
REVIEW ESSAY

Apropos Bagritsky and the Russian-Jewish Question

GREGORY FREIDIN

Shrayer, Maxim D. *Russian Poet / Soviet Jew: The Legacy of Eduard Bagritskii*.
Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001. xv + 163 pp. \$35.00.
ISBN 0-7425-0780-7.

Maxim D. Shrayer's *Bagritskii* contains a short biographical essay (74 pp.), the author's translation of Bagritsky's verse (20 pp.), with the rest devoted to a brief chronology, notes, appendices, index, and an impressive set of photographs.

What *Russian Poet / Soviet Jew* delivers first and foremost is an apologia for Eduard Bagritsky (Dziubin), a popular "young" Soviet poet with a distinct and authentic voice, reminiscent of Nikolay Gumilev's variations on Rudyard Kipling. A "Komsomol poet," he was emblematic of the revolutionary enthusiasm of the 1920s and early 1930s. His untimely death in 1934, at the age of thirty-seven, not unlike Maykovsky's suicide, transfixed him for ever as a poet of eternal revolutionary youth. In the last years of his life, Bagritsky, despite his bohemian reputation, was well established in Soviet literary officialdom: he served on the editorial board of *Literaturnaia gazeta* and was chief poetry editor for the Federatsiia publishing house. He was also married to Lydia Suok, a Russian-Polish woman from Odessa and a sister-in-law to both Yuri Olesha and Victor Shklovsky. This kinship was an important career factor, given the "inbreeding" of early Soviet elites. An ardent and gregarious asthmatic, a zesty raconteur of tall tales, Bagritsky was sincerely mourned by members of his milieu, which included, along with the illustrious Babel and Shklovsky, some odious cultural functionaries. His strong talent, untouched by a systematic education, along with his loyalty to the Bolshevik regime, earned him a state funeral and a posthumous canonization. He was proclaimed for all eternity to be "the finest revolutionary romantic" and "the Revolution's lyric voice."

The Revolution, indeed, put the wind into Bagritsky's sails. In matters of form he tacked hither and thither in the manner of his NEP-era contemporaries; in matters of content his course followed the prevailing political winds—as in his most frequently anthologized "Night" (*Noch'*), "TBC," "Origins" (*Proiskhozhdenie*), and the longer poems, *The Lay of Opanas*, and of course, *Death of a Pioneer Girl*. Mikhail Kuzmin, writing in 1933 about Bagritsky's loyal revolutionary ardor, cautioned his contemporaries, in a tortured phrase, that it would be "dishonest to dismiss Bagritsky's sentiment as not

identical with the feelings typical of people who had lived through these years.” The author of his emblematic “The Bird Catcher” (1918, 1926), he was no eager time-server of the regime; he was, rather, a Papageno of the Revolution. He did not presume or cerebrate. He *believed*—and he used his genuine, if limited, gifts to express this faith in strong, breathlessly excited poetry. This is why his name has been so closely associated with the *sentiment* of the Bolshevik revolutionary mythology and why generations of Soviet school children, including Shrayer and this writer, had to memorize some of Bagritsky’s poetry as part of their Soviet *education sentimentale*.

Dying as he did in 1934, while Soviet literature was only beginning to button up its uniform, and a good decade before the emergence of official Soviet anti-Semitism, Bagritsky left a legacy that contained more breathing space than the post-World War II Stalinist or post-Stalinist cultural establishment could grudgingly provide. When viewed through the prism of postwar Soviet Puritanism and xenophobia, Bagritsky, like much of the modernist and avant-garde culture of the NEP era, appears strikingly unconventional: his metric and rhythmic variety and inventiveness; the pathos of liberation from conventions (bourgeois, of course); his emotional range, with its sudden swings from enthusiasm to despair; his open reverence for the Russian romantic balladeering (from Zhukovsky to Gumilev) and its Western counterpart (from Burns to Kipling); his uninhibited, by Soviet standards, treatment of sex; and, finally, his occasional (very occasional) frankness in dealing with his own Jewish origins. This is what prompts Shrayer to pry open Bagritsky’s official Soviet shell in the hope of surprising us with a shining pearl of an artist—on a par with Osip Mandelstam, Isaac Babel (p. 16), Kazimir Malevich, and Sergei Eisenstein (p. 3). Claims like these cannot be proven or denied, but most will find them excessively generous.

Shrayer’s effort is prompted further by the treatment Bagritsky received at the hands of the late- and post-Soviet Russian ultranationalists, among them the editor of *Nash sovremennik*, poet and critic Stanislav Kuniaev. For Kuniaev, along with his confreres, Igor Shafarevich and the late Vadim Kozhinov, Bagritsky’s *February* puts evidentiary teeth into the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. They view the work as an admission of the Jewish conspiracy otherwise known as the Bolshevik Revolution or, more bluntly—here Kuniaev borrows the story and the underlying allegory from *February*—the rape of Russia by Jews. This assault on his legacy by Russia’s far right set the tone for Shrayer’s study and heavily colors its optics: “Bagritsky’s Jewishness was a central predicament of his identity ... and gave his poetry a major theme that reached an explosive crescendo in his last work, *February*” (p. 16). However worthy Shrayer’s cause, it is hard to reconcile this statement with Bagritsky’s actual legacy. A perusal by this reviewer of what is the most complete collection of Bagritsky’s poetry, the 1964 “Biblioteka poeta” edition, yielded only three, at most four, poems that develop a Jewish theme at any length: *The Lay of Opanas*; “The Last Night”; the pseudo-autobiographical “Origins”; and the posthumously published *February*, which Shrayer makes, along with “Origins,” the focus of his work.

This is not much to show for a fifteen-year-long career of a Jewish poet from Odessa and hardly justifies claiming for Bagritsky, as Shrayer does, the mantle of the “Isaac Babel of Russian poetry.” After all, Babel’s compact legacy is almost totally dominated by Jewish characters and settings. The same may be said about Osip Mandelstam. Although rare in his poetry, the Jewish theme is explored almost obsessively in his prose written between 1921 and 1931 (*The Noise of Time*, *Theodosia*, *Egyptian Stamp*, and *Fourth Prose*). So much for the quantity of Bagritsky’s exploration of Russian Jewish topics. What about the quality?

The poem “Origins” (1930) presents a typical (Jewish) “modernization” narrative. A misunderstood offspring of a traditional (Jewish) family abandons with relish its hide-bound parochial milieu for the romance of the modern world outside. I use the parenthesis because such narratives are common fare in Western letters. Some of them are sentimental, others hypercritical and distanced. Isaac Babel combined the two types in his *Red Cavalry* and other stories. Bagritsky, by contrast, prefers the sentimental kind. His Jewish “Origins” (unlike, say, his altogether gentile “Childhood,” 1924) depicts a world full of the castrating razor-like Jewish beards, rotting dairy cream, girls’ braids teaming with lice, pimply faces, and herring-smearred mouths. The message is unequivocal: the Poet does not fit into this world and when he is expelled from it, he departs crying out: “So much the better! / I don’t give a fig!” (*Tem luchshe! / Naplevat!'*).

Such an attitude, for Shroyer, is an example of “Jewish self-hate,” and he goes to great lengths to demonstrate this by citing many authorities on this subject. There is some merit to his argument but, the authorities aside, “hate” is too strong a word, too laden with moral and historical implications to serve as a descriptive term for what has been a common condition of modernization, with its sharp and sudden generational shifts in class, status, education, urbanization, and so on. By no means a monopoly of upwardly mobile Jews, it has been dramatized countless times in Western literature by Jews and non-Jews alike (from Balzac to Dickens, to Joyce, to Chekhov and Gorky, to Philip, Henry and Joseph Roth, indeed, Sigmund Freud’s own “universal” Oedipus Complex). Bagritsky’s angry tale, devoid of ambiguity and ambivalence, lags behind many in depth or complexity.

The centerpiece of Shroyer’s study, *February*, offers, at first glance, a somewhat more complex, if morally more reprehensible, picture of the “Jewish question.” The problem is further complicated by the questionable nature of posthumous editing. To be fair to Bagritsky, he died leaving behind only a rough draft of this narrative poem. Later “deciphered” by Nikolay Khardzhiev and Vladimir Trenin, these drafts were assembled by them into a more-or-less coherent verse narrative, published in 1936 as *February*, the title being as tentative as the “deciphered” text itself. Indeed, judging by inconsistent or altogether missing motivations, the *poema* was drafted away from a publication when work on it was interrupted by the poet’s untimely death. To complicate matters further, Bagritsky intended to publish *February* as part one of a trilogy, which, *ipso facto*, would have imposed on *February* its own interpretive frame. These facts, taken by themselves, should not prevent a scholar from digging deeply into the unfinished work. However, plumbing unfinished drafts, as Shroyer does, for the poet’s “swan song” (p. 49) about Jewish-Russian relations, Jewish identity—or for that matter, anything at all—is a highly speculative and risky enterprise.

That the avatars of anti-Semitism used an unfinished, raw draft as an emblem of the alleged Jewish conspiracy against Russia should have given Shroyer a pause. Yet, instead of arguing against what by all philological standards was unfair use of an unfinished work, Shroyer attempts to vindicate Bagritsky by engaging in the same hermeneutic sleight of hand and, to his own surprise (p. 76), falls into the same trap as Bagritsky’s detractors. Like Kuniaev, he overinterprets the unfinished *February* as an emblem, this time not of a Jewish conspiracy, but of “the unsettled relationship between Jews and Russians and about the mission of the Jews in modern history.” One man’s sinister plot has become another man’s mission.

The “deciphered” *February* is a first-person verse narrative about a middle-class young man—an Odessa Jew and a World War I soldier—who is deeply offended when a an

upper-class gymnasium girl rejects his clumsy advances. A year later (1917), the two meet again. Now a police commissar of the Provisional Government (hence the title), the narrator is raiding a brothel and recognizes his old flame in one of the prostitutes. She is ashamed, begs for pity, and refuses money. He throws money at her and jumps into bed, “without taking off the jack boots or the gun holster.” An internal monologue of the narrator follows, delivered *in flagrante delicto*: the act, apparently, is meant “to make up for” not only the slight he experienced from her a year earlier but also other, general slights and outrages suffered throughout history by the Jewish people. As if this were not enough, the narrator imagines that his “night seed” will also fertilize her “desert,” and then “storms will follow, the southern wind will blow / swans will trumpet their love song.”

Whatever else may be wrong with this picture, the story’s main event—the brutal and humiliating act of sexual aggression—lacks motivation and violates the convention of poetic justice. More in keeping with the allegory, not of the February, but the *October* Revolution, this rape (at that time, a literary cliché) is out of balance with the pain the narrator experienced at the story’s outset. The Jewish theme, too, lacks motivation. Nothing in the text indicates that it was the narrator’s religion, rather than, say, his looks, manners, or class, that caused the gymnasium girl to decline his advances.

To right this imbalance and to give *February* a decidedly Jewish cast, Shrayer insists—without any documentary or textual basis—that Bagritsky used Isaac Babel’s childhood stories as “a major point of departure for his explorations of the making of the Russian-Jewish identity” (p. 50). But there is nothing in *February* to suggest that Bagritsky borrowed the character from Babel. Here Shrayer begins to stretch his facts. He refers to Babel’s ten-year-old protagonist (“The Story of My Dovecote” and “First Love”) as a “Jewish adolescent” or “teenager” (pp. 51, 55, 56) and gets him “admitted to a privileged Russian high school” (p. 51)—despite the fact he is only ten and has just enrolled in the first grade. Correspondingly, he makes Bagritsky’s noncommissioned officer of twenty appear as a “a young man in his teens.” Enough said.

The history of the first generation assimilated (or acculturated) Russian Jews who played a major role in the construction of Russian and Soviet Russian culture and state remains to be written, and Shrayer must be commended for viewing early Soviet poetry against the backdrop of the Russian-Jewish nexus. But the drafts that Khardzhiev and Trenin called *February* and what Shrayer decided to treat as the culmination of the Jewish theme in Bagritsky’s *oeuvre* (its “crescendo”) is only marginally more useful for telling this story than a Rorschach blot. Undaunted by this philological taboo, Shrayer pushes on toward a definitive, emblematic reading. *February*, he concludes, offers a “universalist vision of Jewish history,” demonstrating that “Jews are a constant source of vital energy for humankind, and their discrete genes [*sic*] will live on in the children of assimilated Jews” (p. 94). Shrayer’s claim is too grandiose in general and in Bagritsky’s case anachronistic. But, then, as one ancient sage had it, “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”

A Reply to Gregory Freidin:

I am grateful to the editors of *The Russian Review* for the opportunity to comment on Gregory Freidin’s review essay. My book about Eduard Bagritskii and the parameters of Jewish identity in the early Soviet period came out in the fall of 2000. In the spring of