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# **TRANSLINGUAL IDENTITY AND ART: MARC CHAGALL'S STRIDE THROUGH THE GATES OF JANUS**

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**Abstract:**

This hybrid piece, combining scholarly inquiry in several fields (from bilingualism and literary theory to visual art, cultural anthropology, and psychology) with the genre of personal essay, explores the concept of multilingual identity and creativity in visual art. Establishing the parallel between the phenomenon of 'literary translanguaging' and the newly coined concept of 'translingual art,' the essay is focused on the multilingual life and art of an immigrant artist, Marc Chagall. Several of his paintings are analyzed within the framework of three translingual identity constructs: duality, ambivalence, and liminality. The complexity of translingual identity, and specifically Chagall's, is illuminated by the author's Jewish Russian roots and immigrant history, amplifying a holistic view of multilingualism and its relationship to creativity.

**Keywords:**

multilingualism ♦ translingual art ♦ creativity ♦ Russian-Jewish identity ♦ Marc Chagall

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A painter's drawing is really his writing...

—Marc Chagall, (1971, 145)

C'est à bout d'arguments verbaux que j'ai vu l'image me faire signe... Non pas l'image verbale, mais bel et bien l'image picturale, le tableau, le dessin, la photo.

—Elsa Triolet (1969, 107)

**J**anus-faced figures and flying clocks, rooftops of churches and synagogues, fiddlers, donkeys, cats with human faces, and lovers resting in a giant bouquet of flowers as if in a tree—spontaneously appeared in my mind's eye on my first (and, so far, last) return visit to Moscow in 2004, after sixteen years living in the United States. Though I had already been writing in English, it was only after that trip that I officially became a citizen of the 'republic of letters' by publishing my first creative piece in my step-mother tongue, a meditation on how my journey to the 'mother land' had been a floating, intimate experience, "a timeless, suspended, and dreamy moment between the West and the East, the past and the present..." (Lvovich 2007, 295).

Even as displacement had been the defining theme of my experience in the United States, I found myself once again displaced on my visit to Moscow, "renamed and deleted" and stranded on the ruins of Soviet history (Lvovich 2013). Every experience I had there was a conundrum, and every reaction was a knot of emotional paradoxes and 'mixed feelings'—the English expression that I finally appropriated to its very core. The conjunction 'yet' seemed a perfect title for my experiences.

Although I'd lived in Moscow for the first 33 years of my life, I felt like an outsider on that visit, faced with unfamiliar signage in the streets and metro stations, now rechristened to their pre-me, pre-Soviet names. Yet Moscow's crowds, colors, and smells struck a nostalgic chord in my inner sensory world. People I had known when I lived in Moscow remained magically frozen in my mind as young beautiful sculptures—yet in real time they had aged and crystallized into partially unfamiliar personae. Their lives were no longer in line with mine. Dramatic political and personal transformations had

reshaped their world in my absence, while I was existing on some other plane, immersed in my American immigrant travails, striving to become a New Yorker and an American professor. Yet, oddly, I still felt like a flamboyant young Francophile from the Moscow College of Foreign Languages enamored with Georges Brassens and Marguerite Duras. On that trip, I saw myself as both old and new, as Russian, French, and American, existing in both the past and present, in endlessly dividing and multiplying reflections in the Lacanian “hall of mirrors”—and I heard my own voices and languages as back-and-forth echoes, unrecognizable and disjointed. I was “losing gravity in Russia” (Lvovich 2007).

On that visit, to paraphrase Aleksandar Hemon (2013, 17), I was inexorably split in a temporal and spatial continuum between ‘me-here’ and ‘me-there,’ where ‘here’ and ‘there’ could interchangeably be America or Russia. In this limbo, I woke up every morning in my friend Katia’s apartment, flustered and confused, with a frustrating sensation of a dream that must be recalled and articulated to save my life, so that I could pull myself together again and land my two feet safely on the ground. In perpetual double vision and literal double speak, I struggled to verbally name my mental levitation, but I only saw puzzled looks and raised eyebrows on Katia’s face when she heard me describe my experience in decadent poem epithets, like ‘timeless’ and ‘ethereal.’ This is when the Chagallian grandfather clock with a fish soared above me in the sky, brushing me ever so lightly with its incongruous wings. I owe to Marc Chagall’s cathartic fantastical images the arousal of my “translingual imagination” (Kellman 2000).

### **The Treasure Bookcase**

I don’t remember when I first heard about Chagall or saw his paintings. It seems to me that his name and his fantastical images have always been part of my life as if stamped into my consciousness even though, in Soviet Russia where I grew up, his work was nowhere to be seen. He was always referred to, like all exile Russian artists and writers, as a traitor.

One of my strongest childhood memories is my grandfather’s ‘treasure bookcase,’ which contained a large collection of books he had acquired as a special privilege during his tenure as president of several Moscow colleges. Most of these books were Russian and European classics, such as the popular and difficult-to-obtain Adventure Series, World Literature Series, and whatever else had been printed in tiny censored droplets—in a country forever hungry for the written word, the only available free, private, yet

genuinely social possession. The bookcase, standing like a monument in Grandfather's living room, was out of bounds for us children. We could contemplate it but we were not to touch it. When I was older and would beg to borrow a book, I sensed Grandfather's trepidation about relinquishing, even temporarily, this symbol of his personal accomplishments, bygone power, and bittersweet pride in having risen from a poor shtetl boy to the heights of Moscow councilman and college president.

I later realized that he had one more reason for keeping these books from his grandchildren: the collection included books published in the USSR since the 1920s, many of which were officially denounced and forbidden by the regime in the 1930s or quietly taken out of print and removed from library circulation after the War. Among his books, for example, there were a few volumes of Sholem Aleichem's stories and plays, as well as the Russian translation of *The Diary of Anne Frank* (which I later managed to borrow). It would have been a disaster had we been caught reading those books in public or lending them to our peers. To hide the contents of his bookcase from a curious eye and to preserve them from dust (Grandfather was compulsively neat), the book spines behind glass doors were covered by blank sheets of paper, magazine clippings, and seemingly random pictures. One of them was Chagall's iconic [Fiddler](#).

I can still hear the pride in my grandfather's voice as he uttered Marc Chagall's name—Марк Шагал—a name that, as a child, I understood literally: *Marc strode* (indeed, it is the past-tense masculine of the Russian verb *to stride*). Until recently, when I started researching Chagall, I had honestly believed that it was an intentional pun--and an unfortunate loss for a non-Russian speaking Western audience. (However, most likely, Chagall's name did not originate from the Russian word for 'striding' but from a Russified version of the Jewish name *Siegal*, with the second *l* added later to make it look more French). The artist himself had whimsically used this pun in one of his paintings, [Cubist Landscape](#) (1918), a composition of geometrical forms containing inside the two-dimensional collage a three-dimensional drawing of the art school he'd founded in Vitebsk. Next to it, little Chagall is walking with an umbrella, the symbol of luck and protection, the visual translation/literalization of a Yiddish idiom. *Shirem* in Yiddish is an umbrella, *bashiremen* means to protect (see more on Chagall's visual literalization on p. 19). His name is printed in all his languages, the letters climbing in chronological order, creating a visual multilingual pun: *Chagall strode* (Harshav 2006, 65).

My grandparents, roughly of Chagall's generation, were born and raised in shtetls in Belarus (Shumilino and Gorodok) near Vitebsk, Chagall's place of birth, and they shared Chagall's native culture and languages (Yiddish and Russian), which filled—and never left—his mind and his canvas. The way I feel now about my American children and their loss of Russian is how my grandparents must have felt about the loss of their Jewish, Yiddish-speaking world. A world that ceased to exist not only in their nostalgic minds but in real life, as a result of Stalin's campaign to destroy the Yiddish cultural heritage which had blossomed in the wake of the revolution but became obsolete during the Great Terror and after the War. As adults, my parents barely understood Yiddish, and I was implicitly taught by the larger culture to be ashamed of its sound. The extermination of Jewish consciousness became complete in the postwar years, a time when the Holocaust was not recognized in Soviet Russia as a genocide carried out by Nazis against Jews. Indeed, it was forbidden to commemorate the Holocaust as such. The Jewish victims of Babi Yar and elsewhere were considered Soviet victims of German Nazism, on par with other Soviet victims—no more and no less.

Loss is often idealized and even mythologized because of its finality, especially if it entails stark cultural and linguistic contrasts between past and present, as in the case of the uprooted Chagall, or in my family's case. My grandfather's shtetl childhood, although spent in poverty, gained sweet significance in his memory as he grew old. In his unpublished memoir, he describes Vitebsk as a gateway to the world where he first saw electricity, a tram, and a train, which connected this mostly agricultural area with the rest of Russia; he speaks with awe of the beauty of the river Dvina, a frequent nostalgic element in Chagallian landscapes. At the time of my grandfather's and Chagall's youth, Vitebsk's population was 52% Jewish. Many of those Jews were educated, and their education meant that they played an important role in providing valuable social connections to the surrounding shtetls.

As a youngster, Grandfather often went to Vitebsk for various errands and work. He was a smart, entrepreneurial young man and eldest son who, just like Chagall, used all his ingenuity and often his back to help his mother support a family of five after the early death of his father. The Bolshevik Revolution, a promise of equality and justice, was a chance for oppressed Jews like my grandfather to rise on its wave, and he like many others enthusiastically joined the movement. Fires were raging in the Russian countryside, spreading from one flimsy wooden home to another, and—seeing the need—he organized his peers into a volunteer town fire squad, then extended the

organization to Vitebsk county, and then to the whole of Belarus. He forged successful rapport with the new powers-to-be, then went to the university in Minsk. Later in his career, he moved to Moscow to become president of one of the first highly ideological Soviet higher education institutions, the Academy of Agriculture.

When my grandparents, in their eighties, followed us in our migration to the U.S., they probably identified even more strongly than they had before with the nostalgic Russian Jewish world Chagall depicted from his own exile. My grandfather died in New York, at the age of ninety-nine. I took an album of Marc Chagall's prints as a keepsake from my grandparents' house—a perfect representation of the 'treasure bookcase' and of their long tumultuous lives transformed by and transforming history in their real and symbolic move Westward, from a shtetl in Belarus to New York.

### **Exile and Translingualism in Literature and Art**

The haunting liminal sensation of being simultaneously inside and outside of two linguistic-cultural realms is often at the core of the growing literary phenomenon we now call "translingualism," a term coined by Steven Kellman (2000). Multilingual writers, such as Romain Gary, Joseph Conrad, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Joseph Brodsky, Jerzy Kozinsky, Nancy Huston, to name only a few, have attempted to capture this fragmentation in their essays, poems, and novels. This is what the legendary polyglot writer Vladimir Nabokov did in his cat's cradles of texts within texts, which are filled with multilingual word play and unreliable narrative voices. In *Pnin* (1989), for example, Nabokov self-mockingly placed his unhappy protagonist, Professor Pnin, on an inter-lingual island of his own where, to his American colleagues' puzzlement, the Russian exile often expressed himself in English using literal translations of Russian sayings and idioms. Like their creator, who mourned his inner Russia, Nabokov's characters mentally returned to Russia. But going back proves impossible, unless you can walk, like Martyn in his novella *Glory* (1991), into a painting of the Russian countryside, which used to hang on the wall of your childhood home.

The themes of return and displacement run through the letters of many authors whose lives were defined by the upheavals of twentieth-century Europe. For example, the multiple chameleon-like impersonations of the Austrian Jew Jakov Lind during World War II described in his 1970 autobiography *Counting My Steps* (written in English), show his linguistic personalities at work—first in Amsterdam, where he was sent from Vienna on a *Kindertransport* after the Anschluss, then in the 'lion's mouth' in Germany, and

during his subsequent exodus to Palestine, which led him to write his particular brand of dystopian fiction (all in English) in post-war London. Lind is not just a double, but a multiple-faced Janus—a multilingual trickster, who changed names, languages, and identities and eventually embraced English to create a liminal ‘third’ space where language is torn from thought and signifier from signified. His characters, like their author, are shipwrecked on an island, a collapsed Tower of Babel, where German is tainted by Nazism, where people talk in incomprehensible idiolects, and where speaking English is called “speaking strange.”

The mental chaos that a multilingual migrant life produces—and its potential for fostering linguistic creativity—is brilliantly exposed in Eva Hoffman’s now classic autobiography *Lost in Translation* (1990). Hoffman calls herself a “living avatar of structuralist wisdom” (106), because of her relentless inside-outside Polish-Jewish-Canadian self-examination, which unfolds along with her English language learning during her acculturation process in North America. She unearths, often in psychoanalytic terms, the psychic split entailed in every stage of her new life, in every personal or social situation, every time a newly learned (English) word diverges from the (Polish) ‘thing’ and is often ‘unfelt’ and disembodied (1990, 107). Hoffman’s gradual bilingual transformation in exile begins to define her. It becomes her literary identity, which adds richness and insight to her writing in English—an advantage for a writer, she claims, a ‘bonus’ of the immigrant drama (1998, 50).

Translingual writers are indeed natural ‘avatars’ of structuralism. They are often people who have found themselves in the outsider position, in internal exile, even before their voluntary or involuntary physical exile. This early outsider status is what I would call a pre-existing condition of translingual creativity. And it is not accidental that many translingual authors were Jewish, since European Jews were always exiles of sorts. Even when they felt at home in the lands of the Diaspora, they faced discrimination and suspicion, no matter how assimilated they were. World War II and the Holocaust reinforced Jewishness as the psychological and historical ‘original’ exile, which shaped Jews’ Protean identity, and generated their longing for home even while they were leaving home (Lifton 1995). Perhaps this pre-existing condition, as tragic as it may be, was, for these Jewish authors, a historical bonus of their diasporic drama, which pushed them toward a multilingual existence and predisposed them to translingual creativity.



The same power of “emancipatory” (Kellman 2000, 28) “fertile detachment” (Hoffman 1998, 50) may be equally cathartic, if not more so, for visual artists. Since the visual world loses less in translation and is “more transportable than the verbal kind” (Nochlin 1998, 37), artists may be better positioned than writers to express instantaneously multiple planes, fragmentation, ambiguity, and liminality of exilic multilingual identity. The loss of language for self-expression, described by Eva Hoffman as “the loss of a living connection” (1990, 107) is, in one sense, irrelevant to their art. Indeed, artists traditionally traveled in ‘voluntary exile’ to other lands for inspiration, learning, and insight, and often inhabited the cultural space of the Other as a catalyst of creativity: Pablo Picasso flourished in France, away from Barcelona, and R. B. Kitaj, who incorporated the fragmented condition of exile into his art, self-exiled from the U.S. to England.

Living and working in a new culture and adopting a new language, with new conceptual and emotional representations can indeed foster not only a different worldview, but also a new sense of color, form, or spatial relations—if we extend the Sapir-Whorf linguistic/cultural relativity hypothesis (see Gardner-Chloros 2014, Pavlenko 2014). Recent scholarship on bilingualism and visual art (Gardner-Chloros 2014) has explored the interplay of identity, language, and culture, not as a direct effect of artists’ bilingualism, but as an implication of their cultural identity production. Using the examples of Vincent van Gogh and Lucien Pissarro to establish the relationship of “dual influences, dual allegiances and dual cultures...found [both] in their painting” and in their (letter) writing, Gardner-Chloros (2014, 176) makes a connection between the development of the artists’ visual styles and their bicultural/bilingual minds and identities.

This view of visual language paves the way for the concept of ‘translingual art’ in parallel to ‘translingual literature.’ The ‘art text’ created by a multilingual artist, an immigrant, an exile, or a cultural traveler, effectively bears just like written text such translingual features as duality, ambivalence, and liminality, both in content and form. It uses creative imagination—what Coleridge calls “esemplastic power”—to assemble “the disparate elements of experience into coherent, lively wholes” (in Hyde 1998, 138), which are “simultaneously available [in visual art] whereas language is sequential” (Gardner-Chloros 2014, 175). Translingual artists are able to convert their “bifocal mental world” (Harshav 2006, 88) into a cohesive narrative on the canvas with an immediacy that often surpasses their textual counterparts, translingual writers. The

following three sections will attempt to capture the three translingual identity components—duality, ambivalence, and liminality—in several well-known paintings by a multilingual artist, Marc Chagall.

**Janus-Faced Double: *Self-Portrait with Seven Fingers (1912-1913)* and *Paris through the Window (1912-1913)***

...Il fut un temps ou j'avais deux têtes...

—Marc Chagall, *Poèmes* (1975, 130)

...There was a time when I wore two heads...

—translated into English by Neil Young

Janus is Roman God of beginnings, endings, transitions, doors, passages, time, and boundaries. His double face symbolizes the dual nature of stepping in and out of doors, past and future. It represents movement and change, as well as the fusion of space and time. The Temple of Janus had doors on both ends called The Gates of Janus.

Marc (Moysey, Moshe) Chagall grew up in Vitebsk in a Hasidic family, the eldest of nine siblings. Yiddish was the language spoken at home. Hebrew (with elements of Aramaic) was his language of early literacy, studied by reading the Bible and Talmud in cheder, an elementary school for Jewish boys. Chagall never spoke Hebrew, but he could read it, and the Hebrew alphabet, along with Cyrillic, later became an important part of his artistic imagery, symbolizing his roots.

There was no further education available for Jews in tsarist Russia, but Chagall's mother bribed a school teacher who, for the sum of fifty rubles, helped get Chagall admitted to a regular Russian secondary school. As hostile and anti-Semitic as that culture was, the Russian world was a gateway out of the shtetl (and eventually into the West). Soon after Chagall entered this Russian school, his parents made another significant break from their Jewish cultural norms, which frowned on visual images, taking their son to Yury (Yehuda) Pen's Art School in Vitebsk for his first painting lessons.

Chagall had difficulties learning Russian and did not do well academically in Russian school. A free spirit, he hated studying Russian, which became a symbol of his second-rate standing: "Let them whisper in the air to each other all the words of the Russian language... I want to stay wild, untamed, to cover myself with green leaves, to shout,

weep, pray” (Chagall 1960, 49). He wanted to be a singer, a dancer, a violinist, or a painter—all non-verbal arts. He wanted to communicate through imagination, free from the constraints of language. But however much he initially hated living his life in Russian, he learned to do so to socialize with his peers and later with his future fiancée Bella (Berta Rozenfeld), a girl from a wealthy educated Jewish family, whose milieu required speaking Russian (outside of the home). Russian, eventually, became Chagall’s dominant language.

His Russianization intensified when he traveled to St. Petersburg to study art with a well-known artist Leon Bakst and had to communicate with learned assimilated Russian-speaking Jews. (Jews were forbidden to stay in St. Petersburg, but Chagall managed to obtain permission and a stipend from wealthy patrons, who eventually helped fund his first trip to France).

That was Chagall’s first and final move, physically and mentally, away from provincial Vitebsk: already from St. Petersburg, he depicted Jewish town life from the outside, as his past, with nostalgic themes he nurtured throughout his life—as seen in [The Dead Man](#) (1908), [The Village Fair](#) (1908), [Russian Wedding](#) (1909), [The Birth](#) (1910)—combining it with elements of Christian iconography, icons and *lubok* (a colorful Russian print, usually with a folkloric subject), affirming duality in his conceptual, psychological, and artistic consciousness. This move away from his Jewish roots and the related socio-cultural and linguistic transformations marked the beginning of his inner—and later outer—exile, the ‘pre-existing condition’ for translingual creativity. He had to escape and lose Vitebsk—to see it, to love it, to be forever drawn to it.

When Chagall first left Russia in 1911 and set off to Paris, the center of art and cultural life, he lived and worked in La Ruche, a settlement for artists, where he connected mostly with other Russian painters and spoke Russian and Yiddish. He painted fiercely, experimenting with Cubism, Fauvism and nascent Expressionism and Surrealism, combining elements of these schools and making the first strides in the creation of his own idiosyncratic visual language. Later he befriended some French avant-garde artists (Robert and Sonia Dulauney) and symbolist poets (Blaise Cendrars and Guillaume Apollinaire), who played a central role in his integration into French society and art life. He felt more and more comfortable in Paris, learning French on the fly; according to witnesses, he spoke it fluently, though he always retained his Russian Yiddish accent.

Bringing together into pictorial space his Russian and Jewish cultures, he negotiated his immigrant identity in France in the “fictional world” of his creation, as Chagall scholar Benjamin Harshav describes it. Referring to his oeuvre as a whole, similar to a bookcase filled with books in series, Harshav extended that term to a larger one, “fictional universe” (2006, 35), in which Chagall’s themes, symbols, elements and colors are grouped and regrouped in a variety of sets, like in a kaleidoscope, forming an idiosyncratic whole in every painting.

Like in a novel with its plot, themes, characters, settings, and language, Chagall’s “fictional universe” is a composite self-referential paradigm, with his autobiography in the center. Each painting is separate, of course, each a fictional world of its own, yet they could be considered chapters in his autobiographical novel, with reappearing iconographic elements, such as Bella the bride, himself as a groom, and variable symbolic details in the background: a rooster, a cat, a donkey, or a cow. In his *Marc Chagall and the Lost Jewish World* (2006) Harshav attributes special significance not just to the artist’s Jewish background but specifically to the role of language, Yiddish, which whimsically fuses diasporic components, sometimes several languages in one sentence. Thus emerges a form of artistic code-switching in parallel to its properly linguistic counterpart allowing for visual translanguaging play, as we shall see in closer analysis of his paintings.

Curiously, as Chagall’s artistic “self-begetting novel” (Kellman 1980) grows outward, the content (i.e. the signified) gradually becomes form—a signifier, his language (of art)—in an interactive semiotic whole. The poet Blaise Cendrars, Chagall’s good friend, understood this:

...He takes a church and paints with a church  
 He takes a cow and paints with a cow  
 With a sardine  
 With heads, hands, knives  
 He paints with a bull’s pizzle  
 He paints with all the foul passions of a little  
 Jewish city  
 With all the heightened sexuality of provincial Russia

(Cendrars 1913)

The *Self-Portrait with Seven Fingers* (1912-1913) and *Paris through the Window* (1912-1913) were painted at this crucial time, featuring introspection, self-referencing, and simultaneity as the main elements of his artistic language. Chagall perceived *Self-Portrait* as a manifesto of his “bifocal mental world” (Harshav 2006, 88). The painter is contemplating his own canvas, *To Russia, Asses, and Others*, painted earlier the same year, identifying himself in this painting-within-a-painting as a Russian Jew working in his Parisian studio (Reich 2012). His hand has seven fingers—a reference to a Yiddish saying *mit ale zibn finger*, ‘doing something with all seven fingers,’ meaning doing one’s best, investing in the work one’s whole being.

Transposing the open, creative, translingual quality of Yiddish, the de-territorialized language of Jewish Diaspora, into his art is one of the constants in Chagall’s paintings (Harshav 2006). Visible to bilingual eyes only, Chagall painted Yiddish idioms’ literal meaning, creating visual puns in the absurd and grotesque fictional world, the same way Kafka did in *The Metamorphosis*, where a person actually becomes a huge insect. In his other well-known picture, *Over Vitebsk* (1915-20), Chagall literalized another Yiddish idiom, *er geyt iber di hayzer*, meaning “goes over the houses/from house to house,” i.e. is a beggar, showing a Jew with a sack on his back, one of the wandering Yiddish fictional characters, the *luft-mentschen* (people of the air), hovering above town (Harshav 2006, 57 and 130). The literalization of L1 idioms is a device commonly used by translingual writers: for instance Vladimir Nabokov, notorious for his bilingual play, literalized this Russian idiom in *Pnin*: “The cat, as Pnin would say, cannot be hid in a bag,” (1989, 43) referring to something obvious that everyone can plainly see.

In the upper right corner of the *Self-Portrait*, in a puffy cloud, one sees a Russian cityscape, and in the left corner Paris, looking like a precursor to *Paris through the Window*. There are always letters from different alphabets, in a Cabbalistic puzzle, adding an extra poetic semiotic level to the meaning, signifying Chagall’s cultural themes: on the wall above the artist’s head, Paris and Russia are inscribed in Hebrew, a nod to his adoptive homes. Hebrew letters are read in Yiddish, supplied with Hebrew vowel markers, *Rosiye* and *Pariz*, where ‘Russia’ (*Rosiya*) is slightly Yiddishized, with *e* at the end, representing his trilingual culture. As in Bakhtinian ‘heteroglossia,’ Chagall engaged a dialogic function among his linguistic resources, marking his languages with “symbolic connotations or indexical meanings” (Jaworski 2014, 135).

As a multilingual, Chagall routinely combined visual imagery and writing in his three alphabets resulting in translingual ‘text art’ in which writing is multimodal. In translingual art, graphic signs are transformed into multiple communicative, visual, and aesthetic media. In this sense, translingual art can be compared to Arabic and Chinese calligraphy or to the artwork of contemporary ‘metrolingual’ artists, like Laurie Anderson and Xu Bing (see Jaworski 2014).

*Paris through the Window*, painted at about the same time, is playing with the same theme: looking back at his life in Russia and looking forward to his relationship with France (hence a double Janus-faced head). Through the window, one sees a flattened Eiffel Tower and Paris cityscape in simple geometric forms, against the background of a multi-colored sky, with a descending parachute figure, paralleling the Tower’s triangular geometry, the same one as in *Self-Portrait*. The recurrent Chagallian element of the umbrella (in this case a parachute as an umbrella) is used as the visual translingual pun (*bashiremen* in Yiddish): Chagall feels at home, protected in Paris, and claims France as his own, with the Eiffel Tower as an iconic symbol in the center. This endearing concept is enhanced by the French national colors, red, blue, and white, predominant in the picture. The Eiffel Tower appears white in a huge beam of light. Translating colors into moods, Chagall once said about colors in Russia and in France, “...Their color is like their shoes [in Russia]: Soutine, myself, all of us left because of the color....Paris is light” (Kagan 1989, 105).

The Janus-faced figure, a blue face and a yellow face, looking in opposite directions, oversees the scene. It is accompanied by a human-faced cat, another translingual sign, possibly symbolizing his wife Bella, a projection of Russianized endearment (kitty—*kiska*—is a common nickname for a beloved woman in Russian). The painting is an affirmation of the divided identity of the artist, looking both ways, towards East and West, Russia and France, past and present, passing through his window—the ritual passage through the Gates of Janus.

Double-faced figures would steadily appear throughout Chagall’s art, as a reflection of his romantic attachments and divided loyalties to Russia and to France, conceptualized as bilingual “bigamy” by the French-Russian writer Elsa Triolet in *La Mise en Mots* (1969). In her book, Triolet placed a photograph of the Janus-faced baroque sculpture of a woman who is looking at one of her faces in a hand mirror. Along similar lines, other translingual writers famously used erotic terms to describe feelings accompanying their

multilingual creativity (noted by Beaujour 1989, Kellman 2013), and apparently so did Chagall in his art, repeatedly merging his image as a French-Russian-Jewish artist with Bella, Virginia, and Vava (see *Sunday*, 1952-54, *The Black Glove*, 1923-48, *The Soul of the City*, 1945, *David and Bathseba*, 1960), expressing bigamy, betrayal, and marital loyalty vis-à-vis his cultural selves.

### **Translingual Ambivalences: *Homage to Apollinaire* (1911-12)**

Ambivalence and divided loyalties reflecting Chagall's background not only found expression in his art, but also characterized Chagall as a person. He has never been one clear-cut persona and never belonged to any one ideology, religion, or art movement, a state which he would have found imprisoning. Chagall lived in the ambivalences he painted and painted the ambivalences he lived in.

Born and raised in a Hasidic Jewish family, he never became an observant Jew himself and early on tore off the restraining chains of religion; yet, he never cut himself off from his people and culture. Christian images filled his art, but they never took over at the expense of his other selves; rather the Orthodox Christianity of his young Russian years allowed him to open his creativity for the Judeo-Christian themes in multiple forms, as a repository of complex mixed tropes (see for example [White Crucifixion](#) [1939]). He never converted, not even metaphorically.

At different periods of his life, Chagall was supportive of Communist ideas but he never embraced them. Like most Russian Jews yearning for liberation (my grandfather among them), Chagall was swept away by idealistic youthful belief in Communism and wanted to contribute to the Russian socialist experiment. After his return to Russia in 1914, mainly to marry the love of his life Bella and to return to France, World War I broke and then the Bolshevik Revolution. Chagall got stuck in Russia. In 1918 he was appointed by the Minister of Education, Anatoliy Lunacharsky, director of the Academy of Arts in his native Vitebsk and the Commissar of Art in Vitebsk county. The idea was to revolutionize art and to attract talented artists, like Malevich and Lissitsky, but organizing and running the school in the devastated country was an incredible struggle, and Chagall felt disillusioned and quit. He taught for a while and suffered hunger and cold, trying to support himself, his beloved wife Bella (whom he married in 1915), and his newborn daughter, Ida, until he was able to miraculously escape Soviet Russia in 1922. It was the end of his communist utopia and of his Russian life and a new beginning for his artistic path in the West, in Paris, which became his home—his second Vitebsk.

During World War II, Chagall fled with Bella to the U.S. and settled in New York, where he spent a few productive years. Pierre Matisse, the son of famous Henri, paid him a monthly stipend and held twenty-six exhibits of Chagall's work in his Manhattan gallery. Chagall did not speak English and never learned it during his exile in New York. His Russian and Yiddish served him well during those years when he grew sympathetic with the Soviet Union because of its fight with Hitlerism, but he never joined the Communist Party, as his friends Paul Eluard and Pablo Picasso had done.

In 1948 Chagall returned to Europe for good and in the decades after, his creativity flourished and transformed beyond painting to include multiple media: mosaics, murals, stained glass, theater designs, ceramics, etc. Chagall received public recognition, honors, and awards from the French government, had a prestigious exhibition at the Louvre, and painted the ceiling of Paris Opéra. He settled in Paris and traveled to work on challenging and monumental commissions in New York and in Israel. Chagall was always a great supporter of the emerging state of Israel and its development and painted with pride stained-glass windows in Jerusalem. However, he was never a Zionist.

In 1952 he moved to Côte d'Azur, where he spent the three last decades of his life. There he married Vava (Valentina Brodsky), his last muse, a Russian émigrée from a prominent Kiev family, who devoted her life to his art. As most European Jewish wives, she combined "the role of a businesswoman with a hostess, of calculation with warmth" (Wullschlager 2008, 472), just like Bella had done, and spoke Chagall's three languages.

During his long and productive life, Chagall never formally joined any art movement. He famously rejected André Breton's invitation to join Surrealism, whose elements, like other schools' elements, are present in his work. Instead, he continued to develop his own idiosyncratic eclectic style, combining ideas from different movements and opting for ambivalent meanings.

The title of the painting, [\*Homage to Apollinaire\*](#) (1912), does not reflect its subject: it is an abbreviated dedication to four avant-garde artists, Apollinaire, Canudo, Walden, and Cendrars, who recognized Chagall early on. At the painting's center is the biblical theme, showing a man and a woman (Adam and Eve) fused as one body, yet fragmented within a circle, with intricate overlapping color boundaries, lines, and body parts. The sun, the moon, and the wheel of time, cut into color segments, encircle the hybrid body reminiscent of Leonardo Da Vinci's famous drawing, and Chagall's signature, in rainbow colors, reads his name twice: Chagall and CHGLL, in consonants only, like in Hebrew,



yet in Latin letters. His first name is a mix of two languages: **М** **ר** **צ**: the first and the last are in French, and **A** and **R** are in Yiddish. The French **M** and the Hebrew **R** get Hebrew vocalization signs, and each letter is of a different color, placed in a descending order.

Both the biblical meanings of genesis and of gender in Chagall's interpretation of the merged genitalia certainly represent a cosmopolitan view of human unity. It is not clear if Eve was born out of Adam's ribs, as the traditional interpretation goes, or if God created them both (Adam and Eve share one pair of legs). Chagall may have known from his early education in the cheder a legend in Midrash that God created Adam *with two faces* and later separated them (Harshav 2006, 96). There is an undeniable allusion here to an Italian Renaissance painting, [\*Expulsion of Adam and Eve\*](#), by Tommaso Masaccio replicating Eve's screaming face. The anxiety of expulsion, of original exile, of divided human existence, and of relentless duality appear in *Homage to Apollinaire* as one of many expressions of the artist's lifetime of ambivalences as a multicultural person with conflicting identities and unsettling fragmentation.

Throughout his career, Chagall's fictional world continued to include ambiguous but always benign creatures: a cockerel-woman, a horse-cockerel, a human donkey, a cat with a smile, and sometimes fantastical hermaphrodite creatures. Possibly influenced by Hasidic mysticism and by closeness to nature and animals in his childhood, Chagall painted animal innocence conflated with his belief in humanity even during the most precarious of times. André Malraux once commented on Chagall's ambiguity, synthesis, and amalgamation in pictures of humanized animals as being the expression of his mystical, religious, pantheist beliefs coming "from a popular Bible invented by him" (in Verdet 1984, 109). This combined Jewish and Christian traditions, male and female genders, Modernist and traditional styles, Latin and Hebrew letters, letters as semiotic signs and letters as graphic shapes with his bicultural/bilingual associations.

### **Flight, Levitation, and Liminality: *Time Is a River without Banks* (1936)**

Seul est mien  
 Le pays qui se trouve dans mon âme  
 J'y entre sans passport...  
 ...Les habitants vagabondent dans l'air  
 A la recherche d'un logis  
 Ils habitent dans mon âme...

—Marc Chagall, *Poèmes* (1975, 130)

The country which is in my soul  
 Is mine alone  
 I enter without a passport...  
 ...Its inhabitants roam in the air  
 In search of a home;  
 They dwell in my soul.

—translated into English by Neil Young

Very few figures in Marc Chagall's paintings, at all periods of his long life, ever stand firmly on the ground. Some are levitating in space (see for example [The Birthday](#) 1915, [The Promenade](#) 1918 or are hovering above ground (*Over the Village*, 1914-18), and others are giant overarching figures dominating the landscape from above (*The Fiddler* 1912-13, [Bella with a White Collar](#) 1917). In his autobiography, *My Life* (1960), which is written, like his paintings, in poetic images, Chagall describes his aunts flying in the sky as though this were a perfectly normal event: "... And Aunt Moussia, Gouttja, Chaja! On the wings of angels they flew across the market, over baskets of berries, pears, and currants. People look at them and ask: 'Who is flying like that?'" (1960, 17)

We often see Paris and Vitebsk, churches and synagogues, crosses and stars of David, Russian peasants and Jewish shtetlers from a bird's-eye view or from Vitebsk rooftops, where his grandfather was once found on a Jewish holiday eating tsimmes (carrot stew). Chagall says his mother told him this story and adds with self-doubt, "Or perhaps I dreamt it?" (1960, 13), alluding to the fact that for him dream and reality may be indistinguishable.

All artists and writers have a special identification with the condition of childhood, but exiles in particular are preoccupied by the need to bind time and cultural space. Chagall's view of his distant Russian Jewish childhood as an ultimate homeland turned his sensory memories into a creative mechanism. The story about his grandfather eating carrots on the roof became a dominating visual image incorporated into his fictional world (*Fiddler*) and the main trope of cultural transcendence, of his liminal psyche defying gravity, in the 'timeless' and 'ethereal' state of being in the world.

'Limen' is a space in-between, the 'threshold' in Latin, a concept existing in structural cultural anthropology within ritual settings. Victor Turner (1969) distinguishes three

stages of the rite of passage: separation, margin/limen, and aggregation. During the transitional liminal phase in-between lower and higher status, the neophyte builds a shelter of leaves and must be humble, submissive and silent. This is a crucial stage that refashions the very being of a neophyte, who is simultaneously outside of structure and inside it.

Turner offers examples of mythical figures stuck in liminal roles, such as court jesters, third sons, and traveling strangers. Echoing Henri Bergson who saw in artists and writers the evolutionary 'life force,' 'élan vital', Turner goes on to say that "...artists tend to be liminal and marginal people," and "edgemen" (1969, 128) whose transformative experiences generate new structures, symbols, and metaphors and whose force of artistic imagination has the unique capacity to assemble fragments into cohesive wholes. This role is often enacted by mythological tricksters—artists, exiles, immigrants, and transnationals, "luminars and liminars" (Hyde 1998).

The concept of liminality, widely used in L2 scholarship, designates the bilingual psyche suspended between two languages, on "the blurred borderline, unable to turn back and regain the old self or to move forward, unencumbered, into a new one." (Granger 2004, 62). Filling in the blank "Learning a language is like..." Claire Kramsch's foreign language students used metaphors of maneuvering among constraints and escaping the limits of their skin, like, for example, learning to fly (Kramsch 2009, 61) and described themselves in "strange terrains, new places, caves, and unknown passages, winding roads, ...uncharted waters, cliff edges, and secret doors" (ibid., 65).

Marc Chagall's well-known painting *Time is a River without Banks* (1936), the piece I spontaneously visualized during my visit to Moscow, vividly illustrates the liminal moment that captures both his past in archetypal Russian fairy tales and his present in France. The grandfather clock from his parents' home becomes a recurrent motif, symbolizing time and memory (see *The Clock in the Street*, 1930; *Winter*, 1941; *Self-Portrait with Clock*, 1947; *Wall Clock with Blue Wing*, 1949). Flying in the twilight over a gothic (French) church tower and a distant Russian village on (Dvina) river shores, the clock's pendulum is swinging upwards, defying gravity as the clock is carried upside down by a green fish—perhaps a reminiscence of his father's herring business—with an arm protruding from its mouth holding a violin and a bow (a kaleidoscopic element of his *Fiddler*). A couple is cuddling on the shore producing the effect of dreaminess and

nostalgia, “in which the bilingual psyche [f]lies, splitting and fusing, like Logos and Eros” (Lvovich 2007, 295).

### “Le Portrait d’un Voyageur”

Last summer, on my visit to France, I spent a hot July week staying with the family of my old friend, in their house in Cagnes-sur-Mer, in Côte d’Azur. Besides the usual sights—touristy Saint-Paul, Renoir’s house, and Chapelle du Rosaire Matisse—Marie Thérèse, ‘ma maman française,’ a vivacious 75-year-old ‘little engine,’ took me shopping to an aromatic street market, where the colors of fruits, vegetables, and flowers were as bright as the color of the sky, of palm trees, and of rooftops. Marie Thérèse stopped at stands and chatted with vendors about their grandchildren or their gardens while we filled our bags with juicy tomatoes, small fresh strawberries, and locally produced cheeses, *les fromages du pays*. This time I experienced the culture that I had always loved via its literature and its language, not through French words (of which there were plenty), but through my senses, heightened by a friendly personal touch, *l’amour du pays*.

Every day I was taken to a rocky beach with warm aquamarine water where colorless pebbles turned pink, dark green, and all shades of pastel; twice a day, every day, I enjoyed long languorous meals on the terrace shaded from the sun by an orange awning, overlooking the medieval fortress on the ever-green hill with picturesque red roof-topped cottages. The view I have taken in during those meals seemed to be painted by an artist who was magically able to reproduce the harmony of senses: the hot still air colored by the orange awning, the doves’ cooing, the taste of sweet baked *courgettes*, the aroma of cantaloupes filled with muscatel, and a slightly thrilling sensation of the chilled *rosé*.

Despite the torrid heat, these meals and outings were my best connections to Côte d’Azur, to its *savoir vivre*, and to its art: rosy windy Renoir, stringent Matisse, and the fountain of life and color, Marc Chagall. It was surely not a coincidence that my hostess, who adored every tree and every view and savored every slice of cheese and every gulp of wine, was an active patron of arts and a huge fan of Chagall in particular. She stacked on my night table quite a collection she had assembled over the years: his autobiography, *Ma Vie*, Bella Chagall’s autobiography, *Lumières Allumées* and a few Chagall art books, including the portable Chagall dictionary, an encyclopedia of his iconography.

When we took a tour into Saint-Paul-de-Vence, where Chagall lived for the last few decades of his life, the town carried a street exhibit of photographic portraits of the

Master called *Le Portrait d'un Voyageur*. All over the town with up and down narrow stone cobbled streets and unexpected mountain views emerging from arcs and turns, terraces and courtyards, life-size pictures of Chagall on large boards appeared here and there on view for vacationing crowds. Smiling Chagall, walking Chagall, Chagall with his wife, Vava, Chagall in his studio, Chagall with a mischievous smile, waving his hand—a lively and witty old man, whose fame is officially ‘owned’ by France.

The Le Musée National Message Biblique Marc Chagall opened in Nice on Chagall's eighty-sixth birthday, the deal brokered by André Malraux—the only art museum in France built during an artist's lifetime. Chagall donated the art and supervised the design and construction of his own memorial.

In 1973, shortly before the opening of the museum, Chagall received an official invitation from the Soviet Minister of Culture, Ekaterina Furtseva, to Moscow and Leningrad, mostly to revisit his Jewish Theater murals. (At the time, his work was still not exhibited in Russia.) Allegedly he refused to visit Vitebsk, overwhelmed by the fear that “the living elements of [his] paintings would be non-existent” (Wullschlager 2008, 513), that the reality had long slipped off the romanticized or demonized ‘fictional world’ of his creation. Other versions of the story claim that he was forbidden by Soviet authorities to travel to Vitebsk. (During Brezhnev's reign all foreigners were required to apply for—and were not necessarily granted—a special permission to move around in the country.)

On one of the paintings exhibited at the Musée Marc Chagall, [\*Le Cantique des Cantiques\*](#) (1960), the two towns, Vitebsk and Saint-Paul-de-Vence are conjoined in a vertical twinship. Like a reflection in water, Vitebsk is inverted on the bottom, the past echoing the present of a gothic French town in a dreamlike Chagallian projection, with the ever-present bride-groom couple presiding over space and time, along with other iconic self-referencing symbols of his artistic autobiography: the sky inhabited by a dove, an angel with a menorah, and an acrobat standing on his hands.

As an ‘arrived’ immigrant and a granddaughter of Vitebsk-born shtetlers, I felt deeply moved by Chagall's art, in all its French *joie de vivre*, while walking in the colorful sunny streets of Saint-Paul, tasting fragrant strawberries in the market, or sinking my teeth into a juicy Mediterranean tomato. As such, I understood how his optimistic artistic energy and the gratitude to his adopted land produced an even more intense closeness with his hometown, Vitebsk, as the distance from it grew with time. Just like Bella

Chagall yearned for the Yiddish of her childhood in her memoir, this little corner of Mediterranean merged in his mind with his idealized town. Far away nearby, it seems.

By the end of our tour of Saint-Paul-de-Vence, Marie Thérèse took me to Chagall's grave. Even at his death, Chagall was at a crossroads, for he was buried (to much distress of his Jewish admirers) at a small Christian graveyard lined with cypress trees overlooking the breathtaking Mediterranean landscape. In the forest of crosses, among bright mauve and snow-white azalea bushes, Chagall's tomb is a simple white marble box, with the engraved name and life dates, without any religious insignia. On its surface, a handful of pebbles has been laid by visitors familiar with the Jewish tradition.

While I was looking for a pebble to put on Chagall's grave, a group of Italian tourists approached and, perplexed, asked their guide about the pebbles. The guide explained that at Jewish cemeteries visitors place pebbles on graves, as a sign of remembrance, instead of flowers. The Italians dutifully gathered some pebbles from the ground and deposited them, ceremoniously, on the grave. Like on his portraits in Saint-Paul streets, Chagall smiled mischievously in appreciation of their Catholic zeal.

As if reading my thoughts, a stray cat nonchalantly snuck around the graves, made a few circles, and finally sat comfortably on Chagall's slick tombstone, in the same restful yet monumental position as the one painted on the windowsill in his *Paris through the Window*. For a moment, I seemed to catch a trickster smile on the cat's human face, its dreamlike gaze turned toward the Mediterranean Sea—yet another of Chagall's homes.

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