Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 13

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Volume 13

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Excerpts from Criticism of the Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers Who Died between 1900 and 1960, from the First Published Critical Appraisals to Current Evaluations

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Preface

It is impossible to overvalue the importance of literature in the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual evolution of humanity. Literature is that which both lifts us out of everyday life and helps us to better understand it. Through the fictive lives of such characters as Anna Karenin, Lambert Strether, or Leopold Bloom, our perceptions of the human condition are enlarged, and we are enriched.

Literary criticism can also give us insight into the human condition, as well as into the specific moral and intellectual atmosphere of an era, for the criteria by which a work of art is judged reflects contemporary philosophical and social attitudes. Literary criticism takes many forms: the traditional essay, the book or play review, even the parodic poem. Criticism can also be of several kinds: normative, descriptive, interpretive, textual, appreciative, generic. Collectively, the range of critical response helps us to understand a work of art, an author, an era.

Scope of the Series

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC) is designed to serve as an introduction for the student of twentieth-century literature to the authors of the period 1900 to 1960 and to the most significant commentators on these authors. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of this period are by far the most popular writers for study in high school and college literature courses. Since contemporary critics continue to analyze the work of this period—both in its own right and in relation to today's tastes and standards—a vast amount of relevant critical material confronts the student. To aid students in their location and selection of criticism written on works of authors who died between 1900 and 1960, *TCLC* presents significant passages from the most important published criticism on those authors.

The need for *TCLC* was suggested by the usefulness of the Gale series *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC),* which excerpts criticism on current writing. Because of the difference in time span under consideration *(CLC* considers authors who were still living after 1959), there is no duplication of material between *CLC* and *TCLC.* For further information about *CLC* and Gale's other criticism series, users should consult the Guide to Gale Literary Criticism Series preceding the title page in this volume.

Each volume of *TCLC* is carefully compiled to include authors who represent a variety of genres and nationalities and who are currently regarded as the most important writers of their era. In addition to major authors, *TCLC* also presents criticism on lesser known writers whose significant contributions to literary history are important to the study of twentieth-century literature.

Each author entry in *TCLC* is intended to provide a definitive overview of criticism on an author. Therefore, the editors include approximately twenty authors in each 600-page volume (compared with approximately sixty authors in a *CLC* volume of similar size) so that more attention may be given to an author. Each author entry represents a historical survey of the critical response to that author's work: some early criticism is presented to indicate initial reactions, later criticism is selected to represent any rise or decline in the author's reputation, and current retrospective analyses provide students with a modern view. The length of an author entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English, and from foreign criticism in translation. Critical articles and books that have not been translated into English are excluded. Every attempt has been made to identify and include excerpts from the seminal essays on each author's work. Additionally, as space permits, especially insightful essays of a more limited scope are included.

An author may appear more than once in the series because of the great quantity of critical material available, or because of a resurgence of criticism generated by events such as an author's centennial or anniversary celebration, the republication of an author's works, or publication of a newly translated work or volume of letters. Beginning with Volume 13, several author entries in each volume of *TCLC* will feature criticism on single works by major authors who have appeared previously in the series. Only those individual works that have been the subjects of vast amounts of criticism and are widely studied in literature classes will be selected for this in-depth treatment. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* are examples of such entries in *TCLC,* Volume 13.

Organization of the Book

An author entry consists of the following elements: author heading, biographical and critical introduction, principal

works, excerpts of criticism (each followed by a bibliographical citation), and an additional bibliography for further reading.

- The *author heading* consists of the author's full name, followed by birth and death dates. The unbracketed portion of the name denotes the form under which the author most commonly wrote. If an author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the real name given in parentheses on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Also located at the beginning of the introduction to the author entry are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose languages use nonroman alphabets. Uncertainty as to a birth or death date is indicated by a question mark.

- The *biographical and critical introduction* contains background information designed to introduce the reader to an author and to the critical debate surrounding his or her work. Parenthetical material following many of the introductions provides references to biographical and critical reference series published by Gale. These include *Contemporary Authors, Dictionary of Literary Biography, Something about the Author,* and past volumes of *TCLC.*

- The *list of principal works* is chronological by date of first book publication and identifies the genre of each work. In the case of foreign authors where there are both foreign language publications and English translations, the title and date of the first English-language edition are given in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- *Criticism* is arranged chronologically in each author entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over the years. All titles by the author featured in the critical entry are printed in boldface type to enable the user to ascertain without difficulty the works being discussed. Also for purposes of easier identification, the critic's name and the publication date of the essay are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the journal in which it appeared. When an anonymous essay is later attributed to a critic, the critic's name appears in brackets at the beginning of the excerpt and in the bibliographical citation.

- Important critical essays are prefaced by *explanatory notes* as an additional aid to students using *TCLC.* The explanatory notes provide several types of useful information, including: the reputation of a critic; the importance of a work of criticism; the specific type of criticism (biographical, psychoanalytic, structuralist, etc.); a synopsis of the criticism; and the growth of critical controversy or changes in critical trends regarding an author's work. In many cases, these notes cross-reference the work of critics who agree or disagree with each other. Dates in parentheses within the explanatory notes refer to a book publication date when they follow a book title and to an essay date when they follow a critic's name.

- A complete *bibliographical citation* designed to facilitate location of the original essay or book by the interested reader follows each piece of criticism. An asterisk (*) at the end of a citation indicates that the essay is on more than one author.

- Most *TCLC* entries include *illustrations* of the author. Beginning with Volume 13, many entries will also contain illustrations of materials pertinent to an author's career, including holographs of manuscript pages, title pages, dust jackets, letters, or representations of important people and events in an author's life.

- The *additional bibliography* appearing at the end of each author entry suggests further reading on the author. In some cases it includes essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights. An asterisk (*) at the end of a citation indicates that the essay is on more than one author.

An appendix lists the sources from which material in each volume has been reprinted. It does not, however, list every book or periodical consulted in the preparation of the volume.

Cumulative Indexes

Each volume of *TCLC* includes a cumulative index to authors listing all the authors who have appeared in *Contemporary Literary Criticism, Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism,* and *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800,* along with cross-references to the Gale series *Children's Literature Review, Authors in the News, Contemporary Authors, Dictionary of Literary Biography, Something about the Author,* and *Yesterday's Authors of Books for Children.* Users will welcome this cumulated author index as a useful tool for locating an author within the various series. The index, which lists birth and death dates when available, will be particularly valuable for those authors who are identified with a certain period but whose death date causes them to be placed in another, or for those authors whose careers span two periods. For example, F. Scott Fitzgerald is found in *TCLC,* yet a writer often associated with him, Ernest Hemingway, is found in *CLC.*

Each volume of *TCLC* also includes a cumulative nationality index. Author names are arranged alphabetically under their respective nationalities and followed by the volume numbers in which they appear.

A cumulative index to critics is another useful feature in *TCLC*. Under each critic's name are listed the authors on whom the critic has written and the volume and page where the criticism may be found.

Acknowledgments

No work of this scope can be accomplished without the cooperation of many people. The editors especially wish to thank the copyright holders of the excerpted criticism included in this volume, the permission managers of many book and magazine publishing companies for assisting us in securing reprint rights, and Jeri Yaryan for assistance with copyright research. We are also grateful to the staffs of the Detroit Public Library, University of Detroit Library, University of Michigan Library, and Wayne State University Library for making their resources available to us. The editors wish particularly to thank Bernard Garber for his assistance with the entry devoted to Rudolf Steiner.

Suggestions Are Welcome

In response to various suggestions, several features have been added to *TCLC* since the series began. Recently introduced features include explanatory notes to excerpted criticism that provide important information regarding critics and their work, a cumulative author index listing authors in all Gale literary criticism series, entries devoted to criticism on a single work by a major author, and more extensive illustrations.

If readers wish to suggest authors they would like to have covered in future volumes, or if they have other suggestions, they are cordially invited to write the editors.

Authors to Be Featured in *TCLC*, Volumes 14 and 15

Innokenty Annensky (Russian poet and critic)—One of the most important Russian literary theorists of the early twentieth century. Annensky's work profoundly influenced the generation of Russian writers that included Anna Akhamatova and Osip Mandelstam.

Charles A. Beard (American historian)—An important historian who examined the influence of economics on all aspects of American history, including the drafting of the U.S. Constitution.

Kate Chopin (American novelist)—Her novel *The Awakening* is often described as the first novel to examine honestly the plight of women in American society. Chopin has been the subject of a great deal of critical comment during the past decade.

Havelock Ellis (English psychologist and literary critic)—A pioneering researcher in the field of human sexuality, Ellis is largely responsible for the liberalization of British and American attitudes regarding human sexuality. His theories had a wide-ranging effect on twentieth-century literature.

F. Scott Fitzgerald (American novelist)—Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is one of the masterpieces of twentieth-century literature. In an entry devoted solely to that work, *TCLC* will present major critical essays examining every aspect of the novel.

Ford Madox Ford (English novelist)—A major novelist of manners, Ford has been the subject of a critical revival in recent years.

Henrik Ibsen (Norwegian dramatist)—Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* is one of the major works of the twentieth-century stage. *TCLC* will devote an entire entry to critical discussions of this important drama.

William James (American philosopher)—The foremost philosopher America has produced, James examined the metaphysical dilemmas of modern life. *TCLC* will present a summary and explanation of his thought as well as critical reactions to his work.

James Joyce (Irish novelist)—Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* examines the nature of youthful idealism and the role of the artist in modern society. In an entry devoted solely to that work, *TCLC* will present the major critical essays on the novel.

Vladislav Khodasevich (Russian poet)—Called the greatest Russian poet of the twentieth century by Vladimir Nabokov, Khodasevich has been the subject of recent critical interest in the United States.

Ring Lardner (American short story writer)—One of America's greatest humorists, Lardner examined small-town Midwestern life and American provincialism.

David Lindsay (English novelist)—An important writer in the genre of fantasy, Lindsay addressed metaphysical and spiritual questions in novels that strongly influenced the works of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien.

Liu E (Chinese novelist)—His *Travels of Lao Ts'an* is one of the most important Chinese novels of the twentieth century.

Jack London (American novelist)—Although often considered an adventure writer, London examined issues of social equality and personal morality in his fiction. Recent years have witnessed greatly renewed interest in his works.

Thomas Mann (German novelist)—His *Death in Venice* examines the decay of early twentieth-century European civilization and the nature of human passions. *TCLC* will devote an entire entry to critical discussions of this novella.

Émile Nelligan (Canadian poet)—He is often called the Canadian Rimbaud for the intensity of his lyric verse and the tortured quality of his life.

Mori Ogai (Japanese novelist)—An author crucial to an understanding of modern Japan, Ogai examined in his novels the effects of Western influences on traditional Japanese culture.

George Orwell (English novelist and essayist)—During the past two years, his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has been more widely discussed than at any other time since its initial publication. *TCLC* will present the critical history of the work and an extensive survey of recent criticism on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in 1984.

Leo Tolstoy (Russian novelist)—His *Anna Karenin* is considered one of the greatest novels in world literature. *TCLC* will devote an entire entry to the critical history of this work.

Paul Valéry (French poet)—Valéry is widely recognized as one of France's outstanding poets and literary theoreticians. His work bridges the movements of nineteenth-century Symbolism and twentieth-century Modernism.

Additional Authors to Appear in Future Volumes

Abercrombie, Lascelles 1881-1938
Adamic, Louis 1898-1951
Ade, George 1866-1944
Agustini, Delmira 1886-1914
Aldanov, Mark 1886-1957
Aldrich, Thomas Bailey 1836-1907
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Austin, Mary 1868-1934
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Bahr, Hermann 1863-1934
Barea, Arturo 1897-1957
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Benjamin, Walter 1892-1940
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Benson, Stella 1892-1933
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Bodenheim, Maxwell 1892-1954
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Campana, Dina 1885-1932
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Chand, Prem 1880-1936
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Corelli, Marie 1855-1924
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Davidson, John 1857-1909
Day, Clarence 1874-1935
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Feydeau, Georges 1862-1921
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Frank, Bruno 1886-1945
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Fuller, Henry Blake 1857-1929
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Glyn, Elinor 1864-1943
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Gourmont, Remy de 1858-1915
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Lewisohn, Ludwig 1883-1955
Liliencron, Detlev von 1844-1909
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Long, Frank Belknap 1903-1959
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Lugones, Leopoldo 1874-1938
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Pontoppidan, Henrik 1857-1943
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Quiller-Couch, Arthur 1863-1944
Rappoport, Solomon 1863-1944
Riley, James Whitcomb 1849-1916
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Rolland, Romain 1866-1944
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Romero, José Rubén 1890-1952
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Stockton, Frank R. 1834-1902
Sudermann, Hermann 1857-1938
Sully-Prudhomme, René 1839-1907
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Tey, Josephine (Elizabeth Mackintosh) 1897-1952
Tolstoy, Alexei 1882-1945
Turner, W(alter) J(ames) R(edfern) 1889-1946
Vachell, Horace Annesley 1861-1955
Van Dine, S.S. (William H. Wright) 1888-1939
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Veblen, Thorstein 1857-1929
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Webster, Jean 1876-1916
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Zoshchenko, Mikhail 1895-1958
Zweig, Stefan 1881-1942

Readers are cordially invited to suggest additional authors to the editors.

Isaac (Emmanuilovich) Babel

1894-1941

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

Babel is considered Russia's most gifted short story writer of the post-Revolutionary era. His highly compressed, anecdotal fiction makes consistent use of contrast and paradox to emphasize the opposition between violence and passivity, romanticism and primitivism, hero and antihero, and, most importantly, the tension between a traditional Jewish ethos in a non-Jewish environment. The pathetic war sketches of *Konarmiia (Red Cavalry)* and the picaresque stories of *Odesskie rasskazy (The Odessa Tales),* Babel's two most important collections, are praised for their emotional depth and have earned him a prominent reputation as both a brilliant stylist and as a sophisticated observer of human nature.

Born in the Jewish ghetto of Odessa, Babel was the son of a middle-class merchant family. His early education consisted of studies in a local business school and traditional Judaic studies in Hebrew, the Bible, and the Talmud. In his formative years Babel witnessed the full force of anti-Semitism during the pogroms of 1905. The pogroms, which were massive riots led by Cossack horsemen and sanctioned by government authorities, resulted in brutal assaults on Jewish citizens and the devastation of Jewish communities. These ruthless demonstrations fostered Babel's concurrent horror of and fascination with the violent Cossack existence and formed the basis for some of his finest works, including the highly acclaimed autobiographical tales "I storiya mori golubyatnei" ("The Story of My Dovecote") and "Pervaya lyubov" ("First Love"). In 1915, after graduation from Kiev Institute of Finance and Business Studies, Babel moved to Petrograd (formerly St. Petersburg, later Leningrad) with the hope of publishing the few stories he had written in school. While in Petrograd he was greatly encouraged when a fortuitous meeting with the Russian proletarian writer Maxim Gorky resulted in the publication of two of his stories in Gorky's magazine *Letopis'*. Recognizing Babel's raw talent, Gorky advised him to gather more first-hand experiences in order to enhance his future literary works. Babel readily agreed and enlisted in the Russian army, serving during World War I at the Romanian front until he was stricken with malaria. After his military service, he claimed to have worked for a short time in Petrograd with the Cheka, a political police force designated to identify and eliminate counterrevolutionary or anti-Communist groups, and a forerunner to the Soviet Union's present-day KGB. However, Babel's daughter, as well as many critics, have disputed this claim, and the extent of Babel's involvement with the Cheka is still undetermined. Throughout this period he continued to write, publishing several short stories in local journals and newspapers.

His major literary development came in 1919 as a war correspondent with the Red Army. Under the command of Semyon Budyonny, Babel rode with the Cossack cavalry against the Poles and Czarist White forces, and many commentators have found it ironic, if not incredible that these soldiers, who

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had been the source of the destruction Babel witnessed in his youth, became the inspiration for his most important literary achievements. Some critics observe that this incongruity was made possible by Babel's infatuation with the primitivism of the "noble savage" epitomized by the Cossacks, while others believe that Cossack life offered him a welcome escape from the religious and moral orthodoxy of his youth. The sketches recorded in Babel's diary during his attachment to the Red Army were developed into the stories of *Red Cavalry,* now considered by most critics to be his masterpiece. During the 1920s, Babel received considerable literary recognition for these sketches, and for the heroic tales of the Jewish gangster Benya Krik which were later collected in *The Odessa Tales.* Eventually Babel's works were censored by the Soviet regime for their erotic detail and lack of commitment to proletarian causes. Thereafter Babel, who refused to write political propaganda, voluntarily restricted publication of his work. In 1934 Babel remarked on his self-censorship when he declared himself to be "master of a new literary genre, the genre of silence." He was arrested in 1939 after subtly criticizing the Stalinist regime in a screenplay he was writing. It is believed that Babel died while in prison in 1941.

Critics generally focus their discussions of Babel's work on his major collection of stories, *Red Cavalry.* While the impressionistic sketches within the work are diverse in subject matter,

they are linked by the first-person narration of Babel's alter ego Kiril Liutov, by the doleful images of the Revolution, and by Babel's overriding concern with violence. The protagonists of *Red Cavalry* are usually illiterate Cossack soldiers who live by their primitive instincts and find self-esteem in direct proportion to their ability to brutalize for the good of the Revolution. Most critics observe that the major tension throughout *Red Cavalry* is the narrator's subliminal Jewish morality contrasted with the more violent Cossack ethos, and his desire to be no longer alienated from the Cossacks as a "bespectacled intellectual." Lionel Trilling notes: "The stories of *Red Cavalry* have as their principle of coherence what I have called the anomaly, or the joke of a Jew who is a member of a Cossack regiment." Thus, in the story "Moi pervy gus" ("My First Goose"), Liutov is morally unable to take a human life, but still wins the esteem of the Cossack force by ruthlessly murdering an old woman's goose. In addition to this contrast between the narrator and his barbaric comrades, Babel employs exacting detail and laconic prose to facilitate the skillful ironic twists characteristic of most of his stories, reminiscent in technique of the works of Guy de Maupassant. For example, in "Pis' mo" ("The Letter") a son boasts to his mother how he tortured and murdered his father who was on the opposite side of the Revolution; in "Pan Apolek" an itinerant Polish artist who reverently paints local citizens as biblical characters is received as a genuine Christian of true faith until, to the delight of Liutov, he relates a vulgar tale about a marriage between Jesus and the Jewess Deborah. Critics praise the distinctive style of *Red Cavalry,* and although the episodes comprising this work are essentially plotless and anecdotal, they are considered among the finest short stories in Russian literature.

For the most part, the stories of Babel's second major work, *The Odessa Tales,* were written during the same period as the stories of *Red Cavalry.* However, with *The Odessa Tales* Babel turned to the ghetto of his childhood to create a legendary world of Jewish gangsters and racketeers. Benya Krik, the central character in several of these tales, is an elusive criminal who menaces the wealthy Jews of the community. Many critics note that, for Babel, Benya Krik represented a romantic reversal of the downtrodden Jew—an identification Babel tried to abandon in his *Red Cavalry* stories. *The Odessa Tales* are rich in the culture and heritage that he regarded so ambivalently in the works of *Red Cavalry.* Throughout the stories, Babel employed many of the same themes and stylistic elements as in his master work, but critics note that *The Odessa Tales* are primarily based on traditionally romantic and humorous situations, and lack the depth of the more contemporary *Red Cavalry* stories. Of the differences between Babel's two major works, Simon Markish has observed that "despite their stunning stylistic discoveries and innovations, despite their nostalgia for a recent but already irrevocable past, despite the utterly new and unexpected appearance of a bandit-hero in Russian-Jewish literature, the *Odessa Tales* continue and perhaps crown the pre-revolutionary tradition of social observation in this literature, whereas *Red Cavalry* opens a new period and establishes a new tradition."

Babel's works were suppressed in the Soviet Union from the time of his arrest in 1939 until 1954, when the death of Joseph Stalin and the rise to power of Nikita Khrushchev initiated a new freedom in literature and the arts. Babel and many other writers who had been incarcerated for slandering the "image" of Stalin, were posthumously rehabilitated into Soviet culture. Thereafter his stories and some of his previously unpublished works were collected and translated into English. Although Babel produced a relatively small body of work, his fiction has been widely praised by Western readers and critics, and today he is recognized as one of the masters of the Russian short story.

(See also *TCLC,* Vol. 2 and *Contemporary Authors,* Vol. 104.)

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Konarmiia (short stories) 1923
[*Red Cavalry,* 1929]
Rasskazy (short stories) 1925
Istoriia moei golubiatni (short stories) 1926
Zakat (drama) 1927
[*Sunset* published in journal *Noonday,* 1960]
Odesskie rasskazy (short stories) 1931
[*The Odessa Tales* published in *The Collected Stories,* 1955]
Mariia [first publication] (drama) 1935
[*Maria* published in *Three Soviet Plays,* 1966]
Benya Krik, the Gangster, and Other Stories (short stories) 1948
The Collected Stories (short stories) 1955
Isaac Babel: The Lonely Years, 1925-1939 (short stories, letters, essays, and speeches) 1964
I. Babel: Izbrannoe (short stories, dramas, autobiography, letters, and speeches) 1966
You Must Know Everything: Stories 1915-1937 (short stories) 1969
The Forgotten Prose (short stories and diary excerpts) 1978

ALEKSANDR VORONSKIJ (essay date 1925)

[A Russian critic, Vornskij was appointed editor of the first Soviet literary journal Krasnaya Nov' *in 1921. He was a conservative Marxist, and, as such, he judged literature according to its literary significance rather than by its adherence to the political ideology of proletarian art, a method which contrasted with the Marxist belief that literature should present an accurate depiction of objective social reality. For his uncompromising critical method, Voronskij was removed as editor of* Krasnaya Nov' *in 1927 and expelled from the Communist party. A year later he was readmitted to the party only to disappear shortly thereafter. In the following excerpt, Voronskij provides an early assessment of Babel's work. He focuses on Babel as an accomplished miniaturist whose epic style captured the essence of an era in the throes of political and social transformation.]*

There is still no collected works of Babel, but the 100 to 200 pages he has published thus far mark him as a writer of unmistakable maturity. This is not to say that his job is done, that he has fully expressed himself. On the contrary, there is still much to come including his most important work. Babel has not yet realized his full creative potential. Not all his works are at the same artistic level, but his prose already shows firmness, maturity, self-assurance and craftsmanship—testimony to sustained, assiduous effort. Babel has his own voice, his own style, but he takes hold not only because he speaks from "the gut," but also because of his intelligence and his capacity for hard work. This is apparent in almost all his miniatures [vignettes]. Clearly he has been to a workshop. He has

culture, and this is his crucial advantage over the bulk of Soviet fiction writers who are trying to make it on their "guts" and on the sheer wealth of their observations and who consider study and hard work a tedious bourgeois prejudice. That is why it so often happens in our country that after a debut, an artist begins to peter out and go downhill: his first or second appearance has made an impact because he expressed himself so fully and directly that formal lapses either were not noticed by the reader or were forgiven as a warrant of the author's sincerity. To make predictions about writers is an idle pastime, but it is proper to take note of Babel's culture, his intelligence, and the firmness of his talent. These qualities give one the right to hope that Babel will not deteriorate and will not go the way of several of his young confreres.

Babel is miles away from naturalism or flatly descriptive realism, but he is also a far cry from Andrej Belyj. He has something in common with Maupassant, with Chekhov and with Gorky, yet he cannot be bracketed with them either. Maupassant is a skeptic, Chekhov is sad, Gorky is a romantic, and all this is reflected in each one's style. Babel's manner is epic, at times biblically epic. (pp. 182-83)

In his miniatures Babel is impassive, calm, slow. He does not hurry, nor does he hurry the reader. He draws out deliberately his spare, weighty, carefully chosen words. He is epic, even in those instances when he becomes lyrical. But Babel's epic is not the kind that is indifferent to good and evil on the assumption that the past has long become ancient history, the topical has evaporated, and all the passions have died out. Babel tries to be epic in his tales about Budënnyj's Red Cavalry. . . . He writes about the stuff of yesterday, follows in the fresh tracks of recent experience; in essence he is writing about the present. His epic is like a campfire that has just gone out: beneath the ashes hot coals are still glowing. Babel's epic quality is *sui generis;* it is an artistic device, calculated and deliberate. (p. 183)

Actually Babel is not at all impassive, indifferent to good and evil, or calm. He has his own point of view; he has a definite attitude toward the epoch, the people, the events, but he has got a grip on himself as an artist. He speaks simply, without unnecessary verbiage, just as we have become accustomed to living simply and without unnecessary verbiage in the midst of the unusual and unprecedented. More important, he understands that the true artist's task does not lie in hitting the nerves harder, but in touching up the canvas "just a bit," as Lev Tolstoy put it—in singling out unerringly whatever reveals the essence of an object, a person, an episode. (p. 184)

Babel has a way of coupling adjectives with nouns that is startling and apt. "Flaming cloaks," "passionate rags," "a dusty wire of curls," "the thick expanses of the night," "a raspberry-colored wart," "powerful evenings," "the deathly aroma of brocade," "the smoke of a secret murder," "the cool depth of the night," "the orange battles of sunset," "the stuffy air turned sour," "the sparkling sky, inexpressibly empty as always during hours of danger," and so on. Perhaps it is this proclivity for epithets that contributes in part to the slowness, the leisureliness, the expressive, flowing quality of his narration.

Babel is also a lyricist. His lyricism is somewhat dreamy, indolent, cool; it does not hold the reader back, nor does it disturb the rhythm of the narrative. The presence of lyricism, incidentally, exposes the precariousness of his epic manner. Babel plays sly games with the reader; he is not a chronicler, but our passionate contemporary.

Babel is cementing the bond between literature and the Republic of the Soviets and the Communist Party. He is close to us and has a firm sense of what our life and our era are about. One can say without exaggeration that Babel is a new landmark on contemporary literature's tortuous, complex road toward Communism. Though some people fail to see this, the content of Babel's works is absolutely unequivocal. (p. 185)

Aleksandr Voronskij, "Isaac Babel," translated by James Karambelas (originally published under a different title in Literaturnye tipy *by Aleksandr Voronskij, 1925), in* Twentieth-Century Russian Literary Criticism, *edited by Victor Erlich (copyright © 1975 by Yale University), Yale University Press, 1975, pp. 182-97.*

PRINCE D. S. MIRSKY (essay date 1926)

[*Mirsky was a Russian prince who fled his country after the Bolshevik Revolution and settled in London. While in England, he wrote two important and comprehensive histories of Russian literature,* Contemporary Russian Literature *(1926) and* A History of Russian Literature (1927). *In 1932, having reconciled himself to the Soviet regime, Mirsky returned to the U.S.S.R. He continued to write literary criticism, but his work eventually ran afoul of Soviet censors and he was exiled to Siberia. He disappeared in 1937. In the following excerpt Mirsky examines the art of Babel's collection of stories,* Rasskazy. *He finds that Babel combines Russian dialect with a terse, personal form of "journalese" to produce a lively and provocative language that is artistically appealing.*]

Babel, this time is not the great and wicked city of the Bible, but merely a young Russian author of Jewish origin, who has written some short stories of considerable merit [called **"Rasskazy" ("Tales")**]. (p. 581)

Babel's stories are the nearest approach, in contemporary Russian prose, to perfection of form, and to what I venture to call "pure art." "Pure art," in the sense I use it here, is that kind of art where the process of "transforming" the "original experience" into artistic values has been completed, and has left no undistilled residue of "human significance," no "ragged edges" of untransformed "emotion." The distinction between pure and alloyed art, in this sense, has, I think, nothing to do with the now much-discussed distinction of Classic and Romantic: it has nothing to do with the quality of the "original experience," but only with the transforming process. The result of "pure art" is that in a work of this description all the human, psychological, or emotional elements possess no significance apart from their *context* to the whole fabric. The examples that come most readily to my mind are (outside pure poetry) Pushkin's "Queen of Spades" and [Synge's] "The Playboy of the Western World." Babel has another point in common with Synge, and that is his language. All his best things are in dialect, and in a dialect spoken by men not originally of Russian speech—consequently full of "solecisms" and offences against the very spirit of standard Russian. The two dialects he uses with best effect are the Russian Jewish jargon of Odessa and the Russian of the (originally Ukranian-speaking) Cossacks of the Kuban, as modified by badly digested Red journalese. I have, myself, a certain familiarity with the latter form of speech and can testify to Babel's extraordinarily truthful rendering of it. His aim, however, is not to phonograph curious dialect, but to put it to the best artistic use, to open up all its latent pos-

sibilities of vocabulary and syntax—in short to make "language" of it. His dialectical style, like Synge's, has that tightness, that inevitable fullness and saturatedness, that approach it to the language of poetry. There are no "empty" words in Babel's Odessite or Kuban Russian—each single word has its necessary place and is made to contribute to the effect of the whole. Compared to the splendour of his dialectal passages (which are placed in the mouth of his characters), Babel's own "author's" Russian is strikingly different. It possesses a certain vividness, but no distinction. It is a hardly glorified form of the semi-impressionistic journalese that has been worn to rags by Russian journalists within the last twenty or twenty-five years. Babel is fully aware of this limitation. To transcend it is evidently beyond his power, but he exploits it very cleverly, and in some of his best stories plays it off against the glorious speech of his characters to emphasize his own wretched intellectualdom—an object of contempt for the rough-and-ready "Red Fighters" of Comrade Budenny's famous Army. This power of irony at his own (or rather "the narrator's") expense is a very prominent feature in Babel, and it redeems, or even annuls, much that otherwise would have to be considered very serious blemishes. And at times these blemishes remain unredeemed, and make some of his stories little better than clever (always that), but rather tasteless journalism. An instance of this kind is the shrewd, but cheap, skit of Kerensky called **"Colour and Line,"** where that politician's statesmanship is explained by his shortsightedness, which allows him to see, in a crowd, only its colour, but not its outlines.

For a writer who has such a sense of economy and concentration, and who has approached so near to absolute perfection, Babel is curiously uneven. He has a peculiar limitation which seems to be an inability to invent his plots. This would explain why some of his stories are so good, and others so indifferent, or even positively bad. The former are evidently those in which he took a good subject "from life"—the latter those in which he was left to shift for himself. Of the ten stories contained in the little volume before me (the only one so far published, except for a small pamphlet of thirty-two pages), three are as good stories as I have read. The others are either not stories at all or very bad stories. In the former case they are sometimes supremely good journalism, and sometimes first-rate narrative *material* without a narrative skeleton to hold it together.

The three good stories all belong to one of two cycles. The first turns on the person of a famous Jewish bandit of Odessa, Benya (=Ben) Krik, surnamed the King—who I am told by Odessites is a real character, and was called in real life Misha Yaponshik (Mike the Jap). The other cycle relates to the exploits of the Red Fighters of the famous cavalry army of Budenny in the Civil and Polish Wars. The word "cycle" is not irrelevantly reminiscent of things heroic and Homeric. Babel's stories are distinctly heroic in tone, in spite of the slangy dialect used by the heroes, and in spite of a rather extreme form of realism in dealing with previously tabooed subjects and objects. But this mixture of outspoken (*very* outspoken) realism and of heroic romance is seasoned by a zest for shrewd irony—the whole making a mixture of very complex, original, and piquant flavour. In this mixture even Babel's own second-rate journalese, when he speaks in the first person, contributes to complicate the whole and introduce a new and necessary note. From the point of view of extreme complexity of tone (only an advertising agent to some "new and piquant sauce" would be able to find adequate words to describe it), the most remarkable of Babel's stories is **"The King,"** relating to one of the greatest exploits of that great hero. What gives the story its unique flavour is that "the King's" most heroic stroke of cunning against the police has as a background the wedding of his middle-aged and deformed sister to a young man whom he had bought with money—the produce of his robberies. The story ends on this note of sordid but spectacular realism. When in the early morning Benya returns home after assisting with mock sympathy at the fire he had arranged at the police-station, he finds all the wedding guests either gone or asleep.

> Only Droyra [the bride] was not thinking of sleep. With both hands she was pushing her discouraged bridegroom towards the doors of the nuptial chamber, looking at him the while, greedily, like a cat who has the mouse in her mouth, and is slightly trying it in her teeth.

The other two first-rate stories, **"A Letter"** and **"Salt,"** are of the Budenny cycle. Here Babel's manner is to treat the worst horrors and cruelties as a matter of course, a manner common to many of the young writers, but in which no one, not even Vsevolod Ivanov, can rival Babel. In both these stories he uses the form of a letter written by a semi-literate (or dictated by an illiterate) Red Trooper. This gives full scope to his masterly command of language. For the Russian reader these two stories are the daintiest delights in all modern literature. They have the verbal concentration of poetry, they can be learned by heart (several persons of my acquaintance know **"Salt"** practically by heart). **"A Letter"** is a terrible story—a father who is a sergeant-major in the White Army kills his elder son, who is a Red soldier—and for this he is tortured to death by his second son, also a Bolshevik; the story is told in a letter to his mother by the youngest son. The subject of **"Salt"** (which is only a few hundred words long) cannot be summarized, so wonderful is the concentration of the story: it takes the form of a letter of a Red Corporal to the Editor of a Red Front newspaper. It is a joy for ever, a real jewel—in spite of the crass and casual horror of the details. For the horror and filth are without residue distilled into what I cannot call anything but poetry.

To translate Babel quite adequately is, of course, impossible, considering what I have said of his language. But his best stories have sufficient narrative backbone and sufficient art in them to make such a (necessarily inadequate) translation worth the while. (pp. 581-82)

Prince D. S. Mirsky, "Babel," in The Nation and the Athenaeum, *Vol. XXXVIII, No. 17, January 23, 1926, pp. 581-82.*

S[EMYON] BUDYONNY (letter date 1928)

[Budyonny was the commander of the First Cavalry Army to which Babel was assigned as a newspaper correspondent during the Russian Civil War in 1919. It is Budyonny and his regiment who are depicted throughout Babel's Red Cavalry. *When the stories were first published in newspapers and magazines in 1923 and 1924 Budyonny was outraged, and in 1924 he wrote a deprecating letter to the editors of* Krasnaya Nov' *expressing his disapproval of Babel's work. In 1928, in the newspaper* Pravda, *Maxim Gorky wrote an essay entitled "To Rural and War Correspondents—How I Learnt to Write" in which he notes his approval of Babel's portrayal of Budyonny and the Cossacks in* Red Cavalry. *The following excerpted letter is Budyonny's public reply to Gorky's essay and his explanation of his distaste for Babel's stories. For Gorky's reply to Budyonny, see the excerpt below, 1928.]*

Dear Alexei Maximovich,

Our national dailies, *Pravda* and *Izvestia,* on September 30 carried an excerpt from your pamphlet "To Rural and War Correspondents—How I Learnt to Write."

In that piece, in discussing the main trends in literature—Romanticism and Realism—you state the following: . . .

> Comrade Budyonny has pounced upon Babel's ***Red Cavalry*** and I don't believe he should have, because Budyonny himself likes to embellish the outside not only of his men, but of his horses too. Babel, on the other hand, embellished his men on the inside, which, in my opinion, is better and more truthful than what Gogol did for his Zaporozhe Cossacks.
>
> Man is still a beast in many respects and, culturally, he is only an adolescent. It is always useful to embellish and to praise him.

Although it is very difficult for me to argue with you on literary matters, nevertheless, since ***Red Cavalry*** has come up as a subject of discussion once again, I must say that I cannot agree with you, Alexei Maximovich, despite all my respect for you, and I will try to explain why I criticized ***Red Cavalry*** and why I think I did so with good reason.

To start with, I believe [a writer] should know his source material and I dare say Babel was never and could never have been a genuine, active combat soldier in the First Cavalry. I know that he hung around with some unit deep in the rear, one of those units that, to our misfortune, were always a drag upon our fighting men. To be precise, Babel was in the backwaters of our First Cavalry.

What does Babel write about that gives him the right to use such a broad title as ***Red Cavalry***?

Babel indulges in old women's gossip, digs into old women's garbage, and tells with horror about some Red Army man taking a loaf of bread and a chicken somewhere. He invents things that never happened, slings dirt at our best Communist commanders, lets his imagination run wild, simply lies . . .

The subject matter of Babel's stories is distorted by the impressions of an erotomanic author. His topics range from the ravings of a mad Jew to the looting of a Catholic church, to the thrashing the cavalrymen give to their own foot soldiers, to the portrayal of a syphilitic Red Army man and end with a display of the author's scientific curiosity, when he wishes to see what a Jewish woman raped by about ten Makhno men looks like. Just as he looks upon life as a sunny meadow in May with mares and stallions on it, so he also views the operations of the Red Cavalry and he sees them through the prism of eroticism.

I happen to know for certain that while Babel saw women's breasts and bare legs around the army's field kitchens, Pani Eliza's servants' quarters, in the middle of the forest, awake and asleep, in various combinations, there were a few other things the First Cavalry was doing that Babel did not see.

And that's quite natural and understandable. How could Babel possibly have seen from the deep rear the spots where the fate of the workers and peasants was being decided. He just couldn't have.

I believe that if Babel wanted to give a title which would correspond to his genre of writing, he should have called his book *In the Backwaters of the Red Cavalry*. That would have been more accurate.

Now I ask: did the author maintain even the most elementary truthfulness, the least respect for historical perspective that is a must for realistic art? He didn't and it is the more shocking in that he is dealing with men of whom some are still alive and with facts familiar to every Red Army man. Alas, Alexei Maximovich, there is not the least concern for truthfulness in it.

I believe, Alexei Maximovich, that you will agree with me that to describe the heroic class struggle, a struggle unprecedented in the history of mankind, it is necessary before anything else to grasp the nature of those classes, i.e., to at least be partly familiar with Marxist dialectics. And it so happens that Babel doesn't qualify by those standards. And that is why his attempt to depict the life and the traditions of the First Cavalry reads like a lampoon and is permeated by a petty-bourgeois outlook.

Of course, the heroic fighters of the First Cavalry are simple, plain, often almost illiterate, men, but "pieces of art" like this one, appearing at a moment when we are witnessing decisive battles between labor and capital, are not only unwelcome, but, I believe, outright harmful.

That is why I have criticized Babel's ***Red Cavalry.*** And I am not the only one to do so, for all the revolutionary masses with whom we are building socialism before your eyes are on my side.

How can one say, in view of all this, that Babel depicted his Red Cavalrymen better and more truthfully than Gogol did his Zaporozhe Cossacks? Is it possible that a sensitive person like you, Alexei Maximovich, has failed to feel that, even when he gave us his "beautiful untruth" about the Zaporozhe Cossacks, Gogol, being a great artist, avoided a sordid tone, while Babel, the alleged realist, has so embellished his fighting men from inside that, to this day, I keep receiving letters protesting against his crude, deliberate and arrogant slander of the First Red Cavalry.

For a long time, we have considered Babel's book as a lampoon, and I wouldn't have mentioned it again if it hadn't been mentioned by you, Alexei Maximovich, just when you were telling our new proletarian rural and war correspondents how to write.

I do not think that they should describe the inspiration of our days the way Babel did. (pp. 384-87)

> *S[emyon] Budyonny, in a letter to Maxim Gorky, translated by Andrew R. MacAndrew (originally published in* Krasnaya Gazeta, *October 26, 1928), in* Isaac Babel: The Lonely Years 1925-1939 *by Isaac Babel, edited by Nathalie Babel, translated by Andrew R. MacAndrew and Max Hayward (reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc.; copyright © 1964 by Farrar, Straus and Company, Inc.), Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964, pp. 384-87.*

M[AXIM] GORKY (letter date 1928)

[A Russian novelist and critic, Gorky is recognized as one of the earliest and foremost exponents of socialist realism in literature. A Marxist theory, socialist realism demands of all the arts an accurate, realistic representation of the evolution of the socialist state. Adhering to this aesthetic principle, Gorky's brutal, yet romantic portraits of the working class had an inspirational effect

on the oppressed people of his native land. From 1920 until his death in 1936, he was considered Russia's greatest living writer; today Gorky is acclaimed in the Soviet Union as the voice of the proletariat and a model for all socialist writers. The following excerpt is Gorky's reply to Semyon Budyonny's attack on Babel's works (see excerpt above, 1928).]

Dear Comrade Budyonny,

I cannot agree with your opinion of Babel's ***Red Cavalry*** and I firmly protest your evaluation of that talented writer.

You say that Babel "hung around with some unit deep in the rear." That cannot take anything away either from Babel or his book. In order to make soup the cook does not have to sit in the pot. The author of *War and Peace* never took part in the fighting against Napoleon, and Gogol was not a Zaporozhe Cossack.

You talk about Babel's erotomania. I have just re-read Babel's book and I found no symptoms of that disease in it, although, of course, I do not wish to deny the presence of certain erotic details in his stories. And this is as it should be. War always awakens an enraged eroticism. And that is something you can learn from any war, from the behavior of the Germans in Belgium, as well as from the behavior of the Russians in East Prussia. I am inclined to consider it a natural although abnormal heightening of the instinct for the preservation of the species, an instinct common in people who are facing death.

I am a careful reader but I didn't find in Babel's book anything that suggests a "lampoon." On the contrary, his book awakened love and respect in me for the fighting men of the Red Cavalry by showing them to me as real heroes—they are fearless and they feel deeply the greatness of their cause. I cannot think of another such colorful, lively portrayal of individual fighting men, another such description of the psychology of the mass of the Red Army that would have helped me to understand the strength that enabled it to accomplish that extraordinary campaign; it has no parallel in Russian literature.

The attack of the French cavalry in Zola's *La Débâcle* shows only the mechanical movement of the mass of fighters and their mechanical clash.

Nor can I agree with you that our fighting men are "simple plain men." I wouldn't have thought they were even without Babel, who with such talent has supplemented my understanding of the heroism of an army which is the first in history to know what it is fighting for and what it is going to go on fighting for.

Allow me to tell you, Comrade Budyonny, that the abrupt and unjustified tone of your letter visits an undeserved insult on a young writer.

Our writers live in a moment of transition under the complex conditions of a country in which there are at least 20,000,000 individual owners and only 2,000,000 Marxists, of whom almost half mouth Marxist precepts about as intelligently as parrots repeat human words. It is impossible under these conditions to make very strict demands of ideological consistency upon these writers. Our life is contradictory and it is not at all as didactic as the past, which can easily teach us whom to love and whom to hate. A writer is a man who lives by the truth, using the color of imagination in order to generate in his reader a reaction of active love or active hatred. You must not forget that people have been brought up with religious views on ownership and that all the misfortunes, all the tragedies of life, all its nasty sides, are rooted in the proprietary instinct which from ancient times has been celebrated as the foundation of the state and the main source of private happiness.

Cover of Red Cavalry, *the first volume of Babel's* Collected Works *(1928).*

It is impossible to re-educate in ten years people who have been brought up for thousands of years to worship gold and money. But we, in our own interest, must make allowances for and treat carefully every man who can help us in our struggle against the decaying but still strong props of the disgraceful past. Babel is a talented man. There are not so many of us that we can afford to spurn talented and useful men. You are not right, Comrade Budyonny! You are mistaken, and you have forgotten that scores of thousands of your fighting men heed your judgments. To be correct and useful a critic must be objective and considerate of our young literary forces. (pp. 387-89)

M[axim] Gorky, in a letter to Semyon Budyonny, translated by Andrew R. MacAndrew (originally published in Pravda, *November 27, 1928), in* Isaac Babel: The Lonely Years 1925-1939 *by Isaac Babel, edited by Nathalie Babel, translated by Andrew R. MacAndrew and Max Hayward (reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc.; copyright © 1964, by Farrar, Straus and Company, Inc.), Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964, pp. 387-89.*