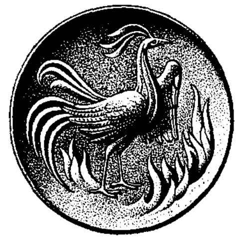
An essay review of "You Must Know Everything: Stories 1915-1937," by Isaac Babel, translated from the Russian by Max Hayward (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 283 pp., $5.95)



# A Poignant Polarity

by CURT LEVIANT

With the appearance of Isaac Babel's *Collected Stories* in 1955 a new generation of English-speaking readers was introduced to one of the most brilliant of Soviet writers. Subsequent reports that the author had died in a Soviet concentration camp strengthened the sense of finality that always surrounds such a title. Yet, to our surprise and pleasure, over the years "new stories by I. Babel" were discovered and published in England, the United States, and ultimately Soviet Russia.

Born in Odessa in 1894, Babel attended that city's commercial high school, but was unable to gain admission to the university because of the Jewish quota. He also studied Hebrew, Bible and Talmud until he was sixteen. A protégé of the great Maxim Gorky, Babel first began publishing in 1916, gained fame overnight with the publication of *Red Cavalry* in 1925, then fell victim to the increasingly repressive measures of the Stalin régime. He was arrested in 1939, and, although his official death certificate is dated March 17, 1941, his daughter Nathalie asserts in an introduction to his collected letters that Babel may have been shot immediately after his arrest. In 1957 he was officially rehabilitated in the Soviet Union, and his collected works were reissued, with Ilya Ehrenburg as editor.

Since 1957 a number of additional writings by Babel have appeared in periodicals and in book form. In 1964 his devoted daughter, now living in New York, issued *The Lonely Years: 1925-1939*, a collection of stories and letters; that same year a Soviet literary magazine published eight of Babel's stories and some fifty letters, and in 1966 two greatly expanded editions of Babel's collected works appeared in Russia, containing stories, plays, letters, and miscellaneous pieces. His final reacceptance into the mainstream of Soviet literature was confirmed when a chapter was devoted to him in the enlarged second edition of the *History of Soviet Literature* (1967).

As with the works of many writers who belong to a minority culture but write in the language of the majority, there is inherent in Isaac Babel's stories the tension of the man who clings simultaneously to the ethos of the majority *and* of the minority, even when they are in conflict. In the Soviet Union this calls for caution and perspicuity, and perhaps even conscious ambiguity, especially if the minority is Jewish. This fence-straddling is readily apparent in Babel's short stories.

The fictional persona in his stories (perhaps Babel himself, perhaps not: the crucible of art has subsumed autobiography) is a man who is buttressed by Jewish skepticism and critical, robust humor; yet at the same time he is an active son of the Revolution. Occasionally the persona-narrator switches roles, from soul-searching idealist to camera lens objectively recording violence. The interplay of these two, replete with irony and covert jabs at Soviet life, gives both potency and poignancy to his work.

Babel's central themes are childhood, war, and life in Odessa. The stories of his early years, his portrait of the artist as a young Jew, may be considered true artistically if not autobiographically. In a letter written in 1931 Babel states: "The subjects of the stories are all taken from my childhood but, of course, there is much that has been made up and changed." These stories depict the reactions of a sensi-

CURT LEVIANT edited the recently published Sholom Aleichem anthology, *Some Laughter, Some Tears*.

# SR: BOOKS

*Book Review Editor:* ROCHELLE GIRSON

tive boy to the torments of a pogrom, as well as to his developing awareness of the outside world.

One of them, "The Story of My Dovecot" (*Collected Stories*, 1955), opens with the difficulties experienced by a Jewish lad in gaining admission to a *gymnasium* and ends when his pet pigeon is smashed against his skull at the height of the pogrom. Another tale, "Awakening," shows how the youngster learns about the world of nature. Skipping his violin lessons, he roams the waterfront and befriends an old man who, noting that the youth cannot name any tree, flower or bird, undertakes to instruct him. Young Babel is told that he must become acquainted with nature before he can write. A typical Jewish child, Babel was more at home with the ancient sages than in the world around him. "In my childhood," he writes, "chained to the *Gemara* [Talmud], I had led the life of a sage. When I grew up, I started climbing trees."

Like the works of all good artists, the stories contain multilevel nuances. As with the doubletalk developed by Babel and other Russians when they spoke publicly of the régime or of Soviet literature, each word contained a thousand pictures. This is especially true in *Red Cavalry*, tales of the Cossacks on the Polish front, where an additional motif is discovered: the bespectacled narrator's efforts to become a member of a group whose values are alien to his. Babel among the Cossacks was (as Kafka once said of himself) triply alienated: a Jew amid gentiles, an intellectual amid boors, and a bourgeois amid peasants; and all these contradictions are mirrored in the seemingly objective and often brutal war stories. But the objectivity of Babel's prose, despite its intense, almost intoxicating lyricism, is deceptive. It is up to the alert reader to penetrate the hidden layers. Compare, for instance, "A Letter" and "Gedali," both contained in the 1955 collection. In the first story Vasily, an illiterate soldier in the Red army, has the narrator write a letter for him to his mother. He asks her to take care of his horse, describes the country and its grain, then casually relates how he and his father, who was fighting with the anti-Bolshevik forces, cut up Vasily's brother Theo. Later he tells how his other brother, Simon, finished off his father. The letter concludes with a reminder about the horse.

The brilliant sketch "Gedali" can serve as the focal point for the polarity between Babel the sensitive Jew and Babel the revolutionary. One Friday evening the narrator, remembering Sabbath eves long past with their candles and sacred texts, visits the pious Gedali, who wants the best of both worlds: "The Revolution—we will say 'yes' to it, but are we to say 'no' to the Sabbath?"

Gedali acquiesces to the revolution, but he will not give up his Judaism. With a combination of Greek logic and Talmudic reasoning, he infers that although the revolution is good, bad men are leading it: "Good men do good deeds. The Revolution is the good deed of good men. But good men do not kill. So it is bad people that are making the Revolution." Gedali knows the *Internationale*, but, like a prophet of old, wants "an Internationale of good people."

These two stories represent the poles of Babel's literary metaphysics. And it is their corruscating interplay that contains the core of Babel's art—the art the Soviet régime had to silence.

Evidence of Babel's attitude toward his craft is scattered throughout his stories, letters, interviews, and the memoirs of his contemporaries. They all point to an artist whose standards were exacting and severe. In his famed "Guy de Maupassant," a story about a young writer who is helping a matron translate the French master's tales into Russian, the hero-narrator declares: "When a sentence is born, it is good and bad at the same time. The secret is to give it the right twist—a scarcely perceptible one. The lever must rest in your hand and get warm. Then you must turn it the right way—only once, not twice." And: "I began to speak of style, of the army of words, of the army in which all kinds of weapons may come into play. No iron can stab the heart with such force as a period put just at the right place." In the appendix to the present volume Konstantin Paustovsky notes that Babel "wrote slowly and always put off handing in his manuscripts. He lived in a constant panic at the thought of words that could no longer be altered, and he was always trying to gain time—just a few more days, or even hours—so that he could sit over his manuscript a little longer and go on polishing, with no one pressing him or getting in his way." And Ilya Ehrenburg recalls: "Writing was sheer agony for him, and he would rewrite the same page dozens of times. It often took him a day to do a quarter of a page, and even at the best of times he could only manage half a page."

**Isaac Babel: "No iron can stab the heart with such force as a period put just at the right place."**

It is in the light of this that we should read *You Must Know Everything*, translated by Max Hayward and edited by Nathalie Babel. In these stories we are once again immersed in the special world of *Red Cavalry* and *Tales from Odessa*. Here too is that unique combination of passion and verbal precision, that same confident sense of craft and esthetic dedication. Reading these stories is like encountering old friends, for many sketches have mirror images in those previously published. Whether parallel or antipodal, they offer a fascinating glimpse into an artist's literary atélier.

The title story, written in 1915, focuses on Babel's Jewish boyhood in Odessa; it brings to mind the violin lessons we read about in "Awakening" (1930) and the members of Babel's family portrayed in other stories. In this sketch the twenty-one-year-old Babel had already outlined the literary path he was to follow: keen observation, highlighted detail, and swift characterization. In four concentrated lines we sense the austere grandmother and the unmanned violin teacher:

> [The teacher] felt very out of place in this remote room, in the presence of the peacefully sleeping dog and the frosty old woman sitting in the corner. At last he took his leave. Grandmother coldly gave him her large leathery and wrinkled hand, but she made not the slightest movement with it. As he left, he bumped into a chair.

The scene changes in "On the Field of Honor" and "The Deserter." Published in 1920, they are adaptations of selections from a florid, bombastic World War I journal by a French captain, Gaston Vidal, published in 1918.

They tell of a French village idiot who refuses to fight and is shot, and of a deserter who is executed by a polite, considerate commanding officer.

"The Quaker" with its tension between a pacifist and a sadist can vie with the best of the *Red Cavalry* tales. It has its parallel in the *Red Cavalry*, where the narrator cannot bring himself to shoot a mortally wounded soldier who in his agony is begging to be killed. "You guys in specs," says another soldier, "have as much pity for chaps like us as a cat has for a mouse."

The centrality of violence in Babel is manifest in this collection, too, especially in the war stories. The perpetual struggle within him between the values of his Jewish upbringing and the code of war is nowhere more apparent than in "And Then There Were None," which is a more subjective, more impassioned treatment of the execution of Polish prisoners than the later version, "Squadron Commander Trunov," found in the 1955 *Collected Stories*.

One of the most delightful pieces is "Shabos Nahamu," which concerns the legendary Jewish wit, pauper and trickster Hershele Ostropoler. It is a comic tale worthy of Sholom Aleichem (Babel, incidentally, edited a Russian edition of Sholom Aleichem's works in the 1920s). Hershele goes out hunting for a meal and, by a series of inspired bluffs, succeeds in passing himself off as a heavenly messenger to a simple-minded housewife and, later, her equally simple husband.

Other pieces can be mentioned that reflect those in the *Collected Stories*. "Odessa" pleads for sunlight in Russian literature, as opposed to Dostoevskeyan gloom—the kind of light-heartedness found in Babel's comic tales of the Jewish gangster Benya Krik. "Inspiration," which tells of a bad writer who reads his story to Babel, recalls once more "Guy de Maupassant" with its guidelines for proper writing.

This volume, with its appended interview with Babel and reminiscences by four friends who lovingly recreate the man and the artist, expands our knowledge of one of the masters of twentieth-century fiction.

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# Book Forum

*Letters from Readers*

### Outrageously Scrambled

MILLER WILLIAMS obviously intended to include a poem of mine, "The Outrageously Blessed," in his pleasant review of my collection *The Company of Children* [*SR*, June 14], but your wry typesetter—probably unable to resist the temptation offered by the poem's praise of "confusion" and its claim that among the "maddening exceptions" we cherish are "lines that need not scan"—managed not only to alter punctuation and diction, but to scramble the whole thing into incomprehensible *prose*! Dear Typesetter, the lines may not need to scan, but they'd love to be allowed to *swing* a little. The poem in its form as a poem appears below.

THE OUTRAGEOUSLY BLESSED

The gods would have us chastened through confusion,
so those who tempt the skies' outrage are blessed.
Though Zeus might be a cupboy for the thanks he gets
from these,
the pretty boys who'd fall asleep
disputing with slow Socrates,
they're still the ones who catch the key equations
and laugh to straw the schoolmen and the schools;
they win the game by changing all the rules.

Small comfort to the sane, who do their best,
to find we cherish maddening exceptions:
the lines that need not scan; the gulfs in nature;
the odds and irritants our cosmic oyster cannot digest
as the pearl grows precious in its queer success.

BARRY SPACKS,
Wellesley, Mass.

### Back to the Dark Ages?

I AM HORRIFIED that Haskel Frankel [*SR*, June 14] should take seriously a practitioner of that hoary superstition, astrology.

In the name of all common sense, what is happening to us? Are we going back to the Dark Ages?

MIRIAM ALLEN DEFORD,
San Francisco, Calif.

### More Light

As I READ HASKEL FRANKEL'S account of the party celebrating publication of *The Homosexual Handbook* [*SR*, June 14] my fun was tempered somewhat by what I considered his feeling it necessary to point out that he went but reluctantly, isn't really . . . ugh! . . . one of them, etc.

If anything matches the pathology involved in the sufferers' situation (yeah, I know, boys, you're actually a superior, gifted, distinguished group, unlike us vulgarly normal louts), it is the way their affliction manages to disconcert the rest of us. Thus, I'm not sure I could've written a less apologetic report than did Frankel, had I been in his place. Tradition has made it virtually impossible for the heterosexual male to evince even a slight interest in the subject without defensively emphasizing where he truly stands. The remedy, to be sure, is more and more light, leading to maximal objectivity.

JOSEPH GANCHER,
Albany, N.Y.

### Peripatetic Recluse

ROLLENE W. SAAL, in her Pick of the Paperbacks for May 31, makes the statement that Anaïs Nin, whose *Diary I* was recently published in paperback, "more recently has lived as a semi-recluse in Greenwich Village." Is Miss Saal perhaps thinking of another "somewhat mysterious literary figure," namely Djuna Barnes, the author of *Nightwood?*

Miss Nin has been anything but a recluse, dividing her time between California, New York and Europe, appearing on numerous college campuses, writer's workshops, on TV and radio, autographing parties, *et al.* As a matter of fact, I sometimes have trouble keeping up with her itinerary.

GUNTHER STUHLMANN,
New York, N.Y.

### No Stolen Thunder

WE WERE DELIGHTED TO SEE *A Manual of Style* so handsomely reviewed in David Glixon's round-up of reference books, [*SR*, May 17]. Morris Philipson, however, although honored to be referred to as its editor, does not wish to steal the thunder from his own manuscript editing staff. Members of this staff, present and former, a few people from other presses, contributed materially and "persons too numerous to mention by name" contributed suggestions. The title page leaves the editorship in discreet anonymity and the people chiefly involved are mentioned in the preface.

DOROTHY B. SUTHERLAND,
The University of Chicago Press,
Chicago, Ill.

### Posthumous Declaration

IF, AS GAY WILSON ALLEN STATES in his review of *Thomas Wolfe's Albatross* [*SR*, June 21], Mr. Wolfe declared anything in 1940, the novelist must have said: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead." Although his last two novels were published posthumously, Wolfe died September 15, 1938.

E. CLAY RANDOLPH,
Gainesville, Tex.