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**Title:** *Marc Chagall: Grenzgänge zwischen Literatur  
und Malerei* by Sabine Koller

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**Marc Chagall: *Grenzgängezwischen Literatur und Malerei*** [German] [Hardcover] by Sabine Koller. Colone, Weimar, Vienna: Böhlau-Verlag, 2012. pp. 408. Bibliographies, Index, Illustrations. € 49.90. ISBN-978-3-412-20866-0.

Review by: **Jelena Milojković-Djurić\***

Sabine Koller's monograph, *Marc Chagall Grenzgängezwischen Literatur und Malerei (Borderlines between Literature and Painting)* presents Chagall's lifelong artistic aspirations encompassing ancestral Yiddish, Hebrew, as well as, Russian and Western cultural legacies at large. His presence in the artistic and cultural life in various metropolises around the world testified to his participation in the ongoing dialogue with his contemporaries transcending the fine arts scenes alone.

Three chapters and a prologue, present in a chronological fashion Chagall's formative years of artistic apprenticeship leading to the creation of his own multifaceted pictorial oeuvre reflective of his interest in the fine arts, folklore and literary sources as well as in the avant-garde compartments of his days.

Koller recognized Chagall's appreciation of his native roots in Vitebsk and his interest in proverbial saying of the Yiddish lore inherent in its language. Koller aptly compared some of Chagall's pictorial presentations to *Sprachbilder - language pictures* - often depicting proverbial sayings. She also noted Chagall's penchant for written word and literary metaphors. She pointed to the influence of Yitskhok Leybush Peretz, the distinguished writer and connoisseur of Yiddish folklore, on Chagall's own artistic outlook. Moreover, books by Peretz, *Der Kunstn Makher (Artist as Magician)* and *Vokstümliche Geschichten (Stories akin to Folk Traditions)* had a profound impact on the promotion of Yiddish literature. Peretz achieved a unique synthesis of Hassidic and Yiddish lore with his own approach to symbolism.

Chagall was attracted to Peretz visions of Yiddish culture and embarked on a set of illustrations for Peretz book, *Der Kunstn Makher*. There is a cosmic presence in Peretz poetics that Chagall revealed in his drawings. The flying human figures and creatures transcend the earth alone: the dead continue on their flight to heaven and the angels circle around the earth. The moon has abandoned the sky and landed on the ground providing a restful site for the weary man. Koller included some of Chagall's illustration in her monograph, and provided an insightful analyzes of these pictorial transliterations.

The amalgamation of different languages both Yiddish and Hebrew (*Mehrsparchkeit*) presented the engine of Peretz own literary works producing a sort of a *Zwiesprache*– a tentative dual language. Chagall's oeuvre encompassed also different languages and literary references both in Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian with occasional usage of Cyrillic and Hebrew letters of the respective alphabets. Chagall was cognizant of the Russian literary and iconographic traditions that he recalled at times in his various works of art.

Koller determined rightly that both Chagall and Peretz embodied in their own individual ways the Yiddish Modern movement that could not have existed without the element of wonder (*Wunderbar*) in conjunction with the underlying spirituality. Chagall succeeded in portraying his own concept of realism entwined with a distinct symbolic air that he defined as *supernaturalism*. Chagall's distinctive vision was admired by the poet Guillaume Apollinaire who advanced the novel perception of *supernaturalism* that eventually became known as *surrealism*.

Due consideration was allotted to historic events starting with the pogroms, the outbreak of both world wars, the Shoa and the painful memories and losses of numerous human lives. Koller encompassed literary works including Chagall's verses pertaining to the belligerent confrontations throughout the twentieth century. Isaak Babel's masterpiece, *Istoriia moiei golubiatni*, (*The history of my dove cove*) summed up the unthinkable sufferings by conjuring a desolate recollection of an adolescent facing the pogrom of 1905.

Koller provided the history of friendship, collaborations and ideological strife parting and reuniting Chagall and his noted contemporaries. She described Chagall as a cross-cultural figure between his native Vitebsk, as an anchor and unchanged periphery, in contrast to the burgeoning metropolises such as Petersburg, Moscow and Paris.

Chagall's own recollections are judiciously presented as narrated in his autobiographies *Eygnis, Übermichselbst (About Myself)* as well as in its French version, *Ma vie (My Life)* that appeared in 1925 and 1931 respectfully.

In 1948 the French publisher Ambroise Vollard, bibliophile and editor, decided to publish Gogol's masterpiece *Dead Souls*. Chagall was invited to provide illustrations for the book. Chagall's succeeded to project Gogol's biting satire of perilous human- and societal failings.

Chagall continued the collaboration with Vollard and illustrated the *Fables* by La Fontaine published in 1952. Most importantly, Chagall commenced the illustration of the *Old Testament* starting in 1956. By his own admission, Chagall considered the Bible as the supreme source of poetry. Biblical scenes and single figures associated with the chosen narratives remained to inspire his creative output. Chagall continued painting, engraving, sculpting and designing stained glass windows, tapestries, and ceramics readily infused with biblical themes. Chagall's collection of these works, *Message Biblique*, was bequeathed to the Museum in Nice in 1973.

Koller's well researched monograph succeeded in offering a novel and profound insight into Chagall's multifaceted creativity and his unique visions of the past within an ongoing dialogue with the world he knew during his long and prolific life.

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