

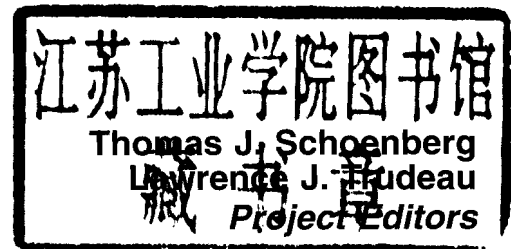
# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC

171

# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the  
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers  
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,  
from the First Published Critical  
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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## Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 171

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# Preface

Since its inception more than fifteen years ago, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)* has been purchased and used by nearly 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. *TCLC* has covered more than 500 authors, representing 58 nationalities and over 25,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as *TCLC*. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” *TCLC* “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

## Scope of the Series

*TCLC* is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author’s works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, *TCLC* helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in *TCLC* presents a comprehensive survey on an author’s career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of *TCLC* is devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

*TCLC* is designed as a companion series to Thomson Gale’s *Contemporary Literary Criticism, (CLC)* which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between *CLC* and *TCLC*.

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- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

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- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
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A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Thomson Gale, including *TCLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *TCLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

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# Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xiii

<b>Isaak Babel 1894-1940</b> .....	1
<i>Russian short story writer, playwright, screenwriter, essayist, journalist, editor, autobiographer, and translator</i>	
<b>Henry James 1843-1916</b> .....	119
<i>American novelist, short fiction writer, essayist, critic, biographer, autobiographer and playwright</i>	
<i>Entry devoted to the novel The Ambassadors (1903)</i>	
<b>Iris Murdoch 1919-1999</b> .....	202
<i>Irish-born English novelist, philosopher, poet, short fiction writer, essayist, and playwright</i>	
<b>Christopher Okigbo 1930-1967</b> .....	334
<i>Nigerian poet</i>	

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 371

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index 471

TCLC Cumulative Nationality Index 483

TCLC-171 Title Index 489

# Isaak Babel

## 1894-1940

(Full name Isaak Emmanuilovich Babel; also transliterated as Isaac, Izaak; also Emanuilovich; also Babel'; also wrote under pseudonym of Kiril Liutov) Russian short story writer, playwright, screenwriter, essayist, journalist, editor, autobiographer, and translator.

The following entry presents an overview of Babel's life and works. For additional information on his career, see *TCLC*, Volumes 2 and 13.

### INTRODUCTION

Isaak Babel is widely regarded as one of the most skillful short fiction writers of the twentieth century. Additionally, he stands out as an important and definitive figure in Soviet literature, despite the fact that the Soviet literary establishment disavowed both him and his work during his lifetime. Because his literary coming of age coincided closely with the transformation of Russia by the Bolshevik Revolution, his work provides a valuable account of that transformation, while it also stands out as a counterpoint to the development of the new Soviet aesthetic. As a writer Babel is praised as a brilliant stylist and a keen observer of human nature. He is best remembered for his short story cycle *Konarmiia* (1926; *Red Cavalry*) and the picaresque stories of *Odesskie rasskazy* (1931; *The Odessa Tales*). These two works use contrast and paradox to convey a number of themes, such as the conflict between violence and passivity, romanticism and primitivism, hero and antihero, and, most importantly, between a traditional Jewish ethos and a non-traditional Jewish environment.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Babel was born on June 30, 1894, to Emmanuel Isaakovich Babel and Fania Aronovna Shvevel Babel, in the port city of Odessa on the Black Sea. Babel's early development was shaped by the tension between the traditions of his Jewish heritage and Odessa's modern, cosmopolitan culture. Though his education was devoted to business and finance, Babel took a strong interest in literature after he was introduced to a number of French authors, most notably Guy de Maupassant and Gustave Flaubert. He soon began writing short stories in French. Babel moved to Petrograd in 1916, where he met the prominent author and editor Maxim Gorky. In addition



to publishing the first of Babel's stories in his magazine *Letopis'*, Gorky became a valued mentor and a lifelong proponent of the young author and his work. On Gorky's recommendation, Babel went off to expand the depth of his experience. He did so in a series of official and military posts, first in the Russian Army during World War I and then, purportedly, in a Bolshevik police force called the "Cheka." In 1919 Babel took a position as a newspaper correspondent with the Cossack Cavalry during their combat against the czarist White Army. In this capacity Babel encountered a range of astonishing events that profoundly influenced his life and work. Out of these experiences he wrote the stories in *Red Cavalry*, one of his best known and most deeply admired works.

Despite Babel's prominence in the Soviet literary scene during and immediately after the Revolution, his work began to lose favor with the Communist regime as early as the late 1920s. As the Communist Party began to control literary ideology more rigidly, Babel's writing

was criticized heavily for its erotic nature and for its lack of socialist zeal. He lived and wrote abroad intermittently from 1928 to 1934, and this contributed to suspicions over his loyalty. When he returned home, his unwillingness to write convincing propaganda pieces further convinced the authorities that Babel was guilty of anti-Soviet sentiment. He was arrested in 1939 by the Soviet secret police and executed by firing squad in 1940.

## MAJOR WORKS

Babel's importance to Soviet literature is based exclusively on the impressionistic and often ironic stories in *Red Cavalry* and *The Odessa Tales*. His most light-hearted and vibrantly drawn works are collected in *The Odessa Tales*, the characters and setting of which are depicted in an almost mythological style. Benia Krik, a central character of the story cycle, is a gangster of the Moldavanka underworld, the Jewish neighborhood in which Babel himself was born. Benia is a passionate and complicated hero, collecting protection money in one scene and falling madly in love in the next. The weddings, funerals, robberies, barn-burnings, and other events that animate the stories are larger than life, even carnivalesque. The colorful quality of these stories exemplifies the views expressed in an earlier essay Babel wrote in praise of Odessa. For Babel, Odessa symbolized life, exuberance, and rejuvenation. He believed that writers should look to Odessa for inspiration and the future of Soviet literature. Another striking feature of *The Odessa Tales* is Babel's unique and skillful writing style. Through his manipulation of syntax, grammar, and rhythmic phrasing, he captures the essence of the Odessan Jewish dialect. He shifts among various narrative forms, including the epic, the comic, the literary, and the colloquial, all to heighten or highlight the stories' desired effect.

Strikingly different in theme and tone is Babel's other major contribution to Soviet literature, *Red Cavalry*. Consisting of thirty-four stories in its first publication, the collection depicts the Polish-Soviet War between the spring and late summer of 1920. Although Babel manipulates facts for the sake of theme, the stories typically coincide both geographically and chronologically with the movements of Semyon Budyonny's cavalry during the conflict. While there are recurring characters and themes in *Red Cavalry*, the narrator of the stories, Kirill Vasil'evich Liutov, is the most significant unifying feature of the cycle. Liutov is a Jewish intellectual who joins Budyonny's cavalry after graduating from law school. His primary role in the war is to observe and report for the army newspaper, but he also explains and interprets events of the Revolution for the soldiers. Liutov expresses horror and anguish at the destruction

of human life and the natural world he observes. However, even though he laments the annihilation of his culture, he does not romanticize the past or forget its corrupt qualities. Liutov is unable to fully condone or condemn either side of the conflict he is observing. Formally, *Red Cavalry* blends striking, often brutal and violent, imagery with what has been called "ornamental" or poetic prose. This exemplifies Babel's participation in the modernist tradition of blurring the boundary between poetry and fiction, which can be seen in the writing of a number of Russian writers between 1890 and 1930. Assonance, alliteration, wordplay, onomatopoeia, and other poetic devices heighten the mood of his stories. Differing language styles also pervade the work; Babel shifts frequently between language registers in order to highlight the striking imagery for which he is so well known.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

During his lifetime, Babel's work received a wide range of responses, from high praise to harsh criticism. His writing was lauded frequently for its high artistic qualities: its rich imagery, emotional depth, and innovative style. In addition, Babel's proficient use of various language devices and registers earned him a reputation as an innovator in the development of Soviet literature. His popularity reached its peak in the early 1920s. After the publication of *Red Cavalry*, however, the praise gave way to an increasing amount of criticism and political suspicion. The same indirect and impassive style which some critics found masterful and subtle seemed too difficult and decadent to others. Officials identified him with the *poputchiki*, a group of writers who did not oppose the Revolution but did not necessarily share its central ideology. Although Babel's talent was generally acknowledged, he was censured for portraying the Revolution naturalistically, in all its chaos, rather than nationalistically, as a matter of cultural necessity. His erotic subject matter also drew increasing criticism as Soviet doctrine became more and more repressive. By the time of Babel's arrest and subsequent execution, his critical reputation had been destroyed.

With the loosening of control on artistic expression after Joseph Stalin's death in 1953, Babel's work was rediscovered and his reputation revived. Since then, his work has been admired widely for its formal skill, its structural intricacy, its powerful and creative use of language, and its complex use of perspective, much as it had been when it was first published. Recent criticism has been devoted to a number of central issues, including the formal architecture of Babel's stories and their depictions of the complex nature of human relations. Edyta Bojanowska has argued that rather than leading us to condemn evil and violence, "Babel aims at expos-

ing the immense complexity of any moral action and, consequently, of any moral judgment. Instead of resolving a moral dilemma, he often chooses to dramatize it." Many critics have also been interested in explaining Babel's "preoccupations" in his tales, most notably with violence and sexuality, and theorizing about the mythological and social sources that inform his world. What has emerged is confirmation of Babel as a master of the short story form and one of the finest writers in Russian literature.

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Liubka Kazak: Rasskazy* (short stories) 1925  
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*Izbrannoe* (short stories, letters, essays, and speeches) 1966  
*You Must Know Everything: Stories, 1915-1937* [edited by Nathalie Babel] (short stories) 1969  
*The Forgotten Prose* [edited by Nicholas Stroud] (short stories and diary excerpts) 1978  
*Collected Stories* (short stories) 1994  
*The Complete Works of Isaac Babel* [edited by Nathalie Babel] (short stories, plays, letters, essays, and speeches) 2002

### Hamutal Bar-Yosef (essay date April-June 1985)

SOURCE: Bar-Yosef, Hamutal. "The Poetic Status of Direct Speech in the Stories of Isaac Babel." *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Soviétique* 26, no. 2 (April-June 1985): 185-91.

[In the following essay, Bar-Yosef argues that the moral center of Babel's work, considered by many critics to be absent or ambiguous, can best be discovered in re-

curing epiphanic moments in which the narrators of the stories collide "with certain brutal, 'anti-poetic' facts, and this encounter is often accompanied by a direct statement," either by the narrator or another character. According to Bar-Yosef, these direct statements are a clue "to the conceptual and moral message" of Babel's stories.]

## 1

Babel' assigned unlimited importance to the stylistic qualities of his stories, and indeed, his critics have often pointed out that the style is a central factor in the unique artistic achievement of his work. Nevertheless, the various elements of Babel's style have only gradually penetrated critical and scholarly awareness. Contemporary criticism saw him chiefly as an ornamentalist, and attention was generally directed to passages of a poetic nature. "Style" was identified with poeticality. Today, however, it is generally accepted that the lyrical passages are only one component in the total stylistic texture of the stories, and what confers the uniqueness on Babel's style is precisely its heterogeneity. The stories are composed of elements belonging to various literary genres and to various linguistic registers: prose and poetry, journalism and folksong, political cliché and proverbs.

Various explanations have been given for the rapid stylistic switches in Babel's stories: the aesthetic effect achieved by the combination or juxtaposition of opposites; or, the contribution made to the dynamics in stories where the dramatic situation is pushed off-stage. Some scholars have discussed the changing narrators, who supplant each other as the styles interchange. Other rhetorical aspects have also been noticed; the difference between Liutov and the "primary" narrator; the wide use of the *skaz* tradition, both by the anonymous narrator and by the fictional characters; and the repeated use of semi-documentary narrative—letter, diary, or the oral account given by one of the characters to the narrator. This variegated choir of voices suggests, according to most scholars, several simultaneous alternatives for the moral and emotional evaluation of the problematic historical and human reality depicted in the stories, especially in *Red Cavalry*, but also occurring in others. Hence the generally accepted conclusion, that Babel' does not assume a definite evaluatory attitude towards his events and characters. Kossacks, Jews and Poles, murderers and victims, on this view, are represented from the same ambivalent moral stance. Carol Luplow, in her excellent *Isaac Babel's Red Cavalry* (1982), ascribes the moral "confusion" to the fictional narrator Liutov, and shows that his attitude and personality are not consistently represented in the different stories, or even within the same story. I would like to add two points to this discussion.

a. The reduced, even miniature, compass of Babel's stories has induced a tendency to read them as if one



were looking at a picture, that is, reacting to the paradigmatic level, while the dynamic process continuing throughout the sequence of the story has been neglected.

If one reads Babel's stories not only in breadth but also in length, one may ask oneself: does what is represented at the beginning of the story have the same validity, the same authenticity, as what is represented as the story goes on and at the end? What emerges from the narrative voices: a static dynamics, as in a mobile, or is there some kind of development, in the course of which certain alternatives are rejected and others accepted in their place? The tendency to understand the significance of a story through an excessive reliance on the information presented in the earlier part, while ignoring the information accumulating as it progresses, is frequently found in the reading process.

b. The direct speech of Babel's characters is a stylistic and thematic factor, that has not yet received due attention. Some critics have regarded it as a sign of aesthetic variation, meant to balance the poetic heights of other passages; others have seen in it a means of characterization, intended to give an authentic representation of the figures, while others again regard it as a factor in dynamization, adding dramatic body to the story.

In order to fill out the two points I have raised, I suggest to look at Babel's stories not as at a well-tempered mobile, but as a gradual stripping of the consciousness, reaching a climax towards the end of the story in a moment of epiphany. The epiphany occurs in the collision of the narrator with certain brutal, "anti-poetic," facts, and this encounter is often accompanied by a direct statement in the voice of one of the characters, sometimes the narrator himself, not necessarily as part of a dialogue.

These direct statements are a clue to the conceptual and moral message of the story. In them is concealed the voice of the author, who is trying, as far as possible, to avoid a direct "telling." The statements are of two kinds: those that convey a harsh, callous attitude, of a speaker who identifies himself with the revolutionary cause, and those that convey tenderness, humanity and sensitivity to suffering, an attitude that belongs to the "old world." In many of the stories both kinds of statement appear, and it is important to note, that the statement of the first, "hard," kind appears first, and that of the second, softer, type—later, usually towards the end of the story.

## 2

Let us illustrate these remarks by means of two stories from *Red Cavalry*. "**Perekhod cherez Zbruch**" and "**Syn Rabbi**." In both the subject of Jewishness has a central importance, and their position at the beginning and end of the cycle (in the 1st edition, 1926) is not accidental.

The opening, very brief, paragraph of "**Syn Rabbi**" is written in the manner of news information, gliding into the style of the historical epic. The narrator appears as a collective voice, identifying himself with the Russian historical memory in the present and in the past. Next comes a long paragraph of nature depiction in a poetic style, moving from impressionism to expressionism. Aesthetic and sensual experience is here given a supreme value. In spite of hints of bloodshed the event is described as a celebratory pageant experience, filled with beauty. Notwithstanding the use of "we," the narrator observes all these details not from the human point of view, but from one that merges with nature (maybe from the point of view of the horses): "Zvuchnye potoki sochatsia mezhdru sotniami loshadnykh nog."

Only in the third paragraph, in the middle of the story, does the "we" turn into "I," and a human narrator appears, a Soviet officer who bivouacs in a Jewish lodging. We hear him saying just one sentence: "Uberite . . . kak vy griazno zhivete, khoziaeva . . ." This phrase expresses with trenchant cruelty Liutov's first reaction to the reality of Jewish life in the shtetl, from the point of view of one who has succeeded in emerging from it and considers himself to be a part of a higher, cleaner and more beautiful life. However, together with the feelings of disgust the description of the room contains hints of condemnation of the brutal sacrilege that has carelessly and indifferently been committed in it. The hints appear in a metonymic fashion: "fragments of the crockery the Jews use only once a year, at Passover" that are scattered on the floor together with "scraps of women's fur coats" . . . and "chelovecheskii kal." The hint is very well hidden and for the moment is presented as from an entirely external point of view. Liutov talks about the Jews as of an alien tribe with strange customs.

As the story goes on, the narrator falls asleep and dreams that the divisional commander, the Natch-Div, fires into the eyes of the Kom-Brig; the eyes fall to the ground, and the Natch-Div shouts: "Zachem ty povorotil brigadu?" The Natch-Div's indignant question echoes the narrator's indignation in his semi-question to the woman (kak vy griazno zhivete), both have the same harsh official tone, the same unrealistic exigence of some impossible "clean" behaviour, both ignore the suffering of common humanity in the name of the demands of the revolution.

The story concludes with the very simple words spoken by the Jewish woman, with a sudden and terrible violence: "I teper' Ia khochu znat' . . . Ia khochu znat', gde eshche na vsei zemle vy naidete takogo ottsa kak moi otets . . ."

This is also a question, a third one. It is the emotional and ideational gravity of the story. The woman's question is not equal in weight to those of the narrator and

the Natch-Div, it does not merely counterbalance them. It overcomes them by its innate power. This is the thematic turning-point, the "pointe," that in retrospect illuminates the significance of the whole story. It also illuminates the identity of the narrator. The woman's words are heard at the moment when the narrator wakes from sleep and discovers that he is lying between the pregnant woman and the corpse of her murdered father. These bare facts, together with the simple, living, speech, of the woman, stir him through several layers of disguised identities.

The woman's speech is not part of a dialogue, it does not characterize her individual or social-cultural personality, it is not used in order to variegate the style. It appears as the voice of an old and ugly reality that cannot be cast aside.

The story "**Syn Rabbi**" begins with an invitation for the Sabbath eve in Zhitomir. The rhetorical address to some Vasili (who appears in no other story) and the style, which is saturated with allusions to romantic Russian folksongs, establish a narrator whose consciousness is alien to Zhitomir and to the Sabbath eve, a consciousness possessing deep roots in Russian culture. Here too the narrator at the beginning of the story is a collective representative of Russia.

Then comes a reminiscent passage describing the narrator's visit to the house of Rabbi Motale Bratslavskii, still to the accompaniment of rhetorical addresses to Vasili. The scene is described in a poetic style, and emerges as a theatrical tableau, exotic, grotesque, where against the dim background hovers the figure of Il'ia, the Rabbi's son, shining with magical holiness and beauty: "prekrasnoe litso Il'i, syna Rabbi, poslednego printsa v dinastii . . ."

Taking a sharp turn, the story leaps from this poetic, nostalgic picture, which belongs to the past, to the dreadful reality of the present narrative. Here we have a naturalistic passage describing the cruelty and ugliness of human conduct during the withdrawal from the front. The following part of this passage was deleted by the Russian censorship in the later editions of the collected stories (of 1957 and 1966): "I chudovishchnaia Rossiia, nepravdopodobnaia, kak stado platianykh vshei, zatopala laptiami po obe storony vagonov."

Il'ia, the Rabbi's son, suddenly appears before the narrator against a background of "typhus-ridden peasantry," who are trying to force their way on to the Political Section Train and are being thrown off it for lack of space. In the center of the story-sequence stands the description of Il'ia, dragged by Liutov on the wagon where he is dying naked in front of two staring girls. Il'ia's physical nakedness, which also reveals the sign of his Jewishness, is a projection of the exposure that

the narrator's consciousness is also undergoing. The metonymic depiction of Il'ia's belongings represents the mixture of cultures and the contradictory, ridiculous, yearnings, that by analogy connect Il'ia and the narrator. From this point onwards the narrator's addresses to Vasili disappear, and, for the first time in the story, towards the end, direct speech is used. Il'ia says with startling dogmatic firmness: "Mat' v revoliutsii—epizod." He concludes, however, the short talk with the narrator with another laconic sentence: "U menia ne khvatilo artillerii."

Here we have a close juxtaposition of the two contrasting voices: the bare harshness of the son of the revolution, and the helplessness and despair of the fighter who did not get enough arms to gain the battle, and became a victim of the revolution. In this short sentence—"I hadn't enough artillery"—Babel communicates his own autobiographical despairing pessimism regarding the possibility of integrating into the new reality, being "insufficiently armed" as he was.

In this story, which was meant to close the whole cycle, Babel added a sort of coda, a paragraph wending with the words: "Ia prinial poslednii vzdokh moego brata."

The narrator's self-identification with Il'ia, the uncovering of his own true identity, are rendered on the level of metaphoric language as an act of receiving a heritage, of dedication to the prophet, or even as an act of renewed creation. Il'ia's last sigh is the breath of life that enters into the narrator. In retrospect the appeals to Vasili and the exotic coloring of the Jewish world appear as theatrical and superficial against the actual voice and image of Il'ia, a representative of the tragic situation of the young Jew in the new world of the revolution.

## 3

Attention to the bare, direct speech is not only useful in understanding the significance of Babel's stories, but also in understanding his poetics. Switches of narrator and style are not only alternations of points of view and value attitudes, but also represent competing poetical alternatives.

The history of literature is, as we know, a history of changing norms. A set of stylistic means that is fresh and attractive at a certain time undergoes obsolescence and loses its force and poetical status in another period. Symbolism, even before formalism, emphasized the importance of the deautomatization of language. At the beginning of the twentieth century, poetry was seen as fulfilling a prime function in revitalizing contact with reality. The language of prose was seen as the result of the crystallization of thought in clichés, after the living contact had become fossilized. Musicality and rich figurativeness of language were hallmarks of a discourse

possessing emotional force, and of epistemological authenticity. These theories, together with the achievements of poetry as compared with prose at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, conferred a preferential status on the language of poetry. It led to a poetic dynamic that caused the conventions of prose genres to approach those of poetry.

Babel' grew up in an atmosphere of strong consciousness of the rapid obsolescence of linguistic expression. He was very sensitive to the thinness of the clichés that depicted and explained contemporary events in the official means of communication. He aspired to illuminate reality afresh by means of stylistic innovations, writing explicitly on this subject in a letter to his mother from the 13th of June 1935:

"In a country as united as ours, it is quite inevitable that a certain amount of thinking in clichés should appear, and I want to overcome this standardized way of thinking and introduce into our literature new ideas, new feelings and rhythms. This is what interests me and nothing else."

(*The Lonely Years* [Isaac Babel: *The Lonely Years, 1925-1939*]: 283)

However, already in his early work Babel' shows signs that he was suspicious of poetic expression. The symbolist tradition of rejecting simple language seemed to him out of touch with real experience. In one of his first stories, "**Vdokhnovenie**," Mishka, a novice author, explains his artistic intentions to his friend, the narrator, Sashka: "V etoi povesti [. . .] Ia khotel dat' novoe proizvedenie, okutannoe dalekoi mechty, nezhnost', poluteni i namek . . . Mne protivna, protivna grubost' nashei zhizni . . ."

Mist, half-shadows, suggestive language, these are echoes of symbolist poetry and narrative, dealing with vaporous situations and depicting characters in an over-refined style. The fictive materials and the human situations which Babel' confronted in his writing were, on the contrary, "low," violent and coarse, the kind of material that at that time was labelled "naturalistic." The representation of this kind of material in a poetic style drawn from the symbolistic tradition was in itself still innovatory. According to the formalist theories that considered de-automatization as the aesthetic purpose of literary creation, Babel' might have been satisfied with this one innovation. But he was aware of the fact that a poetical representation of "coarse" reality implies an attitude of estrangement and alienation towards the events and the characters, in fact, an attitude of hostility towards this "coarse" reality. Babel' refused to write like his Mishka who flees from facing what he finds disagreeable and wraps reality in a weak disguise of poetical beauty.

Babel' was suspicious and critical regarding that system of poetical means, which to symbolist poetics was an

instrument for breaking down the screens set up by language and for touching "der Ding an sich."

When luxuriant poetical textures appear in Babel's stories they are mostly found in the exposition, in the first part of the story, as a conceptual alternative to be rejected as the story proceeds. The exposition, which sometimes covers half the story, presents the possibility of absorbing crude reality without seeing its ugly sides, of wrapping it in an agreeable veil of tenderness and beauty, colourfulness and sensuousness, thus finding it nice and easy. However, as the story goes on, naked reality breaks into the narrator's consciousness, and forces him to face the inglorious and frightening truth that had been repressed. This move is carried out by abandoning the poetic style and by a transition of a style whose poetry belongs to other norms, to new ones. These are norms that in Russian poetry were represented chiefly by Akmeism. This tendency had an impressive continuation in Western poetry, European and American, in the first half of the twentieth century, poetry that rejected figurative excesses and over-rich musicality, and looked to plain, simple speech for new sources towards expressive revitalization and closer contact with reality. In the field of prose one can see a similar tendency in writers such as Hemingway or Camus, who transformed the "degré zéro de l'écriture" into a powerful stylistic instrument.

Babel' sensed the poetic force hidden in the lean and bare discourse of direct speech. Against a background of textures possessing "fat" poetic layers, these "lean" statements appear like holes in a theatre curtain, and like the seven cows that Pharaoh saw in his dream, they swallow up the fat style and emphasize its illusory reality.

#### Efraim Sicher (essay date 1986)

SOURCE: Sicher, Efraim. "Sex and Violence: An Art of Contrasts." In *Style and Structure in the Prose of Isaak Babel*, pp. 39-51. Columbus, Ohio: Slavica Publishers, Inc., 1986.

[In the following essay, Sicher discusses the relationship of violence and sex in Babel's stories, stating that violence is artistically rendered "in the structuring of imagery and symbolism" of the narratives, and that it is "bound up with initiation rites through which the child and the intellectual must come to terms with cruelty, must know life in the sexual sense of the word."]

Violence may appear gratuitous in Babel's stories, but artistically it is motivated in the structuring of imagery and symbolism as part of a deeply moral vision of the world. Babel's modernist prose shocks us into recognizing

ing the primitive brutality of human beings, as well as the paradoxical violence of modernity. Violence is explicitly sexual, bound up with initiation rites, through which the child discovers he is a Jew in a world of pogroms and through which the intellectual must come to terms with cruelty, must know life in all senses of the word. For the narrator of Babel's early stories dealing with sex and prostitution, such as **"Doudou"** (**"Doudou,"** 1917) or **"Through the Fanlight"** (**"V shchelochku,"** 1923), curiosity embodies a kind of aesthetic voyeurism that searches for clues to the compelling complexity of human relations. Matvei Pavlichenko (the eponymous hero of one Red Cavalry story) kills his former master by stamping on him for an hour or more in order, he tells us, to know life fully for what it is.

The "saintly life" of Matvei (Matthew) Pavlichenko excels in its intense sexuality as much as the lives of the ecclesiastic saints excelled in asceticism. Summer and winter Matvei and Nastia go naked and tear off each other's skin. In the description of another Red Cavalry hero, Savitskii, sexuality and violence emphasize his physicality. The narrator of **"My First Goose"** (**"Moi pervyi gus"**) is astonished by the beauty of Savitskii's gigantic body which does not merely stand in the middle of the hut but slices it in two, "like a standard cuts the sky."<sup>1</sup> The narrator, whose own masculine prowess is questioned in the story, envies the violent sensuality of the mighty Cossack commander, a sensuality complicated by a femininity which strangely adds to his seductiveness and which, even more strangely, he shares with the Odessa gangsters in **"The Father"** (**"Otets,"** 1924) who walk past Baska "like girls who have known love" (*Detstvo* [*Detstvo i drugie rasskazy*], 271). Savitskii smells of scent and soap and his long legs are "like girls, clad to the shoulders in shining jackboots" (*Detstvo*, 129). There is gaiety in Savitskii's coarse brutality and he smiles at the narrator as he cracks his whip on the table. Living in disgrace with Pavla, Savitskii exudes an almost feminine perfume (*Detstvo*, 161) and he sees this world and the next as a whorehouse (*Detstvo*, 203). Russian literature has been more prurient than has been popularly suspected in the West, but Babel's Cossacks and Odessa gangsters exhibit an unusually uninhibited and frank libido. There is certainly a truth concerning Babel's portrayal of his characters in the view which the narrator of **"Story of a Horse"** (**"Istoriia odnoi loshadi"**) shares with Khlebnikov of the world as a field of women and horses in May (*Detstvo*, 164).

Babel's women are strong in physique and character; they are, moreover, also strangely sexed. Lyubka, nicknamed "The Cossack," boasts enormous breasts, yet she cannot give milk to her son (*Detstvo*, 266, 267) and she exhibits her masculinity by beating a drunken peasant "like a tambourine" (**"The Father,"** *Detstvo*, 275-6).

Baska in the same story parades in men's boots. With the sex drive of Babel's womenfolk, Cossacks and gangsters are associated the fertility symbols of blood, fire, and sweat. By contrast, the characters belonging to the old, spiritual world of Roman Catholic churches and the Jewish *shtetl* do not prove to be sexually reproductive. The Jewish hetman in **"Afonka Bida"** and Ilia Bratslavskii are impotent despite joining the Revolution; both doomed idealists are described as emaciated (**"chakhloe"**). Ilia has old women's knees, and two fat-breasted typists stare at the wasted virility of his stunted genitals (*Detstvo*, 299). Sexuality is reserved for the active heroes of the new age, not for the victims. Gregory Freiden has read castration and sterility complexes in Babel's portrayal of Jewish protagonists, particularly in his description of their thin necks.<sup>2</sup> One might add that the negation of the sexuality of Jewish protagonists is explicit in the image of the Jews in **"Crossing the Zbrucz"** as chimpanzees and Japs in a circus, or the association of Uncle Shoil in **"Story of My Dovecot"** with fish—he trades in fish in Fish Street and when he is killed in a pogrom he is left with a fish poking out of his open pants. However, such images are not negative in all respects and, needless to say, this does not apply to those Jews who have forcibly rejected the Gentiles' attempt to demean their sexuality, such as Benia Krik, who can sleep with a Russian woman and satisfy her (according to Arye-Leib in **"How It Was Done in Odessa"**).

That the revolutionary forces sweeping Russia were driven by primeval instincts was a motif of much fiction of the twenties and was not uncommonly illustrated by the infectious image of syphilis, from which a number of Babel's Cossacks suffer. Such sexual frankness bears no relation to the libertine *épater les bourgeois* but suggests that carnal passions rule human nature. The Jesus depicted in the Red Cavalry story **"Pan Apolek"** and **"The Sin of Jesus"** (**"Isusov grekh,"** 1922) is certainly more carnal than incarnate. Sex is essentially a bodily function in the Red Cavalry story **"The Widow"** (**"Vdova"**), where it is described in the same terms as eating: Levka chews meat and later has sex with Sashka "crunching and panting" (**"khrustia i zadykhaias"**)—the same noise made earlier by the fettered horses in the bushes (*Detstvo*, 204-206). The animalistic lust of Babel's women with their outsize busts and fleshy thighs is unmistakable. Take Pavla in the Red Cavalry story **"Story of a Horse"** (**"Istoriia odnoi loshadi"**), whose chest "moves like an animal in a sack" (*Detstvo*, 161). As the battle approaches in **"Chesniki,"** two chubby medical sisters frolic in the grass, prodding each other's breasts, and lure on the narrator "like barelegged village girls" who "shriek like pampered puppies," while not far off a soldier lies wounded (*Detstvo*, 219). Then along comes Sashka, plump Sashka known to men in every division, to persuade Steпка Duplishchev to let his stallion mate with her