

# *The Urge Toward the Sublime – The Case of Itzhak Danziger*

*Arturo Schwarz*

*Milan*

**I** believe that art, like poetry and love, is also an instrument of knowledge, as underscored by most esoteric systems, from alchemy to Tantrism to the Kabbalah and, in our century, by Surrealism. Duchamp reminded us that art should be put 'once again at the service of the mind'.<sup>1</sup> In a seminal text of the forties, Bennett Newman, who, according to Thomas B. Hess, was deeply affected by the Kabbalah, which played a central role in his life and art,<sup>2</sup> wrote that the new painter 'desires to transcend the plastic elements in art. ... His imagination is therefore attempting to dig into metaphysical secrets. To that extent his art is concerned with the sublime. It is a religious art which through symbols will catch the basic truth of life which is its sense of tragedy'.<sup>3</sup> In a way Newman's remark echoes Freud's contention that creative artists are 'valuable allies and their evidence is to be prized highly, for they are apt to know a whole host of things between heaven and earth of which our philosophy has not yet let us dream. In their knowledge of the mind they are far in advance of us everyday people, for they draw upon sources which we have not yet opened up for science'.<sup>4</sup>

The demand that a work of art should not merely have an aesthetic quality but also an illuminating one is central not only to Kabbalistic literature but is as old as the first philosophical speculations on the role of art and has never ceased being a leitmotif of aesthetic theories. Plotinus believed that through art 'one could reach down to the principles constituting the source of nature'.<sup>5</sup> Hegel mentioned that 'art's vocation is to unveil the *truth*'.<sup>6</sup> Nelson Goodman, among others, has reiterated Newman's view that the artist should be put on the same plane as the scientist and the philosopher by holding that scientific analysis and artistic creation should be put on an equal footing.<sup>7</sup>

Freud noted that 'Through the gap in the retina one could see deep into the unconscious'.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, Rothko also held that, for the artist, 'The picture must be, as for anyone experiencing it later, a revelation, an unexpected and unprecedented resolution of an eternally familiar need'.<sup>9</sup> This aspiration dates back to the earliest aesthetic theories. Dionysius of Halicarnassus demanded that art should 'arouse ardour in the soul'. In our time, Koestler's requirement that art should have both a 'transcendental appeal and a cathartic effect',<sup>10</sup> encompasses the essence of both Abstract Expressionism and much of Israeli art.

Concerning art's 'cathartic effect', mentioned by Koestler, Freud had remarked that the aesthetic pleasure afforded us by a creative artist 'proceeds from a liberation of tensions in our mind',<sup>11</sup> and Marie Bonaparte, in turn, asserted that: 'Dreams and art fulfil an analogous function as regards the human psyche. Both, in fact, act as safety valves to humanity's overrepressed instincts'.<sup>12</sup>

The debt many an Israeli artist has to the Kabbalistic tradition is impressive: to realize its magnitude we only have to call to mind the main theoretical points that are common to the vast body of esoteric literature referred to as the Kabbalah and which, from the second half of the 12th century and up to this day, have been an essential part of Jewish mystical thinking. The artists I have in mind share with the Kabbalists their operative methodology based on an intuitive, direct and unmediated approach to the inner self. For the Kabbalists this meant going beyond rational thinking to discover the reflection of the divine in their being, while for these artists it is the ideal shortcut to bring to light their inner psychic model. In both cases, ecstatic meditation leads to the hidden self. Indeed, once sublimity is achieved, conventional logic gives way to what I would term mystical ratiocination; i.e., to free associations (*kefitsah*, in the Kabbalist terminology) and to a dynamic rather than causal logic that obeys a 'leaps and bounds' (*dillug*) line. This psychic automatism permits, and not only in the Kabbalah as Di Nola pointed out: 'The involuntary emergence of unconscious images and brings to the fore the deeper dimension of the spirit, now free from the iron laws of knowledge'.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Kabbalist beauty has a transcendental character and thus, in the Sephirothic system, the name of the central *Sephirah* is *Tiferet*, a term conveying the associated notions of Beauty, Knowledge and Truth, whose common denominator is Harmony. Beauty illuminates knowledge, which in turn reveals truth. This aspect of Beauty is underscored even in everyday language, where the Hebrew word *tov* designates both Beauty and Good. Good aspires to Beauty and vice versa.

Among the other spiritual points of contact between these artists and Kabbalistic thought I should mention another three at least: the importance

that inspiration has for both the mystical endeavour and the artistic creative process; the Kabbalist's concern for the substantiation of a messianic message, which for the artists means conveying their utopian vision; and the postulate of the interdependence of the macrocosm (the divine for the Kabbalist, nature for the secular creator) and the microcosm, which actually leads to the drive to discover the means to break one's solitude by finding channels of communication between one's self and the Other.

I do not think that the spiritual and transcendental character of Jewish culture needs further comment, other than to recall Cassirer's remark that 'it was Judaism that took the first decisive step from a *mythical* religion to an *ethical* religion'.<sup>14</sup> In turn, Einstein pointed out the features of the Jewish tradition that made him thank his stars for belonging to it: 'The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, an almost fanatical love of justice and the desire for personal independence' adding that it was these very lofty ideals that were responsible for Jewish survival: 'History has given us a difficult row to hoe; but so long as we remain devoted servants of truth, justice, and liberty, we shall continue not merely to survive as the oldest of living peoples, but by creative work to bring forth fruits which contribute to the ennoblement of the human race'.<sup>15</sup>

Heraclitus reminds us that every human being harbours a spark of the divine and Kant's *Critique of Judgment* emphasizes that all artistic creations have their source in the primal urge of transcendence. In his discussion of Kant's conception of the Sublime, Paul Crowther rightly remarks that to enjoy an aesthetic empathy with the vision of the world embodied in an artwork, it is necessary that the viewer be personally involved and succeed in perceiving 'imaginatively or emotionally [its] overwhelming properties'.<sup>16</sup> In fact, 'to experience the sublime in these terms is to have a full and complete primordial experience of spatio-temporality',<sup>17</sup> since, in the last analysis, 'the sublime can lead to metaphysical and moral insights' and more 'aesthetic experience – and the sublime in particular – has the capacity to *humanize*'.<sup>18</sup>

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As a teenager, in the mid-thirties, Danziger had the opportunity – while studying art at the Slade School in London (1934-37) – to visit, among others, the Anthropological Museum and the British Museum, where he was deeply impressed by the hieratic and uncanny aura of the art from Egypt, black Africa, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, India and Oceania. Later on, several artistic encounters were to play an important role in his spiritual growth: in the late forties, alternating between London and Paris, he worked for Ossip Zadkine, met

Constantin Brancusi, and became more closely acquainted with the aesthetics of Surrealism and its emphasis on the creative values of chance, the unconscious, the oneiric, and 'automatic' writing and drawing.

The esoterical dimension of Danziger's work reflects both an inborn temperament and the impetus of several biographical, cultural and visual events and it is evidenced in both his sculptures and his environmental works. For instance *Ritual* (1962), although supposed to represent an abandoned sheepfold, actually calls to mind a shattered jar and by its shape evoked the "Breaking of the Vessels" (*shvirat kellim*), which, in the earlier Kabbalistic literature, corresponded to the destruction of the first unsuccessful worlds. Danziger may, however, have shared the more positive view expressed in the Luranc Kabbalah, which explained that the broken vessels are not a mishap in the existence of the life-process of the Godhead, but rather a design to bring about a catharsis of the unsound elements of the unsuccessful worlds in the divine system.<sup>19</sup> Danziger's concern with the esoterical tradition also surfaces in his environmental works, such as his project for the Auschwitz memorial (1959) or the "Gate of Peace" (1968) on the Brotherhood Boulevard leading to the Olympic village in Mexico City.

Danziger's studies in garden landscaping at the London schools of the Architecture Association (1951-52) were doubtless prompted by the symbolic associations attached to the garden in Jewish biblical and esoterical literature. Let us recall, in the first place, that both talmudic and midrashic sources describe two Gardens of Eden: the terrestrial garden, a refuge of luxuriant vegetation and peace; and the celestial garden, abode of the righteous (*zaddikim*). The boundaries of the earthly Eden are even mentioned in the Torah (*Genesis* 2: 10-14), while its size is indicated in the Talmud as being one sixtieth of the celestial garden (*Ta'an*: 10a). Jung, among others, has familiarized us with the allegorical values of the garden, which he identified not only with fruitfulness and fertility, but also, because of its protective implications, with the mother archetype.<sup>20</sup> Thus, for Danziger, the garden also, and perhaps predominantly, represented the allegory of the shelter for the Jew sharing his own – temporarily diasporic – condition. Mordechai Omer has perceptively remarked that his garden imagery 'is a complex, a language, with a mystic significance in its structure and in everything that is part of it – animal, vegetable and mineral – and in their locations'.<sup>21</sup>

It is thus no wonder that many of the garden drawings executed during the ten years (1945-1955) Danziger spent in Europe abound with quotes from the *Song of Songs* relating to the garden. Especially indicative are the verses that convey the sense of shelter and happiness it bestows: 'A garden locked my

own, my bride... I have come to my garden, My own, my bride... Eaten my honey and honeycomb, Drunk my wine and my milk'.<sup>22</sup>

In the seventies, and until his untimely death in the summer of 1977, Danziger's preoccupation with man-made scenery was extended to natural landscapes and he embarked on a systematic study of Israeli sites, epitomized by the Hebrew word *makom* (place), the esoterical significance of which is evidenced by the semantic range of this term designating both earthly and heavenly loci. His research was thus aimed at finding and preserving sacred trees or hallowed sites and areas. From here it was but a short step to actually designing a *makom*, combing cultural and ecological elements into a single 'living system', thereby expanding the mythical view of a living Gea.

To Scharfstein, Danziger explained:

Places were beginning to preoccupy me with their qualities, especially with the sacredness that could be attributed to them, or, better, felt in them. I began to notice the local shrines and the sacred trees, to feel the immanence of the holy in what is most ordinary and close to us. And then, having become sensitized to the particular aspects of the landscape, I became involved in planning and protecting it... The dignity of such places demands old, natural things. Heathen images, perhaps the heathen animal element, perhaps that barking, howling animal, the jackal. I came to use the jackal, as I had earlier used the sheep, to express my ideas and later to symbolize our destruction of animals and of wildlife generally.<sup>23</sup>

The drawing *Jackal Landscape* (1967) adds another dimension to Danziger's ecological concern: it was made at the end of the Six Day War and the choice of this wild animal to express the artist's feelings at the end of the war is eloquent - jackals were instrumental in the conflict and defeat of the Philistines (*Judges*, 15: 4-18). In Isaiah's prediction of the fall of another secular enemy they figure again: 'And Babylon, glory of kingdoms ... Shall become like Sodom and Gomorrah... the houses be filled with owls... and jackals shall abide in its castles' (*Isaiah*, 13: 19-22). In this quick sketch the white space of the paper is ruled and ordered by a series of lines in black ink, broken in angles of varying degrees, which conjure up the essential outlines of three leaping jackals. Here Danziger seems to heed Majakovski's advice: 'Economy in art is the main and everlasting rule that governs the production of aesthetic values'.<sup>24</sup>

For Itzhak Danziger, drawings are of special importance because, in addition to being a spontaneous exposure of his psyche, they also constitute a major and autonomous expressive medium within his oeuvre. As was the case with Modigliani, most of Danziger's drawings are already fully accomplished works of art, which the addition of further details could in no way improve. Danziger's quick and nervous sketches are just as often preparatory studies for his sculptures as they are complementary and /or independent statements. In both instances they greatly contribute to a fuller comprehension of the constellation of conscious and unconscious motivations from which his works spring.

For Danziger, just as for Modigliani, drawing was a means to explore his inner self. However, unlike the Italian artist, whose point of departure was a *physical model*, the intimate identity of which he interpreted and transposed visually with exceeding sensitivity, Danziger started from an *inner image*: he did not materialize an *outer* model but rather recalled the impression it had made on him. He aspired to manifest reminiscences extending beyond personal events and furthermore, to materialize – borrowing the poetic formulation of the Talmud – 'dreams longer than the night'. In one word, Danziger is concerned with *yizkor*, i.e., memory, in all its esoterical and historical dimensions. Notwithstanding the different approach of the two artists, I believe that Danziger would have subscribed to Modigliani's view that 'Drawing is possessing, it is an act of awareness and of possession deeper and more concrete than coitus which only dream or death can give'.<sup>25</sup>

Mordechai Omer has noted that, whether figurative or abstract, sculptural or conceptual, Danziger's drawings were motivated by the urge to find a way, or rather, 'a method of thinking into which his life might be poured – a life troubled by continuous metaphoric transitions which rocked him restlessly from one situation to another'. Moreover, 'Danziger saw the artist as a shaman who creates a picture the purpose of which is to establish a way of life for society by making closer ties between the disappearing powers of the hidden world and the accumulating powers of the surface of the manifest world'.<sup>26</sup>

The other graphic works in this collection also illustrate Danziger's involvement with esoterical thought and encompass the two concepts of 'memorialization' and 'rehabilitation' with which, according to Omer,<sup>27</sup> he was mainly concerned in his later periods. *Landscape*, a pastel of the seventies, is a powerful image of the prolific aspect of the land. The creative aspect of Nature (Spinoza's *natura naturans*) finds expression in the metamorphic turmoil of the landscape from which seems to emerge the shape of a cow (*natura naturata*) – the archetypal nurturing animal.

In an earlier work, *Circumcised Man with Shofar* (1946), the title draws our attention to the fact that this personage has perfected himself: he has entered into the covenant (*brit milah*) and hence has been initiated into Judaism. Spinoza believed that this rite was so important that ‘it alone would preserve the nation for ever’. Being circumcised, the man in the drawing is entitled to blow the shofar. He stands as a symbol of the triumph of culture over nature in the same way as Danziger’s *Nimrod* (1939) – characteristically uncircumcised (*arel*) – represented for him the violence of the wild unleashed in the Europe of that period. Indeed *Nimrod* (the first man to make war on other peoples; *Genesis*, 10:8), was conceived on the eve of the Second World War. On the other hand, Danziger’s shofar-blower evokes the visionary dream of salvation achieved with the end of exile and through the liberation of the land of Israel. In view of these associations it was natural for the shofar in this drawing to return five years later, in 1951, in his unrealized project for the entrance gate to Herzl’s grave, which the instrument should have adorned. This musical instrument – one of the oldest known to mankind— was blown to herald the Jubilee Year when ‘freedom throughout the land’ would be proclaimed and everyone ‘was to return to his holding and to his family’ (*Leviticus*, 25: 10); it was also trumpeted in ‘a clarion call to war’ (*Judges*, 3: 27). Among the ten reasons for sounding the shofar, Saadiah Gaon mentions three that are of special relevance in this context: it is a reminder of the prophets, teachers of righteousness who raised their voices like the shofar to stir our conscience; it is to call Israel’s scattered remnants to return to the Holy Land; and finally, it is sounded as a reminder of the Day of Resurrection, the return to life.

The elaboration of this drawing points to yet other ideas: a flowing and flexible line unites the player and the shofar into a single being. Danziger may have wished to graphically illustrate the concept of the Zohar, according to which an esoterical communion is established between the player and his instrument. We may perhaps also see in this drawing an allegorical self-portrait of the artist, recalling the archetypal significance of the primordial sound which, according to *Genesis* (1: 3-29), is endowed with creative powers.

This work also reflects Danziger’s concern with the fate of his people. While in London, in February 1946, Danziger could not have missed the headline to a *Manchester Guardian* article on the condition of the Jews in Poland: ‘Jews Still in Flight from Poland- Driven Abroad by Fear – Political Gangs Out to Terrorize Them – Campaign of Murder and Robbery’. That same month four Jews were murdered on a train from Lodz to Cracow, where they were to attend a Jewish communal convention. In April the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry

published its report recommending the admission of 100,000 refugees to Palestine (a UN trusteeship that would eventually lead to a binational state), and a revocation of the prohibition against the sale of land to Jews. But during the following months the British spared no effort to prevent the departure of immigrant ships to Israel, and in August they started imprisoning “illegal” Jewish immigrants in concentration camps in Cyprus, the ones in Palestine having been filled to the limit of their capacity. It was against this dramatic background that *Circumcised Man with Shofar* was conceived.

The absorbed expression of the *Meditating Shepherd* (1949) communicates Danziger’s constant questioning of his own life choices, as well as his yearning for Jerusalem. An even more appropriate title for this drawing might have been *The Shepherd King Meditating*, since the artist so frequently identified the shepherd with David and the latter with Jerusalem. The fact that this sketch was made in the year following the foundation of the State of Israel points to still other associations. The shepherd king could well stand for the *Yishuv* at large, meditating on its future after the signing of the bilateral armistice with Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria that terminated the military phase of the War of Independence. This identification is enforced by the fact that, just like David, who contrived to defeat all of Israel’s external enemies – the Philistines, Moabites, Arameans and Ammonites – the small *Yishuv*, more than two thousand years later, prevailed against a hostile coalition of surrounding states.

*The Zodiac Sign of Pisces* (1948) testifies not merely to Danziger’s interest in astrology, but also to the important place that calligraphy holds in his oeuvre. Although the Bible takes a disparaging view of astrology, the majority of the talmudic sages believed in the role played by the celestial bodies (*mazal*) in determining human affairs. In several places in the Talmud it is stated that every man has a *mazal*, which is his patron from conception to birth.<sup>28</sup> The Zohar also takes astrology for granted, stating explicitly: ‘All the stars and planets in the firmament are appointed as overseers and officers in order to serve the world. There is not a single blade of grass in the entire world that is not controlled by a star or planet in the firmament’.<sup>29</sup> Among the Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages, Maimonides alone rejected astrology completely. It is therefore not surprising that Danziger steeped himself in this lore.

As for the prominence of calligraphy in Danziger’s oeuvre, here again the sculptor is indebted to a long-standing Jewish tradition, evinced in Hebrew manuscripts, such as illuminated *ketubbot* and *haggadot*. In *The Zodiac Sign of Pisces* the letters take the form of fruits – ripening on the branches of a tree-like

structure that grows from the top of a six-story building – which spell the gracious message *bruchim habaim* (welcome to those arriving).

## Notes

1. Duchamp 1946.
2. Hess 1971: 57.
3. Newman 1943-45: 39,38.
4. Freud 1907: 8.
5. Plotinus, *Enneads*, V, 8, 1.
6. Hegel 1836-38: 55. Hegel's italics.
7. Goodman 1978: 133.
8. Freud 1930: 14.
9. Rothko 1947: 84.
10. Koestler 1964: 336.
11. Freud 1907: 153.
12. Bonaparte 1933: 821.
13. Di Nola 1984: 107.
14. Cassirer 1944: 244.
15. Bonaparte 1933: 185.
16. Crowther 1989: 168.
17. *Ibid.*: 171.
18. *Ibid.*: 174. Crowther's italics.
19. Scholem 1974: 138-140.
20. Jung 1954: 81.
21. Omer 1982: 86.
22. Song of Songs 4: 12, 5: 1.
23. Scharfstein 1982: n.p.
24. Majakovski 1927: 59.
25. Licini 1934: 91.
26. Omer 1981: 58.
27. Omer 1982: 86.
28. *Babylonian Talmud, Shabath*, 53b.
29. *Ibid.*: 2 171b.

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