



Exhibition "The Birth" in Thamgidi Studio Huissen, The Netherlands, September 2nd - October 10th 2005

Opening September 10th 2005

Introduction

*Written by Prof. Dr. **Ton Lathouwers**.*

Ton Lathouwers has been a professor emeritus of Russian literature in Louvain and is now active as a Zen teacher and the spiritual leader of several Zen groups in the Netherlands and Belgium. He is author of, among others, articles, speeches and books concerning Zen Buddhism.

He wrote 'De moed tot het onmogelijke' ('The courage to do the impossible') and 'Meer dan één mens kan doen' ('More than anyone can do').

« "A night of not knowing leads to new revelations".

These words of the Russian poet, Vadim Shefner, show the deep inner reversal he witnessed and his desire to another, infinitely liberating reality: a reality in which birth and death are given a totally new meaning. But these words about the "night of not knowing which leads to new revelations" seem to me to apply as well to the paintings of Natacha Sladkoff. Not without reason she gave her exhibition the title of one of her paintings 'The Birth'¹.

Because I find this painting, that can also be found on the invitation, together with the painting of a young woman in the night on a dock², to be most characteristic of her oeuvre, I want to say something concerning these two works, and particularly in connection with the title 'birth'.

Both works depict night and water as the primal origin: that deepest, unfathomable, enigmatic reality from which everything comes into existence. In the painting of the woman on the dock we see how the strange splendour of vegetative living in all its forms is given a shape out of the night and the mysterious water. In the painting 'The Birth' the white horse that rises from the water is a symbol for the primal power and the boundless vitality of living, a primal power that also rises from the mysterious primal origin made of water and night. Everything refers to a reality which both frightens and attracts: "mysterium tremendum et fascinans", as it is called in the language of mysticism: a mystery that astounds and at the same time captivates and lures.

Because of all this, both paintings show a deep awareness of loneliness, sadness, homesickness and a boundless desire, without being able to say what the object of that desire is. The atmosphere which predominates is indecision, but in that case the type of indecision that makes waiting pure. The painting of the young woman, who approaches us from the wooden dock like an enchanting butterfly-looking creature that could easily fly away, expresses this feeling very well. The night over the mysterious, luminous water unintentionally reminds us of the well-known words of the Spanish mystic John of the Cross: "Without support yet carried" and above all: "Darkness is light enough for me".

Both paintings portray, in two different ways, that a person walking the road of life sooner or later doesn't seem to be able to go any further. The painting of the woman lying who waits in the night and in the silence for the wonder of the new birth expresses the devotion of exclusively waiting and trusting, exactly to the point where one can't do anything anymore. The painting of the woman on the dock that ends right before her feet portrays that one day we will find out that the road before us stops. Because each road that we

travel only becomes a road by the steps that we take and is never defined in advance. Because each step from the heart is always a jump into the unknown, a jump that sometimes feels like a fall. As the Russian poet Voznesensky once wrote about himself: "Am I flying? Am I falling? As a bird? As a stone?"

Therefore, in both works the artist expresses that exactly where our deepest desire is concerned, the only correct attitude is: devotion, detachment, silence and waiting. In one of the paintings this waiting is mainly expressed as something passive: in a motionless lying figure, who lets herself go. In the other painting the same devotion, the same detachment and silence is expressed as an event being active at the same time. In Zen meditation this step forward on the dock without seeing a road is called: "Take a step, where there is humanly speaking no more possibility to take a step". Therefore, for me both paintings express the meditative attitude as profoundly as the picture of the woman in lotus position³.

Another element in the works I referred to, and especially in the reproduction of the two female figures, is the tension between the awareness of vulnerability on the one hand and nevertheless the willingness to reveal oneself and to be seen on the other hand. And this too has to do everything with this meditative attitude of not knowing, waiting, devotion, and remaining silent.

A willingness to be seen: but by whom? Perhaps first by the 'other' who seems to stay absent, who seems inaccessible and at the most makes us think of his presence through figures and encounters, but also by symbols and impulses of the soul. The male face on the painting of the woman on the dock was placed in a way – in the corner far right - which reminds us of the familiar images in the corner on Russian icons. It seems to be like an archetype that refers to the same totally different reality, which icons express: far away and close at the same time, unknown yet foreseen by the heart. But most of all: promising and liberating.

Perhaps the counterpart of this can be found in the painting of the male character, who seems to be caught in a tangle of walls, corridors and steps⁴. Perhaps by this the artist wants to express how much the 'other' can also be caught in a labyrinth without exit, in a world where walls define everything. Those are the walls about which Dostoyevsky, Natacha Sladkoff's favourite writer, bears witness that he will never bow to. Especially because existence knows of no boundaries, always offers an exit, particularly where we see no exit but nevertheless continue to wait and guard in the dark. We can be grateful to the artist that she expresses this 'not bowing' of Dostoyevsky in her own way through her paintings. »



(1)



(2)



(3)



(4)