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*I and the Village*: Nostalgia for a Homeland in Yiddish Art and Literature

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# I AND THE VILLAGE: NOSTALGIA FOR A HOMELAND IN YIDDISH ART AND LITERATURE

MC Koch

*This paper addresses nostalgia for the lost homeland of nineteenth-century Eastern European Jewry, whose state of exile and lack of national boundaries problematized this complex notion. It focuses on Marc Chagall's 1911 painting I and the Village. The painting is viewed, both critically and popularly, as a fantastical image of Chagall's childhood home in a predominantly Jewish town in Eastern Europe, otherwise known as the shtetl. Yet it is more than a personal expression of memory and loss. Its transfiguration of the past into an idyllic world relates to traditional Judaic notions of remembrance found in sacred texts, Walter Benjamin's reconciliation of these notions with modernist thought, and the birth of modern Yiddish literature in the nineteenth century. Through nostalgic depictions in literature and art, the shtetl was brought to the popular imagination at the moment of its historical dissolution. These fictional representations offered a terrain that could not be confiscated and a space, inseparable from the past, in which historical transformation could occur. In this respect, nostalgia captured the paradox of the twentieth-century Jewish experience as an historical process; that is, the dissolution of and longing for a traditional way of life, and the transfiguration of this life into the modern age.*

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## INTRODUCTION

*The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.*

—Walter Benjamin<sup>1</sup>

During his Russian years (1914-1922), Marc Chagall's paintings of traditional Jewish folk life were criticized as counter-revolutionary by many of his Soviet peers.<sup>2</sup> These included avant-garde artists such as Kazimir Malevich and El Lissitzky, as well as Bolshevik officials.<sup>3</sup> The dominant Soviet ideology viewed the past as an obstruction

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1940), in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, [1970] 1999), pp. 245-255; p. 247.

<sup>2</sup> Chagall's individualist approach to art directly countered the Russian avant-garde's collectivist ideology. This ideological rift developed to the extent that, in 1920, he departed from the People's Art Academy of Vitebsk (despite the fact that he had founded it) on the grounds that his art was not sufficiently revolutionary. Aleksandra Shatskikh, 'Teach, Write, Experiment: Malevich in Vitebsk, 1919-22', in *Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk, 1918-1922*, ed. by Angela Lampe (London, Paris, and Munich: Prestel, 2018), pp. 117-129; p. 120.

<sup>3</sup> According to Chagall, his street decorations for a Bolshevik celebration in 1918 Vitebsk prompted Communist critics to ask what exactly green cows and flying horses had to do with Marx and Lenin. Marc Chagall, *My Life* (New York: The Orion Press, 1960), p. 139.

to a promising future. Yet Chagall's preoccupation with the past interrupted these utopian strivings with a certain recognition of what was being lost. The most iconic of these paintings, *I and the Village*, is rendered in Eastern European folk and avant-garde styles, and marked by nascent forms and unadulterated nostalgia.<sup>4</sup> In this painting, the eschatological trajectory of progress that gripped modernity dissolved into a cyclical movement in which the past—that is, the lost world of Chagall's childhood in the *shtetl*, the Yiddish term for a Jewish village—melded with contemporary, avant-garde aesthetics such as Fauvism and Cubism. The painting's montage of memories and dreams fused the past and the present, producing a vision of a strange new world.

When read within the historical framework of the *shtetl's* demise, *I and the Village* was far from counter-revolutionary, and more than a personal expression of loss. The painting's juxtaposition of old and new captured the transformation of early twentieth-century Jewish life. This transformation can best be described in terms of nostalgia, which, as Svetlana Boym writes, 'is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective.'<sup>5</sup> *I and the Village's* Janus-headed perspective reflects centuries-old Jewish traditions of remembrance, formed by exilic life. It also relates to Walter Benjamin's reconciliation of these traditions with modernist thought, and the birth of modern Yiddish literature in the nineteenth century. These Jewish modes of remembrance, both traditional and modern, formed literary and visual representations of the *shtetl*. In these representations, the *shtetl* was transfigured into a mythical Jewish homeland. This homeland offered, to a nationless people, a collective space of belonging and transformation in a collapsing world. The rise of the fictional *shtetl* at the moment of its actual demise demonstrates the importance of nostalgia as a dual historical process; that is, the dissolution of and longing for a traditional way of life, and the transfiguration of this life into the modern age.

## ***I AND THE VILLAGE***

Chagall painted *I and the Village* soon after his arrival to Paris from St. Petersburg in 1910. The painting is an elegy to the life in Russia that he left behind. It depicts the profiles of a man and a cow mirroring each other's transfixed gaze. Within this gaze, a

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<sup>4</sup> *I and the Village* is on display at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. A digital image of the painting can be found on the Museum's website: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78984>

<sup>5</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. xvi.

timeless idyll emerges that is both self-enclosed and fragmenting. Familiar symbols of pre-industrial life are present in the peasant with his scythe, the milkmaid, the row of small homes, and an Orthodox Church. Yet these are upturned and distorted by the peasant woman dancing on her head, the surreal juxtaposition of the face peering out of the village church, and the concentric circles of Orphism, Cubist geometry, and Fauvist colourization.<sup>6</sup> In this topsy-turvy arcadia, Chagall remembers his homeland as a fusion of the latest Parisian art movements with traditional images of folk life. This juxtaposition of old and new produces an uncanny space, suspended between tradition and modernity.

Initially, *I and the Village* forms an effervescent—even cheerful—image of Chagall’s formative years in the *shtetl*. However, the ebullient village scene contradicts actual accounts of Chagall’s birthplace, Vitebsk. Vitebsk, a provincial town located in modern-day Belarus, was described in drearier terms in a pre-1914 edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* as ‘an old town with decaying patrician houses and shabby Jewish quarters, half of its 50,000 inhabitants being Jewish.’<sup>7</sup> In contrast to Chagall’s rendition of a seemingly innocent, harmonious world, Vitebsk’s populace had been subject to discrimination, segregation, and pogroms during its oppressive tenure under Russian governance.<sup>8</sup>

The painting’s cheerfulness also belies Chagall’s melancholic preoccupation with his homeland. On closer inspection, the painting’s idyll is fragmented, suggesting a state of dissolution. This is the painting’s only evidence of the profound sense of loss that motivated Chagall’s obsessively repetitive renderings of the *shtetl*. Chagall’s images of his home are not simply memories, but memories permeated with sadness. He described Vitebsk with a disarming sorrow in his memoir *My Life*:

Green leaves rustling. Your stones. Your graves. Hedgerows, muddy rivers, prayers made. All that is before me. No words. It all lies deep within me, writhes and soars like my memory of you. Your pallor, the thinness of your hands, your dried skeletons bring a lump to my throat. To whom shall I pray? How beseech you, beseech God through you, for

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<sup>6</sup> Orphism (also known as Orphic Cubism or Simultaneism) is an early twentieth-century art movement associated with the French artist Robert Delaunay. Coined by the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire in 1912, Orphism is derived from Fauvism and Cubism, and is recognizable for its bright colors and abstract, circular forms.

<sup>7</sup> Jacob Baal-Teshuva, *Marc Chagall 1887-1985* (London: Taschen, 1998), p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

a bit of happiness, of joy? I often look at the emptiness of the blue sky,  
I look at it dry-eyed, with pity and sadness [...] But enough! Au revoir!<sup>9</sup>

Chagall's grief over his homeland, combined with his idyllic images of this same world, reveal his conflicted attitude towards it. When living in Vitebsk, he found it stifling and voluntarily abandoned it to pursue his art career. Yet away from Vitebsk, during his first years in the bustling metropolis of Paris, it morphed into a timeless symbol of a lost past. Sidney Alexander described Chagall's experiences of returning to Vitebsk in 1914, after four years in Paris: 'He was "home." Or was he? Was this dismal town, this "unhappy town," the Vitebsk he had commemorated in rainbow images? Perhaps Vitebsk was more desirable the farther away it was.'<sup>10</sup>

Why, in the midst of Paris, this backward melancholic glance? Chagall's conflicted relationship to the *shtetl* was a microcosm of the conflicts facing nineteenth- and twentieth-century Eastern European Jewry at large. At the time, Jewish life seemed to be Janus-headed—caught between modernity and a world of tradition that was swiftly disappearing. The *shtetl* embodied this contradiction. While it came to personify a world of tradition and belonging, for many Jews it was also a symbol of backwardness and oppression, at odds with the modern world. Yet even before the last vestiges of the *shtetl* were obliterated by mass emigrations and World War II, it took hold in the Jewish imagination as an enclosed Jewish haven. Chagall's idealized depiction of this world that he had so eagerly abandoned exemplifies the way in which, through literature and art, the dwindling *shtetlach* (plural for *shtetl*) were reconfigured into 'small hamlets saturated with tradition and authenticity, where people and livestock freely mingled.'<sup>11</sup> Like Chagall's depiction of Vitebsk, these were fictional accounts.

What was the historical *shtetl*, and why idealize it? Vitebsk was one of thousands of Jewish townships that developed throughout Russia's Pale of Settlement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Pale of Settlement was essentially a sprawling ghetto in Russia to which Jews were confined, as non-citizens, from 1772 until 1917. In contrast to its legacy as an enclosed Jewish world, the *shtetl* encompassed a multifaceted culture that revolved around intricate economic and

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<sup>9</sup> Chagall, *My Life*, p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> Sidney Alexander, *Marc Chagall* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1978), p. 162.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin Nathans, *Beyond the Pale: Jewish Encounters with Late Imperial Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 2.

cultural relations with the broader Christian population throughout Russia, Poland, and the Ukraine.<sup>12</sup> Although the *shtetlach* flourished during the eighteenth century, they began to decline in the latter half of the nineteenth century due to a variety of factors. These included pogroms, a rise in Russian anti-Semitism, and mass emigrations.<sup>13</sup> Chagall, like many Jews at the time, left the *shtetl* at the height of its decline. He would live to see it vanish into history. Despite this, Vitebsk lived on in his psyche, paintings and memory as the fantastical emblem of a lost Jewish world. In this respect, *I and the Village* is a prototype for the complex role that nostalgia played for nineteenth- and twentieth-century Eastern European Jews. The *shtetl's* historical demise correlated with the emergence of a fictional *shtetl* in modern literature and art. These nostalgic representations were a way of coping with tremendous loss that had its roots in centuries of exilic life.

## **ZAKHOR: NOSTALGIA AND EXILE**

‘My paintings are my memories,’ wrote Chagall.<sup>14</sup> Yet *I and the Village's* world is fictitious; Vitebsk itself is nowhere to be found in this colourful cosmos. As such, Chagall’s dreamlike depiction of the *shtetl* presents a paradox. In it, the comfort and joys of home are accompanied by its distortion to the point of unrecognizability, thereby rendering it both present and absent. In a word, it is nostalgic. ‘Nostalgia,’ Boym writes, ‘[...] is a longing for a home that no longer exists or never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy.’<sup>15</sup> These opposing sentiments are contained in nostalgia’s etymology. Nostalgia is coined from the Greek words *nostos* (‘return’) and *algos* (‘longing’ or ‘suffering’). It means the pain of return, and also the suffering of absence, or no return.<sup>16</sup> The paradox that underlies nostalgia is evident in Chagall’s *shtetl*. His fictional homeland depicts a point of origin or return that is both preserved and lost.

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<sup>12</sup> Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern gives an excellent historical account of the *shtetl* in his 2014 book, *The Golden Age Shtetl: A New History of Jewish Life in Eastern Europe* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> An increasingly suspicious Tsarist regime, along with modernization and increasing xenophobia occurring in Russia transformed the once flourishing *shtetlach* into impoverished villages and towns. These towns, along with their Jewish inhabitants, began to be associated via intensifying anti-Semitic sentiments with ‘provincialism, timidity and stupidity, ghettoization [...] pedestrian thoughts, coarse manners, and bad taste.’ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>14</sup> Baal-Teshuva, *Marc Chagall 1887-1985*, p. 264.

<sup>15</sup> Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, p. xiii.

<sup>16</sup> Barbara Cassin, *Nostalgia: When Are We Ever at Home?* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), p. 5.

The nostalgia that underscores *I and the Village* was, on a personal level, motivated by the foreignness of Paris and Chagall's homesickness for the familiarity of Vitebsk. However, Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi addresses this paradox in more general terms with regards to Jewish identity as conflicted between acquisition and loss. She writes,

The modern [...] discourse on home, exile and return captures the intensified longing for a place of origin as ultimate reference or antecedent—the presumption of a paradise whose loss or absence preserves it in a kind of negative space.<sup>17</sup>

In line with Ezrahi's account, the two sides of nostalgia, or what Barbara Cassin describes as 'rootedness and wandering,' are also more broadly related to exilic experience.<sup>18</sup> Historically, Jewish exile refers to the Jews' centuries' long displacement from their homeland, beginning with the 607 BC Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem. The resulting diaspora, or scattering, produced vast geographical and cultural disparities. Despite these disparities, Jews maintained a cohesive identity through a shared origin and collective memories. That is, this sense of displacement was tempered by a transcendental sense of origin and history as the chosen people imbued with a unique destiny.

*I and the Village* reflects a Judaic worldview formed by centuries of displacement and a recognition of the transitory nature of home. Chagall's paradisiacal village was rooted in memory and imagination, yet it existed ahistorically, outside of time and space. In this way, if viewed in relationship to his Jewish heritage, Chagall's timeless, fragmented *shtetl* is not simply a subjective or fictitious account of his childhood. In formal terms, the painting's disparate cultural references produce an image of diaspora. These consist of an array of French, Russian, and Jewish styles (Cubism, Fauvism, and Russian, and Jewish folk art), along with diverse ethnic and religious idioms. The male figure in the foreground wears a cap often worn by Russian-Jews, yet he also wears a cross necklace. The *shtetl* background is interrupted by the spire of a Russian Orthodox Church. Despite these incongruities, the imagery combines to form an ephemeral image of home.

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<sup>17</sup> Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> Cassin, *Nostalgia: When Are We Ever at Home?* p. 23.

Further, in much the same way that Chagall's childhood memories unfold incongruously in *I and the Village*, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi notes that 'the Jewish past unfolds before the historian not as unity but [...] as multiplicity and relativity.'<sup>19</sup> That is, instead of the Western historical narrative that objectively correlates with a chronological series of events, the Jewish past reconciles the disparities of exilic life with a subjective world of collective memories and text rather than territory.<sup>20</sup> At the heart of exile is *Zakhor*, the act of remembering.<sup>21</sup> *Zakhor's* centrality in Jewish tradition is related to the conditions of exile that privilege memory over place. Rather than being fossilized in time or relegated to local ruins, this collective memory infuses and forms the present with transcendental meaning. These memories were transmitted through generations by prophets and scribes. They focused, often anachronistically, on the mystical significance of recurring catastrophes rather than on the linear, empirical narratives of conventional Western historicism.<sup>22</sup>

For example, the Book of Lamentations, a sacred text lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem's First Temple in 423 BC, illustrates Judaism's transcendental understanding of history. Using strikingly vivid metaphors, this poetic collection memorializes the historical destruction of Jerusalem as a divinely inspired event. Just as *I and the Village* transfigured the demise of the *shtetl* into an ideal origin, the Book of Lamentations transformed the besieged city of Jerusalem into a symbolic paradise: 'All who pass your way clap their hands at you; they scoff and shake their heads at Daughter Jerusalem: "Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of the whole earth?"'<sup>23</sup> While Lamentations' idealization of Jerusalem is a common motif in sacred Hebrew texts, the central role of nostalgia in exilic life is perhaps most poignantly reflected in the 137<sup>th</sup> psalm of King David. This passage fused the historical Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem with *Zakhor*, or remembrance: 'By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.'<sup>24</sup>

The result of this fusion produces a poetics of loss and, through remembrance, a distant promise of return. Like Chagall's renderings of Vitebsk, this imagery is at once deeply personal, but ahistorical; both psalm and painting reflect a longing for an

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<sup>19</sup> Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1996), p. 96.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> *New International Version*, Lamentations 2:15.

<sup>24</sup> Psalms 137:1.



intangible origin. This preservation of Jewish spaces via collective memory—rather than territory—was an ancient tradition, embroiled in exilic experience. As *I and the Village* demonstrates, it continued in the modern era via different terms. This continuity occurred in literature as well as in art. Yerushalmi notes:

Much has changed since the sixteenth century; one thing, curiously, remains. Now [today], as then, it would appear that even where Jews do not reject history out of hand, they are not prepared to confront it directly, but seem to await a new metahistorical myth, for which the novel provides at least a temporary, modern surrogate.<sup>25</sup>

As Yerushalmi suggests, novels superseded sacred texts in the modern, secular age. Yet they performed a similar function. Out of the ruins of the *shtetl*, modern Yiddish literature constructed a fictitious homeland that, like ancient representations of Zion, privileged collective memory and imagination over historical accounts.<sup>26</sup> In this respect, Yiddish literature perpetuated a long tradition of responding to catastrophe via its incorporation into the textual sphere. Through nostalgia, it offered a new metahistorical myth that transfigured the past in Jewish imagination. A mythical *shtetl* emerged in this literature that offered an immaterial space of belonging in the modern world.

## **YIDDISH LITERATURE AND THE MYTHICAL *SHTETL***

In the nineteenth century, Yiddish literature superseded the use of sacred Hebrew text as a means of recording catastrophe and loss. This was particularly true for the novel, which immortalized the diverse towns, villages, and even resorts populating the Pale of Settlement as a singular, enclosed Jewish haven. The use of Yiddish as a literary language for the first time in history reflected a striking historical shift. Patronized as the common (or slang) language of the *shtetl*, Yiddish was a linguistic reflection of modern literature's more secular themes.<sup>27</sup> It was opposed to Hebrew, the sacred language of the vernacular. The Jewish literature scholar Daniel Miron notes that the birth of Yiddish literature revealed the paradox of a modernizing Jewish condition. At

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<sup>25</sup> Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, p. 98.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Benjamin Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), p. 27.

once a fallen language and emblem of a collapsing world, it also signified, like Chagall's transfigured *shtetl*, a new culture emerging from the ruins.<sup>28</sup>

Chagall resisted criticisms of his work as literary.<sup>29</sup> However, *I and the Village* must be understood in relation to the conscious use of Yiddish by novelists such as Shalom Aleichem (1859-1916) and S. Y. Abramovitsh, (1836-1917) who also immortalized the *shtetl* in popular imagination. The parallels between the painting and Yiddish literature are both linguistic and formal. Linguistically, Yiddish was Chagall's native tongue. His idiosyncratic use of several different artistic movements in the same work reflects Yiddish which, as a fusion language, incorporates several different languages into itself.<sup>30</sup> Further, Yiddish discourse is, like Chagall's imagery, in essence non-narrative; it is digressive and associative, full of parallels and idioms.<sup>31</sup> Formally, *I and the Village's* premodern enclave bears a striking resemblance to the *shtetl* depicted in Yiddish literature—particularly in the writing of Shalom Aleichem.

Shalom Aleichem, (also known as Solomon Rabinovich), was perhaps the most well-known voice to emerge from the Pale. He is considered the literary counterpart to Chagall, who was known to admire his work.<sup>32</sup> Aleichem's stories centred on the modernization of Eastern Europe's Jewry. Yet, as in Chagall's work, Aleichem sees

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<sup>28</sup> Dan Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl and Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), p. 50.

<sup>29</sup> Chagall explained in a 1949 interview with J. P. Hodin that he 'searched for neither poetry nor literature nor for symbols. I only try to be myself. To be honest and simple'. J. P. Holdin, *The Dilemma of Being Modern: Essays on Art and Literature*, qtd. in *Chagall: Love and the Stage*, ed. by Susan Compton (London: Merrell Holberton, 1998), p. 16.

<sup>30</sup> Barry Davis notes that: 'Any language which existed in the same geographical location as Yiddish was spoken, entered the Yiddish language, and in some cases the reverse was the case. The influence of Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, Romanian, medieval Romance languages, amongst others, can be observed. With German, the situation was somewhat more complicated, for Yiddish arose from a Germanic substrate.' Barry Davis, 'Yiddish: The Perils and Joys of Translation', *European Judaism*, 43.1, (2010), pp. 3-36; p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> Benjamin Harshav, 'Introduction: The Texts of a Multicultural Artist', in *Marc Chagall on Art and Culture*, ed. by Benjamin Harshav (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 1-26; p. 22. An example of this can be seen in this passage from S. Y. Abramovitsh's *Fishke the Lame*:

And it's then that I, mind you, Reb Mendele the Book Peddler, have my work cut out and come into my own, making the circuit of Jewish towns with my cartload of stock, from which I furnish the kindred with all the necessaries of the rite of weeping—to wit: with Fastday lamentations and Penitential prayers, with Ladies' Breviaries and graveside recitals, with ram's horns and Festal Prayerbooks. So there you are! Because, you see, whilst Jews are sorrowing everywhere and grieve the livelong summer away, wearing the season out with weeping, I do business and ply my living. But I've got off the point.

S. Y. Abramovitsh, *Tales of Mendele the Book Peddler: Fishke the Lame and Benjamin the Third*, ed. by Dan Miron and Ken Frieden, trans. by Ted Gorelick and Hillel Halkin (New York: Schocken Books, 1996), p. 14.

<sup>32</sup> Harshav, 'Introduction', p. 6.

Jews as coping with modernity through looking back. This is especially true of Aleichem's main protagonist, Tevye the Dairyman, who features prominently in Aleichem's series of short stories, *Tevye the Dairyman and Motl the Cantor's Son*.<sup>33</sup> Tevye is a simple soul who tends to his animals, observes the Sabbath, and clutches desperately to a world of tradition—even as this world collapses around him. Tevye's guilelessness mirrors that of Chagall's subject in *I and the Village*, whose dazed interaction with the cow seems at odds with his upturned surroundings. Aleichem's *shtetl* also resembles that of Chagall's, in that it is rooted both in personal memory and an archetypal past.<sup>34</sup> He describes it thus:

The town of the little people where I shall take you, dear reader, is exactly in the middle of the blessed Pale into which the Jews have been packed as tightly as herrings in a barrel and told to increase and multiply. [...] Stuck away in a corner of the world, isolated from the surrounding country, the town stands, orphaned, dreaming, bewitched, immersed in itself and remote from the noise and the bustle, the confusion and tumult and greed, which men have created around them and have dignified with high-sounding names like Culture, Progress, and Civilization.<sup>35</sup>

While Aleichem mentions the very real poverty and hardships of life endured by Russia's Jewish non-citizens, 'packed as tightly as herrings in a barrel' on its western borders, he also describes a primitive world, insulated from 'Culture, Progress, and Civilization.' This world mirrors the self-enclosed cosmos of *I and the Village* that, like Aleichem's remote little town, is depicted as 'dreaming, bewitched, immersed in itself'. Neither depiction of the *shtetl* is historically accurate. Rather, these erroneous representations are symptomatic of nostalgia which, as Boym describes, and as Tevye personifies, 'is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values.'<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> For a recent translation see Shalom Aleichem, *Tevye the Dairyman and Motl the Cantor's Son*, trans. by Aliza Shevrin (Johannesburg: Penguin Books, 2009).

<sup>34</sup> David Roskies, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> Shalom Aleichem, 'The Town of the Little People', in *The Old Country*, trans. by Julius Butwin and Frances Butwin (New York: Crown, 1946),

[https://www.facinghistory.org/sites/default/files/THE\\_TOWN\\_OF\\_THE\\_LITTLE\\_PEOPLE\\_o.pdf](https://www.facinghistory.org/sites/default/files/THE_TOWN_OF_THE_LITTLE_PEOPLE_o.pdf) [accessed 16 September 2020].

<sup>36</sup> Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, p. 8.

Both Aleichem and Chagall utilize nostalgia to construct a fictitious homeland. In doing so, their *shtetlach* are rendered with a certain levity that obscures their tragic undertones. However, the disintegrating world of the Eastern European Jew could be a maddening one. It is significant to note that initial fictional accounts of the *shtetl* represented it in a more scathing light—the *shtetlach* were caricatured not as idylls, but as quagmires that offered no escape. In this respect, Chagall's fragmented, self-enclosed *shtetl* was anticipated—in darker terms—by the writing of S. Y. Abramovitsh. Abramovitsh, popularly known by his fictional persona, Mendele Moykher Sforim (Mendele the Book Peddler), was the first novelist to memorialize the *shtetl* in Yiddish.<sup>37</sup> His collections of short stories, *Tales of Mendele the Book Peddler: Fishke the Lamé and Benjamin the Third* are situated in three towns in Russia's Pale of Settlement. The towns are described in terms of psychic geographies, rather than as existing entities.<sup>38</sup> They merge in a seamless continuum, with little regard for real geographical distances or distinct boundaries. In this way, they share the same sense of fictional Jewish space found in Chagall's village scene.<sup>39</sup> Mendele's description of the Green Mountain of Glupsk exemplifies how even landmarks do more to confuse than orient travellers in such landscapes:

[O]ur horses had brought us all the way to the foot of the Green Mountain, which lies at the approach of Glupsk.

Now the Green Mountain of Glupsk certainly wants no introduction[...]. For to my infant fancy [it] appeared a thing both marvelous and unsurpassably fair—not in the least resembling those pitiful eminences of mere dirt which passed for mountains in our neck of the woods; but made of a more noble stuff ... say of coriander seed and honey, or of the Manna from Heaven, or even of the soil of the Holy Land, as are the Mount of Olives and the Lebanon. [...] I discovered that Green Mountain was a very ordinary mountain—more of a hillock really—and quite, quite indistinguishable from any other object of its kind in our region [...].<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Miron, *Image of the Shtetl*, p. vii.

<sup>38</sup> Dan Miron, 'Introduction', in *Tales of Mendele the Book Peddler*, ed. by Miron and Frieden, pp. vii-lxx; p. xlvi.

<sup>39</sup> Dan Miron's description of these towns could, in fact, very well describe *I and the Village*: 'Embedded within a unified continuum, which is only marginally envisioned in terms of geographical contiguity and continuity, the three towns [...] are juxtaposed, played on against the other in a way which allows them to function like pieces of colored glass in a kaleidoscope.' *Ibid.*, p. xlii.

<sup>40</sup> Abramovitsch, *Tales of Mendele the Book Peddler*, pp. 290-91.

Mendele's description of the Green Mountain reflects his profound dissatisfaction with the *shtetl*, particularly in comparison to the mythical Holy Land. He drifts circuitously through this disjointed world, peddling his books and sharing stories with his companions; he is the paradigm of the Wandering Jew. His life is a metonymy for exilic experience, in which a universe defined by text and discourse replaces that of national territory. Mendele's persona exemplifies the paradoxes of Russian-Jewish life at the time. Contradictory, tragic-comic, and caught up in elliptical wanderings, he is, as David Roskies describes, a 'child of the *shtetl*.'<sup>41</sup> Yet he is confined to interminable exile within this same 'closed and self-destructing world.'<sup>42</sup> Through Mendele, Abramovitsh articulates a more cynical response to a shattered world. In one episode, the pitiful attempts of Mendele's family to maintain cheerfulness after a devastating pogrom drive him to a state of frenzy. He wishes to 'take up one of the harps by the waters of Babylon and play an ecstatic tune mixed with sorrow, so that suffering Jews might dance until they dashed themselves into madness against the rocks.'<sup>43</sup> Abramovitsh's subversion of the image of the rivers of Babylon exemplifies the radical shift in Jewish modes of existence that, like Chagall's topsy-turvy villages, were upturned by modernity.

The striking similarity between these literary and artistic renditions of the *shtetl* suggest that they were not merely based on personal sentiment. Rather, they reflected a more collective use of nostalgia as a means of coping with catastrophic loss. Miron suggests that the construction of the unalloyed *shtetl* in modern Jewish imagination was a shared attempt to make sense of a way of life that was falling to pieces. In a quasi-biblical sense, these accounts (both visual and literary) projected the *shtetl* as a fictional Jerusalem or mini-state. Transformed into an ahistorical myth, these representations of the *shtetl* sustained modern Jewish identity and experience in an otherwise 'cold, harsh, individualist and egoistic' world.<sup>44</sup> These literary attempts to acclimate the Jewish past with modern life likewise appear in the writing of Walter Benjamin. Although Benjamin was not a writer of fiction, Jewish traditions of remembrance formed his understanding of modernity. Benjamin recognized the

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<sup>41</sup> David Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 60.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Miron, *Image of the Shtetl*, p. xii.

importance of nostalgia in modern life—not only as a way of coping with catastrophic loss, but as a means of transformation.

### ***STILLSTELLUNG: THE ZERO HOUR***

As a German-Jewish intellectual and a staunch Marxist, Benjamin inhabited a different cultural sphere than that of the Eastern European Yiddish writers and artists. However, the distinctive modes of remembrance that we see in these representations of the *shtetl* are reiterated in Benjamin's writing, particularly through the related concepts of the Angel of History and the dialectical standstill, or *Stillstellung* (Benjamin's neologism, often translated as the zero hour). Both concepts focus on nostalgia—the former in terms of understanding history, and the latter in terms of its transformative power. Benjamin's critical fusion of historical materialism and Judaic traditions elucidates the dual role of nostalgia in modern Jewish life.

Benjamin allegorical reading of Paul Klee's 1920 monoprint *Angelus Novus* articulates his paradoxical notion of progress. He describes this Angel of History in the following words:

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.<sup>45</sup>

For Benjamin, progress and ruin go hand in hand. The Angel turns his back to the future and envisions history not as 'a chain of events,' but as a 'single catastrophe'. The Janus-headed Angel, suspended between past and future, illustrates a Judaic understanding of history and progress. Franz Rosenzweig posits the following:

[Jews had] long achieved a condition of stasis through the observance of an atemporal law that removed it from the flux of history. As opposed to

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<sup>45</sup> Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', p. 249.

Christendom, which is ‘eternally on its way,’ the Jewish people experience eternity in the midst of history itself.<sup>46</sup>

This rejection of historicism for collective memory—as seen in the Angel’s backward gaze—exemplifies the Jewish emphasis on *Zakhor*. Benjamin’s application of this Judaic mode of remembrance to modernity, via the Angel of History, is evident in *I and the Village*. The picture is suspended, like the Angel, between the past and the future. Its upturned, fragmented space mirrors Benjamin’s storm of progress, in which the debris of a paradisiacal past forms an image of a strange, timeless, and entirely new world. This sense of atemporality ‘in the midst of history’ correlates, more generally, with the literary tendency to represent the *shtetl* as ahistorical in the face of its demise. These nostalgic representations were a way of coping with modernity. For Benjamin, however, nostalgia was not only a way of understanding historical progress. It was also a means of transformation.

Benjamin’s experience of nostalgia’s transformative power occurred during his meanderings through the shops and bazaars of 1926 Moscow. There he encountered a kaleidoscopic array of outdated merchandise. He recalled this experience in his *Moscow Diary*:

During the course of my long morning tour, I [...] noticed [...]: market women, peasant women, standing next to their market of wares (sometimes also a sled like those they use as children’s wagons here in winter). In these baskets lie apples, candies, nuts, sugar figurines, half hidden under cloth. You would think that a sweet grandmother had looked around before leaving her house and had picked out all the things she could take to surprise her grandchild.<sup>47</sup>

Benjamin’s wistful take on these quaint vendors is also evident in his description of other wares on display: Chinese paper flowers, red and yellow wooden toys, weathervanes, and colourful orbs used for decorating trees—the ‘peasant origins’ of which were ‘clearly apparent’, according to Benjamin.<sup>48</sup> Like the traditional world of the *shtetl*, which seemed irreconcilable with modern life, this object-world of

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<sup>46</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, qtd. in Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, pp. 92-93.

<sup>47</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Moscow Diary.’ *October*, 35 (Winter, 1985), 4+9-135, pp. 19-20.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

commodities seemed to have been rendered obsolete by the Revolution. Yet, for Benjamin, this object-world was as essential to the Revolution as the worker's clubs and debates that he frequented. Rather than signifying regression, this debris from the past evoked a nostalgic experience in which the past collided with the present. This produced an uncanny, metamorphic moment brimming with revolutionary potential. As Christina Kiaer describes it,

[T]he dreaming collective of bourgeois culture would awaken from the “dream sleep” of the commodity phantasmagoria into a socialist culture when the wish-images of what he called the “ur-past” [...] would be made visible in the newest technological forms.<sup>49</sup>

It was in this moment of temporal juxtaposition—or the zero hour—that Benjamin saw the potential of the past as offering a portal to a future world.<sup>50</sup>

Just as Chagall's work was regarded as reactionary by the Soviets, Benjamin's experience of the street fair's object-world as a revolutionary portal surprised his leftist peers. The latter held that world revolution necessitated a radical break from the past.<sup>51</sup> Benjamin recognised, however, the collective power of nostalgia. It was similar to that of the revolutionary consciousness that the Bolshevik intelligentsia were unsuccessfully attempting to disseminate amongst the Russian people. However, Benjamin's incongruous synthesis of premodern and industrial Russian life offered an alternative vision that transcended ideological parameters.<sup>52</sup> This vision was, like the Angel of History, based on Judaic traditions of remembrance.

Through the zero hour, Benjamin sought to reconcile the conflict between Judaism's transcendental sense of history and Marxism's eschatological orientation towards a future utopia. Benjamin was aware that Judaic law forbade the aid of soothsayers or fortune tellers to see the future. Rather, it encouraged *Zakhor* through the Torah and prayers.<sup>53</sup> It was only through remembrance—of its history, traditions, and homeland—that future redemption would occur, and the Messiah would be ushered in. Benjamin saw this Messianic age as an allegory for Communist utopia. In

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<sup>49</sup> Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2005), p. 182.

<sup>50</sup> Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, p. 27.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, p. 255.



this respect, like Nietzsche, Benjamin resisted modernity's sense of irreversible time.<sup>54</sup> Rather than the waves of eternal return suggested by Nietzsche, however, in which the past replays itself infinitesimally, Benjamin held that, in line with Judaic tradition, 'the past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption.'<sup>55</sup> That is, the past contained the seeds of progress.

*I and the Village* envisions this paradoxical understanding of progress. Its fragments and idioms of *shtetl* life evoke the same nostalgia experienced by Benjamin in Moscow's street fairs. Its peasants, milkmaid, and religious references signify an obsolete world. Yet, just as the street fairs took on new meaning in the midst of revolution, these folk idioms, derived from the past, are reconfigured via the language of modern art. Chagall's *shtetl*, wrested from its original environment, reflects what Boym describes as Benjamin's 'impure modernity,' in which 'a new language could explore the dialects of the past [...] sabotaging both the bourgeois common sense and the new revolutionary orthodoxy.'<sup>56</sup> In this distinctly Benjaminian sense, the *shtetl* was restored and transfigured in the collective imagination at the moment of its dissolution into history.<sup>57</sup> Through nostalgia, this obsolete Jewish space was preserved in the precarious, malleable present of the zero hour.

## **HISTORICAL TRANSFORMATION**

Benjamin's revolutionary street-fair and the nostalgic transfiguration of the *shtetl* in literature and art were symbolic attempts to acclimate traditional modes of Jewish existence with the modern world. These symbolic representations also mirrored history. *I and the Village's* fragmented, upturned world depicted a profound—even violent—shift in Jewish life. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century life for Eastern European Jews was one of unprecedented seismic change.<sup>58</sup> In Russia, a disintegrating economic situation combined with waves of pogrom and population increase. This resulted in the mass migration of Jews from villages and towns in the Pale to larger cities in Russia, Palestine, and America. A nationwide famine in the 1860s accelerated

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<sup>54</sup> Boym, *Future of Nostalgia* p. 28.

<sup>55</sup> Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', p. 245.

<sup>56</sup> Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>57</sup> Chagall was not directly familiar with Benjamin's work (Benjamin's writing on history occurred decades after this painting was created). However, Benjamin was a prominent figure in modernist currents of thought. His writing and Chagall's work intersect in their melding traditional Jewish ideas with modernity; Chagall intuitively, and Benjamin intellectually.

<sup>58</sup> Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution*, p. 5.

the circumstances. In the decade before 1881, over 40,000 Russian Jews migrated to America.<sup>59</sup> In 1917, the boundaries of the Pale of Settlement were eliminated and the Bolsheviks granted Jews full civil liberties and citizenship. In 1941, the last remnants of *shtetl* life came to an end when the German army invaded the Soviet Union. By the end of 1942, most of the five million Jews remaining in this area had been murdered.<sup>60</sup> Vitebsk itself was razed to the ground by the Red Army during World War II.<sup>61</sup> Chagall refused to return to it again.<sup>62</sup>

The eradication of the *shtetl* was countered by the Zionist resettlement of Israel in 1948, and new diasporas to America and throughout the world. However, according to Benjamin Harshav, the most profound transformation took place internally. It consisted in a different way of relating to the world. That is, it involved a different understanding of Jewish identity, and resulted in the most radical changes in Jewish history that had occurred in two thousand years. The Modern Jewish Revolution, as it was termed by Harshav, ‘entirely changed [the Jews’] geography, modes of living, languages, professions, consciousness, culture, politics, and place in general history.’<sup>63</sup> Rather than the conventional overturning of a cohesive political system within a national territory, this revolution was internal, and overturned a universe founded on discourse, collective experience, and self-identification. Harshav notes:

Revolutions are usually sudden political and military acts of overthrowing an old regime that governs a society. [...] Here the revolution was first of all internal. [...] This Modern Jewish revolution was not directed against a political power structure but rather against a governing semiotics, a set of beliefs, values, and behavior, and towards internalized ideals of a new world culture. In this respect, it is similar in time and nature to the revolution that occurred in modernist art and literature at the time.<sup>64</sup>

As Harshav suggests, the Jewish Revolution was unique in that it did not occur within the bounds of national territory or history. Rather, it occurred in an internalised, collective world of memory and tradition. This internal world was

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<sup>59</sup> Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 113.

<sup>60</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *The Death of the Shtetl* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 6.

<sup>61</sup> Baal-Teshuva, *Marc Chagall 1887-1985*, p. 13.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.

<sup>63</sup> Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution*, p. 8.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

envisioned in the *shtetl*, which contained within itself the Janus-headed perspective of history: the violent dissolution of traditional Jewish life, and the transfiguration of this life into modernity. The paradox underscoring this cultural phenomenon is captured in *I and the Village*. The painting, produced in 1911 Paris, is not simply an image of personal loss. It is a portrait of nostalgia which, as Boym describes, exists ‘on the threshold of past and future’.<sup>65</sup> Simultaneously anchored in the demise of the *shtetl*, yet prescient, it projected a future world that would come to pass in the transformation of Eastern European Jewry into a new culture that extended from Eretz-Israel to America. ‘The past,’ said Benjamin, ‘can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.’<sup>66</sup> *I and the Village* envisioned the past as a picture—arresting in time, for future generations, the unique place of the *shtetl* within Jewish memories and geographies. While it located Eastern European Jewry in a common, utopic domain, its fragmented, self-enclosed forms flashed a final farewell to a world in the final stages of collapse. This phantasmagorical *shtetl* arose from an acute nostalgia in the face of loss. Yet through nostalgia, the *shtetl*, which was all but eradicated by the end of World War II, was preserved in Jewish imagination through art and literature. It was a material reality, entrenched in history. It was also only a facsimile of an interior homeland, profoundly allied with modern Jewish identity and its indelible origin, wherever that may be.

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<sup>65</sup> Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, p. 29.

<sup>66</sup> Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, p. 247.

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