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**Title**: Nostalgic impulse : Marc Chagall’s trilogy of illustrated books in France
**Issue Date**: 2012-11-28
La Bible marks the ending of Chagall’s trilogy of illustrated books created between the two World Wars. Viewed from a historical perspective, the trilogy of Les Âmes Mortes, Les Fables de La Fontaine and La Bible was executed at a time when everything was precarious. Many artists, including Chagall, had to leave their countries and continued to procure the sense of dislocation and nostalgia through their creations. It is not surprising that the reappearing allusion to the Jewish Diaspora was formed in Chagall’s works by this nostalgic impulse in an epoch of exile.

Chagall’s trilogy has proved to be a suitable object for modern nostalgia studies. Svetlana Boym’s definition mentioned in the introduction is particularly applicable. According to her argument, the two types of nostalgia—restorative and reflective—might use the same triggers of memory and symbols, but tell different stories about it. And in Chagall’s artworks, both tendencies are visualized in his personal presentations. As Boym describes it:

Nostalgia of the first type gravitates toward collective pictorial symbols and oral culture. Nostalgia of the second type is more oriented toward an individual narrative that savors details and memorial signs, perpetually deferring homecoming itself. If restorative nostalgia ends up reconstructing emblems and rituals of home and homeland in an attempt to conquer and spatialize time, reflective nostalgia cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space.

In most of Chagall’s artworks, including the three series of illustrations, the two tendencies of nostalgia can be found to co-exist in the same pictorial symbols and devices while narrating different visions simultaneously. However, in Chagall’s illustrated worlds, the distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia is less distinct. The spaces depicted in the illustrations seem to be fragments of real places in the past, but are often twisted by unrealistic or anachronistic imagination. As if he encountered them when dreaming his childhood, everything seems to be familiar but also blurry and intermixed with elements of current moments. On the one hand, the symbols of a homeland are restored visually in the illustrations in

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232 Boym, 2001, p. 49.
the restorative sense; on the other hand the individual signs shatter the fragmented memories and reflect a longing for the lost in the reflective sense.

It is exactly the way this trilogy bewilders the realities of time and space—or in Boym’s description, the way it temporalizes space and visualizes time—that it combines and fulfils the notions of nostalgia. Echoing the contemporary surroundings, the illustrations reject the loss of a certain time and space by recapturing it in imaginary images based on collective or individual memories.

In Chagall’s trilogy, many spatial devices refer to the dreamy spaces haunting one’s obscure memory. In Les Âmes Mortes, perspectives are often distorted and objects seem absurd; more importantly, it often presents a stage-like composition. “At the Town Gate” (illu. 47), the last piece in the first volume of Les Âmes Mortes, is a typical example of theatrical arrangement. As the semi-circular outline resembling a stage curtain separates the scenes of the drama “Dead Souls” from the two viewers in the foreground, “At the Town Gate” draws the curtain down at the end of the first half of Les Âmes Mortes. The theatrical device within a picture reveals the gap between the real and the virtual, reminding the audience that the seemingly realistic fragments in the restorative nostalgic journey actually reside in the imaginary fiction. As if waking from a dream on a long night, the audience senses something unreal during the drama/illustrations, but not until the last moment do they realize the illusive construction and start to consciously look forward to the following part of the journey home.

The awakening composition in this illustration therefore allows for the exploration of a “virtual reality of consciousness” in reflective nostalgia. Likewise, other pictorial devices in the trilogy have similar effects, for example the surrealistic colours in the backdrops of the watercolour drafts for Les Fables, or the anachronistic sighs such as the reappearing Star of David and the mysterious prophetic visions in La Bible. When constructing the original images in the memories, the illustrations at the same time present the flexible and creative imaginations to reveal the virtuality of shattered memories. Besides the illustrations themselves, the co-existence of two types of nostalgia has become one of Chagall’s characteristics in his later works.

The form of the illustration also enhances the discontinuity of the illusive memories. The frames of each illustration are separated from each other by text and make it impossible to construct a coherent plot. Illustrations can be seen as a continuing narration, but they are as such individual pictures reciting different fragments of the storytelling. Unlike comic strips with dialogue balloons that tell

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\text{Defined by Henri Bergson, the virtual reality of consciousness is about human freedom and creativity. Boym quoted his definition and used Marcel Proust’s way of remembrance as an example. Boym concludes that it is the memorable fugue that matters, not the actual return home. See Boym, 2001, p. 50.}
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a story in a combined form of word and image, readers of illustrations cannot understand the complete story by merely looking at the images; instead, the illustrations open up a new meaning beyond the texts. The last seven pieces in Les Âmes Mortes are good examples of presenting fragments of past memories. When Gogol finally revealed the past of Chichikov through the long storytelling of the narrator, Chagall chose some significant plots to visualize past moments via the misty atmosphere evoked through the use of aquatint. Though the six illustrations (apart from the final piece showing the sleeping hero) imply a complete story in the “reality” of the text, they can also be seen as separate portraits from different stories. The reconstruction of memories is therefore awakened or broken up in the format itself.

In addition to a confusion of the spatial and temporal senses, Chagall’s trilogy also presents the yearning for a different time, which lingers with one’s life in one’s memories. Each series of the trilogy refers to a past period of time, and altogether the chronography formed by these three series displays a reverse order of time. The literary texts on which his series is based go backwards in time: from 19th century Russia (Dead Souls), to 17th century France (La Fontaine), all the way back to the Holy Land during the centuries before Christ (Bible). This corresponds to the spiritual states suggested in the themes of each series: from adult desire (Dead Souls), to innocent infancy (Fables) to the primitive status when men were newly created with a better connection to the divine being (Bible). Placed together, the quests in these three series consequently construct a journey through the mental and spiritual experience of human beings. As the journey goes on, more distant memories are gradually awakened. However, the journey is not merely about the past it revisits; it also hints at the prospects of an idealized future, like the prophetic visions indicated in the last illustrations of La Bible:

Nostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective. [...] Unlike melancholia, which confines itself to the planes of individual consciousness, nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory.

The past is gone. The nostalgic impulse understands it. In Chagall’s case, he chose to stay in the south of France for the rest of his life after he returned from the United States, instead of returning to Russia—the frequently depicted and
dreamed-of hometown. He knew by heart that the past, the old Vitebsk, could not be restored in reality and therefore stayed away from it in order to keep on longing for it until the end of his life journey.⁵⁶ “A modern nostalgic can be homesick and sick of home,” as Boym concludes.⁵⁷

Apart from the analysis of the unusual presentation of time and space in Chagall’s trilogy, which fulfils the two categories of nostalgia, the approach to nostalgia in this research also explored both external and internal factors that determined the accomplishment of the trilogy, and hence determined the outcome and the meaning of the trilogy in different aspects. The external factors, such as historical or social situations, evoke the nostalgia of the age and are in turn reflected in contemporary artworks. Synchronically, Chagall’s trilogy represents the artistic trends in a political environment of diasporas and exile; diachronically it not only responds to the history of *livres d’artiste* from the golden age, but also continues traditions of illustration, especially in the examples of *Fables* and *Bible*.

In terms of internal factors, nostalgic sentiments also manifest themselves in Chagall’s own notion of art and his motifs of presenting dreamy, topsy-turvy visions. The subject matter of these three illustrated series—Russian peasant lives in *Les Âmes Mortes*, animal and human relationships in *Les Fables*, and inspiring biblical characters in *La Bible*—become a kind of microcosm of Chagall’s long and profound artist life. Ultimately the main concern in Chagall’s artworks concentrates on nostalgia, not merely of an individual, but of a nation or of the whole of humankind. To achieve this, Chagall determinedly chose a surrealist style to present the lost and longed for images in his distant memories. In addition to the visualization of an abstract notion of nostalgia, the festive and caricatural expression of his pictures on the one hand implies the avant-garde art movements of his time; on the other hand it also responds to influences from his multicultural backgrounds.

This thesis therefore performs a new application of nostalgia studies to the realm of the visual arts. Moreover, since the sense of nostalgia is explicitly expressed in the three chosen texts themselves, it opens up a further interpretation of the relation between the literary texts and their illustrations. In this way, nostalgia studies provide another approach for word-image relationships. Meanwhile, by using Marc Chagall’s early illustrated books as examples of nostalgic expression, this thesis foregrounds the importance and seriousness of the

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⁵⁶ Chagall kept picturing the nostalgic views throughout his artistic life. For example the painting “Artist over Vitebsk” (1982), the very old theme of Vitebsk was done just 3 years before his death.

⁵⁷ Boym, 2001, p. 50.
artist’s illustrated works. It also draws attention to the once-cherished genre of *livre d’artiste* to modern readers.

In this thesis I have tried to position Chagall’s three illustrated books within a framework of nostalgic sentiments. In doing so I was able to access a more consistent or more reasonable relationship with the historical background, both synchronically and diachronically. I expect that this approach of word-image relations can be further applied to other artworks, especially those created in the same era as the trilogy. Moreover, through this initial effort, I intend to motivate a review and re-evaluation of the vast productions of other illustrated books, either by Chagall or by contemporary artists, from the perspective of word-image relationships, for they are certainly worth it.