

The World to Come

Daniel Mark Epstein

The floor of the artist's studio, brown bare boards, has been carefully swept. There is no sign of the painter's drippings and spills, the chaotic palette of a year's mixing and daubing. It might be a doctor's office or jeweler's shop.

There is a single object on the floor: a bronze-colored sycamore seed or prickly burr has rolled under the engraver's worktable. The burr lies directly beneath the right rim of the copperplate centered on the black surface, the disk that will create a burin engraving to be called *Angela's Garden*.

Burr, burin. A verbal pun to match the visual, for the copper color of the prickly burr brightens in the copper of the burin engraving. The wild, fantastic multiverse of Angela's pointillistic garden of leaves and petals—that includes one tiny, clearly defined burr in the thicket of cherry trees and branches—has flowered from the little world of the seed beneath the table.

If the artist were seated at his work, his sharp burin poised above the copperplate, the objects that would meet his vision first upon looking up would be the pale blue aerogram from his wife, Renée, in Brooklyn, and a clipped quotation from Wittgenstein. These are posted low between the windows, near the desk where the stopwatch with the runner on its face leans from the black surface toward the aerogram, casting a crescent shadow (*trompe l'oeil*) upon the wall. The sweep-hand of the dial is phallic, comical, starting from the runner's groin, pointing to the letter with its curious dream.

Renée dreamed she was giving birth in this very place, this apartment in the German village. She was frightened because she thought the child was dead within her. But then in the dream she “faked everyone out because it was not a real child but a big air bubble! Wow, what does this all mean!!!!?” she asks her husband, thousands of miles away.

As if in response to the question or as comment on the dream, there is the quote from Wittgenstein on a square of paper next to the letter, explaining (as only the Austrian philosopher could explain years before the Holocaust) that our grasp of the



world to come is impossible. The language we use to describe it is rooted in life and life is uncertain, ever-changing.

So the child of the dream that is only an air bubble becomes the naked girl-child on Renée's lap in the triptych that was painted by Simon the engraver seated calmly opposite, but not in this world, which is the world conceived by the burr and burin. In this world of the burr and the burin, man and wife, and the double view of the German village, there is, as yet, no painting and no child. It is all prophesy and magic. The year is 1971. The child on her mother's lap has yet to be born.



Fourth Avenue studio, Brooklyn, c.1973



Однократная

Виза М № 274435

визовая

ИИЧХАДЗЕ

Семен РАФНЕЛОВИЧ

1918 г. ОДИН

ИЗРАИЛЬ

СССР
УОЗНТИ
Моести ОЗ

На
жительство
до ИНОЯОРАТИ



"Брест"

6/7-71г



The Exit Visa

Louis Menashe

Doesn't anyone stay in one place anymore?

—"So Far Away," Carol King

How many Jews want to leave the U.S.S.R.?

Answer: 250,000,000

—Old Soviet joke

I. *Dynamics in Russian History*

V. O. Klyuchevsky, the eminent Russian historian, wrote of people in motion, citing that feature as a key to understanding the course of Russian history and its background. The melancholy question asked by Carol King is suggestive of a particular phase in U.S. social history—the sixties and seventies, when young people, especially, left familiar moorings to seek love and bliss in San Francisco or communal peace and harmony close to the earth in the New England countryside. Klyuchevsky wrote of the vast population movements in the quest for farming land and pastures through the centuries across the Eurasian plains. Among the colonizers were settlements of Eastern Slavs, whose most powerful and numerous members were the Great Russians.

The Russian princes, later Tsars, established their commercial and political center in Moscow, and what was once a city-state became the platform for an expanding polity that eventually stretched to the Pacific, and then some, to the peripheries of what is now the northwest U.S. and Alaska (as Sarah Palin might point out). The Tsars did it by force and diplomacy, and when it came to their own people, they tried to insure socio-economic stability by enserfing the peasant population. Keeping the Russian peasants in one place to work the land for their masters and the state was the goal. It was largely successful, but the system continuously leaked. When peasant serfs faced cruel masters, tax collectors, or military recruiters—they often *didn't stay in one place anymore*, adding another wrinkle to Klyuchevsky's tableau of people in motion. (And, Carol King permitting, to her *Tapestry*.) They fled. They went to borderlands