

ANGELS' EVERYDAY LIFE – ITZAK MANGER AND MARC CHAGALL

CRISTINA DEUTSCH

*In poor houses there is so much beauty; Faith
ennobles hungry lips. In its abject smallness the hand
that is beaten Keeps all doors open for a poor
neighbor Beside the cold fire of the dying coals,
Around the tables, heads leaning on elbows, Ears
perked and old greybeards speaking Words of wisdom,
sorrow and imagined miracles.*

And above all heads – the silent one, the liberator

*He emerges from the talk and sits in their midst. The
thin coals flicker with new fire And redden all the
heads and beards carved out of the fire.*

(Mani Leib – “In Hayzer Oreme”)

“Oh, Lord, You who are hiding Yourself among the clouds or behind the shoemaker’s house, make my soul have a revelation, the tormented soul of a stammering boy, show me the way. I do not want to be like everybody else. I want to see another world.”¹ We can say that this prayer of Marc Chagall fulfilled in the same time with the creation of a new universe: that of his paintings. “Another world”, created from the same mixture of earthly and divine, being, after all, the same strange place about which Shmul Abe Abervo, the naughty angel of Itzak Manger, who leaves it for being born on Earth, is telling us about. What will link together these two Heavens – the pictorial one of Chagall and Manger’s literary one – is exactly this rapprochement of a territory which is mythical, but also profoundly terrestrial at the same time: the Jewish *shtetl*. Whether it treats about the native Vitebsk of Chagall or about Manger’s Galician borough, this will be the common ground where the creative personalities of the two will meet. Exactly from this fact starts, on the one hand, the inclusion of the visual images and of the text into an allegory. With Manger, as well as with Chagall, we do not have any

¹ Marc Chagall, *Viața mea*, translated into Romanian by Oana Popescu, Bucharest, 2000, p. 122.

longer two well-defined levels (heaven – earth), we can “discover” this simply by throwing a superficial glance, because these are in a continuous mingling, being sometimes mistaken for one another, they are in a permanent attempt at mixing together, so the religious and the human aspects live together in perfect harmony. Manger’s “The Heaven’s Book” is full of provincial angels working as tailors, policemen, publicans who do not have at all that glamour and greatness with which they could be seen in the Old Testament (and in a similar situation we find, anyway, also the great Patriarchs and the Kings who become in here mere people thrown into the everyday life of a wretched little town). “In heaven was getting really dark – remembers the friend of the angel ‘Wee-Wee’ ”², the one who will come into being on Earth on the Sabbath’s eve – “Inside the houses where the angels were living together with their families candles were flickering, bearded angels were bent upon yellowish tomes. Fat female-angels, with three rows of double chins were darning shirts, young angel-gals were rocking their new-born children to sleep, whispering a lullaby.”³

The angels of the Jewish tradition, those of the Old Testament and of the Talmud, are completely different: in here we can come across seraphs, cherubs, *haiot* (“living creatures”), all these categories being characterized throughout the richness and the precision of the functions they are endowed with, using an elaborated hierarchical system and an enhanced individuality (all these determinations will be obvious also in Manger’s work, but with a clear tendency of desacralization and, with a feebler impact, in Chagall’s painting as a whole where, exactly because of the nature of his work, he was unable to make a clear individualization because working mainly with symbols, we cannot speak about the proper sense of a portrait, taking into consideration the concept of concretism). More precisely, in Chagall we will not have a “story” of Heaven, a description of its topography, a narrative of “what is going on in there”, but only suggestions, mental images concerning sooner what “should be going on in there”, things that are transposed by the painter on the canvas. In a description like that from Isaiah, 6, where we are told that “In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, with the train of his garment filling the temple. Seraphim were stationed above; each of them had six wings: with two they veiled their faces, with two they veiled their feet, and with two they hovered aloft. ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts!’ they cried one to the other. ‘All the earth is filled with his glory!’ ”⁴ We will not recognize practically anything of the world of Manger and Chagall’s angels.

Attempting, for example, to analyze one of his many paintings where angels’ images are present, “The Creation of Man”, we notice that its center is occupied by

² To urinate (children’s slang). The Romanian translation of the name is “Pişulică”.

³ Iţic Manger, *Cartea Raiului*, second edition, translated by Iosif Andronic, Bucharest, 1993, p. 11.

⁴ *New American Bible*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, 2002, p. 686.

the figure of the angel (with a frequent type of orientation that we can often find in Chagall's technique, from right to left, considered by the art critics as a possible clue to his orientalism – the angel's face, as well as his wings, are turned left, backwards. This would be the inferior center of the painting – but not at all less important because of this peculiar detail (if we ignore the two lovers from the right side down – a figure linked with another topic of the Chagallian work, that of terrestrial love, of “domesticity”, of home, elements which, as we shall see, are also very important in Manger's novel, anyway this being a manner of seeing the things more like in the Yiddish fiction in general, if thinking only of writers like Shalom Alechem or Isaac Bashevis Singer, as well as other tiny figures which are gravitating around the main characters). The last one – the angel who is holding the man in his arms, imposes himself to our eyes from the first moment, announcing his importance exactly because of the size, exaggerated by far in comparison with the other elements present in the painting (most likely that the effect is much more shocking in the original version, taking into consideration the dimensions of the canvas: 300 × 200 cm). Another thing that strikes at a first glance is (apparently) the clear separation between the terrestrial and the celestial, between “up” and “down” – but this is only a game, an illusion, one of Chagall's attempts to delude the watcher, to make him understand that, in fact, the line separating the two worlds will never be possible to outline clearly. In some way, the “down” world from the painting should be the “upper” one and the other way round; not because the angels' place would be without fail in Heaven and not on the ground (we must not forget that we are not talking here about an “individualized angel”, we “are not told” that this is, for example, the angel Zachriel or Uriel or some archangel from the Judaic angelology, he is not in the least “an invented angel” like those from Manger's Heaven), but simply because this fact is suggested to us in a technical way: we only should pay a little more attention to the colors that were used. What should be earthly, tellurian, is just an extension of blue (celestial color par excellence), while what should be celestial is a colorful explosion – yellow, red, green, purple, only some stains of blue here and there, it is a variety that should rather define the peoples' world than the divine. And again, something absolutely obvious, in the lowest part we have an amalgam of heavenly and earthly components, intermediated by the association human being – angel.

The upper side of the painting has as a center that reddish whirlpool – sun which generates images from the Old Testament and (nothing strange for Chagall, whose art is a mixture of Judaism and Christianity, this being something frequent) the New Testament: Moses' Tables of Law, offered by some hands which are looming from behind a house scarcely outlined in the highest point of the canvas, a character blowing the Sophar⁵, angels, groups of people who seem to be praying, a

⁵ *Sophar* (Hebrew, masculine noun). Horn used in the ceremony in the Synagogue, during periods of repenting and, especially, on the occasion of Rosh Hashanah and at the end of the final ceremony of Yom Kippur. Apud Jean-Christophe Attias, Ester Benbassa, *Dictionar de civilizatie iudaică*, translated by Șerban Velescu, Bucharest, p. 335.

fish (maybe an image of the Leviathan?) going down undisturbed through the glamorous yellow of the background, the ladder of Jacob, who is raising a menorah in his right hand.⁶ A peculiar detail is the fact that in all Chagall's paintings often the menorah does not have seven arms, as would be normal, but only three – maybe a reminiscence from the Kabbalah, where number three plays an extremely important part, being a symbol of the creation: “The creation implies a creator, the act of creating, the creature”⁷, and right besides it shows up the unfailing goat of Chagall (seeming to come out directly of a Chasidic tale). The crucified Jesus is the biggest element from this side of the painting, but it is hardly outlined, so his face does not say anything at all to us. In conclusion, we can assert that this “Creation of Man” is not related only to the divine but the human being as “creature” is involved in here, having a strong relation especially with his inner humanity relating itself permanently with the heavenly element – proofs stand the episodes from the Old and the New Testament which remind us more of the atmosphere of the Russian village of Chagall's childhood than some sort of scholarly theological interpretation.

The same sensation of “descent” of the sacred into the profane, of their mixing together, will accompany us all along Manger's novel. The only difference between the angel “Wee-Wee” and Shmul Abe Abervo is, in fact, the lack of wings: the religious element is, as in the shtetl's world, only a component of the everyday life, of the domestic aspect, we do not have here those angels of light, almost impalpable, actually without a material consistence, whom we can notice in Dante's “Paradise”, for example. For Manger, the angels go to the pubs, they beat their wives, they are gossiping all the time and they do a lot of practical jokes. Not even the saints, fellow townsmen of the angels, are less interesting from this point of view: “What makes the angels more and more angry is that the saints are mere loafers. They will not do anything, they will not put – as the saying goes – a finger into cold water and, above all, they use the angels as if those were their servants from the making of the world”.⁸ It is a parody of the Paradise, but also a humanization of this space, it is, in fact, a “Paradise retold”, so that people could understand it more easily, with the purpose to have it closer (exactly this way of thinking, typical of the Judaic philosophy, of making the divine, the sacred thought capable of being lived with all yourself, to be able to be seen and touched by the human being makes this strong connection between Chagall and Manger). The Shor Habor bull's evasion into the Christian Paradise and the funny adventures of its bringing back by “Wee-Wee” and his friend with the purpose of fattening it

⁶ *Menorah* – chandelier with seven arms, symbol of Judaism. Constructed following the precise indications given by God to Moses (*Exodus*, 25:31-38), it was initially put in the Sanctuary, then in the Jerusalem Temple (apud Dagobert D. Runes, *Dicționar de iudaism*, translated by Viviane Prager, Bucharest, 1997, p. 265).

⁷ Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire des symboles*, Paris, 1974, tome PIE à Z, p. 337.

⁸ Ițic Manger, *Cartea Raiului*, p. 35.

again for the banquet planned for Messiah's coming, the way in which the three Patriarchs, Avruem, Iancăv and Ithoc, are searching desperately the marks made with chalk on the Shor Habor's more delicious parts, Patriarchs who do not conserve anything from the biblical greatness but, as we are told, are envied by everyone in Paradise because "each one of them has a good-looking house with an orchard, as well as large pieces of land, worked by the poor angels", the anti-Semite angel Dimitri Stasiuc who terrorizes the two little Jewish angels when they arrive in the Christian Heaven, the incitement of the Leviathan with the stones by the children-angels, Perale, the lady-angel who went crazy because of an unhappy love story, the rope walkers' tour from the Muslim Paradise to the Jewish Paradise for staging a show – all these remind us of the fact that "eventually, Heaven is nothing else but a piece of common land, every day being so sad that it daily forces us to think of Heaven".⁹

The same sensations that wake up inside the one who is looking at all this, the same sort of images and the same type of mentality has been used by Chagall in many of his paintings. In "À la Russie", for example, we notice that the Chagallian red (a color which, in symbology is, together with white, one of the colors consecrated to Yahve as God of love and wisdom) is concentrated, almost completely, upon (or inside, better said) the red cow in the lower left side of the painting (but which has a correspondent in the upper right part – a spot of color which forms some sort of nimbus of the head separated from the body); in this way, it forms a diagonal which cuts the painting in a descending direction – we have the impression that the red spot does not reflect itself on the black sky, but on the cow put on the roof and on the red tub in front of it. This red cow (as well as the Shor Habor bull from Heaven) is a symbol of home, of Russia itself, of the village where domesticity, the terrestrial and the fabulous, the miraculous, are in a permanent mixing. We must pay attention also to the fact that the cow, an animal pre-eminently bound to the ground, terrestrial as much as a being can be, is presented here in a curious attempt at ascensional desire, at detachment – beyond any doubt we can see with our eyes that it is perching on the roof of a house! – a house that, in its turn, is extremely high in comparison with the typical Russian church situated right besides. Obviously, this is another fact that demonstrates again that for Chagall Judaism and Christianity coexist without disturbing each other (as Manger's three parallel Paradises do not). This symbol of Russia, the red cow with twisted threatening horns, bathed in a bloodish red, with the tail thrust up like a whip, is nourishing with its milk a little goat and a baby who has a strange greenish hue – this image is related to the beheaded character who is going down holding a bucket in his hand (or maybe a watering can?) and who amazes us because of his size: he is larger than the cow, this being, in its turn, larger than the church, and it is not the effect of the perspective, if watching attentively the way in

⁹ Paul Anghel, introduction to Itic Manger, *Cartea Raiului*, p. VI.

which the two roofs are placed. It could be an image of God, a divinity coming down into the intermediary area between heaven and earth, the roofs of Chagall's houses being some sort of "springboard" from which it is possible to jump directly into the sky.

As we can see, it is not necessary to encounter angels in Chagall's paintings in a direct manner, we *know* that they are always there (and if not in the foreground, then maybe hidden behind the habitual house with the red roof or behind some strange bunch of flowers). The red angel with a surrealist touch from the painting simply labeled "To My Wife", kneeling, with the wings stretched and contemplating a green fish holding an umbrella in its "hand", around whom a little chicken is pecking peacefully (or maybe one of the Paradise's canary of which Shmul Abe Abervo tells us) or that from the painting called "Angel", one who protects, covering with his wings a variegated country world where goats, horses, women with handkerchiefs on their heads, houses, faces of children can be distinguished – they are all inhabitants of the same demythized Paradise, parodied, maybe "retold", but always true, at least this is what the ex-angel Shmul Abe Abervo asserts in front of the rabbi when he tells him that "maybe the Heaven you depict is a delusion, a chimera. The Paradise from where I come is the true one and, even if it has its faults, it is beautiful after all." As Chagall's Russia, fabulous and mythical, but which he cannot forget because it is that place so real which can be called "home".