

Modern Critical Views

ISAAC BABEL

Edited and with an Introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



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Harold Bloom

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Summary: Critical essays on the work of Isaak Babel, one of a group of poets and novelists whose works were part of a rebirth in Russian literature in the 1920s following the Communist Revolution.

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Editor's Note

This book brings together the best criticism available in English on the work of Isaac Babel. The critical essays are reprinted in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Eden Quainton and Jane Sharp for their erudition and zeal as researchers.

My introduction contrasts the *Tales of Odessa* and their hero, the Jewish gangster Benya Krik, with the Cossack stories of *Red Cavalry* in order to take serious exception to Lionel Trilling's contention that Babel had any admiration for the Cossacks. My own sense of Babel as a Jewish writer is then exemplified by a reading of the fierce story, "The End of the Old Folk's Home."

The chronological sequence begins with Victor Shklovsky, who celebrates Babel's originality in a critical romance or dialectical prose lyric. Raymond Rosenthal also sees Babel as a celebrator of the lost hope of the marvelous. In the most famous essay on Babel, the great critic Lionel Trilling analyzes *Red Cavalry* in terms of Babel's fascination with Cossack vitality and violence, an analysis that I dispute in my introduction, since I believe that Trilling misreads some aspects of Babel's quite Jewish irony.

Irving Howe movingly finds in Babel the demand upon life for happiness, which is consonant with the retrospective overview of Renato Poggioli, who finds in Babel an overwhelming power to touch and move. The Irish short story writer Frank O'Connor, shrewdly apprehending Babel's sly humor, shows more distrust of Babel's overt appreciation of "the romance of violence" than Trilling did.

Ilya Ehrenburg, the Soviet Jewish writer most schooled in survival, offers his tributary memoir of Babel, as well as his later memorial speech in Babel's honor. Edward J. Brown's overview emphasizes the terrible pathos of Babel's life and work, perhaps to the exclusion of more salient qualities. The heroic Andrey Sinyavsky accurately praises Babel for his cognitive strength, a qual-

ity that helps account for Babel's extraordinary ingenuity at structuring his stories, which is analyzed by Victor Terras in his deeply informed essay.

Konstantin Paustovsky contributes a fascinating personal account of Babel, while Patricia Carden analyzes Babel's mastery of the grotesque in *Red Cavalry*. Babel's abortive career as a dramatist is sketched by R. W. Hallet, after which the *Tales of Odessa* are illuminated by James Falen's introduction to their background, an introduction that rightly emphasizes the element of fantasy in the stories. Simon Markish follows with an appreciation of the implicit stance of Jewish resistance in Babel's work.

Yiddish folklore, a deep if somewhat concealed motif in Babel, is investigated by Maurice Friedberg in the *Red Cavalry* stories. The great *Odessa* story, "Di Grasso," is read by Gregory Freidin as Babel's artistic manifesto and testament.

Efraim Sicher analyzes the ironic myths both of Babel's literary career and of his writings, after which Peter Stine gives us an exegesis of the artistic "violences" in Babel, so many of which have been weakly misread.

This book ends with a superb brief essay on Babel by the great scholar-critic of modern Russian literature, Victor Erlich, an essay that is published here for the first time. Erlich emphasizes Babel's extraordinary ability "to bring together incompatibles, to juxtapose contraries" at every level of his art. The aesthetic dignity of Babel's work receives its proper answering voice in Erlich's critical eloquence.

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Introduction

I

"If you need my life you may have it, but all make mistakes, God included. A terrible mistake has been made, Aunt Pesya. But wasn't it a mistake on the part of God to settle Jews in Russia, for them to be tormented worse than in Hell? How would it hurt if the Jews lived in Switzerland, where they would be surrounded by first-class lakes, mountain air, and nothing but Frenchies? All make mistakes, not God excepted."

—"How It Was Done in Odessa"

Benya Krik, Babel's outrageously insouciant gangster boss of Jewish Odessa, utters this defense to the bereaved Aunt Pesya, whose wretched son has just been slain by one of Benya's hoods in an exuberant error. The Jewish presence in Russia, then and now, is one of God's exuberant errors, and is both the subject and the rhetorical stance of Babel's extraordinary art as a writer of short stories. Babel's precursors were Gogol and Guy de Maupassant (and Maupassant's literary "father," Flaubert) but repeated rereadings of Babel's best stories tend to show a very different and older tradition also at work. Babel's expressionist and economical art has unmistakably Jewish literary antecedents. The late Lionel Trilling undoubtedly was the most distinguished critic to write about Babel in English, but he underestimated the Jewish element in Babel, and perhaps introduced a perspective into Babel's stories that the stories themselves repudiate.

Babel was murdered in a Stalinist purge before he was forty-seven. His work is not officially forbidden in the Soviet Union, and he was legally cleared of all charges in 1956, fifteen years after his death. Yet there are few editions of his stories, and little Soviet criticism is devoted to them. Presumably Babel's erotic intensity does not please cultural bureaucrats, and so

overtly Jewish a writer, in mode and in substance, is an uncomfortable shadow in a country where teaching Hebrew is currently a legal offence. Anyone who believes that Babel's world is wholly lost ought to wander some Friday evening through "Little Odessa," as Brighton Beach in Brooklyn is called these days. Benya Krik's descendents are alive and well, a little too well, in Little Odessa. Babel is the storyteller of Jewish Odessa, the city also of Vladimir Jabotinsky, founder of the Zionist Right, teacher and inspirer of Menachem Begin and the Irgun Zvai Leumi. The Odessa of Babel was a great center of Jewish literary culture, the city also of the Hebrew poet Bialik, and of the Yiddish writer Mendele Mocher Sforim. Like Bialik and Sforim, Babel writes out of the context of Yiddish-speaking Odessa, though Babel wrote in Russian.

Trilling ought to have had second thoughts about his characterization of Babel's self-representation in *Red Cavalry* as "a Jew riding as a Cossack and trying to come to terms with the Cossack ethos." Lyutov, Babel's surrogate, is trying to survive, but hardly at the cost of coming to terms with the Cossack ethos, terms that Tolstoy in one of his modes accepted. On the contrary, Babel's Cossacks are not Tolstoyan noble savages, but are precisely the Cossacks as the Jews saw them: subhuman and bestial, mindlessly violent. Trilling imported something of his own nostalgia for the primitive into Babel, with curious results:

Babel's view of the Cossack was more consonant with that of Tolstoy than with the traditional view of his own people. For him the Cossack was indeed the noble savage, all too savage, not often noble, yet having in his savagery some quality that might raise strange questions in a Jewish mind.

But those questions certainly are not raised in Babel's mind, the mind of the Odessa Jew, with a perpetually glowing awareness of "how it was done in Odessa." That awareness informs his two very different ways of representing violence, ways that urgently need to be contrasted when we reflect on Babel's stories. This is one way:

Then Benya took steps. They came in the night, nine of them, bearing long poles in their hands. The poles were wrapped about with pitch-dipped tow. Nine flaming stars flared in Eichbaum's cattle yard. Benya beat the locks from the door of the cowshed and began to lead the cows out one by one. Each was received by a lad with a knife. He would overturn the cow with one blow of the fist and plunge his knife into her heart. On the blood-flooded ground the torches bloomed like roses of fire. Shots rang out.

With these shots Benya scared away the dairymaids who had come hurrying to the cowshed. After him other bandits began firing in the air. (If you don't fire in the air you may kill someone.) And now, when the sixth cow had fallen, mooing her death-moo, at the feet of the King, into the courtyard in his underclothes galloped Eichbaum."

("The King")

And meantime misfortune lurked beneath the window like a pauper at daybreak. Misfortune broke noisily into the office. And though on this occasion it bore the shape of the Jew Savka Butsis, this misfortune was as drunk as a water-carrier.

"Ho-hoo-ho," cried the Jew Savka, "forgive me, Benya, I'm late." And he started stamping his feet and waving his arms about. Then he fired, and the bullet landed in Muginstein's belly.

Are words necessary? A man was, and is no more. A harmless bachelor was living his life like a bird on a bough, and had to meet a nonsensical end. There came a Jew looking like a sailor and took a potshot not at some clay pipe or dolly but at a live man. Are words necessary?

("How It Was Done in Odessa")

This is the other way, the violence of the Cossack and not of the Odessa Jew:

But I wasn't going to shoot him. I didn't owe him a shot anyway, so I only dragged him upstairs into the parlor. There in the parlor was Nadezhda Vasilyevna clean off her head, with a drawn saber in her hand, walking about and looking at herself in the glass. And when I dragged Nikitinsky into the parlor she ran and sat down in the armchair. She had a velvet crown on trimmed with feathers. She sat in the armchair very brisk and alert and saluted me with the saber. Then I stamped on my master Nikitinsky, trampled on him for an hour or maybe more. And in that time I got to know life through and through. With shooting—I'll put it this way—with shooting you only get rid of a chap. Shooting's letting him off, and too damn easy for yourself. With shooting you'll never get at the soul, to where it is in a fellow and how it shows itself. But I don't spare myself, and I've more than once trampled an enemy for over an hour. You see, I want to get to know what life really is, what life's like down our way.

("The Life and Adventures of Matthew Pavlichenko")

Notices were already posted up announcing that Divisional Commissar Vinogradov would lecture that evening on the second congress of the Comintern. Right under my window some Cossacks were trying to shoot an old silvery-bearded Jew for spying. The old man was uttering piercing screams and struggling to get away. Then Kudrya of the machine gun section took hold of his head and tucked it under his arm. The Jew stopped screaming and straddled his legs. Kudrya drew out his dagger with his right hand and carefully, without splashing himself, cut the old man's throat. Then he knocked at the closed window.

"Anyone who cares may come and fetch him," he said. "You're free to do so."

(“Berestechko”)

The first way is violence stylized as in a child's vision: "On the blood-flooded ground the torches bloomed like roses of fire," and "There came a Jew looking like a sailor and took a potshot." The second way is highly stylized also, but as in the vision of a historical Jewish irony: "With shooting you'll never get at the soul, to where it is in a fellow and how it shows itself," and "carefully, without splashing himself, cut the old man's throat." When Babel represents the violence of the Jewish gangs of the Moldavanka, he colors it as he renders Benya Krik's wardrobe: "He wore an orange suit, beneath his cuff gleamed a bracelet set with diamonds," and "aristocrats of the Moldavanka, they were tightly encased in raspberry waistcoats. Russet jackets clasped their shoulders, and on their fleshy feet the azure leather cracked." But Babel's representation of "the training of the famous Kniga, the headstrong Pavlichenko, and the captivating Savitsky," is quite another matter. The irony, ferociously subtle, is built up by nuances until the supposed nostalgia for the virtues of murderous barbarity becomes a kind of monstrous Jewish in-joke. General Budenny's fury, when he denounced *Red Cavalry* as a slander upon his Cossacks, was not wholly misplaced.

II

Whatever the phrase "a Jewish writer" may be taken to mean, any meaning assigned to it that excludes Babel will not be very interesting. Maurice Friedberg, the authority on Babel's relation to Yiddish folklore and literature, rather strangely remarks of him that: "A leftist, Russian, Jewish intellectual, particularly one strongly influenced by the adamant anti-clericalism of the French Left, could hardly be expected to return to the fold of organized religion." That Babel did not trust in the Covenant, in any

strict sense, is palpably true, but the nuances of Jewish spirituality, at any time, are notoriously difficult to ascertain.

Babel's irony is so pervasive that sometimes it does threaten to turn into the irony of irony, and yet sometimes it barely masks Babel's true nostalgia, which is not exactly for the primitive. Gedali, Babel's "tiny, lonely visionary in a black top hat, carrying a big prayerbook under his arm," may be as ironic a figure as the "captivating" Savitsky, whose "long legs were like girls sheathed to the neck in shining riding boots," but the two ironies are as different as the two visions of violence, and can be conveyed again by a textual clash:

We all of us seated ourselves side by side—possessed, liars, and idlers. In a corner, some broad-shouldered Jews who resembled fishermen and apostles were moaning over their prayerbooks. Gedali, in his green frock coat down to the ground, was dozing by the wall like a little bright bird. And suddenly I caught sight of a youth behind him, a youth with the face of Spinoza, with Spinoza's powerful brow and the wan face of a nun. He was smoking, shuddering like a recaptured prisoner brought back to his cell. The ragged Reb Mordecai crept up to him from behind, snatched the cigarette from his mouth, and ran away to me.

"That's Elijah, the Rabbi's son," he declared hoarsely, bringing his bloodshot eyelids close to my face. "That's the cursed son, the last son, the unruly son."

("The Rabbi")

His things were strewn about pell-mell—mandates of the propagandist and notebooks of the Jewish poet, the portraits of Lenin and Maimonides lay side by side, the knotted iron of Lenin's skull beside the dull silk of the portraits of Maimonides. A lock of woman's hair lay in a book, the Resolutions of the Party's Sixth Congress, and the margins of Communist leaflets were crowded with crooked lines of ancient Hebrew verse. They fell upon me in a mean and depressing rain—pages of the Song of Songs and revolver cartridges. The dreary rain of sunset washed the dust in my hair, and I said to the boy who was dying on a wretched mattress in the corner:

"One Friday evening four months ago, Gedali the old-clothesman took me to see your father, Rabbi Motale. But you didn't belong to the Party at that time, Bratslavsky."

("The Rabbi's Son")

And I don't mind telling you straight that I threw that female citizen down the railway embankment while the train was still going. But she, being big and broad, just sat there awhile, flapped her skirts, and started to go her vile way. And seeing that scatheless woman going along like that and Russia around her like I don't know what, and the peasant fields without an ear of corn and the outraged girls and the comrades lots of which go to the front but few return, I had a mind to jump out of the truck and put an end to my life or else put an end to hers. But the Cossacks took pity on me and said:

"Give it her with your rifle."

So I took my faithful rifle off the wall and washed away that stain from the face of the worker's land and the republic.

("Salt")

The pathos of Elijah the Rabbi's son is rendered bearable by a purely defensive irony, the irony of incommensurate juxtapositions, of Communist leaflets and the Hebrew Song of Songs. Irony in "Salt" dissolves all pathos, and defends Babel, not from his own affections and identifications, but from Cossack bestiality. It cannot be that Babel did not understand his own cultural affections. His first mode of irony is altogether biblical, and is neither the irony of saying one thing while meaning another, as in "Salt," nor the irony that contrasts expectation and fulfillment, for no expectations remain in "The Rabbi" and "The Rabbi's Son." Babel writes the irony of the Covenant, the incommensurateness of the Chooser and the chosen. That irony is no less Jewish than the allegory of "Salt," but its Jewishness is far more archaic.

III

The best of Babel's stories are neither in *Red Cavalry* nor in the *Tales of Odessa*, though those are my personal favorites. Babel's best work is in "The Story of My Dovecot," "First Love," "In the Basement," "Awakening," "Guy de Maupassant," "Di Grasso"—all tales of Odessa, but with the difference that they are tales of Babel himself, and not of Benya Krik. But if a single story has in it the center of Babel's achievement, it is the extraordinary, outrageous, and ultimately plangent "The End of the Old Folk's Home." Restraining himself from overtly celebrating the raffish inmates of the poorhouse by the Second Jewish Cemetery in Odessa, Babel nevertheless portrays this motley group of old men and women with a gusto and exuberance that make them the peers of Benya Krik the gangster. Gravediggers, cantors,

washers of corpses, they live by their wits and unscrupulousness in hiring out their single oak coffin with a pall and silver tassles, recycling it through endless burials.

Alas, the Bolsheviks use the coffin to bury one Hersch Lugovoy with full military honors, pushing away the old men when they attempt to turn the coffin on its side so as to roll out the flag-draped corpse of the heroic and faithful Jewish Bolshevik. The rest of the story, an astonishing mixture of Dickensian pathos and Gogolian humor, portrays the doomed but still vital antics of the old folk in their final days before they are evicted from the poorhouse. With the expulsion itself, Babel achieves his finest conclusion:

The tall horse bore him and the manager of the department of public welfare townwards. On their way they passed the old folk who had been evicted from the poorhouse. Limping, bowed beneath their bundles, they plodded along in silence. Bluff Red Army men were keeping them in line. The little carts of paralytics squeaked; the whistle of asthma, a humble gurgling issued from the breasts of retired cantors, jesters at weddings, cooks at circumcisions, and ancient shop-assistants.

The sun stood high in the sky, and its rays scorched the rags trailing along the road. Their path lay along a cheerless, parched and stony highway, past huts of rammed clay, past stone-cluttered fields, past houses torn open by shells, past the Plague Mound. An unspeakably sorrowful road once led from the cemetery to Odessa.

(“The End of the Old Folk’s Home”)

The troping of “road” for the unspeakably sorrowful procession itself is characteristic of Babel. As for the squeaking, whistling, and “humble gurgling,” it is the funeral music by which Babel implicitly laments the loss of a desperate vitalism in the old folk, roisterers who in a sense are coffin-robbers, but never grave-robbers. These aged scamps are Babel’s heroes and heroines, even as the Bolshevik bureaucrats and brutal Cossacks are not. Presumably Babel was another victim of Stalin’s virulent anti-Semitism, but his best stories transcend his victimization. They give nothing away to the anti-Semites, nothing away even to Stalin himself. We hear in them finally a voice masterly in its ironies, yes, but also a voice of comic celebration eternally commemorating “the image of the stout and jovial Jews of the South, bubbling like cheap wine.” Benya Krik’s heroic funeral for the poor clerk killed by mistake is a superb exemplification of Babel’s art at its most joyous:

And the funeral was performed the next morning. Ask the cemetery beggars about that funeral. Ask the shamesim from the synagogue of the dealers in kosher poultry about it, or the old women from the Second Almshouse. Odessa had never before seen such a funeral, the world will never see such a funeral. On that day the cops wore cotton gloves. In the synagogues, decked with greenstuff and wide open, the electric lights were burning. Black plumes swayed on the white horses harnessed to the hearse. A choir of sixty headed the cortege: a choir of boys, but they sang with the voice of women. The Elders of the synagogue of the dealers in kosher poultry helped Aunt Pesya along. Behind the elders walked members of the Association of Jewish Shop Assistants, and behind the Jewish Shop Assistants walked the lawyers, doctors of medicine, and certified midwives. On one side of Aunt Pesya were the women who trade in poultry on the Old Market, and on the other side, draped in orange shawls, were the honorary dairymaids from Bugayevka. They stamped their feet like gendarmes parading on a holiday. From their wide hips wafted the odors of the sea and of milk. And behind them all plodded Ruvim Tartakovsky's employees. There were a hundred of them, or two hundred, or two thousand. They wore black frock coats with silk lapels and new shoes that squeaked like sacked suckling-pigs.

("How It Was Done in Odessa")

Those orange-shawled "honorary dairymaids," stamping their feet like gendarmes on parade while "from their wide hips wafted the odors of the sea and of milk," are Babel's true Muses. The entire paragraph becomes a phantasmagoria, a visionary evocation of a Jewish child's delight in the muscular exuberance of the Odessa mob. Babel's pragmatic sorrow was in his political context. His joy, fantastic and infectious, was in his nostalgia for his own childhood, and for the archaic and celebratory force of the Jewish tradition that claimed him, after all, for its own.

VIKTOR SHKLOVSKY

Isaac Babel: A Critical Romance

I find myself somehow reluctant to take a close look at Babel. An author's success must be respected, and the reader should be given the opportunity to learn to like a writer before trying to figure out the reasons for his success.

I'm ashamed to take a close look at Babel. His story "The Rabbi's Son" (*Syn rabbi*) contains this passage: "The girls, planting their unpretentious bandy doe legs on the floor, stared coldly at his sexual organs, that stunted, tender, curly-haired masculinity of a wasted Semite."

So for my article on Babel I have chosen the method of lyrical distancing. Once there was old Russia, enormous, like a mountain spread wide with furrowed slopes.

Some people wrote upon her with pencils, "This mountain will be saved."

That was before the Revolution.

Some of those who had written on the mountain in pencil worked on Gorky's *Chronicle*. Gorky had just arrived. He was stooped, discontented, sick, and he wrote the article "Two Souls." A highly erroneous article.

A story by Babel appeared in one issue. It concerned two young girls who tried unsuccessfully to perform an abortion. Their father held the post of prosecutor in Kamchatka. Everyone noticed that story and remembered it. Then I met Babel himself. Average height, high forehead, huge head, a face unlike a writer's, quiet dress, entertaining conversation.

Came the Revolution, and the mountain was cleared away. There were

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some who still ran after it with pencils in their hands. There was nothing left for them to write on.

Just then Sukhanov started to write. Seven volumes of reminiscences. They say he wrote them before the events happened, since he foresaw everything.

I arrived from the front. It was autumn. Gorky's *Novaya Zhizn* was still being published.

In it Babel wrote some comments under the heading "The New Day." He was the only one who maintained his stylistic sangfroid throughout the Revolution.

Babel's sketches dealt with such things as how plowing is done today. It was then I became better acquainted with him. He turned out to be an imperturbable man with a concerned voice, and a lover of fine feeling.

For him fine feeling was as necessary as a country house (*dacha*).

I met Babel for the third time in Petersburg in 1919. Petersburg was covered with snow in winter, as if the city itself stood snowbound in the middle of a road, only it was something like a latticed snow fence along a railroad track. In summer Petersburg was covered by a deep blue sky. There was no smoke from the chimneys, and the sun hung over the horizon; no one interfered with it. Petersburg was empty—its inhabitants were at the front. Among the cobblestones on the streets the grass in little shoots of green flame struggled up towards the sun.

Side streets were already grassed over.

In front of the Hermitage, on the wooden pavement which was resonant right at that place, children played at skittles with torn up blocks. The city was beginning to be grown over, like an abandoned military camp.

Babel lived on 25th of October Street, No. 86.

He lived alone in his furnished apartment; his visitors came and went. Maidservants saw to his needs, cleaned the rooms, emptied the buckets with bits of unfinished food floating in them.

Babel lived, contemplating at leisure the city's hungry lechery. His room was clean. He would tell me that "nowadays" women could be had only before six since the streetcars stopped running after that.

He had no feeling of alienation from life. But I had the impression that when he went to bed, Babel would sign his name to each completed day as though it were a story. The tools of the man's trade had left their mark on him.

A samovar inevitably graced Babel's table, and even sometimes bread. And that was a rarity in those days.

He was always a warm and willing host. A certain retired chemist used