

Avner Levinson: The Studio and the Attic

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On the day when the breath of life will infuse the arts, it seems that before painting will gain volume, before poetry will take shape, and before music will be embodied in the material, sculpture will be the first to thaw and come to life. Sculpture is the most plastic of the arts, and already in its natural starting point, we find a body that has shape and volume. The distance between sculpture and its possible resurrection is therefore that of wishful thinking, an incantation, or a spell, which have already used their power to awaken sculpture from its silent slumber.

It had already been told of Victor Frankenstein from Geneva, who joined separate organs into one whole and awkward body, brought it to life, and created the monstrous creature that starred in Mary Shelley's famous novel. And like Frankenstein, so we have Pygmalion, whose mythological story is recounted in Book 10 of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. Pygmalion was a Cypriot sculptor who found flaws in every woman he met. And so he created a statue in the likeness of Aphrodite, made the perfect woman with his very hands, and named her Galatea. Pygmalion loved his creation, fell in love with it, dressed it in clothes, gave it gifts, and during Aphrodite's festival, prayed that it will become his bride. When he returned home and kissed the statue, he discovered that his prayer was answered - Galatea opened her eyes and came to life. And like Pygmalion, so we have Prometheus, who together with his brother Epimetheus was given the task of populating the earth. The two were given many traits and attributes - wisdom, wings, fur, speed, etc. to accomplish Zeus' task. Epimetheus (whose name literally means "afterthinker") acted in haste and created clumsy animals, while Prometheus (whose name means "forethought", or "think before you act") took a long time, and eventually created a godlike creature from earth and water - man. And like Prometheus, we also have Rabbi Judah Loew, the Maharal of Prague, who created the Golem. The creature served as a loyal messenger who inspired fear in the hearts of anti-Semites during the days of the week. On the Shabbat, the rabbi would remove the breath of life, lest the Golem violate the Shabbat. One Shabbat eve, the rabbi forgot to deactivate it, and the Golem violated the Shabbat, started running wild, and endangered the lives of the gentiles in the city. The rabbi chased the Golem, and caught up with it outside Prague's ancient synagogue *Altneuschul*. The Hebrew letters אמת ("truth") were etched on the Golem's forehead, and so in order to kill it, the rabbi erased the letter א, leaving מת ("dead"). Legend has it that the remains of the Golem are still kept in the attic of the ancient synagogue to this day.

All these tales, with the required distinctions, are of course variations on the divine story of creation (the creation of man and woman), which holds the magic of creation: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them" (Genesis 1:27); it attests to the labor involved: "And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man" (Genesis 2:22); and contains a creative element: "And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Genesis 2:7).

Avner Levinson is a sculptor, and his work is comparable to the work of the men whose stories were mentioned here in brief - those formulators of figures, heapers of materials, joiners of organs, and creators of entities. Levinson's sculptures are free standing - in contrast with the spirit of installation or site-specific art that provides a web of contexts - and in the spirit of the tradition of free standing statues that goes back all the way to antiquity (and particularly in modernism, which informs these works) they do not depend on the space in which they are presented. His are sculptures that act as independent units of material and spirit that carry their values with them, and those are intrinsic to them, as they are to man.

Levinson sculpts mostly through additive methods, meaning, with materials that give the possibility of adding and not only subtracting, such as clay, plaster, papier-mâché, and other materials, which allow to shape the sculpture by adding material to create its form (before it will eventually be cast in bronze or some other material, of course), and stand in contrast to subtractive sculpture executed in materials such as marble, stone, or wood. The conceptual difference between the two, beyond the fact that addition works from the inside out and subtraction from the outside in, is that subtractive sculpture is rooted in the perception that the lump of raw material holds a shape that should be "freed" - a belief in the preexisting, while the additive method creates the shape out of nothing, as an act of creation.

Levinson's creation is the human body, or at least one that the human body stands in affinity to its forms. Levinson sculpts free standing heads and figures, as well as bodies that have a relationship of proximity to one another. His sculptures are characterized by a lumpy, unfinished surface, evocative of a

dense and cracked rock more than facial features and a body. Those bodies and faces suffer deformities, disintegration, elongations, and shortenings of unnatural proportions, and possess a degree of decomposition. These are not the outcomes of mutilation, but are rather expressive of creation unbound by the shackles of a commitment to an illusory portrayal; commitment that was discarded in favor of emphasizing the sculpture's plastic values, the facture that also acknowledges its haptic dimension, and the intrinsic logic of a sculpture that is not based on an origin in reality, like a model or some other signified chosen to be represented. And thus, following this logic, Levinson created disembodied heads, legs without an upper part, bodies without limbs on the one hand or a figure with elongated arms on the other hand, entities with no sexual identity, indistinct human configurations, and even sculptural connectors in various degrees of abstraction. This practice is also manifested in Levinson's drawings, which are not necessarily studies for his sculptures - sometimes they are executed in a thin, almost automatic line, and at times they seem like a mild geometric drawing that relinquishes the natural appearance. The logic of the sculpture prescribes not only other physical possibilities, like those mentioned, but also a distinct physical behavior. Thus for instance, Levinson's work reflects the problem of the figure's equilibrium as a being that is expected to follow the laws of physics, but mostly of the sculpture system as an autonomous arena. These are subtle games of equilibrium, governed once by secure balance and once by the loss of stability. This is also the relationship between the tangible material and the spaces and openings in it. According to Levinson, the viewer should perceive this absence as a part of the sculpture's material quality, just like moments of silence are a central component in a musical composition, like a blank line is an important part of poetry, and like the window opening or the space of the door are integral to an architectural space.

We can draw parallels between Tel Aviv and Prague, between today and the past, and compare Levinson's studio to the attic of *Altneuschul* synagogue. As a place where the organs of the Golem - the statue that had been brought to life and died - are like the sculptures of Levinson, scattered around the studio in different stages of creation and casting: a giant head here, a pair of legs there, a figure stumbling on one of the occupied pedestals. Rows of tiny heads bearing the traces of faces are arranged on shelves on the one hand, and several metal "spines" waiting to grow a body on the other hand - in the parallels, the idea of creation reveals the potential embodied in the sculptures-Golems. However, all this is not viable as long as the sculpture remains alone, without the presence of a human being (a real, flesh and blood, living human being) beside it - without the spectator of art, whose presence and gaze as though etch the letters *אמת* on the forehead of the sculptures

and breath some life into them. This idea was eloquently articulated by the Jewish German philosopher Franz Rosenzweig, in his book *The Star of Redemption*:

The work is there in its uniqueness, in its detachment from the originator, its incredibly intense life that yet does not belong to life. It really is outside of itself; it has neither house nor home; [...] it is its own kind and mode [...] In the spectator there has grown together the mere humanity of the originator and the content-rich, soulful uncanniness of the work. Without the spectator, the work would be mute, it would be a statement, but not from speech, since the work does not "speak" to its originator and Pygmalion seeks in vain to animate the marble that he himself has sculptured; the work "speaks" only to the spectator. And without the spectator, it would have no lasting influence in reality. By bringing into view painted canvases, written pages, the work does not really, as a matter of fact, enter real life [...] But to enter into reality, art must regenerate men; yet artists, these rare non-men who live alone, spread far and wide in the throngs of people, are absolutely not this type of men. This would not be because their capacity as originators, like the existence of the world, as creatures [...] art only becomes reality when it educates man to be its spectator and when it is given a lasting "public".¹

In this conceptual dimension, Levinson's sculptures possess the potential of realization, the possibility of existence, if we turn to the "precedents" of Victor Frankenstein, Pygmalion, Prometheus, the Maharal of Prague and the likes, whose hands have shaped forms, created figures, and breathed life into them. This potential is a convenient ground for the gaze of the spectator-creator (since it is the spectator who activates the piece with his gaze) and the equation that places the spectator and the sculpture in a relationship that is not the relationship between a subject (spectator) and an object (sculpture), but between a subject and a subject, or at the very least, between a subject and an object that has subjective traits.

Little wonder then, that the first words said by God himself in the Book of Genesis were "let there be", the words of creation that hold the power of the maker to execute his creation from theory to practice. And not for nothing, the great Jewish British sculptor Jacob Epstein titled his autobiographical book *Let There be Sculpture*, since after all, this expression understands this essential quality, which is one of the qualities of sculpture, and is also found in the sculptures of Avner Levinson.

1 Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, translated by Barbara E. Galli, University of Wisconsin Press, 2005, pp. 260-262.