

Milk and Wine*

In memory of Irit Fleischer

Nurit David

First of all, I would like to thank you for inviting me here and providing me with an opportunity to take a closer look at my own works. Apart from easier access to the sources and origins thereof, it is essentially much the same as observing someone else's works, whether a friend or a stranger. It has been a long time, and my work has undergone several transformations, so that I was indeed afforded a fresh point of view. Only a small part of the things I am about to say here are reflections that emerged while creating the paintings; all the rest is re-view. I would like to thank you in advance for the patience which I hope you will have, to walk with me in the somewhat winding paths of my work.

The lesson is entitled "Words and Images" – a pair that evoked great interest in the last century, although it seems to me that quintessential Modernism used words to butt images, and images to beat words (one may note that the vast interest in this dialectic is attributable mainly to plastic art, to artists as well as scholars, and to a much lesser extent – to writers and poets, whose experiments in the field of the envisualization of words remained marginal. The suicidal instinct of painting was much stronger than that of the literary field). Many 20th century painters exercised loss of identity in the no-man's-land in-between words and images; they yearned for neither; they longed for a locus of freedom, where images are flattened and abstracted, and signs acquire physical presence that renders them still. They wanted to trample the dust in no man's land. The word "dust" may be associated in this context with the grains of pigment, for the (male) deconstructive enterprise – that begins with the Impressionist brushstrokes, continues with Cubism, and passes through the American all-over paintings – culminates in the monochrome paintings, where, as a result of so much deconstruction and re-kneading of the universe, the basic units are the finely-ground grains of pigment, and to the monochrome I shall still return.

With respect to the intricate relationship, the love-war relationship, between words and images, I have come a long way over the years; a route which in this lecture I chose to set in landscape; namely, to refer to a restricted number of paintings – either landscape paintings per se or those touching upon it, since nowadays I am painting landscapes. The conflictual pair "words and images" would function as a parental entity (an archetype) for the other pairs that would emerge during my lecture. I like binary divisions, even if such divisions are often artificial and it would be more accurate to talk about sequences; nevertheless, it helps one articulate – polarities lend themselves more easily to articulation.

I will begin with a painting whose title accommodates two figures. It is called *Figure of Milk and Figure of Wine* (fig. 1, p.10). It is part of a series that has come to be known as "the monochromes", albeit the monochromatism here is interrupted by the reddish-purple and white stains. Ostensibly, it belongs to the "no-man's-land" paintings – the images, when identifiable, are flattened and abstracted, and the words, along with their meanings, have been buried under the layer of green paint-matter that appears as though it had been uniformly applied. However, once the second projector is switched on, displaying the text printed in the form of a poem, this uniformity would split apart. It turns out that the buried words do have meaning, and they thwart reading of the painting as belonging to a total present (I called the act of paint application, following the act of gluing the text and images, "flooding with Present"), to a total presence (a modernist aspiration). The cut images and text (if one were to explore their origin) link to other places and times, and to references from painterly and literary works by others. The painting masquerades as one thing, and turns out to be yet another. It embeds duality on several levels.

Here is the text concealed in the painting:

Figure of Milk and Figure of Wine

A route of initiation brings figure of milk to the path of figure of wine. In a landscape of character trees and character mountains beside a lake, figure of milk pledges to serve.

Effervescence of wine dresses and wine jewels – a circle of wine is marked in the lake.

Modest clothes of milk, lackluster after bathing, prepare the Hebrew of the days to come. Behind the partition a singing group of men 'It's a Wild World.' The feasibility of the word 'men', of the word 'wild', has been formulated – a circle of weeping is marked.

'You will preserve your dryness in bottles, the imagination of the dry ones, the wooden ones' – a circle of milk is marked.

'Real/fresh life in preserves' – a drop of sweat appears.

Figure of milk (the letter), preserves of vitality, 'to find your death on paper,' to complete the circle of milk.

Figure of wine, to suck back its vitality in the form of preserves, dying out,

selfsame, in real death, to complete the circle of weeping.

A real figure of wine grows only through figure of milk within the diluted figure, to complete the circle of wine.

Father, you suspended our milk, our wine. You suspended our character in the landscape of your body, and we now suffer from a suspended character. Must hunt you down. On the round line of character encompassing the landscape are pointed character trees, a woven character carpet: unattainable. Must hold onto the written character thread and climb up to you.**

I will try to bring you into the text from several directions. On the biographical level, let's say "a landscape of character trees and character mountains beside a lake" refers to the Sea of Galilee. Two figures, of young girls, standing by the Sea of Galilee, or in the mountains, thereabove. Given the choral group of men singing "It's a Wild World" behind the partition in the shower, which is no other than the Cat Stevens song "Oh baby, baby it's a wild world", we may say it is about a Nahal*** group in one of the kibbutzim by the Sea of Galilee in the early 1970s. Two young girls, one in wine dresses and wine jewels, is, say, outstanding, beautiful, and talented, say, in painting. The other in "modest clothes of milk, lackluster", is, say, lanky and not very pretty, at times trying her hand at writing, reaching out for the Hebrew. From the first line it is already clear that for the latter, figure of milk, the encounter with the former, figure of wine, is a stop along a route of initiation, and incidentally – that she is in fact the protagonist of this text, and that it is presented from her point of view. It is she who comes a long way, while figure of wine seems to have been born perfect, with ready-made excellence, and perhaps this is why her life was short-lived.

In terms of the visual scene depicted in the text, the two figures seem to witness a vision whereby the Sea of Galilee transforms into concentric circles of fluid – the external, larger circle of wine; the ring of weeping, or tears, adjacent to it; the small sphere of milk; and the bead of sweat at the center of the lake, and correspondingly – at the heart of the text. In terms of meaning, the two principal fluids, the milk and the wine, and the two fluids accompanying them, possibly allude to two fields of creation – the colorful wine is painting, whereas writing, where one begins and ends with a white paper, is the milk. These two fields of creation, in turn, may be linked to different modes of creation. Painting, which is tantamount to wine, is perhaps the natural talent associated with vivid imagination and emotion, with weeping, which in this case is linked to love of men and to death. It is insinuated that figure of wine died young; there is a sense of immediacy, referring to a clear-cut character, distinct identity, fullness. Writing, which is tantamount to milk, is linked to a long route of initiation and to sweat – effort, woodiness, dryness, diluted, dual identity, imagination undergoing a process of preservation in bottles. Creation in the latter instance

is made possible through mediations; it is a sort of deadening and resurrection, rather than a direct consequence of life powers. The character is suspended in another's body, in the landscape of the father's body (the painting was featured in an exhibition entitled *ABA* ('Father') at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, in 1987).

The text climbs up the landscape paths; it goes up and down the alleys of a terraced town hewn in the rock, the likes of which already appeared in previous works. A town featured from the most remote over-view, from a side-view, as well as from the viewpoint of the one traversing it, realizing it via walking, whereby it folds and unfolds before him. The text, like the traveler, traverses its paths, therefrom descending into the fields, which are also presented from different points of view; field plots, weed stems or wheat stalks, even a hint of vineyards, through the vine leaves and their tendrils. The pair "town and village" will resurface later on. The text wishes to be heard and not to be heard at one and the same time. There may be a muting male element and a chattering female element. Silence masquerades as painting.

Apart from the text which is the work's skeleton and was written especially for it, the crystallization of the work was underlied by two additional texts written by others. Each such painting would take some two-three months to make, during which time it would absorb all kinds of things that accompanied me then. At that time, being fed up with city life, I moved for a while to a house in Ra'anana with a large unattended yard, and the little nature that came into my life may have allowed this green painting. Two texts: one poetry, the other – prose. The former is a book consisting entirely of preliminary drafts for a single poem by French poet Francis Ponge. The poem is called "The Pré," and the book – *The Making of The Pré*. The latter – a book of prose by English writer Malcolm Lowry entitled *Under the Volcano*. The titles of these books take us to two landscapes – the *pré* and the mountain. I remember myself sitting by the table that was taken out of the house to be placed under the Avocado tree in the yard in Ra'anana reading Ponge's book; I remember myself with the garden hose in hand, standing knee-high in weeds, under the influence of the landscape of the town of Quauhnahuac, in the shade of the two Mexican volcanoes Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl in Lowry's novel. I perceive the biographical as that which embraces challenges posed by books.

These two books may perhaps serve as representatives of the two modes of creation I described, which are affined to two types of personality and may be manifested via two types of landscape. On one hand, the verdant, open, unfurling and exposed plateau, and on the other – the mysterious, exotic, dramatic intensity of mountainscapes. As we shall see, these two types of landscape will accommodate two diametrically opposed modes of existence, two different life stories, even two types of death. Ponge's poem, or rather essay, as he would have it, about the *pré*, begins with something pertinent to our concern here – the relationship between words and images, reading as follows:

"Since we are concerned here more with a way of being / Than with a platter served up before our eyes, / Speech is more suitable than paint / Which would never do. // To take a tube of green and spread it on the page / Will fail to make a *pré*, / They are born another way. / They well up from the page. / And the page should furthermore be brown."¹

The *pré* is something that must be cultivated, that must be made through hard work. The page is compared here to soil, and the making of the poem to its tilling. The weed will well up from the page, the words must create the green (rather than the paint, for we are in the sixties, which more or less parallels the time of plastic art's abstention from color in conceptual art). Francis Ponge compiled "The *Pré*" for nearly five years. The *pré* is identified with a specific landscape site, yet it is recreated via words, via meanings. Ponge relies on the meaning of the term 'pre' in language, as a prefix, an affix, as in the word 'preparation.' The *pré* must be prepared. Ponge shifts from a physical place to a mental one, from the landscape to the page; it is poetry of consciousness, a poetry of control through language, poetry devoid of inspiration, devoid of climaxes and surprises. It is a proposal for an orderly, changeless way of being. Ponge likens the *pré* to a handkerchief stretched from four rocks or four hedges of hawthorn. Something that can be folded and put in one's pocket. The world does not deviate from the boundaries of consciousness and may be unveiled by means of man-made tools. Ponge uses the word 'nature' as a two-sided coin – Nature on our planet and our nature, what we, human beings, are – and these two in concert prepare a *pré* for us or prepare us for a *pré*. The diameter of consciousness is equal to that of the globe. It is poetry that embeds an ideal of a consciousness without a 'self', which is like a separate development, almost objective. In my text I link the subject to nature by comparing character ('*offi*') and horizon ('*ofek*'); character is that which forever draws away, whereas when I discuss the absence of 'self' – perhaps unlike the French standpoint – some strain of lamentation, associated with a romantic view, always creeps in.

The two white bottles concealed within the verdant landscape in my painting are taken from Ponge's book, although the milk bottles were not admitted into the final version of the poem. "Those bottles are evidently milk bottles, i.e. (almost) baby bottles.' The music of bottles is like that of the *prés*. Milkmen's bottles, bottle racks (large delivery trucks of bottles). The music of the large bottle delivery trucks. Milk bottles, baby bottles. 'Saturated *pré*, soaked *pré*, lawn that is not forbidden.' ... The music of the baby bottles dancing in the pot (of aluminum), boiling, dancing in the water of the boiler. 'What a lovely music is made' in the boiling of the *pré*, the jiggling dance of the baby bottles of the grass...".² However, says Ponge in the poem, "The fact is that the place of long palaver / Can also become that of decision. // Of the two equals that arrive upright, one at least / After a crossed assault of oblique blades / Will remain couched, / First above and then below."³ Even an emotionally-charged subject such as a duel acquires a simple geometric form in Ponge's poem: vertical line,

diagonal line, horizontal line. And with the horizontal line the poem too rushes to its end, to its demise, to the poet's death; the poem as a whole is now fathomed as a burial service, preparing the *pré* as a burial ground, if not for the poet, then at least for his name being buried under the line at the bottom of the poem (fig. 2, p.11).

"...Therefore Gentlemen, typographers,
Place here, I beg you, the final stroke.

Then beneath the line, without the slightest space, couch my name,
In lowercase, quite naturally,

Save for the initials, of course,
Since they are also those
Of Fennel and of Purslane
That tomorrow will grow above.

Francis Ponge"⁴

This is, thus, poetry that antecedes fate; death will not catch the poet unprepared. Through language one domesticates death. Ponge, who was highly attuned to plastic art, and who at the beginning of the poem rejects the possibility of painting, introduces the visual here in another way, one which is akin to that of contemporaneous plastic artists. Ponge rejects painting just as painters did. In fact, he rejects poetry too, arguing for a practice which is more scientific than poetic. In a letter to a friend he talks about poetry as being murdered by its object; he talks about "effort against 'poetry.' And not, of course, in favor of the pine woods (I'm not completely mad); but in favor of the mind/spirit, which can draw some lesson from it, can grasp there some moral and logical secret."⁵ Writing is, hence, belief in improvement or elaboration of consciousness.

And if we may return to death which is referred to here with composure resulting from acceptance of judgement, subsequent to acceptance of the nature of the world which is also human nature – in his poem "Still Life and Chardin," Ponge writes "Isn't death present in the heart's normal pulsation, in the normal *tempo* of respiration? ... The fatal, for me, is so much more sympathetic when it moves steadily on, without demonstrative outbursts, goes of itself"⁶ – if we may return to the death at the end of the poem, death which has a comic streak to it, which is not entirely convincing, we may be able to cross the river Styx toward Malcolm Lowry's novel, which almost entirely takes place in the course of a single day, against the background of the "Day of the Dead" ("*El Día De Los Muertos*") Festival in a small Mexican town in 1938, soon after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and the subsequent war; a single day that ends with the protagonist's wretched death against the backdrop of a

political confrontation, founded on misunderstanding and malice, between the drunken protagonist and the equally drunk men of the Secret Police, in a cantina located over a ravine in an intoxicating landscape. Here, as opposed to Ponge's text, death is unprepared, it is contingent and chaotic. The protagonist's body is thrown along with a dead dog down the ravine.

The book as a whole is an attempt to confront chaos in ever-expanding circles— from the psyche of the protagonist, the writer's alter-ego, who is an alcoholic, through his relationships with various people, and mainly with his beloved ex-wife who left him the year before and returned to him by surprise on that same day, through the political chaos in Mexico, and the powerful landscape and climate dominated by the two volcanoes, to the raging turmoil of worldwide politics deteriorating into unimaginable abyss. It is a story of disintegration and death set within a magnificent, sublime geography, the work of an arbitrary, fertile divinity (or, rather, divinities, if we take into account the cultural stratification in the region). The story begins as follows:

"Two mountain chains traverse the republic roughly from north to south, forming between them a number of valleys and plateaus. Overlooking one of these valleys, which is dominated by two volcanoes, lies, six thousand feet above sea level, the town of Quauhnahuac. It is situated well south of the Tropic of Cancer, to be exact on the nineteenth parallel, in about the same latitude as the Revillagigedo Islands to the west in the Pacific, or very much further west, the southernmost tip of Hawaii – and as the port of Tzucox to the east on the Atlantic seaboard of Yucatan near the border of British Honduras, or very much further east, the town of Juggernaut, in India, on the Bay of Bengal.

The Walls of the town, which is built on a hill, are high, the streets and lanes tortuous and broken, the roads winding. A fine American-style highway leads in from the north but is lost in its narrow streets and comes out a goat track. Quauhnahuac possesses eighteen churches and fifty-seven cantinas. It also boasts a golf course and no less than four hundred swimming pools, public and private, filled with the water that ceaselessly pours down from the mountains, and many splendid hotels."⁷

Here, quite clearly, the world comes before writing. The scene is set within the big world, and that world collapses on writing in avalanches. There is an abundance of life that also generates an abundance of disasters, and writing pursues the events and trains of thought in a concurrent technique of realism and stream of consciousness. In my painting there is a trace of stormy events, like those transpiring in Lowry's novel, in the two red patches whose contours are derived from two historical paintings by Delacroix – *Death of Sardanapalus* and *Massacre at Chios*. These patches are like flying parachutes tied to the milk bottles, which possibly make it difficult for them to take off. (In Lowry's book, the protagonist, the Consul, wonders "What is man but a little soul holding up a corpse?"⁸). The text within the painting expresses some fear of the "wild world" out there, as well as fascination with it. The milk and wine are at once repulsed

by and attracted to one another. The painting and the text shyly lust for a place of intense events and dramatic figures.

Unlike Ponge's sober, self-conscious poetry, the novel by Lowry – who himself had undergone numerous detox treatments and two years after the successful one, in 1957, 10 years after the book's publication, at the age of 48, committed suicide by swallowing sleeping pills and drinking a bottle of gin – is about loss of control, about compulsive conduct and obsessive thought. The world appears like a collection of random, albeit highly enchanting and mysterious, occurrences (the protagonist is ostensibly busy writing a book about Kabbalah, alchemy, and magic). The bottles often featured in it are not milk bottles. Ponge's milk bottles, hidden in the grass, which are some kind of rambling man-made flock, are replaced here with a bottle of tequila which the Consul, the book's protagonist, had hidden amidst the bushes in his wild-growing garden, secretly drinking from it. His past is drowning in the numerous bottles he had emptied.

"The Consul dropped his eyes at last. How many bottles since then? In how many glasses, how many bottles had he hidden himself, since then alone? Suddenly he saw them, the bottles of aguardiente, of anís, of jerez, of Highland Queen, the glasses, a babel of glasses – towering, like the smoke from the train that day – built to the sky, then falling, the glasses toppling and crashing, falling downhill from the Generalife Gardens, the bottles breaking, bottles of Oporto, tinto, blanco, bottles of Pernod, Oxygénée, absinthe, bottles smashing, bottles cast aside, falling with a thud on the ground in parks, under benches, beds, cinema seats, hidden in drawers at Consulates, bottles of Calvados dropped and broken, or bursting into smithereens, tossed into garbage heaps, flung into the sea, the Mediterranean, the Caspian, the Caribbean, bottles floating in the ocean, dead Scotchmen on the Atlantic highlands – and now he saw them, smelt them, all, from the very beginning – bottles, bottles, bottles, and glasses, glasses, glasses, of bitter, of Dubonnet, of Falstaff, Rye, Johnny Walker, Vieux Whiskey blanc Canadian, the apéritifs, the digestifs, the demis, the doubles, the noch ein Herr Obers, and et glas Araks, the tusen taks, the bottles, the bottles, the beautiful bottles of tequila, and the gourds, gourds, gourds, the millions of gourds of beautiful mescal... The Consul sat very still. His conscience sounded muffled with the roar of water. It whacked and whined round the wooden frame house with the spasmodic breeze, massed, with the thunderclouds over the trees, seen through the windows, its factions. How indeed could he hope to find himself, to begin again when, somewhere, perhaps, in one of those lost or broken bottles, in one of those glasses, lay, forever, the solitary clue to his identity? How could he go back and look now, scrabble among the broken glass, under the eternal bars, under the oceans?"⁹

If my text is about accumulation of identity by preservation in bottles which are the body's surrogates, then here identity is shattered into a thousand bottle fragments that can no longer be put back together again, and will no longer contain anything ever again.

Throughout the novel, wherever you turn, the two volcanoes emerge, from this side or that, sometimes the one, sometimes the other, and sometimes both; they are even described as the epitome of the perfect marriage. Similarly, one may say that the "Father" who suddenly appears in the last section of my text, dominates the entire process of initiation depicted in it like a powerful presence, like a cloud, and possesses the power to thwart it. Like the mountains that are compared in the book to a woman's breasts, Father too is double-breasted; he contains both liquids, the milk and the wine, and is capable of withholding both of them. While my text, like Ponge's, conveys belief in labor and effort, it nevertheless embeds recognition of greater unintelligible potentially-obstructive forces.

Through these two books I can juxtapose two values – love and labor; values whose mutual competition and complementation have preoccupied me while executing the painting. In Lowry's novel, carved in stone on one of the village houses is the inscription: "*No se puede vivir sin amar.*" You cannot live without love. This phrase re-appears on the last page of the book, in the gradually fading consciousness of the Consul, weltering in his own blood. It is introduced as a solution, as that which would explain everything to the protagonist's loved ones; this phrase will introduce clarity, yet such clarity is possible only at the moment of death. If there is love and if there is a solution, they will only come forth in death. Death is the novel's ultimate hero, emerging through the Mexican "Day of the Dead" Festival under all kinds of guises, one of the most macabre among them is that of the bartender's son in the cantina where the Consul finds his death, who devours chocolate skulls and chocolate skeletons and chocolate coffins while leafing through comic books (even the milk here is contaminated with death). Against this pair – love-and-death – which in my text is the cause of weeping that in the painting is represented by two wine-colored long drippings, one may pose the redeeming and healing value of work, which is continuous nourishment. You improve yourself and develop through work.

I would like to linger a bit more on the book's ending (fig. 3, p.13) – the novel too ends with visual stress. Unexpectedly, the sign hung on trees in public parks, which has already been mentioned at least twice, re-appears here. It reads as follows: "¿LE GUSTA ESTE JARDÍN? ¿QUE ES SUYO? ¡EVITE QUE SUS HIJOS LO DESTRUYEN!" ("You like this garden? Why is it yours? See to it that your children do not destroy it!") The Consul, whose knowledge of Spanish is muddled by the alcohol, at one point misinterprets the sentences, interpreting them as follows: "You like this garden? Why is it yours? We evict those who destroy!", thinking that these are "simple words, simple and terrible words, words which one took to the very bottom of one's being, words which, perhaps a final judgement on one, were nevertheless unproductive of any emotion whatsoever, unless a kind of colourless, cold, a white agony, an agony chill as that iced mescal drunk in the Hotel Canada on the morning of Yvonne's departure."¹⁰ For me, this sign, with the odd answer-less question, "Why is it yours?" and the remark about the destructiveness of children, as well as the Consul's distorted interpretation of it, epitomize the mystery of the garden of

existence, its beauty and charm, magic and cruelty, which the novel endeavors to capture. The words here do not shed light on the events, but rather reinforce the darkness; they form yet another layer of mystery, and are tantamount to an obstruction. The sign appears posthumously. On behalf of whom is it articulated? In the name of what hidden higher authority?

Several times in the book depictions of paintings emerge, always figurative paintings, usually with a moral message – either Rivera's murals or the following portrayal: "Over the chevron-shaped windows, which looked down the Calle Tierra del Fuego, hung a terrifying picture he hadn't seen before, and took at first to be a tapestry. Called 'Los Borrachones' – why not Los Borrachos? – it resembled something between a primitive and a prohibitionist poster, remotely under the influence of Michelangelo. In fact, he now saw, it really amounted to a prohibitionist poster, through of a century or so back, half a century, God knows what period. Down, headlong into hades, selfish and florid-faced, into a tumult of fire-spangled fiends, Medusae, and belching monstrosities, which swallow dives or awkwardly, with dread backward leaps, shrieking among falling bottles and emblems of broken hopes, plunged the drunkards; up, up, flying palely, selflessly into the light toward heaven, soaring sublimely in pairs, male sheltering female, shielded themselves by angels with abnegating wings, shot the sober. Not all were in pairs however, the Consul noted. A few lone females on the upgrade were sheltered by angels only. It seemed to him these females were casting half-jealous glances downward after their plummeting husbands, some of whose faces betrayed the most unmistakable relief. The Consul laughed, a trifle shakily. It was ridiculous, but still – had anyone ever given a good reason why good and evil should not be thus simply delimited?"¹¹

I can say that over the years my painting shifted from affinity with Ponge's approach, namely belief in the ability to shape the world, or to become acquainted with it, through elaboration of consciousness in the direction of Lowry's pessimistic, albeit more plentiful, view, and correspondingly – from conceptual to figurative painting.

Now I would like to skip seven years ahead, to a painting from a series of illustrations for James Joyce's *Dubliners* stories (fig. 4, p.14). Once again we have two figures, and in the background of the painting – a formal abstraction of "Figure of Milk and Figure of Wine"; the covering seems to crack, and trees are revealed therebehind. Just before the death of the hero in Lowry's novel, it is "as though the trees themselves were crowding nearer, huddled together, closing over him, pitying..."¹² The trees succeed where humans fail. In Joyce's story, under the guise of a love story, two young men solicit a maid to steal for them from her master. It is a story without heroes. City life frays the soul and wears out compassion, generating rough and rugged men who have lost their way. Lowry writes about the Consul, his protagonist: "a picture of his soul as a town appeared once more before him, but this time a town ravaged and stricken in the black path of his excess, and shutting his burning eyes he had thought of the beautiful functioning of the system in those who were truly alive, switches

connected, nerves rigid only in real danger, and in nightmareless sleep now calm, not resting, yet poised: a peaceful village."¹³ (one can see how the words turn in on themselves – the healthy ones are those who are poised, just like in death, and to this inversion I shall still return). In “Two Gallants” the soul is a weary, worn-out town.

The painting *Two Gallants* is like an act of sabotage against the sanctity and mental cleanliness of the early painting, the relief, emerging in its background. The figures, appearing in the relief through symbols and signs (bottles and footprints), are gradually incarnated here via configurations of objects, that have a comic, ridiculous dimension about them. After seven years, consciousness has not really succeeded in engendering a beautiful mind in a beautiful body. Instead, some cabbage heads and woody bodies flourished. The blue daily work shirt and white Sabbath best have become entangled, and femininity, in the form of a pearl necklace, was violated, and never achieved independence. Sanctity is substituted here with the courage to express oneself. Caution is replaced with the right to fail. Order becomes opulence; silence or secret become public prattle. The irresponsibility typifying the characters in the story, their drifting with the waves of the urban crowd, is manifested via some measure of casting off responsibility in the act of painting too.

In terms of the relationship between words and images, order is restored. The painting contains images, and the words have returned to the book. The *Dubliners* stories exhibit a common pattern – they are set in the dense urban reality, poverty-ridden for the most part; the style is descriptive and realistic. Against this backdrop one of the characters experiences a moment of realization, introspection and self-examination that is usually typified by a poetical aspect reflecting the better facet of one’s personality, a nucleus that holds onto pure intentions for self-realization. The use of objects as the building blocks of these paintings allowed me to connect with reality, and at the same time leave it open to that moment of self-revelation that becomes possible when the shell of the ‘self’ begins to crack.

In *Two Gallants*, possibly the harshest among the stories in this collection and the most urban among them, the brief moment of reflection fails to prompt the reader to sympathize with the character: “He was tired of knocking about, of pulling the devil by the tail, of shifts and intrigues. He would be thirty-one in November. Would he never get a good job? Would he never have a home of his own? He thought how pleasant it would be to have a warm fire to sit by and a good dinner to sit down to. He had walked the streets long enough with friends and with girls. He knew what those friends were worth: he knew the girls too. Experience had embittered his heart against the world. But all hope had not left him. He felt better after having eaten than he had felt before, less weary of his life, less vanquished in spirit. He might yet be able to settle down in some snug corner and live happily if he could only come across some good simple-minded girl with a little of the ready.”¹⁴

In the painting, the plot is conveyed via the interrelations between objects, some of which have more than one meaning or function – the blue shirt is the body of one of the figures, and at the same time, its sleeve stands for the river crossing through Dublin (Liffey River); moreover, it is tied to the white shirt – which is some kind of a cloud that strives upward – pulling it back down, toward the town and toward the basic needs represented by the cutlery cases.

In the limited series where I situate the family in pharmacies, I revert to questions concerning the alchemy of creation; placing identity at a crossroads, I inquire – milk or wine? (fig. 5, p.15). No doubt, I have finally reached painting; the books are the upper horizon of the work, and they are closed, but the painting deals with hybrids, and creation here may be “he-goats’ milk” or “black milk” as in Paul Celan’s poem. The meaning of milk is inverted, for the link with mother-cow introduces new possibilities, not-as-perfect, into the work; possibilities associated with body, multiplicity and chaos. There is a pasture, but the flock and cattle graze on the rocks by the sea. The staff and white pillow are attributes of the good shepherd, whose association with the Frankenstein-like pharmacist who is suspicious of creating the monsters on the right hand side, is puzzling. The stick is recalled from the previous painting, where it functioned as the covetous body of the two gallants, and as a cross tilted sideways. Amongst the books there is a circle encompassing the head of a sleeping girl. The text here is the subconscious of the painting, and even though it is unidentified, its presence is stronger than ever – this painting tells a story.

The later the paintings, the less they yield themselves to interpretation. The landscapes I am painting nowadays are composed of vistas photographed in the Jerusalem area and landscape details drawn from Renaissance paintings, often extracted from the backgrounds of crucifixions. Here I would like the story to be written or actually inscribed within the body of the landscape. One may say that the landscape is constructed here, like the monster’s body in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* – a story with which I was preoccupied and which loomed in the background of several paintings in the past – from fragments of corpses of painting, alluding to the Scriptures.

The gap between these paintings and the relief “*Figure of Milk and Figure of Wine*”, presents the ‘shift’ that has occurred in my work in recent years. It is a gap between two different approaches to time. The relief is like an anticipation for the end of time; a claim for a total place where birth and death are one. Thus the world must be new, a recently created world – one must invent a new language of painting, write a new poem, and halt everything within the birth process; to fixate the young beauty by means of the green, in the very moment of its formation. The sensory intensity involved in stopping time is a magical solution to the problem of identity that finds itself united with space’s powerful appearance. Like Ponge, I too amass the place via an ongoing work process; but unlike him, I do eventually spread green paint explicitly indicating presence, turned outward, toward others. Ponge accepts an identity that changes through

thought sequences, and life that is duration, even after death. He relies on existence identified with the mind, choosing to disregard the visual. I was interested in the awareness of the split between what you are for yourself and what you are for others, and how “what you are for others” folds inward, rendering inwardness which is void, interior and shell folding in on one another.

In one of the current paintings (*Landscape # 2*), out of the landscape which more than it is green, is typified by a somewhat morbid body-color, two babies are born, but these are akin to porcelain dolls. Life is attained by brushing against different types of death. The world here appears age-old. The painting sections that I borrow from the Old Masters are etched with the ancient text. The landscape is composed of these text patches. In *Under the Volcano*, an incomprehensible, albeit redeeming death occurs against an astonishing visuality, grander than life. Alcohol is the means whereby the body is transferred into hallucinatory realms, lending it a distinct identity, which in its self-confidence resembles that of the landscape. In my painting the landscape embeds the cycle of life, death, and resurrection. The path toward ‘painting’ does not veer away from corpses, nor does it regard death as a longed for solution.

1. Francis Ponge, *The Making of The Pré*, trans. Lee Fahnestock, University of Missouri Press, Columbia & London, 1979, p. 225.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 230.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 231.
5. Francis Ponge, *Things: Selected Writings*, trans. Cid Corman, White Pine Press, NY, 1986, p. 60.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
7. Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano*, Signet Books, NY, 1966, p. 29.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 317.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 322-323.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 156-157.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 228-229.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 406.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 173.
14. James Joyce, *Dubliners*, Dover Publications, NY 1991, p. 35.

* A lecture delivered at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, Jerusalem, May 2000.

** A revised version of Richard Flantz’s original translation in the catalogue of my exhibition at Givon Gallery, 1991.

*** “Pioneering Combatant Youth” – a Kibbutz-based army corps.