église, La fabrique" (1922), in *De Cézanne au Suprématisme* (Lausanne: l'Age d'Homme, 1974), p. 180.

18. Grobman, "On Malevich" (n. 7), p. 106.