

About Léo Bronstein

LÉO BRONSTEIN WAS BORN IN AUGUSTOVO, Russia (now Poland). He studied literature and philosophy at the University of Madrid between the years 1920 and 1923, and subsequently studied philosophy and fine art in Paris. In 1932 he was awarded the degree of Docteur de l'Université de Paris at the École de Psychologie and the École des Professeurs of the Sorbonne, working chiefly under the direction of Henri Focillon. From this period come his first two books, *Lutte et réconciliation: Essai sur la manifestation du réel dans l'art*, and *Altichiero: L'Homme et son oeuvre*, a study of Italian art in the fourteenth century which was his doctoral thesis.

He came to this country in 1932 and became first Research Associate and then Associate Professor at the Iranian Institute of Art and Archaeology (later, the Asia Institute), teaching the history of Near Eastern art, the social and economic history of Iran, and advanced and intermediate courses in the Russian language. There he was also Director of the Documentary Survey, which summarized and catalogued the documentary material in European languages bearing on the history of Iranian art and culture. The Survey subsequently passed from the Institute to the Fogg Art Museum of Harvard University. To the Asia Institute period belongs his next book, *El Greco*.

In 1952 he joined the faculty of Brandeis University, retiring in 1967, as Professor Emeritus in the Fine Arts and Near Eastern Civil-

xx
*About Léo
Bronstein,*
by Abigail L.
Rosenthal

zation. He was a celebrated teacher, lecturing to packed auditoriums. After his last class at Brandeis, his students organized a surprise outdoor party and picnic that has since become a celebratory event (Léo Bronstein day or—in 1978—weekend) each year at Brandeis.

The books of his last years were *Fragments of Life, Metaphysics and Art* and *Five Variations on the Theme of Japanese Painting*.

On June 1, 1976, Léo Bronstein was killed accidentally by a motorcyclist in Strasbourg, where he had gone on his way to see the Gruenewald "Crucifixion" in Colmar. Of the additional manuscripts not yet published at the time of his death, *Kabbalah and Art* was his last (most recently completed) work.

Léo Bronstein was a member of a notable musical family. His brother is Rafael Bronstein, the violinist and teacher of musicians. His niece is Ariana Bronne, the concert violinist. His grandniece is Nanette Glushak, the ballerina.

What is difficult about describing the man is to account, in a few short words, for the look on the faces of his near relations, students, colleagues and other friends at the memorial meeting organized by Brandeis University. His mourners looked to me like abandoned orphans. Since they were after all an élite gathering—certainly cultivated, worldly and resourceful beyond the average—one would have to suppose that the "protection" they felt Léo gave them was woven of no ordinary stuff. It was an emotional, moral and aesthetic protection, woven of the finest threaded alchemical gold. People took Léo's presence in their lives as a sign that their fondest hopes were profoundly justified; and likewise a sign that their worst terrors were—with great finality and truth—understood. Léo was as good a concretization of the rabbinic legend of the 36 whose righteousness is the secret support of the world as most of us are likely to encounter. His vision and passion seemed to maintain the world as a bearable condition. I thought there was ample reason for the remark of one of the nearer mourners to me: "To tell you the truth, I can't live without him."

To tell the truth, we don't have to live without him. We can (now at last) read and (slowly) absorb his books, in their conjoined significance. I felt no need to do this while he was around. It seemed superfluous to read Léo when one could see him and talk to him. I see with enormous interest and relief that there is—through his books—the possibility of continuing to learn from him now that he is physically gone.

Kabbalah and Art is a work for the seeker, rather than a work for the conventional reader. It is perhaps the densest and most impressionistic of Léo's works. It may be best read in conjunction with some of the more discursive earlier works, such as *Fragments of Life, Metaphysics and Art*. The sincere seeker will gain from a meditative reading of *Kabbalah and Art*, however, unmistakable glimpses of a seeker and thinker of great stature who is traveling down a rich vein of existence, on which he has already traveled very far and seen much more than the average seeker. What he has seen and known has evidently given Léo Bronstein the courage of *earned* originality.

I would try to paraphrase the thesis of *Kabbalah and Art* as follows: Justice alone is not enough; the ethical alone is never enough. There is in the ethical an exclusionary character which is *at once* and pervasively made up for and compensated by the art-image. And this compensatory soothing redistribution of affect and percept is a characteristic of reality itself. It is not a projection or mere wish about reality, for visual art is not a merely human wish projected on the impassive material medium; it is an expression of the indispensably feminine side of reality itself, which Kabbalah calls "mercy." Mercy seems to flow into the dry places made by justice, as sea water flows back into a pit dug furiously by a child in the sand.

What is Jewish about this hypothesis (or visionary assertion) of the intertwining of art-image and ethical concept, mercy and justice, is perhaps its refusal of reification. An art-image may be, by what Léo Bronstein calls "substitution," a point of ingathering for the Infinite. But no single art-image (such as the image of Christ) may preempt the field of the Infinite and subordinate the other art-images to itself. There is, then, no exclusive "stone" that was first rejected and then "made head of the corner." Léo Bronstein takes the Jewish intention—in its Kabbalistic expression—to be world-pervasive. He does so for all kinds of reasons, some of which I can only conjecture or impute to him, on the basis of the clues in *Kabbalah and Art*. Perhaps the Jewish intention is one of iconoclastic interiority, and therefore world-pervasive. Perhaps it is also conceptual, and therefore world-pervasive. Certainly it is historical and in quest of justice, and therefore absolutely influential. Perhaps because, by nature and vocation, the Jewish intention accepts and absorbs the actual, it seeps through other cultures and unavoidably pervades the world. Others have thought so, about the Jewish intention, for these and other reasons. In *Kabbalah and Art*, Léo Bronstein

xxii seems not so much to *think* the Jewish intention world-pervasive, even of the most remote and un-Jewish art-images, as to *see* that it is so, and to begin his story from there. What is religious about this insight is the attribution of such pervasive intentions not only to the single relentless culture of the Jews, but also to the Creator, and to the Creation as the Creator's reflection-absorbed.

I have known Léo Bronstein almost all my life. He was there to look me over through the visitor's window pane at the hospital where I was born. In my childhood I was to listen, uncomprehending but fascinated, to the conversations between my father, the late Professor Henry M. Rosenthal, and Léo, and I think that I began to study philosophy so that I could understand those conversations.

But there are also many aspects and reflections of Léo which are signs of the singular environment that he created. The stories he knew! The things that happened to him! The unsentimental aphorisms: "The world prefers a murderer to a petty-petty thief." (And the world, he felt, was in this false-fastidiousness mistaken.) Or, on higher education: "The kids are forced—forniced—to study sublime matters. Sublime-matters! It is wonderful!" Or the mock-musical refrain, condensing the accents of the many languages he spoke and read, with which he'd punctuate some droll anecdote or narrative account of human insufficiency: "What do I know?" he would say. "How can I judge?" Meaning that he *could* judge, and he did know, but that that fact was not all-important.

When he was a younger man, he was very handsome, and he dressed incomparably well, all his life, in what may have been the Catalan style of his youth. He loved parties and "good-times," as he called them—yet in the years I knew him there was hardly a day that was not partly spent in giving physical care to some elderly, enfeebled, or otherwise handicapped person.

When he was in the middle of his life, crossing the Atlantic as he often used to do at the time when my parents first knew him, a couple approached him on shipboard, apologizing for their intrusion but explaining that they had recently returned from India where they had been studying with a Master, that they recognized in him another Master, and would be grateful if he would permit them to study with him, to teach them what he knew. Léo laughed, of course, and said that he did not know anything.

Another time—in my childhood now—he came up to visit my family at the summer place we rented in New Jersey. It happened that our landlady was a theosophist, in addition to being a rather strong-minded, energetic and practical person. “Is that Léo?” she asked. “Why, he’s an Enlightened being.” How, she was asked, could she tell? “It’s obvious,” our landlady replied cryptically. “I can see his halo.”

I think there were many people who saw in him a master, though not in the dogmatic or hieratic sense, and saw or thought they saw his halo, though not in the physical sense.

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xxiii

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