H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ruth Dorot. *The Art of Time, The Art of Place: Isaac Bashevis Singer and Marc Chagall - A Dialogue.* Translated by Micaela Ziv. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2011. vii + 138 pp. Illustrations. $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84519-409-3.

Reviewed by Khayke Beruriah Wiegand (University of Oxford)
Published on H-Judaic (December, 2012)
Commissioned by Jason Kalman

Imaginative Landscapes of the Shtetl Past in the Art of Isaac Bashevis Singer and Marc Chagall

Ruth Dorot's recent monograph, *The Art of Time, The Art of Place*, is a comparative study of the works of two of the most prominent twentieth-century Jewish artists: the Yiddish writer and Nobel Prize-winner Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904-91), and the popular painter Marc Chagall (1887-1985). The monograph comprises an introduction and five main chapters, a bibliography, and an index. In addition to this, there are several illustrations within the chapters, as well as a middle section with beautiful color reproductions of the most important works by Chagall under discussion here. The book as a whole is handsomely produced in a large format, with all its reproductions of Chagall's paintings and stained-glass windows, plus additional illustrations and photographs of Chagall and Bashevis Singer on the dust jacket. Dorot's point of comparison of these two very distinct artists, the writer and the painter, is that "both artists share a common spiritual source, the Jewish culture and tradition of their birthplace in Eastern Europe of the late nineteenth century (Chagall) and early twentieth century (Bashevis-Singer)" (p. 1).

Isaac Bashevis Singer, known to his Yiddish readers as Bashevis, was born in the small Polish town of Leoncin in 1904, but spent most of his childhood on Krochmalna Street in Warsaw, where his father, who was descended from an illustrious line of rabbis, Kabbalists, and *hasidim*, had his rabbinic court. Bashevis's mother was the daughter of the rabbi of Biłgoraj, who was an outstanding scholar and a *misnaged*, an opponent of *hasidism.* His father's mysticism and his mother's rationalism were a source of constant friction in the household, but both were formative influences on the young Yitskhok (Isaac) and found their way into Bashevis's writings. Marc Chagall was born into a traditional Jewish, but not rabbinic, family in Vitebsk in White Russia in 1887. His father was a poor fishmonger, and his mother was the mainstay of the household. Dorot writes that Chagall absorbed the hasidic atmosphere of his hometown, an "atmosphere of happiness, passion, dance, ecstasy and enthusiastic joy" and expressed this in his work (p. 2). Both Bashevis and Chagall left the traditional Eastern European Jewish world of their childhood and became modern Jewish artists in the United States and France, respectively. Both shared a similar Eastern European Jewish background, which they both explored in their art in very distinct ways. In her monograph, Dorot compares the works of these two very different artists according to subject matter.

The first chapter, entitled "Jewish Experience," is devoted to Bashevis's and Chagall's depiction of the Jewish shtetl in their works. In this chapter, Dorot offers a comparative analysis of Bashevis's short story "The Old Man" (published in English translation in *Gimpel the Fool*, 1957) with Chagall's painting *The Cattle Dealer* (1912) and a further comparative analysis of Bashevis's short story "The Little Shoe Makers" (published in English translation in *Gimpel the Fool*, 1957) with Chagall's painting *Vitebsk, The Blue House* (1917). What both artists have in common, is that both their depictions of the old Eastern European Jewish world are grounded in the realities of shtetl life in its historical setting, but are at the same time highly imaginative, including many supernatural, metaphysical elements. This is referred to by Dorot as "Metarealism" (p. 34).

Chapter 2 is entitled "Jewish Artists and Their Works," which is "a recurring motif in the works of both Bashevis-Singer and Chagall" (p.38). In this chapter, Dorot presents a comparative analysis of Bashevis's novel *The Magician of Lublin* (first serialized in the Yiddish *Forverts* in 1959, published in English translation in 1960) with Chagall's painting *Self-Portrait with Seven Fingers* (1912). Yasha Mazur, the main character of Bashevis's novel, is

"an abundantly talented magician" (p. 50). Chagall's painting depicts "an especially gifted painter, conveyed symbolically by the two extra fingers, hinting at his ability to perform artistic magic" (p. 51). Both artists have a desire to fit in with their non-Jewish surroundings, but still remain tied to their Jewish origins and culture. But while Bashevis describes the conflicts and changes in Yasha's life "from the start to the radical conclusion," Chagall depicts himself at one particular point in time, in the midst of a crisis. Dorot concludes this chapter with a reference to the title of her monograph: "This comparison clearly reflects that literature is the art of time, while painting is the art of place" (p. 52).

Chapter 3, "Love and Lovers," contains a comparative analysis of both Bashevis's short story "Sam Palka and David Vishkover" (published in English translation in *Passions*, 1975) with Chagall's painting *Lovers over the Town* (1914-18) and of Bashevis's novel *Shosha* (first serialized in the Yiddish *Forverts* in 1974, published in English translation in 1978) with Chagall's painting *Between Darkness and Light* (1938-43). Dorot notes that the motif of love and lovers is central to the works of both Bashevis and Chagall, and that three different kinds of love can be found in their works: spiritual (within the framework of traditional Judaism), sentimental/nostalgic (connected with the experience of the shtetl and Yiddish language and culture) and physical/sensual. But while Bashevis "tends to keep these three kinds of love distinct" (p. 54), in Chagall's work they are "united in a single essence" (p. 55).

Chapter 4, "The Holocaust (Shoah) and War," includes a comparative analysis of Bashevis's novel *Enemies, A Love Story* (first serialized in the Yiddish *Forverts* in 1966, published in English translation in 1972) with Chagall's painting *The Fallen Angel* (1923-47). Bashevis's novel and Chagall's painting "both deal with the Holocaust and the ravages of war," but both choose to "focus on less common perspectives and analyse the subject from unusual angles" (p. 79). Bashevis presents the survivor Herman Broder in New York after 1945, with his complicated relationships with three women being completely shaped by his and their horrible experiences during the war. Chagall also dwells on the effects of "*the* crisis of colossal proportions," rather than depicting actual combat or torture (p. 79). But despite all the destruction and horror experienced in the Holocaust, "Jewish existence in both works endures and triumphs," in Chagall's case thanks to the endurance of the Torah, in Bashevis's "thanks to the birth of little Masha, who continues Herman's lineage and the Jewish legacy" (p. 81).

Chapter 5 is an exploration of religion and mysticism in Bashevis's and Chagall's work. This culminates in a comparative analysis of Bashevis's novel *The Slave* (first serialized in the Yiddish *Forverts* in 1960-61, published in English translation in 1962) with Chagall's stained-glass windows at the Hadassah Medical Centre in Jerusalem (1960-62). In Bashevis's seventeenth-century novel, we find an abundance of biblical motifs, related to the love of Jacob, the Jewish slave, and Wanda, the daughter of his Polish master, who eventually becomes the Jewish Sarah and gives birth to their son Benjamin. The couple is compared to the biblical Jacob and Rachel, as well as to Ruth and Boaz and to the lovers of the Song of Songs. Chagall's twelve stained-glass windows are his own unique, colorful depictions of the twelve tribes of Israel, based on Jacob's blessings to his twelve sons. Both Bashevis and Chagall are very loyal to their biblical source. Both works are connected with nature, the cosmos, and God's creation, as well as with questions of good and evil, reward and punishment, and the history and sufferings of the Jewish people. Both move freely between the hardships of daily existence and "a yearning for redemption when one will be able to rise above the alienated and alienating real world, between exile and revelation" (p. 107).

Unfortunately, despite the aesthetically beautiful form of Dorot's book, there are many flaws in its content. There are several factual inaccuracies and oversimplifications. For example, Dorot states in her introduction that Bashevis and Chagall "both depict the vibrant life in the *shtetl* (Jewish village) and the Jewish ghetto" (p. 2). However, a shtetl was, of course, not a "Jewish village," but an Eastern European market town with a sizable Jewish population, and to use the term "Jewish ghetto" in this context, after both Bashevis and Chagall fortunately escaped the Nazi ghettos and camps by leaving Eastern Europe in time, is utterly appalling. In her chapter on religion and mysticism, Dorot refers to "Rabbi Yitzhak Lurie"–instead of Luria–and presents a very oversimplified version of his doctrine of creation: "According to the *Kabbalah*, God limited Himself during the act of creation. As a result of this limitation, known as 'reduction' (*tsimtsum*), numeral external 'husks' were created which comprise much of our environment" (p. 83). However, Dorot conflates two stages of the Lurianic doctrine of creation here, the first one being the divine act of *Ẓimẓum*. But the "husks" or *Klipot* only emerged in connection with the second stage in the process of creation, according to Lurianic theory, which is known as the "breaking of the vessels."

These are only some of the more serious factual inaccuracies and oversimplifications, but many more can

be found throughout the monograph. Dorot is strong in her analysis of Chagall's works within the context of twentieth-century art. But she is rather weak in her analysis of Bashevis's prose. She doesn't seem to have worked with the Yiddish originals, but only with the translations, where so many stylistic nuances of Bashevis's language, as well as Kabbalistic references, get lost. Dorot doesn't seem to grasp the irony and ambiguity in some of Bashevis's works either, particularly in the epilogue of his novel *The Magician of Lublin*, when instead of returning to a full life within the Jewish community with his faithful wife Esther, the repentant magician Yasha has himself immured in a small doorless structure, which is, in fact, a very un-Jewish solution to his moral and ethical dilemmas.

Moreover, Dorot's comparison of particular Chagall paintings with particular novels or stories by Bashevis often seems rather random. Thus Bashevis's character Yasha in *The Magician of Lublin*, which is a novel, not an autobiographical work, cannot seriously be compared with the artist Chagall, as he depicts himself in his *Self-Portrait with Seven Fingers*. And all that Bashevis's novel *The Slave* and Chagall's stained-glass windows in Jerusalem have in common is that they employ biblical and mystical motifs. But the particular motifs and the way in which they are employed are very different. Bashevis and Chagall didn't know each other personally or influence each other directly in their very different art forms. So all that can be compared, is some common themes in their works, which is rather vague. Dorot's monograph ends with her fifth chapter on religion and mysticism. There is no conclusion, and unlike in Bashevis's *The Magician of Lublin*, there is no epilogue, which could provide some counterbalance to the feeling that the reader is left with at the end: that something is lacking here, that *The Art of Time, The Art of Place* is somewhat incomplete.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Khayke Beruriah Wiegand. Review of Dorot, Ruth, *The Art of Time, The Art of Place: Isaac Bashevis Singer and Marc Chagall - A Dialogue*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. December, 2012.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33872

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.