

Isaac Babel (1894 – 1940)

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Isaac Babel (1894-1940) was, perhaps, the first Soviet prose writer to achieve a truly stellar stature in Russia, to enjoy a wide-ranging international reputation as a grand master of the short story,¹ and to continue to influence—directly through his own work as well as through criticism and scholarship—literature produced in our own day. All this acclaim notwithstanding, Babel, whom contemporaries remember as a man with a gift and a penchant for mystification, remains one of the more enigmatic figures of Russian modernism. Even the corpus of his writings is uncertain and may never be firmly established. The works by which he wished to be known, however, indeed his best known works, have gone through thirty five editions in the Soviet Union alone and, beginning in 1926, have been translated into all the major European tongues. By contrast with this renown, Babel's "authorized" legacy is quite compact. Begun and finished, for the most part, in 1921-1926, it consists of three major story cycles, two plays, and several pieces of short fiction—all fitting comfortably into an average-sized volume. Together they account for approximately half of

¹A. Voronsky, in his well-known essay on Babel described the writer as the only "international author" among the big names in Soviet literature. Polonsky: internationa, a writer for an industrial metropolis. See his "Babel", Seifullina, *Krasnaia nov' 5* (1924). Likewise, Abram Lezhnev expressed similar ideas in 1926, describing Babel as the fulfillment of the Serapion Brothers' advice to young writers: "go West." Lezhnev, A. "Babel", *Pechat' i revoliutsiia* 6 (1926):119-128. See also A. Gabor, "O vliianii sovetskoi literatury v Germanii," *Na literaturnom postu* 20 (1927):93. V. Pozner, "Sovetskaia literatura vo Frantsii," *Literaturnaia gazeta* (September 12, 1934).

Babel's extant output: movie scripts, early short fiction, journalistic sketches, one translation, and a few later stories that remained unpublished in Babel's lifetime (they were considered offensive either to the party line or the censor's sense of public delicacy).

His most famous work, the cycle of short stories and vignettes, *Konarmiiia (Red Cavalry)*, was first published in a separate edition in 1926. It dealt with the experiences of the Russo-Polish War of 1920 as seen through the bespectacled eyes of a Russian Jewish intellectual working, as Babel himself had done, for the newspaper of the red Cossack army. This autobiographical aura played a key rôle in the success and popularity of the cycle. The thirty three jewel-like pieces, strung together to form the first edition of *Red Cavalry*, were composed in a short period of time, between the summer of 1923 and the beginning of 1925, and together constitute Babel's lengthiest work of fiction (two more pieces would be added subsequently). They also represent his most innovative and daring technical accomplishment. For the first time, in Russian letters at least, the opulence and subtlety of modernism lent themselves to the expression of the cruelest and basest sensibility. An instant success, *Red Cavalry* met with a virtually universal acclaim as the first true masterpiece of Russia's post-revolutionary prose fiction; it had generated a critical response that had exceeded Babel's own output even before the appearance of the separate edition.³ Clearly, he touched the raw nerve of contemporary culture.

Another cycle, *Odesskie rasskazy (The Tales of Odessa)*, contains four novellas ("Korol" ["The King" 1921], "Kak eto delalos' v Odesse" ["The Way It Used To Be Done In Odessa," 1923], "Otets" ["The Father," 1924], and "Liubka Kozak" ["Liubka the Cossack," 1924]). Although completed in 1921-23, for a long time the cycle was believed to have preceded *Red Cavalry*. United, like the stories of *Red Cavalry*, by their protagonists, the setting, and the narrator, *The Tales of Odessa* presented a larger than life, Rabelaisian picture of the city's Jewish underworld, whose members go about their carnivalesque business, meting out poetic justice to the melancholy powers of Prudery, Capital and the local police. Inherently theatrical, *The Tales of Odessa* had an easy time crossing over into film and drama. In 1925-1926, Babel wrote a script based on the story cycle, naming it *Benia Krik* after the chief

³A. Lezhnev, 1925.

protagonist of the Odessa stories. By contrast with *The Tales of Odessa*, where the action takes place in 1905-1907 and the king of the Odessa gangsters reigns unchallenged, the script stretches to include the 1917 Revolution and the civil war. It ends with a close-up of the back of Benia Krik's head as it is being shattered—deservedly, we are supposed to think—by a red executioner's bullet. Perhaps a coincidence, the characters in the script fall without exception into two groups: the traders and the criminals are Jews (like the author of the script and the film director), whereas the proletarian revolutionary activists, who finish off the gangs, are ethnic Russians. Produced in 1926, the film ran into a brief trouble with the censors but was released in January, 1927, to enjoy considerable popularity.

Also in 1927, Babel completed his first play, *Zakat (The Sunset)*. Thematically different, it was in other respects closely related to the *The Tales of Odessa*; from this common milieu derives it some of the most comical dialogue known to Russian theater. As the title suggests, *The Sunset* offered a melancholy meditation on the passage of time, as revealed through dramatic form of a bloody conflict between a brutal father who refuses to act his age and his children, who do not hesitate to use force in order to age him. Although the younger generation prevails and the play ends with the children's triumph, theirs was a Pyrrhic victory, and not only because it anticipates their eventual defeat at the hands of their own children. The small Jewish, bourgeois, and criminal world in which such a victory possessed some relative value would soon be ground up by the revolution and the new Soviet state. Babel's contemporaries understood this without any prompting from the playwright. In print, the play made for a good reading; on stage, the response was mixed. In Odessa, the *The Sunset* played to packed audiences in two theaters simultaneously (in Yiddish and in Russian), but the Moscow production of 1928, staged while Babel was in Paris, ended in a disaster, largely, it seems, because the director tuned it to a crudely ethnic and anecdotal key.

Babel began work on the book *Istoriia moei golubiatni (The Story of My Dovecote)*, his other major tetraptych, in 1925, when two of the stories were published, but did not complete the other two until five years later. An episodic fictional chronicle of the author's childhood years, the four stories combine into a portrait of the artist, not as a young man, but, rather, as a studious Jewish boy poised at the edge of adolescence. Less exuberant in their style, the four novellas have more in common with the

more traditional autobiographical fiction of Leo Tolstoy and Maksim Gorky than the more probing explorations of the consciousness of a gifted child found in *The Noise of Time* by Osip Mandelstam, *The Childhood of Luvers* by Boris Pasternak, and, earlier, *Kotik Letaev* by Andrei Bely. Indeed, the cycle appears to have been aimed at a wider audience, one that possessed only limited patience and little taste for modernism. Nevertheless, crafted as skillfully as anything that Babel ever wrote, *The Story of My Dovecote* must be counted among the minor masterpieces of short fiction.

After *The Sunset* came out in February, 1928, Babel published very little that had not appeared previously, although editions of his writings, revised and expanded to include a most recent story or two, kept issuing with what was surely an enviable regularity. Close to thirty separate editions, among them a collected works, rolled off the presses during the decade following the publication of *Red Cavalry*. One work not related to the three cycles, the play *Mariia (Maria 1933-35)*, represented a rather uninspired attempt to appease Babel's official "creditors"—the high cultural and, it seems, political establishment that had allowed the "silent" author to continue maintaining a remarkably high profile. With its pathos directed against the remnant of the aristocracy and the unscrupulous Jewish bourgeoisie under the New Economic Policy (NEP, 1921-1928), the play arrived long after the NEP, with all of its remnants, had been obliterated in the Stalin Revolution. Babel worked too slowly, political winds were changing fast, and the play misfired, although it may have earned him a brief respite—just for trying—from the intense official pressure to produce.

In the 1930s Babel devoted much of his energy to film, random journalistic work, and almost compulsive travel, roaming ceaselessly across the Soviet Union, ostensibly in search of new material for his work in progress. Throughout this dozen or so years, he assured his family and friends in correspondence as well as conversations that he was working on a major project, a novel, perhaps.⁴ In 1925 he told Dmitrii Furmanov, a fellow writer, he was considering a novel about the Cheka.⁵ Possibly some echoes of this project may be discerned in the rumors, circulating in Russia in the late 1920s and

⁴The novel's provisional title was *Kolia Topuz*. See, i.a., I. Ehrenburg's memoirs and Babel's correspondence with the family in *You Must Know Everything*.

⁵Furmanov's diary.

reported in the emigre press, that the Cheka had stopped the publication of a new piece by Babel.⁶ According to several memoirists, including I. Ehrenburg, in the late 1920s and early 1930s Babel was working on a novel, *Kolia Topuz*, in which a conman successfully reforms himself through work in socialist construction.⁷ During the period of the First Five-Year Plan when the prison population engaged in forced labor was rapidly expanding, such topics were in the air. Babel's patron and protector, Maksim Gorky, at the time the most important figure in Soviet culture, actively encouraged fellow writers to explore this subject. Whether Babel tried his hand at it or merely wished to appear trying is a question that will, most likely, remain unanswered.

His tendency to subtitle his stories as part of a larger work in progress—a consistent practice beginning with *The Tales of Odessa*—confuses matters further. "V shchelochku" ("Through the Crack"), an odd piece about a scene observed by the narrator through a peephole in a bordello, was published in 1923 and came, according to its subtitle, "From the Book *Etchings*." It has no acknowledged companions in the published Babel, although it resembles his two stories published by Gorky in 1916. Some fifteen years later, "Gapa Guzhva" (1931, *The Lonely Years*), a story about a Ukrainian village whore caught up in the collectivization of agriculture, was published as "The First Chapter of *Velikaia Krinitisa*." Its companion piece, "Kolyvushka," yet to appear in the Soviet Union, bore a slightly different subtitle: "From the Book *Velikaia Staritsa*." There are no traces of other chapters. In response to the harsh criticism of *Maria*, Babel declared that he was revising the play as part of a trilogy covering the period of 1920-1935.⁸ But, in the words of the Soviet commentator of the play, "no materials testifying to Babel's continued work on the trilogy have been preserved."⁹ When Babel was

arrested in May, 1939, all of the papers that were with him at his dacha in Peredelkino, were confiscated. Now they are presumed lost, destroyed together with a portion of the NKVD archive in 1941 when the seizure of Moscow by the German armies seemed imminent. Thus we may never know whether Babel was writing for the drawer or trying to produce literature that could be officially accepted. Nor will we ever know whether any of his efforts, if indeed there were such efforts, led to substantial results.

The only extant manuscript of an unfinished work of fiction, *Evreika (The Jewess)*, lends credence to the claims that Babel had, indeed, tried his hand at a different genre and a different thematic material. A third-person narrative with an unmarked, "objective" style, it tells the story of a recently widowed woman who leaves her decaying shtetl for Moscow to settle there with her only son. He insisted on this move and she followed him but apprehensively because, as she puts it, the capital had already too many Jews. A civil war hero, a decorated Red Army commander and a student at a military academy, her son belonged to the new Soviet elite, and yet, he also acknowledged, if only to himself, the unease he felt in his new prestigious surroundings. The manuscript breaks off just as the narrative reaches its first potential conflict: the more cultivated neighbors are beginning to complain about the smell of his mother's Jewish cooking. Did Babel abandon this project for reasons of censorship or for fear that its publication might damage his reputation? Or could it be that he simply failed to sustain the narrative style that seems alien to the rest of his known fiction? Or did he complete *The Jewess* only to lose it once and for all in the incinerators of the Lubyanka prison?

We do know, however, that with the exception of *Maria* (1933-1935), the unfinished *Jewess*, and two or three later stories, Babel's *major* fiction is all of a piece. The three cycles share the same narrator, though they emphasize his different facets, and we continue to encounter him in the later stories which, accordingly, borrow their settings, or sets, from *Red Cavalry*, *The Story of My Dovecote* and *The Tales of Odessa*. Even the two novellas dealing with the collectivization—both third-person narratives—recall with such pungency and vividness the style of *Red Cavalry* that a knowing reader of Babel would find the absence of that bungling and humane *intelligent*—who failed to acquire the hoped for "simplest of human skills" to kill—at the least,

⁶Information appeared in *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik*.

⁷See the memoirs of Ehrenburg and Pirozhkova.

⁸I. Lezhnev, "Novaia p'esa I. Babelia," *Teatr i dramaturgiia* 3 (1935):46-57. M. Maizel, "Dragotsennye oskolki," *Literaturnyi Leningrad* (November 5, 1935). See also *Literaturnaia gazeta* (March 4, 1934) for a report of Babel's public reading of *Maria*.

⁹*Izbrannoe*, p. 475.

conspicuous and, at the most, profoundly telling. It is this narrator who represents the chief protagonist of what has reached us of Babel's fiction. The author's mask, with time he came to be identified with the name of Isaac Babel, blending into one the man, the character, and the persona that straddled the two—the writer.

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For an author whose best-known works were composed and published during a six-year period (1921-1927), the spectacular renown enjoyed during the remaining twelve, virtually barren years, and a remarkable posthumous fame, must be considered, on a par with his texts, as part of his literary career. A member of the post-World War I generation of European and American writers, he developed, not unlike Ernst Hemingway or Scott Fitzgerald, a charismatic public persona that could appeal, often justifiably, to different facets of the Euro-American literary taste.¹⁰ To some he appeared, first and foremost, as an artist whose genius, forged in the Revolution, transcended the boundaries of ethnicity and class;¹¹ others, for whom the aesthetic criterion took the pride of place, admired him as an avant-gardist who reinvigorated Russian prose and elevated the short story, a humbler genre, to the lofty heights of great art.¹² And those of his readers who felt disillusioned with the Russian Revolution or never accepted its promise could focus their attention on Babel's meager output in the 1930s and, after 1939, his disappearance in the Gulag, citing them as

evidence for the incompatibility of true art and communist totalitarianism.¹³

Babel's posthumous "rehabilitation," or the official clearing of his name of all charges in 1954, and the subsequent reissuing of his work in the Soviet Union at the time of de-Stalinization made him an attractive symbolic figure to the less orthodox members of the Soviet cultural elite. They eagerly promoted his name and his writings, eliciting protest from the die-hard Stalinists whose interference made it easier for the champions of Babel to dissociate themselves retrospectively from the worst brutalities of the Soviet state.¹⁴ But in identifying with this "martyred" star of Soviet literature, and, by implication with the more tolerant 1920s when Babel made his spectacular debut, these advocates tended to magnify the author's tragic demise while underplaying his—and by implication, their own erstwhile—loyalty to the regime during the period of worst terror.

An analogous revision of the writer's legacy, if on a smaller scale, took place among the left intellectuals in the West in the late 1950s and 1960s. With new editions of his writings running off the presses all throughout Western Europe and the United States, Babel's name was once again coming into vogue—in parallel with the ever mounting evidence for the catastrophic scale of the Stalinist purges. In the United States, in particular, where the later, post-McCarthy, fashion for Babel had been anticipated, at least, as early as 1947 (R. Rosenthal),¹⁵ the figure of the writer was recruited to perform a multiple duty by such influential critics of their generation as Lionel Trilling and Irving Howe.¹⁶ Presented as a symbolic distillation of

¹⁰S. E. Hyman, "The Identities of Isaak Babel," *Hudson Review* 4 (1956):620-27.

¹¹See Voronskii, Lezhnev, Benni. See also J. Freeman, J. Kunitz, L. Lozowick, *Voices of October. Art and Literature in Soviet Russia* (New York, 1930). V. Pozner, *Littérature russe* (Paris, 1929), pp. 347-50.

¹²Shklovskii, "Isaak Babel': Kriticheskii romans," *Lef* (1924); I. Eventov, "Vozvyshenie novelly," *Lietraturnyi sovremennik* 12 (1935). See also E. Zamiatin, "O segodniashnem i o sovremennom," *Litsa* (New York, 1955). D. S. Mirskii, "I, Babel. Rasskazy" (rev.), *Sovremennye zapiski* 26 (1925):486-88, and "Babel," *Nation* (January 23, 1926):581-82.

¹³Max Eastman, *Writers in Uniform: A Study of Literature and Bureaucratism* (New York, 1934). Anonymous, "He Died for Art," *Nesweek* (July 27, 1964). I. Howe, "The Genius of Isaak Babel," *New York Review of Books* (July 20, 1964).

¹⁴D. Starikov, "Neobkhodimoe utochneniia" I. Erenburg, "Neobkhodimoe ob'iasnenie," *Literaturnaia gazeta* (February 9, 1957); also his *Liudi, gody, zhizn'. Kniga tret'ia*, in *Novyi mir* 9 (1961): 146-52.

¹⁵R. Rosenthal, "The Fate of Isaac Babel: A Child of the Russian Emancipation," *Commentary* 3 (1947):126-31.

¹⁶L. Trilling, "The Fate of Isaac Babel," *London Magazine* 7 (1956):40-58, and his "Introduction" to I. Babel, *Collected Stories* (New York and London, 1961). I. Howe, "The Right to Write Badly," *The New Republic*

beauty and truth (Russian authors victimized by the regime seem to lend themselves naturally to such treatment), Babel served as a powerful indictment of Stalinism and at the same time, as a man committed to the promise of Bolshevism, provided a vindication for the long-standing fascination with the Russian revolution on the part of the intellectual Left. Moreover, at a time when the exclusively political and Manichean formulas for political engagement were losing their appeal, Babel turned into an exemplary case for the ambivalences and ambiguities faced by an intellectual --and a Jewish one, too-- whose identification with the "people's cause" is tested most rudely by his supposed beneficiaries.

As a Russian Jew, who in his writings thematized the advantages and liabilities of this double designation, Babel attracted substantial Jewish readership both in his own country and abroad, in particular, the United States.¹⁷ For this audience, too, and with special poignancy after the Second World War, he served, not only as a story-teller and playwright, but as a powerful symbolic figure whose life reproduced the recent history of the Jews of Europe, with all their accomplishments and tragic fate.¹⁸ Because there is no more consensus regarding this history than that of modern Europe or Russia, Babel has been alternately called upon to provide evidence for the failure or success, or merely the complexity of the attempts made by the Diaspora Jews to identify with the political or cultural agenda of their native country.¹⁹ More recently, Babel's biography and his writings, where Jews often assert themselves with vigor and militancy, provided a stimulus for a new sense of

collective identity among the Jews of the Soviet Union—an unanticipated consequence of the coming together of de-Stalinization, awareness of the holocaust, and Israel's victory in the Six-Day War.²⁰

What made Babel's effectiveness as a symbolic figure possible in the first place—his writings—have influenced the course of literary history in a significant and productive way. As in the history of political and aesthetic sensibility, Babel's achievement in this area possesses an exemplary character. He was one of the first major Jewish writers, along with Franz Kafka, to develop and practice a particular literary idiom in the language of the dominant culture, the idiom that has come to be associated with the experience of the assimilated, modern European Jew. Some of his more perceptive compatriots understood this at once. A. Z. Lezhnev, a well-known critic and a member of the editorial board of the influential *Press and Revolution*, wrote in 1926:

Babel is the first Jew who entered Russian literature as a Russian writer, at least the first prose writer. Up until now we only had Jewish writers attached to Russian literature. [...their work] was interesting for the reader curious about the ethnographic details rather than art. It is only in Babel's hands that the life of [the Jews of] Odessa has acquired aesthetic value. [...] *The Tales of Odessa* and "The Story of My Dovecote" prove that he is capable of transcending the limitations of the anecdotal or ethnographic tendencies.²¹

Judging by his impact on such an accomplished and mature author as Osip Mandelstam (*The Egyptian Stamp*, 1928), a score of lesser and younger writers who began in his shadow,²² and, most remarkable, his influence in our time on the Jewish American writers, like Phillip Roth and Grace Paley,²³ Babel established the foundation for what

(July 4, 1955):16-18, "The Genius of Isaak Babel," *The New York Review of Books* (August 20, 1966). S. E. Hyman, "Identities of Isaak Babel," *Hudson Review* 4 (1956):620-27, "New Voices of Isaak Babel," *New Leader* (July 20, 1964):16-17. S. Marcus, "The Stories of Isaak Babel," *Partisan Review* 3 (1955):400-411.

¹⁷A. Kaun, "Babel: Voice of New Russia," *Menorah Journal* 15 (November, 1928):400-410.

¹⁸Anonymous, "Ordeal of a Russian Jew," *Time* (June 27, 1955):62, 64.

¹⁹R. Rosenthal, "The Fate of Isaac Babel: A Child of the Russian Emancipation," *Commentary* 3 (1947):126-31. Milton Ehre, *Isaac Babel* (Boston: Twayne, 1986).

²⁰S. Markish, "The Example of Isaac Babel," *Commentary* 64 (1977):36-45.

²¹A. Lezhnev, 1926, p. 85.

²²List Babel's epigones

²³Phillip Roth, *The Ghost Writer*; Grace Paley, "An Homage to Isaac Babel."

might have emerged as a Jewish Russian literature had it not been for the Great Russian chauvinism of the Soviet state.²⁴

Equally important, the exemplary character of Babel's achievement goes beyond the properly Jewish theme to encompass other forms of what sociologists call the phenomenon of cultural marginality.²⁵ A member of the intelligentsia, a Jew, and because of this doubly *different* from his fictional setting, Babel's author-narrator rejected some aspects of his Jewish heritage, and combined others, openly and skillfully, with powerful strands in his adopted milieu; in the process he produced a master script for future writers who, whether Jewish or not, wished to play the rôle of the *other* at the very center, and not the margins, of their country's culture.²⁶

A protagonist in the drama of his own making (although he had to share the directing with the times), Isaac Babel not only produced some of the best short fiction of this century, he also performed the rôle of a "marginal" writer with consummate skill. Indeed, he was able to maintain the illusion of authorship during those years when, by his own sardonic admission made from the stage of the First Congress of Soviet Writers, he was practicing "silence—the most difficult of all literary genres." Thus the *oeuvre* alone, especially its "authoritative" version, cannot account with sufficient fullness for the whole complex of ideas, texts, and events that have come to be associated with Babel's name. His background, the cultural tradition that he entered when he embarked on a career of literary authorship, the expectations of the more powerful segment of the reading public, his fiction, and, finally, his strategy for achieving and maintaining a high literary profile—all have contributed to the formation of what constitutes Babel's legacy for us.

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Isaac Emmanuilovich Babel or, according to the records of the Odessa Rabbinate, Isaac Manievich

²⁴Markish agrees. *Commentary* 11 (1977).

²⁵K. Mannheim

²⁶A. Kazin, "The Jew as a Modern Writer," *Commentary* 41 (1966):37-41. See also J. Kunitz, *Russian Literature and the Jew: A Sociological Inquiry into the Nature and Origins of Literary Patterns* (New York, 1929).

Bobel, was to Man' Yitzkhovich and Feiga Bobel in the city of Odessa on June 30, 1894.²⁷ His only sibling, Mera (Merriam, Mary?), after her emigration to Belgium, Madame Marie Chapochnikoff, was born in 1900. Even these two facts, which should be as innocuous as any birth certificate, are hard to disentangle from the two sets of narratives we associate with Isaac Babel. One of them, his own fiction, follows the autobiographical convention and centers on the narrator whose biographical attributes identify him (apparently) with the author himself. The other set is harder to circumscribe: simply put, it consists of what the reading public knows about the history of culture, politics and society in modern Russia, including the history of Russia's Jews.

The two impart a specific meaning to the fact that Babel's family was Jewish, secular, and, when he was born, well on its way toward joining the middle class. Although lacking in systematic education, the parents identified with the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment movement that had accepted Russian as the language of emancipation. And so it was embraced in the Babel household, functioning as the intergenerational lingua franca, with Yiddish reserved for the parents as their private tongue. Obviously, the culture of the shtetl and the ghetto, inseparable from Yiddish, was still very much their culture. Born and raised in an enclosed, small and homogeneous community, which they later fled, they nevertheless experienced it as an irreducible place of origin, one where they had once wholly belonged, and one whose spiritual and emotional resources were still accessible to them. By contrast, their children, who were expected to make the final break with this culture, would never be part of either that or any other undivided world. With his wife and daughter living in France, his mother and sister in Belgium, another wife and another daughter in Russia, with scores of motley relatives in Odessa and Kiev, and with his own career as a Soviet Russian writer now reaching for the stars, now descending into silence, Babel was the mobile (or homeless) man of the twentieth century par excellence.

Mobility had already distinguished the previous generation. The comfortable financial position Babel Senior achieved early in his son's life placed the family in a distinct minority among the subjects of the Russian Empire. It belonged to an even more distinct minority among Russia's Jews, who had to

²⁷V. Tsukerman, "Isaak Babel': Novyi dokument." *Glagol* 3 (New York, 1981).

contend with the official and informal, but officially sponsored, anti-Semitism as well as severe legal disabilities. The latter included the prohibition to dwell outside the Pale of Settlement, specially designated urban areas in Russia's south-west, and rigid restrictions on access to education. "In Odessa, there is a very poor, populous and suffering Jewish ghetto, a very self-satisfied bourgeoisie, and a very pogromist city council," wrote Babel in 1917 about the city of his birth, fully aware what misery and humiliation he was spared because his parents belonged to the second, fortunate category.²⁸

To be born in Odessa or, rather, to have lived there when Babel did, namely between 1905 and 1915, was another stroke of luck, and one that Babel used every opportunity to acknowledge. The revolution of 1905, although it failed to destroy the old regime, immensely strengthened the civil society, creating in the urban centers of Russia a heady atmosphere replete with political debate, strikes and demonstrations, a pluralistic press and a thriving market for arts and literature. Under these conditions, no matter how hostile the official policy, the Jewish community of Odessa was too large (in 1900, a third of Odessa's half a million citizens were Jewish), too well-organized, and too varied to be kept in the state of hopeless oppression. On this count alone, Odessa was unique. As Simon Markish tells us in his essay on Babel, it resembled more the Jewish communities in the turn-of-the century American cities than any in Russia. The effect of the government policy regarding Jews was further limited by the heterogeneity of the city population, the rest of which constituted a *mélange* of ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, Greeks, and in addition, small but culturally important enclaves of French, German, and English merchants.²⁹ The pungent, freewheeling atmosphere of a major port city and industrial center, the remarkable ethnic mix, and a considerable, heavily Jewish bourgeoisie supporting a network of secondary schools, newspapers and journals, several theaters, an opera company, and a university, provided an Odessa Jew in search of a worldly

fortune with an opportunity to breach the isolation of the third-class citizenship and the ghetto milieu. Surmounting these obstacles would have been much harder in a smaller, less cosmopolitan place and would have involved more painful compromises with the official policies in St. Petersburg or Moscow, the two capitals kept, largely, free of Jews.

Equally important, in the country that was growing weary of the old regime—symbolized by the aristocratic, decorous, *northern* St. Petersburg—the thoroughly middle-class, *southern* Odessa could be seen as one of the sources of country's social and cultural rebirth. True, a Petersburg snob was likely to turn his nose up at this "very awful city," but the growing contribution to Russian culture by the provincial artists and writers gave substance to Babel's 1917 prediction that the spirit of Odessa, bright, merry and bourgeois, would soon be challenging the dominant Petersburg sensibility, its Dostoevskian moodiness, classical splendor and imperial chill:

A man from Odessa is the opposite of a Petrogradian. It is becoming an axiom that Odessans do well in Petrograd. They make money. Because they are brunets, plump blonds fall in love with them [...] This, one might say, begins to sound too much like a joke. No, sir. Something more profound is involved here. The point is simply that these brunets are bringing with them a little sun and a little levity.

Apart from the gentlemen who bring with them a little sun and a lot of canned sardines with interesting labels, I think there must arrive—and soon—the fertile, invigorating influence of the Russian South, the Russian Odessa, perhaps (*qui sais?*), the only city in Russia where our national and so badly needed Maupassant can emerge. ["My Notes: Odessa," 1917]

Babel's optimism was, in part, born out by the history of Russian literature and society in the 1920s. As soon as the imperial center ceased to hold, the provincial intelligentsia quickly stepped in to fill the vacancy, with the "men of Odessa" marching stylishly in the forefront. Some of the better known writers and poets of the post-revolutionary decade, indeed, the "classics" of Soviet literature, including

²⁸"Moi listki. Odessa," *Zhurnal zhurnalov* 51 (1917):4-5. Cited according to Isaak Babel, *Zabytyi Babel': Sbornik maloizvestnykh proizvedenii I. Babelia*, ed. and comp. Nicholas Stroud (Ann Arbor, 1979), p. 49

²⁹On Odessa; statistics

Valentin Kataev, Konstantin Paustovsky, Eduard Bagritsky, Iliia Ilf, and of course, Babel himself, came from Odessa. What was happening in literature paralleled the post-revolutionary reshuffling of the empire's social and demographic deck. Together with the limited free enterprise permitted under the New Economic Policy, these changes may well have imparted to Petrograd or Moscow some of the Levantine commercial atmosphere of Odessa during its most thriving period, inaugurated by the 1905 revolution and brought to a close by the Great War. It was that Odessa that Babel knew and liked best, and the credit for the city's reputation as the Russian Marseilles, which is how some imagine it in its halcyon days, must go to *The Tales of Odessa*. Conceived in the austere world of 1920-1921, they paint a picture of the city as Babel remembered or wished to remember it during his school years, 1905-1911. But books have their own fate, and in the imagination of Babel's readers, this cycle of four stories has forever transformed Odessa, more precisely, its Jewish ghetto with its underworld, into a romantic *pays de Cocagne*, historically its first Jewish or, for that matter, Russian Jewish or, simply, Russian version.

* * *

Few facts are available on which to base a reconstruction of Babel's childhood or family. His own autobiographical writings have often proved a misleading source, at least, when compared to the recollections of his sister, two Odessa poets who had some contact with his family and, indirectly, his own, still only partially published, correspondence.³⁰ A writer, above all, a writer with a cultivated public persona, he was more concerned with following the spirit of the truth than its letter. He admitted as much in a 1931 note to his mother which accompanied his autobiographical fiction: "All the stories are from the childhood years, with lies added, of course, and much

³⁰For the sister's reminiscences see Judith Stora-Sandor, *Isaac Babel: L'Home et l'oeuvre* (Paris, 1968) and U. Spektor, "Molodoi Babel," *Voprosy literatury* 7 (1982):278-81. Other memoirs: Sergei Bonadrin, "Prikosnovenie k cheloveku," in A. Pirozhkova and N. Iurgeneva, eds., *I. Babel: Vospominaniia sovremennikov* (Moscow, 1972); and S. Gekht, "U steny Strastnogo monastyria v letnii den' 1924 g.," *ibid*.

that is altered."² More important, by modifying the facts of his childhood, Babel was not simply exercising the prerogative of a writer of fiction; he was, it seems, carrying out a deliberate strategy—one with significant consequences for an author with a high public profile. "When the book is finished, then it will become clear why I needed all that," he ended the explanation, suggesting, cryptically, that the four stories were only a part of a larger cycle.³¹ Indeed, a 1937 story, "Di Grasso," would have fit neatly with the earlier four³² whereas most of the stories that appeared in the 1930's fill the "autobiographical" gap between childhood years and *Red Cavalry*.

Given Babel's talent for cyclization, it would appear that he had in mind a larger autobiographical frame designed to incorporate his known and future work and enclosing the entire life span of the boy who grew up to be the author-narrator of *Red Cavalry* and, finally, a major Soviet writer. The great success enjoyed by the autobiographical fiction of Maksim Gorky—Babel's acknowledged protector and mentor—its elevation to the status of a national epic in the 1930s, lends support to this conjecture. Furthermore, in the early 1930s when Babel's output was diminishing, such a master frame would have helped to allay the pressure to produce, permitting him to present his past achievement, perhaps, even the writings he had previously suppressed, in a fresh, more contemporary light. Far from opportunistic, this strategy was making use of the essential attributes of Babel's art, its apparent autobiographical character. The other, no less significant properties of his writings, especially *Red Cavalry*—their modernistic fragmentariness and the delirious mixture of pathos and baseness for which the broad reading public and the cultural bureaucracy were losing tolerance—these "outmoded" properties would have lost their prominence, after they were integrated into a more coherent, epic narrative frame.

How early did Babel decide to pursue this strategy? The pressure to follow the ragged and fragmented vision of the post-civil-war literature with the Apollonian gaze of an epic masterpiece was

² Letter to the family, October 14, 1931.

³¹*Vozdushnye puti* 3 (1963), p. 106.

³²SO on Babel's possible or, rather, impossible, recollection of the pogrom in Nikolaev, see the testimony of his sister, Mera Shaposhnikoff, in Judith Stora-Sandor, *Isaac Babel: L'Home et l'oeuvre* (Paris, 1968), p. 000. Or Nathalie Babel?

already noticeable in the middle 1920s. An epic, it was felt, was needed to certify the revolution as a *fait accompli*, to transform it from the event of an overwhelming immediate experience into a holiday which all would happily celebrate. Treated in this way, the revolution would be wrapped in the magical aura of Origin, conferring legitimacy on the status quo and constituting the present as a natural order. Some writers, among them Evgenii Zamiatin, actively resisted this sort of program,³³ but many, if not most, went along with it either out of conviction, opportunism, or sheer exhaustion with the revolutionary flux. The further into the 1920's, the more this need intensified, becoming a key item in the broader political project of nation- and citizenship building under the new, as we now refer to it, Stalinist order. Babel, whose friendship was appreciated among the discerning members of the Soviet elite, was sensitive to the literary as well as political trends and eager to stay in the forefront of the emerging Soviet Russian literature. This ambition can be seen with an unaided eye in many of his statements, both public and private, in which he expressed his desire for a new style and a different genre.

"The Story of My Dovecote," which bore a meaningful dedication to Maksim Gorky and gave its name to the entire childhood cycle, was published in 1925. It was also during this time that Babel was trying to make up his mind on the future of *Red Cavalry*—whether to freeze the cycle in its present form or to expand it until the number of pieces approached fifty (his original plan).³⁴ That he published it as a separate edition in 1926 shows the project to have been essentially completed. Babel was ready or, better, was compelled to go on to other things if he wished to remain among the key players in Soviet Russian literature. The anxiety of falling behind, indicative as it was of Babel's own ambition, was typical in the literary life of the time. The 1920s and early 1930s were a period when neither the reading public nor the cultural establishment, nor the printing and distribution of literature had yet to be stabilized or, better, *Stalinized*—that is to say, reached the stage when publishing became strictly regimented and the reading public atomized. True, the later inclusion of "Argamak" (1930) into *Red*

Cavalry and the publication in 1937 of "The Kiss," a story clearly associated with it, changed the élan of the book, but these were two master strokes meant to ease the incorporation of *Red Cavalry* in the larger autobiographical framework.

The romantic tradition of playing art and life against one another has had a particularly welcome reception in Russia, and with the tremendous growth in educated readership and literary commerce by the 1900s, it practically set the tone for the literary intercourse for the rest of the twentieth century. Indeed, such authors as Blok, Mayakovsky, Mandelstam, Gorky, Pasternak, Tsvetaeva, not to mention Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, are remembered as much for their gesture as for their art. This phenomenon literary celebrity did not become an object of systematic study until shortly after the death of Alexander Blok (1921) when the Formalist critics attempted to come to terms intellectually with the passing of the foremost figure among the Russian modernists. Using Blok's career as a paradigm case, they persuasively demonstrated the tendency of an author's life, whether fictional or real, toward a powerful symbolic transformation in the eyes of his readership. Some of the best writings of Yurii Tynianov (on Blok and Khlebnikov), Boris Eikhenbaum (on Blok and Tolstoy), Roman Jakobson (on Mayakovskii) and Boris Tomashevskii's work on the typology of authorship were devoted to charting this aspect of Russian literary culture. To follow the Formalists' perspective, what was merely a contingent fact in an author's biography could acquire in the eye of a devoted public, the fateful necessity of an event in a fictional narrative, yet at the same time retain the undeniable materiality of a lived experience. The life of an author therefore had the potential of being at once symbolic and real: a biographical detail could function as a "literary fact" (Tynianov's paradoxical coinage); the biography as a whole could become transformed into what we now call myth; and its protagonist-author, into an object of veneration among the reading and sometimes even non-reading public.

Needless to say, this complex phenomenon had its own history. Literary expression began to play a pivotal rôle in the formation of the self-image of the Russian intelligentsia in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, when the educated classes grew progressively alienated from the institutions of the autocratic state. Combined with the primacy of the

³³Zamiatin, "Entropy..."

³⁴Furmanov, *Literaturnoe nasledstvo*.

artist in the ideology of European modernism and its corollary, the crisis of faith, this aspect of Russia's cultural history helps explain the facility with which the figure of a Russian writer could acquire the charismatic aura of a secular saint. Indeed, it was and, to a lesser extent, still is a matter of general belief that a writer had his hand on the pulse of the nation which the reader could feel only by keeping his hand on the writer's pulse.

Babel was very much part of this tradition, indeed, one of its more masterful vehicles in this century. As a member of the Russian intelligentsia, he was its product, as a writer, he paid tribute to it all his life. This is why in order to bring his fictional construct into a sharper relief and to gain a better understanding of his literary project as a whole, it is important, where possible, to juxtapose the author's own narrative account with the historical testimony, including memoirs, documents and correspondence. Almost everything written on Babel has been done with the awareness of these two interdependent paths, however often writers may have conflated them, as did Lionel Trilling in his influential essay, or kept them too far apart, treading softly on one and marching merrily along the other.

* * *

Soon after Babel's birth and most likely for business reasons, the family moved to Nikolaev, a small port town about a hundred miles north-west of Odessa, where in the course of ten years his father had established himself as a representative of an overseas manufacturer of agricultural equipment.³⁵ When in Nikolaev, the boy had a dovecote to keep, a yard to play in, a garden to pick the fruit from, and a pogrom which, happily, did not directly affect the Babel household or diminish its fortune.³⁶ It was also in Nikolaev that at the age of nine or ten he began to attend the Count Witte Commercial School, a type of institution that did not discriminate on the basis of religion.³⁷ We do not know whether Babel ever tried

³⁵Sergei Bondarin, "Prikosnovenie k cheloveku," A. Pirozhkova and N. Iurgeneva, *I. Babel: Vospominaniia sovremennikov* (Moscow, 1972), p. 133ff.

³⁶N. Babel, Introduction, in Isaac Babel, *The Lonely Years*.

³⁷Babel's autobiography of August 31, 1915 (cited in Spektor, p. 278).

to enroll in the less liberal but far more prestigious gymnasium, but his fictional alter ego from *The Story of My Doves* (1925) did, and more. That boy nearly lost his mind from the pressure of preparing for the entrance examination, which he, a Jew, had to pass with distinction, and having passed and having been admitted, found himself in the middle of a pogrom and nearly lost his life.

In 1905, Babel's family was affluent enough to return to Odessa, where all of their son's childhood distractions, save for the school and, perhaps, an occasional pogrom, were replaced by tutors—in French, English, German, in the "hated" violin (piano for the sister), and, till the age of sixteen, in Hebrew, the Bible, and the Talmud. The mix of the subjects is significant, for some have tended to imagine the young Babel as a rather stereotypical Jewish youth immersed in the traditional scriptural studies till the age of fifteen, when he discovered secular learning, sex and Maupassant (not necessarily in that order). As with many images of Babel, this one can be traced to the author's own self-presentation, which in 1924 when the "Avtobiografiia" ("Autobiography") was published, may have been perceived as a fresh conceptualization of the experience of an assimilated Jew. In fact, it may stand at the origins of what by now has become a cliché:

I was born in 1894 in Odessa, in the Moldavanka, the son of a tradesman Jew. On father's insistence, I studied Hebrew, the Bible, the Talmud till the age of sixteen. Life at home was hard, because I was forced to study a multitude of subjects. Resting I did at school.

Thus begins Babel "Autobiography." The items are carefully selected to produce the highest contrast with the author's present position as a famous Russian writer. The oppressive "ghetto" Jewishness is emphasized through detailed enumeration whereas the cosmopolitan nature of Babel's home education is represented as an indiscriminate agglomeration of anonymous disciplines. But emancipation was not long in coming. By the end of this opening paragraph, the typical product of the traditional ghetto milieu was fluent enough in French to produce what would appear as competent French fiction:

At the age of fifteen, I began writing stories in French. I wrote them for two years and then stopped: my *paysans* and all sorts of

authorial meditations came out colorless;
only the dialogue was a success.

The educational fervor, befitting a middle-class family on its way up, was matched by the residence on the second or third floor of an imposing building that stood at the intersection of Post and Richelieu, two of the city's more fashionable avenues.³⁸ The new address contrasted sharply with their former home in the Moldavanka, a humble Jewish neighborhood where the author was born. Two decades later, he would headquarter there his fictional family after *its* move from Nikolaev to Odessa ("V podvale" ["In the Basement," 1931], and "Pervaia liubov" ["First Love," 1925]).³⁹ Of course, in fiction, what this "populous and suffering Jewish ghetto" ("Odessa," 1917) lacked in life's comforts—and the script *Benia Krik* painted a horrific picture of Jewish poverty—it had made up in local color that Babel had been applying unsparingly beginning with the first story of the Odessa cycle, *The King* (1921).

Even a cursory comparison of the biographical details with the autobiographical fiction published in 1925-1932 reveals a certain tactic: the constructed biography could tolerate the author's bourgeois background only if it was *bourgeois manque*. A number of Babel scholars have suggested that the author tried to "proletarianize" his fictional background in order to curry favor with the class-conscious Bolshevik regime.⁴⁰ In the 1920s, however, this sort of humbling could yield no more than small change, especially, coming from a "fellow traveler" and not a "proletarian" writer. It did, however, make perfect narrative sense, as it echoed the tried and true "bourgeois" novelistic convention according to which heroes were to be cultivated, not in a well-endowed hothouse, but in the open and,

³⁸The following Odessa addresses have been mentioned in the memoir literatures: 19 Rishel'evskaia, corner of Pochtovaia, later Zhukovskii St. (Bondarin and Gekht, *BVS*, p. 33 and p. 67, respectively), Ekaterininskaia (Paustovskii *BVS*, p. 19).

³⁹In "Karl-Iankel" (1931), Babel gives a Moldavanka address for his family: "He walked past our windows along the Dal'nitskaia Street. . ." *Izbrannoe*, p. 264.

⁴⁰Nathalie Babel, Ehre, etc.

preferably, on top of a social compost heap. Babel must receive credit for producing a stunningly effective Jewish version of this plot motif which, after the Soviet climate had turned inhospitable, migrated to New York and Hollywood where it has been enjoying a thriving career to this very day.

In keeping with this principle, the fictional parents had been completely ruined in a pogrom. In addition to this misfortune, their son became severely ill, forcing them to move to Odessa in search of qualified medical cure. Their only child, he had developed a nervous condition in reaction, it seems, to a triple shock caused by the violence, the scene of his father's self-abasement before a Cossack officer, and the unexpected proximity of luscious bosom and hips incautiously paraded by the family's Russian neighbor, Galina. She was the first woman to steal the boy's heart and kind enough to offer temporary refuge to the Babel family ("First Love," 1925). From the reader's perspective, the story provided a "realistic" (in psychoanalytic terms) motivation for the sensibility Kirill Vasilievich Liutov (meaning literally, the vicious one) displayed in *Red Cavalry*. But in the sense of Babel's emerging *Bildungsroman*, it was not the child who, as the saying goes, was the father to the man. Rather, it was the man who was fathering his own childhood.

* * *

According to the family lore, Babel's grandmother played an important rôle in his upbringing. Quarrelsome, as Babel's sister remembers her, she was excessively strict with her granddaughter and equally indulgent with her grandson.⁴¹ Babel left a portrait of her in a 1915 unfinished story entitled "U babushki" ("At Grandmother's"), which was to be part of a cycle *Childhood*.⁴² He spent Saturdays at her frightfully

⁴¹Spektor, p. 278.

⁴²The title page of the extant manuscript makes this clear. The top of the page has the title *Detstvo*, underlined and followed by a full stop, the title of the story itself "U babushki" (without quotation marks of underlining) is inscribed below on a separate line and is also followed by a

overheated home, doing his homework and receiving tutors while she sat and watched. At regular intervals, she would interrupt her vigil in order to indulge her grandson and herself in largely recreational eating. If the story is to be trusted, this formidable woman was rather informal about observing the Sabbath but worshipped ardently and with complete devotion her grandson's secular education. Illiterate herself, she was in a sense a child of the Enlightenment and believed fervently in knowledge as the sole means of conquering the world; and *that*, in its turn, was the only end she regarded to be worth pursuing.

"Study," she says suddenly with great force, "you will achieve everything—wealth, fame. You must know everything. Do not trust people. Do not have friends. Do not give them your money. Do not give them your heart."⁴³

Some of the elements making up Babel's poetics are already present here: hyperbole, in the mountains of food; contrast, in the difference between the grandmother's own illiteracy and the studiousness of her charge; even the sadomasochistic sensuality, in the overwhelming excitement that the boy feels as he reads and rereads the famous "whipping scene" in Turgenev's "First Love." Similar to the later stories, a key metaphor here becomes thematized, that is, unfolded to produce its own minor narrative—a mini myth. Consider the story's physical ambience. The *atmosphere* in the grandmother's room was literally *stifling* but figuratively, too, it was the *stifling atmosphere* of the household in which the boy was growing up. By now a cliché, this figure of speech can still provide fictional motivation for the young men in a hurry taking flight from their nests—Jewish young men, and also Southern young men, in North American fiction, or Irish, in the English. However, the air at the grandmother's was not only stifling, it was also intolerably *hot*. This atmospheric item, placed in a suggestive context, begins to translate into desire, indeed, a tightly wound spring of desire, typical for a sexual frustration narrative. Babel would have it uncoil spectacularly in the numerous episodes of sexual violence and abandon in *Red Cavalry*, *The Tales of Odessa*, "First Love"—episodes that powerfully stir the narrator destined only to observe and never (almost never) participate. "At the Grandmother's" displays parts of this narrative machinery operating still at a relatively low idle:

I was then reading Turgenev's "First Love." I liked everything about it: clear words, descriptions, the dialogue, but it was that scene when Vladimir's father hits Zinaida on the cheek with his whip that would cause in me an extraordinary turmoil. I would hear the swishing of the whip, its pliant, leather body, sharply, painfully, would light into me. I would be gripped by an ineffable anxiety. At that point I would have to abandon the reading and pace the room. But grandma sat motionless, and even the air, hot and stupefying, was motionless as though it knew that I was studying and was not to be disturbed.⁴⁴

However much it anticipates the later Babel, "At Grandmother's" would not have fit the master autobiography without major revisions, for it offered no visible escape route nor any palpable future. The material of the story lacked variety, and its virtual uniformity tended to dominate the story unchallenged, depriving the episodes of relative scale. Under such conditions, hyperbole and contrast were prevented from growing into a Babelian grotesque and the slightly bizarre sensuality was kept from evolving into something more orgiastic. Even the proverbial detachment of Babel's narrator, so unsettling in his later work and already detectable here, might appear quite natural given the soporific monotony of the milieu. What seems to be entirely absent but what would distinguish the later stories beginning with "The King" (1921) was excess—whether in emotional intensity or affectless detachment—excess, born of an unclouded Nietzschean admiration for the beauty and power of life that existed, if not beyond, then to the side of the "accursed" worries about good and evil.

"The Story of My Dovecote" provides an instructive contrast. There a Jewish boy who has finally earned his acceptance by the state and become a student at an elite school runs into a pogrom. The reward for his efforts, four long-coveted pigeons, are taken away from him and are literally smashed against his head, but this is done by a man whose hands are touched by leprosy and who has no legs. These details of the grotesque, one might say, excessive deficiency (absence of legs) and overabundant presence (can there be just the right amount of leprosy?) provide an aesthetic escape

full stop. It is a matter of convention to consider the top line as a title of a book and the bottom, one of its chapters.

⁴³Lit. nas. vol 74 (1965), p. 486.

⁴⁴LN vol 74 (1965), p. 486.

hatch, which, at first, is too narrow to notice but soon becomes as wide as the doors of the church:

I was lying on the ground and the entrails of a smashed bird were dripping down my temple. They were flowing down my cheeks, in small rivulets, dripping and blinding me. The tender intestine of a pigeon was crawling across my forehead and I was closing the other, still unstuck eye in order not to see the world lying about me. This world was small and horrifying. [...] ⁴⁵

Still, the boy gets up and, walking towards home, his eye is attracted by the sight of a young peasant lad smashing the window frames of the house belonging to a certain Kharitos Efrussi. Mentioned only in passing, the address is significant, because it transforms the pogrom into an all too visible hand of poetic justice. This hand not only punishes Jewish boys for playing successfully by the rules of the hated empire but also takes revenge on the Jewish merchant Efrussi who did not and used bribes the previous year to place his son in the gymnasium at the expense of the more deserving protagonist. Once the economy of vengeance has been established, the reader can begin to enjoy vicariously, that is through the eyes of the narrator, the sight of the unrestrained natural beauty and pure strength displayed unabashedly by the pogromist fellow:

He was bashing at the frame with a wooden mallet, swinging with his whole body and, when he sighed, he smiled all around with an amiable smile of intoxication, sweat and spiritual strength. The entire street was filled with the cracking, snapping, and singing of the breaking wood. The fellow kept on bashing just to bend his body, just to break into sweat, and to shout the words of an unknown, non-Russian language. He was shouting them and singing, and tearing from the inside his blue eyes. . .

A dozen or so years later this blond and blue-eyed *Bestie* would be riding with (or against, it

⁴⁵*Iz*, p. 218.

does not matter) Budennyi's cavalry followed by the narrator's admiring gaze.

Like his formidable mother, Man', or more urbanely, Emmanuel Babel put great value on education and the worldly accomplishments it was bound to facilitate. He enforced his convictions with the vigor and excess of a self-made man, creating for his male offspring a studious and extremely tense household. "At school I rested," was how Babel qualified his home academic program.⁴⁶ Moody, sarcastic, and given to memorable fits of anger, Babel senior was not averse to literary composition and penned satires—in Hebrew or Yiddish—aimed at the failings of his relatives and friends.⁴⁷ In his son's fiction, with its unconcealed Oedipal economy, he played the rôle of a weak man who cared more about property than dignity ("First Love"):

Ahead of them, at the corner of Fish Street, the pogromists were smashing our shop, throwing out boxes with nails, tools and my new portrait in the gymnasium uniform.

"Look," said my father and did not get up from his knees, "they are taking my sweat and blood, Captain, why..."

The officer mumbled something, saluted with his lemon glove and touched the bridle, but the horse did not move. Father was crawling around it on his knees, rubbing himself against its short, kindly, slightly shaggy legs.

"Yes, sir," said the Captain, pulled at the bridle and was off; the Cossacks followed. [...]

"Lousy copeks," mother said as father and I were entering the room, "your life, and children, and our unhappy happiness—you have given up everything for them... Lousy copeks."⁴⁸

Because such a character was unworthy of being cast as a closet writer (an anticipation of the

⁴⁶I. Babel, "Avtobiografiia," *Izbrannoe* (Moscow, 1966), p. 23.

⁴⁷On moods, see N. Babel's "legendary rages," on sarcasm and composition, see Gekht, p. 67-68.

⁴⁸*Iz*, p. 223

author's own vocation) Babel pressed the cherished gift into the hands of an exorbitantly colorful maternal grandfather, Levi-Yitzkhok—a ragtag type stitched together from patches of a bohemian fantasy, Dickensian and Rabelaisian characters, and, perhaps, a boyhood wish ("In the Basement"). A different picture emerges from Babel's letters in which he could treat his father's memory with conciliation and generosity, even if tinged ever so slightly with the feelings that posthumous effusiveness had not completely effaced (emphasis added):

When I go through moments of despair, I think of papa. What he expected and wanted from us was success, not complaining. [...] Remembering him I feel a surge of strength, and I urge myself forward. Everything I promised him, *not in words but in thought*, I shall carry out because I have a sacred respect for his memory.⁴⁹

As far as the public persona of Babel senior was concerned, he was a well respected businessman who radiated so much dignity and honesty that his neighbors felt honored to be sharing a building with him.⁵⁰

Mrs. Babel we know considerably less about, except that she was given to worry, a trait for which her son's correspondence provides repeated testimony. "I think that you and mama are suffering from an anxiety mania that is becoming pathological" reads Babel's letter to his sister, echoing previous and anticipating future similar epistolary expressions of filial exasperation.⁵¹ In another letter, Babel castigates her for a "weakness of character," an especially vexing trait that he believed to have inherited from her.⁵² The glimpse afforded by her daughter's reminiscences is less conflicted, if bland:

Mother was kind, had a gentle character, often had to humor father when he was upset; he was quick to anger. Mother ran the

household and brought up the children. She taught my brother to read.⁵³

In his fiction, Babel sketched her out as a woman capable of grand emotions, one disillusioned in marriage ("our unhappy happiness"), nobly ashamed of her husband's acquisitiveness, and anxious to make up for these misfortunes by loving her son—much too much ("First Love").⁵⁴

As to Babel's sister, she was spared, more exactly, denied the rôle of a protagonist in the family's ambitious script, and in her brother's stories she appears not at all, except in the plural of the reference to the children that the fictional father had ignored in his capitalist pursuits ("First Love"). It is tempting to think that in acknowledgement of her conspicuous absence, Babel paid her an ironic tribute in naming after her the lead character that, in its turn, gave her name to the play *Maria*. Like his sister in his fiction, *Maria* never steps out onto the stage but, remaining invisible, she exerts a crucial influence on all the other dramatis personae.

However complicated Babel's relationship with his parents and sister may have been, the bonds established in childhood and youth remained powerful throughout his lifetime. They were strong enough for him to accept financial responsibility for his mother and sister after they had emigrated to Belgium in 1925 (his father died the previous year); and, more remarkable, he corresponded with them regularly throughout the worst years of terror in the 1930s, insisting, from all indications sincerely, that they join him in the Soviet Union. His last letter to them was postmarked May 10, 1939, antedating his arrest by only five days.⁵⁵ Perhaps the clearest echo of Babel's attachment to his mother and sister, so evident in his correspondence, can be found in the unfinished *The Jewess*, in his apparent nostalgia for his family, his desire to reunite and share a household with them found their fictional fulfillment.

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⁴⁹*The Lonely Years*, p. 87. It is surprising that this letter was not among those published in Russian in *Vozdushnye puti*.

⁵⁰Sergei Bondarin, "Prikosnovenie k cheloveku," *BVS*, p. 133ff.

⁵¹"Vyderzhki iz pisem I. E. Babelia k materi i sestre (1925-1939)," *Vozdushnye puti* 3 (New York, 1963):104.

⁵²Letter of September 29, 1926

⁵³Spektor, p. 278.

⁵⁴Pirozhkova's memoirs or Babel's letters? (grandmother).

⁵⁵The last published letter to them, mailed from Peredelkino, is dated May 10, 1939.

A man of broad and varied education, in his schooling Babel had bypassed the gymnasium and the university, the two elite, although not exclusive, educational institutions of the Russian Empire. In 1906, his parents enrolled him in the second grade of the Nicholas I Odessa Commercial School No. 1. According to their charter, schools of this type prepared young men for careers in business or industry, or, if they wished to continue their studies, for admission to specialized colleges and polytechnics. By contrast with the gymnasium's classical curriculum, commercial schools emphasized "practical knowledge," such as sciences and modern languages. The shibboleth of the higher stratum in the empire's educational system, the ancient tongues, were excluded from the curriculum of the commercial schools, an exclusion that made it more difficult for their graduates to go on to a university.

Notwithstanding the obvious liability, some schools of this type, among them the famous *Tenishev*, had a good academic reputation and were popular. Less regimented (Jews, for example, could be freely admitted), they tended to have a more varied student body, whose members, as in the case of Babel's class, were distinguished by the impurity of their pedigree: "the sons of foreign merchants, Jewish brokers, titled Polish nobility, Old Believers, and a lot of superannuated billiard players" (the order may give one some idea of the social hierarchy at the Empire's outer fringe). Many "progressive" families, including the aristocratic Nabokovs, the academic Struves, and the well-off Mandelstams, found this sort of schooling preferable to the "conservative" gymnasium education.

Whether Babel's parents enrolled their son in a commercial school as a matter of choice or for reasons of necessity cannot be determined with certainty. What we know, however, is that Babel completed the course of studies two years ahead of his contemporaries, earning the highest grade in such subjects as Russian Literature, Russian Grammar, German, French, English, Commercial Geography, Law, History, and Political Economy. It may be tempting to see some residue of bitterness in Babel at his having to settle for the Commercial School in "The Story of My Dovecote," where the boy protagonist succeeds, under his father's relentless pressure, in being admitted to a gymnasium. But Babel had sufficient *narrative* reasons to give his plot a different spin: the award of the admission in the

story's first movement serves as a perfect counterpoint for the denouement of the second movement, namely the pogrom.

Three of Babel's life-long attachments can be traced to his years at the Commercial School: one, to Russian literature, one, to France, encouraged by his French teacher, Mr. Vadon, and the third, to Odessa. Neither one should be taken for granted. The fact that an ambitious young man, a Jew, chose a career in Russian letters indicates that opportunities in this area existed even for a Jew and that pursuit of a writer's career was deemed significant enough to satisfy what surely must have been an intense desire for fame and attainment. Russian literature, the literature of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, Chekhov and Chernyshevsky, Gorky and Blok, served the intelligentsia as a symbol of everything worthy and magnificent in the country's culture, and for an educated Russian Jew it was surely one of the ultimate elective affinities. Nor was there anything self-evident in Babel's identification with Odessa. He lived there continuously for only six out of his forty five years (while studying at the Commercial School) and returned to it only briefly in the years after the revolution. Indeed, few writers raised in the provinces grow up to identify with the city of their birth.

Equally significant, among the three languages he learned well at the Commercial School⁵⁶ only French happened to become a point of identification for Babel. Even if he had made the selection under the influence of an exceptionally gifted teacher, the choice cannot be regarded as accidental, as it fell on the supremely cosmopolitan language, one associated with the nobility of manner and spirit, literary high culture, and diplomatic intercourse. It was a significant move in Babel's strategy of self-presentation to point out that he began to write Russian fiction only after he had tried his hand at producing stories in French under the tutelage of his French teacher. That man, Mr. Vadon, was not merely French, he was a native of Brittany, a provincial man, like Babel himself. This was an attribute that the famous writer Isaac Babel displayed prominently during the years when he was lionized in Petrograd and Moscow. It was also around that time that Shklovskii, who pronounced Babel to be the best

⁵⁶Fluent German, see Pirozhkova.

contemporary author, praised him for "having seen Russia the way a French writer, accompanying Napoleon's army could." Emphatic, cultivated identification with what was outside Russia proper served to give Babel the reputation of the writer who could penetrate into the very center of things.

Yet, neither Odessa nor France would have played a rôle in Babel's legacy if he had not developed a style in which the two became mutually reinforcing. The southern port city of Odessa made more palpable the riper aspects of the French cultural heritage, while *les lettres françaises* enabled Babel to transform the prosaic "dusty Odessa," as Pushkin once referred to it, into a mythic metropolis which he would later on serve up to the readers, exhausted by the years of war and revolution and starved for color and abundance, in a pungent Rabelaisian sauce. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that Odessa became a meaningful entity on the literary map only after Babel had put it there, and Babel thought about putting it there only after he had been able to see in it a city that bore some semblance to Gogol's frivolous Ukraine, but situated to the West of it: halfway between the Mediterranean of romantic fiction (Shklovskii pointed to Flaubert's *Salammbô*) and the Cocagne of the French popular tradition and François Rabelais. Indeed, no native son of Odessa in Babel's generation has produced a picture of the city that owed a greater debt to the Gallic carnivalesque than anything that could be found in Russian letters.

Even more important, although Babel had in his possession all of the necessary ingredients as early as 1917 ("Moi listki: Odessa" ["My Notes: Odessa"]), the particular style emerged only after the civil war, when he returned to his native city after a stint as a war correspondent in Budennyi's cavalry army. The experience of the revolution combined with the ability to see beauty in the exercise of power unrestrained by the notions of good and evil—this is what enabled Babel to produce a feast for the mind's eye rather than a series of rough and wordy collage of desolate and ravaged Russia à la Boris Pilniak or Vsevolod Ivanov. Both *Red Cavalry* and *The Tales of Odessa* embodied a simple twentieth-century discovery—it had been prophesied before, most notably by Nietzsche—that power could be justified by form, not by the measure of evil or goodness, but by the criterion that discriminated against the sick, the weak, and the ugly. What made Babel's version of the superman particularly moving and ethically acceptable to people who identified with the oppressed was his success at endowing lowly

characters with all the attributes of life's supreme masters. Hitherto they had been depicted as the humiliated and the wronged whose credo, in Nietzsche's terms, never went beyond the hissing *ressentiment* of the down-trodden. In Babel, these people acquire a joyful Gargantuan stature. A Jew can "pick a fight in the streets and stammer on paper, be a tiger, a lion, a cat, spend a night with a Russian woman and leave her satisfied" ("How It Used to Be Done in Odessa"). A soldier elevated by the revolution to the rank of a division commander can make one wonder at the "beauty of his giant body":

He stood up and, with the crimson of his breeches, the tilted red little cap, the medals nailed into his chest, cleaved the hut in two like a battle flag cleaving the heaven. He exuded the smell of perfume and the cloying coolness of soap. His long legs resembled young women sheathed up to the shoulders in the shining riding boots.

Like his Jewish counterpart, the gangster boss Benia Krik, this Cossack general "stammered on paper." His irresistible vitality was unaware of civilization's restraint, as the narrator discovers as he is watching him finish writing out an order:

"with the destruction of which" [the enemy], continued the division commander and messed up the entire sheet, "I charge the above Chesnokov up to and including the capital penalty, whom I will blow away on the spot, which you, Comrade Chesnokov, having worked with me at the front for more than a month, cannot doubt."

The Division Commander signed the order with a curlicue, tossed it to his orderlies and turned to me his gray eyes dancing with merriment. ("Moi pervyi gus" ["My First Goose," 1924])

Already Dostoevsky acknowledged the supreme seductiveness of the bond between power and beauty (the handsome Stavrogin in *The Possessed*), and the idea animated the writings of Babel's immediate predecessors, foremost among them Gorky, Blok, Gumilev. But Babel was the first one to surround with a deceptively ethical aura the cruel truth that even the most brutal power could be made palatable if it was beautifully attired.

* * *

After graduating from the Commercial School in 1911 and unable to enter the University of Odessa, Babel was sent to Kiev to enroll in economics at the Kiev Commercial Institute. It was in Kiev that he met his future wife, Evgeniia Gronfein. She came from a much richer and far more cultivated family than Babel's own, and Babel appreciated the intellectual and artistic atmosphere that existed in the household, especially, the ease which came with the family's inherited wealth and well-established social status. Her father, an importer of agricultural equipment, had done business with Babel Senior and was happy to receive his partner's son in his house, although not happy enough to favor his daughter's interest in the aspiring economist. Both from the testimony of Nathalie Babel, the writer's daughter, and his own correspondence, we know that the future in-laws saw in Babel a provincial upstart, an opinion that Mrs. Gronfein was to change only when he became a famous and well-connected Soviet writer.⁵⁷

An echo, and only an echo, of Babel's experience at the Gronfeins may be heard in "Guy de Maupassant" (1920-1932), a story about an aspiring writer who is hired by the wife a Jewish banker to help her translate the complete Maupassant. Like the Gronfein's, Raisa Bendersky (this was her name) was a native of Kiev and she also happened to bear the first name of Babel's sister-in-law. Mrs. Bendersky possessed a "ravishing body" of a prosperous Kievan Jewess, literary pretensions, mitigated by a genuine artistic sensitivity, and a bottle of Muscadet of 1883, her husband's favorite and most intoxicating vintage. Predictably, the writer, by contrast with Mr. Bendersky, was poor as a church mouse but had imagination, energy, talent, and style. While working on "L'aveu," he found himself reenacting clumsily, together with the banker's wife and in the banker's absence, the novella's artlessly seductive plot. Another glimpse of Babel's Kievan period (1911-1915) is afforded by his daughter's biographical sketch (*The Lonely Years*) which outlines a complementary picture. Aware of his weakness for the bourgeois opulence and

self-indulgence displayed by the Gronfein household, Babel responded by cultivating a heroic stance of life-affirming asceticism:

My mother refused to wear the furs and pretty dresses her parents gave her. My father, to harden himself, would walk bareheaded in the dead of winter without an overcoat, dressed only in jacket. These Spartan efforts ended abruptly one day when my parents were walking, in their usual costume, and a woman stopped, an, apparently mesmerized by what she saw, pointed at my father and shouted "A madman!" Thirty years later my mother was still mortified when she remembered this incident. Nor had she forgotten her astonishment when her fiancé took her out to tea for the first time and she watched him gobble down cake after cake with dizzying speed. At the Gronfeins, he refused everything but tea. The explanation was simple. "When I start eating cake, I can't stop," he said. "So it's better for me not to start at all."

It was also while in Kiev that Babel made his debut in print. "Staryi Shloime" ("Old Shloyme," 1913) tells the story of one Jewish family's response to forced resettlement: the younger generation decides to convert rather than be uprooted but the old man, who discerns the truth through the fog of senility, hangs himself. Written in a sentimental key and in the third person (both uncharacteristic for the later Babel), the three-page story belongs wholly to the genre of the bleak "socially-aware" Russian prose, including its Jewish variety, in which government oppression and calls for liberation followed one another with the same unimaginative inevitability as night follows day. Nothing about "Old Shloyme," not even its violent outcome, is unexpected, and the protest implied by the story is so grimly conventional that instead of challenging the status quo, which was apparently the intention, it tends to do the opposite, implicitly affirming the present as part of the order of things. However what is significant about "Old Shloyme" as well as the far more sophisticated "At the Grandmother's" is a lack of hesitation on Babel's part to engage openly the Jewish theme. One would look in vain in the

⁵⁷Correspondence on the liquidation of the Gronfain Kiev estate

pre-1917 Mandelstam or Pasternak, roughly Babel's contemporaries, for overt signs of such identification.

In October, 1915, the Kiev Commercial Institute was evacuated to Saratov, a town in the provincial heartland of Russia, where Babel was to remain until graduation in May, 1916. Only two years passed after the publication of "Old Shloyme," but "At the Grandmother's," completed in Saratov, displayed a different literary sensibility. The protagonist himself narrates the story, and his voice, still hesitant but growing hollow with distance, presents the most intimate milieu, that of his childhood, as a strange world, driven by forces unacknowledged and unmatched by conventional narrative patterns:

It was quiet, spectrally quiet; not a sound could be heard. At that moment, everything seemed extraordinary, and I wished to flee from it all, and I wanted to stay here forever. The darkening room, Grandma's yellow eyes, her slight frame wrapped in a shawl, hunched over and keeping silent in the corner, the heated air, the closed door, and the stroke of the whip, and that piercing swishing sound—only now I understand how strange it all was and how full of meaning.

By the end of 1915, Babel completed his course work at the Commercial Institute, but before taking the final examinations transferred his credits to the Law Faculty of the Petrograd Psycho-Neurological Institute. This was a private establishment with the rank of a university which, among other things, qualified its Jewish student for a temporary residence in the capital. Living in Petrograd illegally for months at a time, Babel was finally enrolled as a fourth-year student on October 10, 1916, and received his residence permit a few days later. The permit was to expire on February 15, 1917, timed perfectly, as fate would have it, to coincide with the expiration of the issuing party. Although the "Autobiography" creates the impression that he abandoned all plans for a respectable business or professional career as soon as he moved to Petrograd, the record shows otherwise. A certain amount of hesitation is evident in his decision to proceed with qualifying examinations at the Commercial Institute in the spring of 1916. He did well, receiving "excellent" in political economy, general accounting, and "urban and rural economics with statistical analysis," "good," in commercial law, and "satisfactory" in economic geography. On the basis of

this performance, he was informed more than a year later, he had been awarded the degree of the Candidate of Economic Sciences of the Second Rank. Such academic diligence, especially, in a non-philological field, was considered unbecoming of the Author, whose loyalty could not be divided between the material matters and the essential world of art. The clutter of factual detail might have obscured from the reader's view the Bohemian and heroic persona that Babel was cultivating during the publication of *Red Cavalry*.

Whether or not he took his law studies at the Psycho-Neurological Institute seriously, Babel pursued his literary interests with concentration. In a matter of months after his arrival in Petrograd, a short period even for a talented beginner without connections, his persistence paid off. At first, as he wrote in his "Autobiography," setting up another situation of high contrast, the Petrograd editors gave him a cold shoulder, suggesting that his future was in the retail trade. Then, in 1916, a sudden success: he was discovered by Gorky, who published two of his stories in the November issue of *Letopis'* (The Chronicle), a prominent left-wing journal edited by the grand man of letters himself.

The stories were masterly and vintage Babel in subject matter as well as style. Similar to his later writing, they invite the reader to an unblinking examination of the detrius of existence, rewarding those who are not too fastidious to persevere with a pleasurable jolt of discovering a shining, if slightly oversized, human pearl. Written in the third person, they project a consciousness (based on the self-image of the Russian intelligentsia) which incongruously combines detached perspectivalism with a delicately muted appeal to a sentimental heart. A plump prostitute with a penchant for squeezing out her pimples in view of her clients gives a grudging refuge to a Jewish businessman without a residence permit who eats herring for supper and has a habit of airing his toes before climbing into bed. As the story winds to a close, each, it turns out, possesses a heart of gold and is capable of striking up a fleeting and touchingly disinterested friendship. ("Ilia Isaacovich and Margarita Prokofievna," 1916). The ending of the other story, "Mama, Rimma i Alla ("Mother, Rimma, and Alla," 1916) surprises the reader with a lightening glimpse of the emotional treasure concealed under the grimly incautious romances of two adolescent girls and the insidious pressures of middle class poverty crushing their aging mother. Pointing to the other shore where the view of human

misery and ugliness was unclouded by conventional compassion, Babel was ready to make the crossing.

Throughout his career Babel emphasized Gorky's recognition of his talent to the exclusion of all the others, treating it virtually as a divine sanction to practice his art and later invoking it as a talisman for protection. The publication of the two novellas, however, did not pass unnoticed, which shows that in the literary world of Petrograd Babel had more than one friend.⁵⁸ "The stories are simple, full of observation and a sense of measure," wrote a staff critic of *Zhurnal zhurnalov* (Review of Reviews),

qualities that are not as ordinary as one might think. In effect, to learn literary technique means to acquire a sense of measure and an awareness of scale. Here Babel has a gift.

This recognition led to an invitation to contribute a regular column to this journal and a productive association with Gorky's post-revolutionary anti-Leninist newspaper *Novaia zhizn'* (New Life). The first carried Babel's name on its masthead in October-February, 1916-1917: "Bab-El' (and later, I. Babel). Moi listki" ("Bab-El. My Notes"). The second published Babel's "Dnevnik" ("Diary") a series of sketches about revolutionary Petrograd from February to November, 1918. These writings stand half-way between Babel's fiction and ordinary reportage and, although not as distinguished as Babel stories, firmly professionalized him as a writer.

* * *

Like most of his contemporaries among the intelligentsia, indeed, like the entire country, Babel led a peripatetic existence during the years of the revolution and civil war. In the spring of 1917, he joined the Russian army at the Rumanian front, resurfacing in Petrograd early in 1918 as a reporter for Gorky's *Novaia zhizn'*. His "Diary," published

⁵⁸Friendships with M.E. Koltsov, E.D. Zozulia, P. Pil'skii, S. Chernyi, M. Levidiv -- all from *Zhurnal zhurnalov*. See Spektor.

regularly till the closing of the newspaper by the Bolsheviks at the end of 1918, followed the general direction of Gorky's critical stance, combining pleas for greater humanity with dispassionate observations of the daily cruelties brought about by the revolution and exacerbated by the ruthlessness of the Bolshevik regime. "To hoist a rifle and shoot one another—on occasion, this may not be so stupid, but this is not the whole revolution," Babel wrote on the subject of a new maternity hospital. He concluded in a typical *Novaia zhizn'* fashion with a defense of the noble institution of motherhood:

Who knows, maybe this is not the revolution at all? Children must be born under good conditions. And this—I know for certain—is the real revolution. ("Dvoretz materinstva ["Palace of Motherhood," 1918])⁵⁹

This early collaboration with Gorky found only a partial acknowledgement in Babel's official self-portrait. The mention of *Novaia zhizn'* (in 1918, Babel also wrote for *Zhizn' iskusstva*) is nowhere to be found. What must have felt as an honor for a beginning writer turned out to be, in retrospect, a politically imprudent association. In addition (and it is difficult to determine which was a more decisive factor), dwelling on a regular literary employment could dull the luster of Babel's cultivated reputation as an extraordinary author who bore the mark of election visible only to the genius of Gorky and was, as it were, disgorged complete on the literary scene by the revolution itself:

To this day, I pronounce the name of Aleksei Maksimovich [Gorky] with piety. He published my first stories in the November issue of *Letopis'*, 1916 [...], he taught me remarkably important things, and when it turned out that two or three tolerable youthful works of mine were merely an accident, that nothing was coming out of my literary efforts and that I wrote remarkably badly—Aleksei Maksimovich told me to go into apprenticeship among the people.

⁵⁹"Dvoretz materinstva," *Nzh* 56 (March 31, 1918). Also in *ZB*.

And for seven years—from 1917 to 1924—I have been apprenticing among the people. ("Autobiography"). During this time I served as a soldier at the Rumanian front, in the Cheka, the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment, in the food requisitioning teams of 1918, in the Northern Army against Iudenich, in the First Cavalry Army, in the Executive Committee of the Odessa Guberniia, in the 7th Soviet Printing House in Odessa, did reporting in Petrograd and Tiflis, etc. And only in 1923 did I learn to express my thoughts clearly and concisely. Then I once again began to compose fiction. ("Autobiography")

There is a certain irony in the fact that this humble "apprenticeship among the people," the phrase serving as title for the second volume of Gorky's autobiographical trilogy, consisted of writing essays and sketches for several newspapers, the chief among them Gorky's *Novaia zhizn'*. The chronology of events, too, was intentionally jumbled, with the Petrograd reporting, circa 1917-1918, sandwiched between the items referring to 1920 and 1922. Such stories as "Khodia. Iz knigi Peterburg 1918" ("The Chinaman. From the Book Petersburg 1918," 1923), an anecdote which possibly planted the seed of Iurii Olesha's "Envy," and the hilariously anti-Dostoevskian "Iisusov grekh" ("The Sin of Jesus," 1922)⁶⁰; were passed over in silence. Some significant events were omitted, among them Babel's marriage to Evgeniia Gronfein in 1919—an absence which, like his failure to mention the hard earned degree in economics, served to magnify his commitment to the writer's vocation. Otherwise he would not have been able to write, as he did in "Guy de Maupassant" (1932), that

when I was only twenty, I said to myself: I'd rather starve, go to jail, have no home of my own than do accounts ten hours a day. There isn't any special valiancy in this vow, but I have not broken it, nor ever will. The wisdom of my ancestors was sitting in my head: we are born in order to enjoy working, fighting, loving—that's what we are born for, and nothing else.

⁶⁰Voronskii, "Babel."

Still, however distorted factually, the account conveys the spirit of the truth. A one-time employee of the Cheka and a member of the food requisitioning teams, Isaac Babel must have had a hard time subsisting exclusively on a vegetarian diet.⁶¹ It is tempting to imagine that these experiences, in particular, as well as his participation in the revolution and the civil war, in general, had made him a very different writer. His most astute and least sentimental admirer, Victor Shklovskii, appears to have thought as much (emphasis added):

Russian literature is as gray as a siskin, it needs raspberry-colored riding breeches and leather shoes the color of heavenly azure.

It also needs that which prompted Babel to leave his Chinamen to their own devices and to join *Red Cavalry*.

Literary protagonists, maidens, old men and young lads and all the situations have been worn thin. What literature needs is concreteness and to be cross-fertilized *with the new style of life*. ("Isaac Babel: A Critical Romance," 1924)

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In June, 1920, soon after Babel had returned to Odessa, he published four short novellas adapted from a popular collection of war anecdotes by Gaston Vidal, *Figures et anecdotes de la Grand Guerre* (Paris, 1918). A short step separates the "ridiculous" fare of Vidal from the true sublime of *Red Cavalry*, reminding one of Anna Akhmatova's poetic apostrophe to the pious reader: "If only you knew from what trash poetry emerges, unaware of shame." In the staccato precision and the brevity of the adaptations, Babel easily eclipsed the wordy braggadoccio of the original, but the narrative play with the grotesqueries of life and death lacked sufficient seriousness, and was still redolent of the

⁶¹Responding to the publication in the *Literaturnaia gazeta* of an article by Bruni Jasenski re. Babel's alleged interview on the French Riviera (no. 29, 1930), Babel referred to himself as a "man who worked for the Cheka since 1917." The full text of this statement which Babel made at a special meeting of the Secretariat of FOSP on 13 lipcu, 1930) is published in Janina Salajczyk (1972):109-110.

officers mess and the cheap thrills of the wartime middle-brow periodicals. In retrospect, however, it is apparent that the four pieces represented a crucial exercise in the verbal orientation toward a new consciousness, the source of Babel's future esteem. This was a mindset steeled by the brutality and misshapen absurdity of life which, in the experience of contemporaries, had no precedent before 1914 or, for the Russian intelligentsia at large, until the beginning of the civil war in 1918. Exotic, alien to the Russian reader (existential curiosities at the Western front), Vidal's material relieved Babel of the compulsion, if he still had any, to balance the senseless cruelty of war with sentimental appeals.

A whole new horizon opened when he decided to interpose between the author and the events the figure of Gaston Vidal, whose voice was borrowed, as it were, for the main narrative. Drawing such a clear distinction between the narrator and the author further obviated the necessity for an explicit judgment. Perhaps the most important discovery was made in "Dezertir" ("The Deserter"), a story about an officer who had just offered a shell shocked young soldier a choice between the firing squad, with shame eternal, and suicide with honor. When the deserter proved unable to shoot himself, the officer, who "did not take offense at small things," obligingly pulled the trigger. In a postscript added to the story, the author-narrator removes the mask of the Frenchman and repeats Vidal's characterization of the officer verbatim, demonstrating that the same statement, no matter how trite, can generate a new and profound meaning when uttered by a different speaker:

Gaston Vidal writes about this incident in his book. The soldier was actually called Bauji. Whether the name Gémier I have given the Captain is the right one, I cannot really say. Vidal's story is dedicated to a certain Firmin Gémier "in token of deep respect." I think this dedication gives the game away. Of course, the Captain was called Gémier. And then Vidal tells us that the Captain was a patriot, a soldier, a good father, and not a man to take offense at small things. That's something if a man doesn't take offense at small things.

This "discovery" of the interdependence of the voice and statement and, therefore, of the relativity of

meaning, help account for Babel's mastery over the overwhelming material in *Red Cavalry*—for his skill of shifting nimbly from one to another voice. The device of narrating in marked voices, which the Russians term *skaz* if the voice happens to be substandard, was used widely in post-revolutionary prose, a literary and linguistic tribute to the post-1917 social leveling and the provincial saturation of the urban intelligentsia culture.⁶² However, it was contemporary poetry that served Babel as the ultimate model for his narrative technique.⁶³ Many poets, especially Blok, Mandelstam, Esenin, Mayakovsky, were masters at weaving the voice of the other into the fabric of their verse. What distinguished their use of the voice of the other from *skaz* was the dominant presence of the dramatically complete figure of the poet. Even if merely implied, this chief protagonist whom the reader identified with the author functioned as the central referent point in much the same way as a star's gravitational pull defines the course of the orbiting planet.

In *The Tales of Odessa* and *Red Cavalry*, the function of this Poet would be performed by the man from Odessa, a Jew and a Russian *intelligent* who had "autumn in his heart and spectacles on his nose" but wished to look at life as a green promenade for "women and horses" and was possessed by a still greater desire to retain the intellectual's central position in the country's culture, the position from which the revolution had threatened to displace him. This narrator would be the first to walk into the verbal ambush of the changing world. Camouflaged from the reader's unaided eye, the author would be moving behind the narrator, maintaining a safe distance for himself (but not necessarily the reader), yet staying close enough to keep the narrator in full sight.⁶⁴ If in "The Deserter," Babel went out of the

⁶²On *skaz* and *skaz* see, for example, Nik. Stepanov, "Novella Babelia," which represents a good summary of the "Formalist" view. B. V. Kazanskii and Iu. N. Tynianov, eds., *Mastera sovremennoi literatury: I. E. Babel' (Stat'i i materialy)*, (Leningrad, 1928).

⁶³Nik. Stepanov (and after him, virtually every writer on Babel) emphasised Babel's dependence on poetry in the matter of style but ignored a similar influence of contemporary lyric poetry on the structure of his narrative project. See Stepanov, pp. 25ff.

⁶⁴Cf. Nik. Stepanov, p.25.

way to emphasize this distance, in *Red Cavalry*, more sure of his craft, he caused it to emerge imperceptibly and grow from story to story.

Kirill Liutov, the compassionate, humane narrator, could not take his mortally wounded comrade out of his misery, but the author, who remains invisible, could and did—through his emissary, a wild, violent, and only slightly "red" Cossack ("Smert' Dolgusheva" ["The Death of Dolgushev," 1923]). In "Guy de Maupassant" (1932) drunk with the wine bought with his first honorarium, the young narrator exclaims:

"He got scared, your Count [Tolstoy], he lost his nerve... His religion is—fear... Scared by the cold, by the old age, the Count made himself a shirt out of faith..."

"And then what?" Kazantsev asked me, his bird-like head swaying from side to side."

The question remained unanswered, because the response—only in small part, to Tolstoy's *The Cossacks*—had been provided in *Red Cavalry*. There the narrator would play the rôle of a latter-day Count Tolstoy, a distant relative of the noble protagonist of *The Cossacks* and a spiritual heir to the vegetarian humanism of the late Tolstoy. But the author, who had learned from Nietzsche, not Dostoevsky, about the tragic sense of life and the beauty of power, and who had experienced both—that author would know no fear, accepting calmly and with majesty all the gifts from the Pandora's box of life. In the adaptations from Gaston Vidal, Babel's author functioned as a Russian voice conveying a Frenchman's witness to the carnage at the Western front. In *The Tales of Odessa* and *Red Cavalry*, Babel constructed a "foreign" author, foreign in his sensibility, watching with cool curiosity a Russian Jewish intellectual as he picks his way through a minefield of daily life in a Cossack army fighting for the "world revolution and"—the overused, bland pathos is spiced up with irony—"a pickled cuke" ("Konkin," 1924).⁶⁵

* * *

The spectacular acclaim Babel enjoyed during the publication of *Red Cavalry* and *The Tales of Odessa* helps us to understand why his later writing

⁶⁵Cf. Shklovskii, p. 83.

was dominated by the figure of the autobiographical narrator-protagonist. Among the intelligentsia, sympathetic to the revolution but shocked and disoriented by the catastrophic events of the preceding decade, his stories were embraced as the first true masterpiece of the new era. What they saw in these stories was, above all, a new language, a new way of speaking about the world, that made it possible to assimilate revolutionary change without compromising the moral and, even more important, aesthetic sense of the Russian intelligentsia. "Babel knows about the necessity of cruelty," wrote the influential critic A. Lezhnev in his 1926 essay,

no less than those who criticize him. In his work, it is justified ("Salt," "The Death of Dolgushev"), justified with the revolutionary pathos. His cavalrymen are no brutes; otherwise *Red Cavalry* would have amounted to a libel of the Cavalry Army. But the justification of cruelty—in a strange and conflicting way—exists side by side with his rejection of it. This contradiction cannot be resolved.

Instead of trying to solve this paradox by conceptual manipulation, Babel opted for a mimetic construct, inventing an exemplary, aesthetically convincing model of the self. As Lezhnev's analysis implied, this model, if internalized, would help one become reconciled to the brutal and unsightly way that power was exercised in the good revolution. But not everyone was able to discern in Babel's art a complex truth and a positive spirit.

The most sophisticated among the detractors accused Babel of the cardinal intelligentsia sin: apologizing for the revolution by appealing to abstract moral principles. That Babel's "bourgeois humanism" was no longer coursing sluggishly through the veins of a typical intelligentsia hero but was pulsating mightily through the hearts of muscular protagonists, that fact made Babel's stance particularly pernicious. The most impressive bill of particulars, entitled "The Poetry of Banditry (I. Babel)," was drawn by V. Veshnev (V. Przhetslavskii), a critic associated with the Komsomol journal *Young Guard*. Trying to dispel Babel's considerable mystique, Veshnev cautioned the youthful readers to be wary of what he believed to be Babel's insidious moral economy.

For the most part, Babel depicts the greatest cruelties of our civil war. But these cruelties are presented in the light of total justification of those who perpetrated them. [...] Babel approached the revolution with a moral yardstick. This is damning enough. Revolution is not subject to morality. On the contrary, morality is subject to the revolution.

Paying homage to Babel's craft, Veshnev saw the greatest danger precisely in the effectiveness of his fiction, implying that Babel made the acceptance of the revolution a matter of, not an ideological or even moral choice, but an aesthetic judgement:

The bandit stories with their poetry of anarchism are written simply, transparently, and seductively. They can and they will enjoy ideological success. Are we going to be pleased by this?⁶⁶

Apparently Veshnev was not pleased, but his prediction turned out to be correct. The stories were successful and, what is more, they soon achieved the reputation of the foremost masterpieces of Soviet fiction and maintained this status, despite repeated assaults, throughout the 1930s.⁶⁷

Whatever one might say, the cultural sphere of the revolution belonged to the intelligentsia, and Babel fulfilled, in the Marxist critical parlance of the day, the social command of this "pseudo-class": he endowed the experience of the revolution and the civil war with a heroic and romantic aura (Nik. Stepanov, 1928).⁶⁸ Many were called to the task, but Babel alone was chosen, not the least of it because he had managed to continue looking at the world through the traditional spectacles of the Russian intelligentsia, the masterpieces of Russia's literary art:

Writers are compulsively drawn to the plots and events of the revolution that lie about at every corner. They grab at and burn their fingers on the still smoldering logs. There is neither enough strength nor aesthetic stability. And how can there be enough to enable one to clear away the fiery ashes and, burning with memories, to touch the smoldering and bloody years. [...] [Intentional] propaganda destroys art, depriving it altogether of its true effectiveness as a tool of mobilization. [...] The revolution in the soul of contemporary

reader is much more terrifying, more profound, and its voice is softer than the thunderous sighs of the so-called revolutionary art...

[...] What overwhelms in Babel's stories is their truthfulness, a strange echo of the familiar Ukrainian laughter of the "little Gogol," conjoined with the great intensity of the justification of sacrifice... (Ia. Benni [Cherniak], 1924)⁶⁹

Benni comes the heart of the matter when he seeks an explanation for the effectiveness of Babel's art and locates it in the "autobiographical" basis of his writings. Nothing could be more convincing, according to him, than the individual experience of an intelligent, mediated though it might be, by the invention of fiction.

Babel's stories are heroic stories. Their biographical, even autobiographical, truthfulness, which at once determines the reader's trust in the artists and his writings, constitutes their sole foundation. Literary mastery, rich and colorful language, even the invention itself, emerge out of this biographical truth as naturally as grass and flowers on a meadow.⁷⁰

A writer who was able to justify the revolution morally and aesthetically, who made this justification the matter of self-sacrifice, Babel was likewise credited with the invention of the new linguistic culture. "In the art of using live language, Babel is successfully catching up with the classics," wrote a Marxist literary critic Georgii Gorbachev, offering what counted, perhaps, as the highest praise for a contemporary writer. He continued in an awkward but, for this reason, more telling manner:

Babel's work with the language serves the cognition of life, development of technique, aesthetic expressiveness, the cause of the creation of a [new] linguistic culture, which is so important for us, for language represents the most important tool of the enlightenment and communication among the masses which have entered a period of

⁶⁶V. Veshnev, "Poeziia banditizma (I. Babel)," *Molodaia gvardiia* 7/8 (1924):277ff.

⁶⁷Vs. Veshnevskii et al.

⁶⁸Stepanov (1928), p. 16.

⁶⁹Ia. Benni, "I. Babel," pp. 136, 139.

⁷⁰Benni, p. 136.

great cultural and social ferment.
(Gorbachev, 1925)⁷¹

As in an echo chamber, the praise continued to amplify Babel's achievement until *Red Cavalry* was declared to "constitute, alone, a factor determining the development of our art" and a "token of the urban, industrial future of Soviet Russia" (Viach. Polonskii).⁷² The editor of *Krasnaia nov'*, Aleksandr Voronskii, a pivotal figure in the literary life of the 1920s, stated clearly and simply that "Babel was strengthening the association of literature with the Soviet Republic and the Communist Party."⁷³ Coming from the man whom the Party had commissioned to win the intelligentsia to the cause of the Bolshevik revolution, this was high praise indeed. No wonder that Babel dismissed his pre-1917 literary efforts as insignificant, declaring in the "Autobiography" that his career had commenced in 1923-1924, when the trend-setting avant-garde *Lef* and *Red Virgin Soil*, the most prestigious and weighty of contemporary journals, began publishing stories from his two major cycles.

Controversy was not an unwelcome part of Babel's celebrity, based as it was on a work dealing with the immediate past and one which possessed a strong documentary flavor. Not only the places of action could be located on the map of the Polish campaign, but many actors in *Red Cavalry* retained their prototypes names (these would be altered only in the later editions). However risky, perhaps, because it was risky, this strategy contributed to Babel's success. Even when the notable verity of his civil war cycle impinged on the self-image of the Commander of the First Cavalry Army, Semyon Budennyi, it was the author, not the warrior, who came out the winner. Unlike his more urbane comrades-in-arms (Voroshilov, for one), who patronized the arts and knew the value of being made part of Babel's canvas, this semi-educated warrior could not make sense out of Babel's unconventional

expression and failed to appreciate his admiration for the mighty barbarians of the revolutionary war. Affronted by the lurid detail in *Red Cavalry* and exploited by the enemies of Voronskii's journal, he accused Babel in print of vicious libel on the heroes of the First Cavalry Army. The verbal charge, which bore the title, "Floozy-ism of Babel from *Krasnaia nov'*," a clumsy pun on the Russian *baba* (a common condescending term for a woman), succeeded only in bestowing on Budennyi himself a reputation of a comical Goliath. When another opportunity arose in 1928, after the fall of Voronskii, Budennyi once again stepped into the fray—only to be snubbed in *Pravda* by Gorky himself. The great man of letters, an undisputed authority on culture at the time, explained to the general with barely concealed exasperation that in a backward country like Russia, it was not the business of undereducated men to meddle in matters concerning enlightenment. Any subsequent attempts to reignite the controversy had little chance of success after Stalin pronounced his laconic verdict: "There is nothing wrong with *Red Cavalry*."⁷⁴

* * *

It is not easy to walk away from a gold mine that has yielded a great treasure no matter how scant the present return may be. Babel's gold mine was his invention of a new theme and style and he was either unwilling or incapable of surrendering them even at the risk of becoming a prisoner of his uncommonly good fortune. The theme was that of an emancipated Jewish intellectual who was trying to integrate himself into a world that was his by the claim of reason but that could offer him only a dangerous and palpably very alien way of life. Like the narrator of *Red Cavalry*, Liutov, this character wishes to learn to accept the vibrant brutality and the baseness of existence (the Dionysian element) and to transfix it in the cool contemplative beauty, which, according to Nietzsche, was the gift of the Apollonian art (the theme receive a narrative development in "Pan Apolek," 1923). Together with his non-fictional contemporaries, Liutov had seen the humanistic values pulverized in the Great War, and he found the conventional, ultimately, Christian ethic unacceptable. To do otherwise was for him tantamount to the loss of sight—symbolic castration—a motif that runs throughout Babel's

⁷¹Gorbachev, "O tvorchestve Babelia i po povodu nego," p. 275.

⁷²"[...] Babel is a child of urban culture and his works, in terms of the method of representation, are among the most exemplary in the literature of the modern industrial city." Polonskii, "Babel," in his *O sovremennoi literature*, 2d ed. (Moscow, 1929), p. 73.

⁷³A. Voronskii, "Literaturnye siluety (I. Babel i L. Seifullina)," *Krasnaia nov'* 5 (1924):281.

⁷⁴Ervin Sinko, *Roman eines Romans: Moskauer Tagebuch* (Cologne, 1962)

fiction, especially *Red Cavalry* (Perekhod cherez Zbruch ["Crossing the Zbruch," 1924], "Gedali" [1924], "Liniia i tsvet" ["Line and Color," 1923]).

Indeed, the spirit of *Anti-Christ* was in Liutov's blood:

I see you from here, the treasonous monk in lilac habit, the plumpness of your hands, your soul, tender and merciless, like a cat's soul, I see the wounds of your god, oozing semen, the fragrant poison intoxicating virgins. ("Kostel v Novograde" ["The Novograd Cathedral," 1923])

The more astute among Babel's sympathetic readers recognized in his writings the ethos of Nietzsche although they avoided pronouncing his name, preferring such code words as "paganism," "nature," "life" (A. Voronskii). The style was such that it undermined any discourse that could be defined as dominant. "Babel speaks in one voice about the stars and the clap," wrote Shklovskii in 1924 in his essay on Babel, giving what to this day is, perhaps, the sharpest and, certainly, most concise formulation of the Babelian style. That theme and that style, with only slight variations, Babel continued to practice well into the 1930s.

The four novellas of 1937-1938, which were his last fiction to appear, do not suggest that his writing was likely to change. "Sud" ("The Trial," 1928) tells the story about a deracinated White officer being convicted of petty fraud by an indifferent French court. Written in a staccato style, thematically it belongs to the genre of exposing the ills of the capitalist West which is practiced by Soviet writers wishing to justify their travels beyond the Soviet borders. Babel, who belonged to a handful of the well-travelled authors, had to feel a particular sense of obligation. He had three long sojourns in France between 1928 and 1935, the briefest lasting several months, he had a wife and a daughter in France and mother and sister in Belgium, and had to contend with persistent rumors about his alleged intention to emigrate. "The Trial" was also one of the few third-person stories ever written by Babel, who ordinarily eschewed the objective authority associated with this narrative stance. But the other three return once again, whether ostensibly or by implication, to the narrator of *Red Cavalry*.

"Potselui" ("The Kiss," 1937), the only story about Liutov's successful seduction, ends in the narrator cruelly betraying the woman that he had won by displays of sentimental intelligentsia humanity. "The Kiss" could easily have been integrated into yet another edition of the civil war cycle (the last one came out in 1932), but the central motif of the story represented, if anything, the sign of the more recent times. "Sulak" (1937) named after a peasant rebel killed in the story, filled a chronological gap in the Liutov "epic," placing the bespectacled narrator in the Ukraine in 1928 at the beginning of the collectivization drive. He was accompanying a Cheka officer ordered to seek out, arrest and, if need be, destroy Sulak. The story was as grotesquely brutal as anything in *Red Cavalry*. Published, as chance would have it, in the journal *Molodoi kolkhoznik* (*The Young Collective Farmer*), "Sulak" must have been especially appreciated by the young inhabitants of the terrorized countryside.

"Di Grasso" (1937), the fourth story, belongs thematically to the childhood cycle. Seen against the background of the Great Terror, and one of the writer's last stories, it begs to be interpreted as Babel's literary testament: a retrospective allegory of his life in art. The story is set in the familiar Rabelesian Odessa of the early 1910s and told in the first person—a voice of a man and writer sharing with his readers a formative episode from his bygone youth. A boy of fourteen, he became involved with a gang of scalpers who did a lively business, exploiting the Odessans' weakness for the performing arts. Incautiously, he chose to obtain the startup capital by pawning his father watch with the head scalper, an unscrupulous man, who thought nothing of keeping both the watch and the money. The boy, on the contrary, was terrified by the prospect of facing his father's Jehovah-like wrath. What saved him was the sudden popularity of a visiting Sicilian actor, the tragedian Di Grasso, and not the money he was able to make by scalping tickets to Di Grasso's performances, but quite literally his art. Night after night, in a spirited interpretation of his rôle, Di Grasso leapt into the air, flew across the stage, killed his wealthy rival with his bare teeth, and proceeded to drink the enemy's blood, growling and shooting fiery glances at the enraptured audience, as the curtain was slowly descending on the crime of the heart. This extraordinary display of the power of passion so moved the scalper's wife that she forced

her husband to return the watch to the boy who had already arranged to flee Odessa aboard an English steamer. The story ends with the boy—delivered from his misfortune by the orgiastic art of Di Grasso—transfixed by a sudden experience of an Apollonian epiphany:

Clutching the timepiece, I was left alone and suddenly, with the kind of clarity I had never experienced before, I saw the towering pillars of the City Hall, illuminated foliage of the boulevard, the bronze head of Pushkin under the pale gleam of the moon—for the first time, I saw what surrounded me as it really was: quiet and ineffably beautiful.

Babel's predicament in the 1930s was not unlike that of the boy in "Di Grasso." He, too, was living on borrowed time, hoping for a deliverance through an artistic miracle. Confronted with the choice between the materialist Scylla of the West, with art at the mercy of scalpers, and the revolutionary Charybdis, presided over by the father figure Stalin, he chose not to emigrate (and he had plenty of opportunity) but to remain in Russia which he continued to see through the eye of his art. By no means blind to the Stalinist repression, he continued to measure the social and political experience of his country, so massively tragic and irreducibly complex, with the aesthetic formula according to which unbridled and violent passion revealed the real world—"quiet and ineffably beautiful." Whether or not Babel ever intended "Di Grasso" to be interpreted in this manner, many of his contemporaries among the intelligentsia, desperate for a rationalization of the Great Terror, would hardly have resisted the story's subtle appeal.

It must have seemed for awhile that Babel would be spared the fate of millions of his contemporaries who disappeared in the massive waves of arrests in 1937-1938. This was not to be. Babel's turn came on May 16, 1939, when he was arrested on unspecified charges at his country house in Peredelkino. Until recently, the circumstances of Babel's arrest and death have been shrouded in mystery. Now we know (Arkady Vaksberg, "Protsessy" [The Trials]) that a warrant for his arrest was issued thirty five days after he had been taken into custody, that he was charged with belonging to a secret Trotskyist organization since 1927 and, since 1934, serving for the French and Austrian

intelligence.⁷⁵ The litany of fantastic charges contained in the verdict suggests the actual motif for Babel's arrest—his association with Gladun-Khaiutina, a longtime Odessa friend and colleague at the editorial offices of *SSSR na stroike* (USSR In Construction) who also happened to be the wife of the recently deposed head of the secret police Nikolai Ezhov (he was last seen in public on 31 January 1939). Babel's verdict read in part: "Having been organizationally associated in his anti-Soviet activity with the wife of an enemy of the people Ezhov—Gladun-Khaiutina—Babel was drawn by the latter into anti-Soviet conspiratorial terrorist activity, shared the goal and tasks of this organization, including terrorist acts [. . .] against the leaders of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and Soviet government." Even Babel's famous *Red Cavalry* became an item in the writer's indictment as a "description of all the cruelties and inconsistencies of the civil war emphasizing only the sensational and rough episodes." In the course of a seventy two hour long continuous interrogation (the "conveyor belt," as it is known in the language of the Gulag), Babel, who at first denied all the charges, finally relented and "confessed" to having been recruited into the spy network by Ilya Ehrenburg and provided André Malraux with, of all things, secrets of Soviet aviation. The latter charge must have been suggested by the film script that he had just completed: it dealt with uncovering the saboteurs among the Soviet dirigible designers (Falen, p. 231ff.).

The list of Babel's coconspirators read like a "who is who" in Soviet culture. In addition to Ehrenburg, it included, among others, such writers as Valentin Kataev, Leonid Leonov, Iurii Olesha, Lydia Seifullina, and Vsevolod Ivanov; film makers S. Eisenstein and G. Alexandrov; actors S. Mikhovs and L. Utesov, and even one Polar explorer, Academician Otto Shmit. As Vaksberg suggest, the NKVD must have been planning a large-scale show trial involving the flower of the Soviet intelligentsia. But plans changed and the operation had to be mopped up. On four separate occasions, in October, November, 1939, and finally, in January, 1940, Babel wrote appeals renouncing the testimony he was forced to give under torture, pleaded to have

⁷⁵Vaksberg, A. "Processy." *Literaturnaia gazeta* (4 May 1988), p. 12.

witnesses called and asked for an attorney. On January 26, these appeals reached the Chairman of the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court, V. Ul'rikh, who responded to them by signing the death warrant. A day later, Babel was shot. Fourteen years later, in a posthumous review of his case by the same Military Collegium, Babel was cleared of all charges "for lack of any basis" in the original indictment.

"Probuzhdenie" ("The Awakening," 1931). We have not heard the last from Isaac Babel.

* * *

At the time of arrest, Babel was forty five—the "middle of the life's way" for a prose writer, with a lot more to tell us about what happened to Liutov as he was trying to integrate himself into the new world of Soviet Russia. But whereas Babel, man and writer, could be arrested and executed, the theme and the style he invented were free to pursue their own fate. Finding the Soviet soil increasingly inhospitable, they migrated to a more temperate climate where, grafted to the English language, they helped to produce the American version of the narrator "with the autumn in his heart, spectacles on his nose," and, as Phillip Roth expanded the formula in his *Ghost Writer*, "an erect penis." Victor Shklovskii, who better than anybody understood the intensely "writerly" (scriptible) nature of Babel's art, had anticipated this turn of phrase when he cautioned the readers not to identify the narrator type with the writer himself:

Babel is not like that: he does not stammer. He is brave, I even think that he "can spend the night with a Russian woman, and a Russian woman would be satisfied."

Because a Russian woman likes a good tale.

As do Russian and non-Russian men and women. They now can satisfy their desire for a good Babelian narrative in Phillip Roth and—marvel of marvels considering the hairy-chested machismo of Babel's characters—in the stories of Grace Pailey. Even the American television is known to make use of theme and style invented by Isaac Babel, as it did in the PBS series *Gustav Mahler* (dir. Ken Russell) where the Austrian composer, perhaps in deference to the expectations of the Babel touting audience, was forced into living the childhood of Babel's narrator in

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