

**REVOLUTION AS AN ESTHETIC PHENOMENON:**

**Nietzsche's Spectacles on the Nose and Autumn in the Heart  
of Isaac Babel's Russian Readers (1923-1932).**

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My natural readers and  
listeners are even now  
Russians, Scandinavians and  
Frenchmen -- will it always be  
that way?  
F. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*

A versiojn of this essay was published in the volume *Nietzsche In Soviet Culture*  
(Oxford University Press, 1994).

Nietzsche, the Russian Nietzsche, to be precise, holds the key to understanding Babel's success in the 1920s. A few juxtapositions will suffice to amplify the presence of Nietzschean overtones in the reception of Babel's fiction:<sup>1</sup>

Nietzsche:

*Dare to devote some thought to the problem of restoring the health of a people which has been impaired by history, to how it may recover its instincts and therewith its integrity.*

*On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History For Life.*<sup>2</sup>

Babel:

Before saying goodbye, the Chief of Staff wrote a resolution over his grievance: "Restorate the above described stud to its primordial status."

"The Story of a Horse" (p. 84)<sup>3</sup>

Nietzsche:

*You say it is the good cause that hallows even war? I say unto you: it is the good war that hallows any cause. War and courage have accomplished more great things than love of the neighbor. Not your pity but your courage has so far saved the unfortunate.*

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<sup>1</sup> I was first alerted to Babel's Nietzscheanism by the thoughtful and thought-provoking study of James E. Falen, Isaac Babel, Russian Master of Short Story (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1974). I subsequently took up the issue in my essay, "Fat Tuesday in Odessa: Isaac Babel's 'Di Grasso' as Testament and Manifesto," The Russian Review 40, no. 2 (1981):101-21, developing it in my "Isaak Babel," in European Writers: The Twentieth Century (New York: Scribners, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life*, trans. and Intro. by Peter Preuss (Indianapolis, 1980), p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> All citations of Babel's texts, unless otherwise noted, are from *Izbrannoe*, intro. by L. Poliak, comment. by E. Krasnoshchekova (Moscow, 1966). All translations are mine.

*Thus Spake Zarathustra*<sup>4</sup>

Babel:

Afonka stuck the papers into his boot and fired a shot into Dolgushev's mouth. "Afonya," I said with a pathetic smile, and rode up to the Cossack, "I just couldn't do it." "Get away," he said, turning pale, "I'm gonna kill you! You jerks with specs, you take pity on us folks like a cat pities its mouse..."

"The Death of Dolgushev" (p. 67)

Nietsche:

*Only where the state ends, there begins the human being who is not superfluous: there begins the song of necessity, the unique and inimitable tune. Where the state ends--look there, my brothers! Do you not see it, the rainbow and the bridges of the overman?*

Z, 52

Babel:

"Where does police begin," he screamed, "and Benya ends?"  
"Police ends where Benya begins," replied reasonable people."

"How It Was Done In Odessa" (p.169)

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<sup>4</sup> *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. by Thomas Common, in F. Nietzsche, *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, intro. by Willard Huntington Wright (NY: Modern Library, 1954), p. 48.

Alexander Blok:

*Man is a beast; man is a plant, a flower; he shows the qualities of extreme cruelty, seemingly inhuman, animal cruelty, and the qualities of primordial tenderness -- equally inhuman, almost vegetative...*

"The Collapse of Humanism"<sup>5</sup>

Babel:

You are tiger, lion, cat. You can spend the night with a Russian woman and the Russian woman will be satisfied.

"How It Was Done in Odessa" (p. 165)

## **THE IRONY AND THE PATHOS OF THE REVOLUTION**

It is a truth universally acknowledged that post-revolutionary Russian prose, with its palpable verbal texture and penchant for paradox -- two key features of Babel's art -- was a direct heir to the literary patrimony of the preceding decade. Continuity extended to other areas as well, not the least of it, because most of the stars who graced the post-1917 horizon had either been launched on the course before the revolution (Babel, for one), or had been shaped by and matured in the twilight years of the Russian empire (Zoshchenko, Olesha, Lunts). But even though they were rooted in the literary institutions of the old regime and largely unfettered by the new ones,<sup>6</sup> these authors could not write, could not afford to write, in Zoshchenko's understated phrase, "as though nothing had happened."<sup>3</sup> The workhorse solution for this dilemma, common in a period of rapid change, was the

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<sup>5</sup> A. Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh*, ed. by M. A. Dudina et al., vol. 4 (1982), p. 346.

<sup>6</sup> B. Eikhenbaum, "V ozhidanii literatury," *Russkij sovremennik* 1 (1924):280-296. See also his, "V poiskakh zhanra," *ibid.* no. 3 (1924):228-31.

<sup>3</sup> M. Zoshchenko, "Literatura dolzhna byt' narodnoi," in his *1035-1937* (Leningrad, 1937), p. 394. Cited in M. Chudakova, *Poetika Mikhaila Zoshchenko* (Moscow, 1979), p. 70.

deployment of the ironic mode.<sup>4</sup> By and large, the ironic effect was produced by the use of local dialects and a densely metaphoric style (the "ornamental prose") or by using the technique of *skaz*.<sup>5</sup> Both approaches were a foil for the stylistically "unmarked" prose and the "standard" literary Russian associated inevitably with the centralized order of the departed state and its objectifying institutions.

Likewise, in searching for forms of emplotment, writers could no longer draw sustenance from the certainties of affirming or denying the truths of religion, science, progressive secular ideologies of the Enlightenment, not to mention everybody's tried-and-true favorite, the oppression of the old regime. Instead, they tended to structure their narratives along the lines of irreconcilable conflict and paradox, pitched a few ironic registers below Dostoevsky's high tragedy or the symbolists' fascination with an apocalyptic *mêlée* (Blok's *The Twelve*, Pilniak's *The Naked Year* or Vsevolod Ivanov's *Dityo* can serve as prime examples). This ironic trend in the culture, which had bade farewell to the world of the old regime, provided a nurturing environment for Nietzschean paradigms, which had been deeply, at times seamlessly assimilated (as well as contaminated) by the Russian intelligentsia.<sup>6</sup> The resurgence of "the new barbarism," provoked by the Great War<sup>7</sup> and culminating in the civil war, made Nietzschean formulae

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<sup>4</sup>For an excellent discussion of this issue, see M. Chudakova, "Puti slova v proze 1920-kh-1930-kh godov," in *Poetika Mikhaila Zoshchenko*, pp. 98-130. See also my "Dying As Metaphor and the Ironic Mode," in *The Coat of Many Colors: Osip Mandelstam and His Mythologies of Self-Presentation* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1987).

<sup>5</sup>I define *skaz* as a first-person narrative which contains elements of vocabulary and grammar which (1) are not normally associated with published literature and (2) define the narrator as a social inferior of the implied reader. Cf. Boris Eikhenbaum, "Illiuziia skaza," in his *Skvoz' literaturu: Sbornik statei* (Leningrad, 1923), pp. 152-57. V. V. Vinogradov, "Porblema skaza v stilistike," in *Poetika: Vremennik Slovsesnogo otdela Gosudartvennogo instituta teorii iskusstv* (Leningrad, 1926), pp. 24-40). Mikhail Bakhtin, "Tipy prozaicheskogo slova. Slovo u Dostoevskogo," in *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo* (Moscow, 1963), pp.242-73. M. Chudakova, "Netozhdestvennost' avtorskogo slova," in her *Poetika Mikhaila Zoshchenko*, pp. 64-97.

<sup>6</sup>See discussion in *Nietzsche In Russia*, especially, the preface by George Kline and the Introduction by Bernice Glatzer-Rozenthal). The Nietzscheanism of Viacheslav Ivanov, a key figure in the Russian Symbolist movement, deserves further study (see Patricia Ann Mueller-Vollmer's Ph.D. Thesis, "Dionysos reborn : Vjaceslav Ivanov's theory of symbolism" (Stanford University, 1985). His cultural and religious theories, which received their most powerful impetus in an early "revelatory" reading of Nietzsche, illustrate both the "seamlessness" and "contamination" of the Nietzsche assimilation. Adopting Nietzsche's aesthetics and the fundamental existential antinomies, Ivanov had no trouble in combining them with his ideosyncratic Russian populism and Christianity. For an analysis, see my "In Place of a Biography," in my *A Coat of Many Colors: Osip Mandelstam and His Mythologies of Self-Presentation*.

<sup>7</sup>"Not only has the Great War has laid bare all the decrepitude of the higher values, their inability to prevent the bloody catastrophe, but it made them into manifest allies in its crimes. In what name was the War fought? It was in the name of the motherland, faith, culture, science, freedom, art, morality, justice." A. Voronskii, "Iz sovremennykh nastroyenii (po povodu odnogo spora," *Krasnaia nov'* 3 (1921):247. A heavy ironist, he.

particularly useful for making sense out of what was perceived as both an epochal cataclysm and an epochal opportunity for fundamental renewal.

*Correspondence Out of the Opposite Corners*,<sup>8</sup> the famous, indeed exemplary, polemic between Viacheslav Ivanov and Mikhail Gershenzon, is a case in point, and contemporary response to it, in particular, the essays by Boris Schloezer and Aleksandr Voronsky -- one published in the Paris *Sovremennye zapiski*, the other in *Krasnaia nov'* -- deserves our attention both as a convenient point of departure for the subsequent discussion and because they help dispel whatever skepticism there may exist regarding a profound, to coin a term, Nietzscheanism of the Russian intelligentsia.

The Nietzschean paradigm of *The Correspondence*, as witnessed by Schloezer and A. Voronsky, among others,<sup>9</sup> was plainly apparent to their contemporaries as much as a belief that the events of the preceding decade had been unfolding more or less in keeping with the script proposed by the "philosopher with a hammer." Philosophy's dream about the unity of theory and practice (Nietzsche converges on this point with the champions of the hammer-wielding proletariat) as well as the artists' dream of breathing life into art seemed to be coming true. As Schloezer put it, mental creativity ceased to be "merely fiction, allegory, game of wits, but became a matter of ultimate urgency, of a here-and-now decision which would not, as before, remain suspended in the air but actually generate action." Voronsky could not agree more:

For us, the grave diggers of the old world, the cause of the struggle against the old has gone so far that our evaluation of our heritage have long ceased to be a matter of theory, but have come to acquire, with each passing day, practical urgent significance.<sup>10</sup>

For the times are truly peculiar," Schloezer went on with his meditative review,

life has become remarkably accepting, in some ways pliable, malleable: the powerful joints that have held it together have crumbled, new unknown strata have emerged capable of serving as material for new forms, forms to one's liking -- so it seems.

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<sup>8</sup>Viach. I. Ivanov and Mikhail O. Gershenzon, *Perepiska iz dvukh uglov* (Petersburg: Alkonost, 1921).

<sup>9</sup>Voronskii, "Iz sovremennykh literaturnykh nastroenij," *Krasnaia nov'* 3 (1921):244-255. P.S. Kogan, "Viach. Ivanov i M.O. Gershenzon, 'Perepiska iz dvukh uglov'" (rev.), *Pechat' i revoliutsiia* 3 (1921); Mikhail Kuzmin, "Mechtateli," in his *Uslovnosti: Stat'i ob iskusstve* (Petrograd, 1923).

<sup>10</sup>A. Voronskii, "Iz sovremennykh nastroenii (po povodu odnogo spora)," *Krasnaia nov'* 3 (1921):244.

Everything is in flux, everything is dissipating, creeping, seeping -- shapeless and chaotic. This prompts an arrogant thought: let's take advantage of the dissolution [...] to become an artist, to create a culture of free artists which in his dreams Nietzsche, too, had tried to anticipate.<sup>11</sup>

Gershenson and Ivanov spoke at each other from the opposite corners: for Ivanov, revolution established one more rung on culture's "ladder of Eros," a *sui generis* contraction along which humanity was able to retrieve its primordial immutable memories even as it ascends to God; for Gershenson, revolution was a burst of liberation, return to innocence, freedom from cultural "fetishism," an unprecedented opportunity for creativity. Yet, the two ostensible opposites are framed amply, with space to spare, by the teaching of Nietzsche -- because, as Schloezer insisted (and Voronsky concurred<sup>12</sup>), theirs was "a Russian debate primarily and not," as it might appear, a "debate between a European and an inhabitant of Scythia." "For the thinkers of a West-European type," Schloezer drove his point home, "culture was a *fact* which required explanation only,"

Whereas for Ivanov and Gershenson, this fact requires first of all a *justification*, be it moral, mystical, aesthetic, even biological. A Russian debate about culture always revolves around the problem of justification of culture. [...] In the West, this issue was raised by Nietzsche (Rousseau was first but not as profound), but there his call elicited no response; the storm he provoked soon abated, everything in the minds remained as though nothing had happened. The genuine reception of Nietzsche occurred in Russia only (Shestov) -- in Russia where Dostoevsky and Tolstoy had already worked for Nietzsche's cause before him. It took the War and the events in Russia, and human suffering to awaken in [Western] Europe, too, the voices of probing and alarm.<sup>13</sup>

Remarkably, although it was based on a very different, Marxist, set of premises, Voronsky's reading of the *Correspondence*, likewise, led to a conception of the future directly inspired by Nietzsche. In "developed socialist society," wrote Voronsky,

cultural values, having received new meaning, will cease to be fetishes, for man will be perfectly aware of their "human, all too human" genealogy, their social significance, their enormous, yet subsidiary, role as socially useful factors determining progress.

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<sup>11</sup>Schloezer, "Russkii spor o kul'ture," *Sovremennye zapiski* 11 (1922):197, 207.

<sup>12</sup>"Despite and in spite of the apparent difference between the views of culture professed by the two authors, both live in the same mental square, and their thoughts and moods have much in common." A. Voronskii, "Iz sovremennykh nastroyenii (po povodu odnogo spora)," *Krasnaia nov'* 3 (1921):246.

<sup>13</sup>Schloezer, *ibid.*, p. 210ff.

The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. At that time, the human personality will cease to be subject to the oppression of the faceless, countless values that pretend to have the life of their own.<sup>14</sup>

To appreciate the extent to which Nietzschean vocabulary and paradigms were assimilated by the intellectual elite of the revolutionary Russia, one may juxtapose the phenomenon of the Ivanov-Gershenzon *Correspondence* with "The Collapse of Humanism" (1919), the famous civil war address by Alexander Blok, one of Russia's most authoritative, prophetic and enchanting voices. The Nietzschean spirit is readily discernible in Blok's address, married though it was -- characteristically for the intelligentsia milieu -- to the *narodoliubie* of Russian Populist tradition<sup>15</sup> (a kind of crossbreeding of Nietzsche's individualism with mass politics that subsequently accommodated both Stalinism and Fascism).

In Blok's mystical historiosophic vision, the Great War and the Russian revolution appear as the culmination of two historical tendencies, as it were, Wagnerian leitmotifs: the descending one of the humanist Enlightenment, which has dissolved itself in the mediocrity and hypocrisy of the bourgeois age (roughly an equivalent of Nietzsche's critique of Socratic rationalism and its domination of Western consciousness), and the ascending one, the life-giving "spirit of music," the creative life-blood of culture as art. It would seem that in such an aesthetic scheme, there would not be a place for a social revolution, for the revolt of the lower classes, which threw Russia into the abyss of the civil war.

Not so for Blok. His poetic imagination had little trouble in fusing the ontogeny of class war with the phylogeny of Nietzsche's yearning for a return to the primordial, pre-Socratic culture:

It turns out that the guardian of the spirit of music is that same elemental force to which music is returning (*revertitur in terram suam unde erat* [Gen. 3:19]) -- that same people, those same barbarian masses. Therefore it is no paradox that the barbarian masses, who possess nothing but the spirit of music, turn out to be the guardians of culture in those epoch when civilization, which has lost its wings and voice, becomes the enemy of culture despite

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<sup>14</sup>A. Voronskii, "Iz sovremennykh nastroyeni (po povodu odnogo spora)," *Krasnaia nov'* 3 (1921):254.

<sup>15</sup>"Today one cannot think of any counter-revolutionary rubbish which would not be embraced by the hitherto people-loving intelligentsia (*narodoliubivye intelligenty*)." A. Voronskii, "Iz sovremennykh nastroyeni (po povodu odnogo spora)," *Krasnaia nov'* 3 (1921):253.

the fact that it commands all the instruments of progress -- science, technology, law, etc." [...] This music is a savage chorus, a disharmonious scream for the civilized ear [...] It brings destruction to the achievements of civilization, which have seemed unshakable; it runs contrary to our customary melodies of "the true, the good, and the beautiful"; it is plainly hostile to that which has been implanted in us by the upbringing and education of the humane Europe of the past hundred years.<sup>16</sup>

Acknowledging his deep rootedness in what he calls disdainfully "civilization," Blok threw his lot with the culture of the "savage chorus," with the "spirit of music" and put his trust in its promise to transform man into an *artiste* even at the tragic price of intelligentsia's self-annihilation. Blok's words resonated powerfully in contemporary imagination.<sup>17</sup>

Against this background, it requires little effort to recognize in Babel's writings -- especially, his story cycle *Red Cavalry*, which took Russian by storm in 1924-1925 -- a particular articulation of the same radically antinomian, Nietzschean visions of the Russian revolution -- a culmination of the world-historical drama, its irony based on "pushing down that which was falling," its pathos inspired by the mind-boggling magnitude of the destruction and the desperate anticipation of the dawning of a new age. That antinomy *was* the revolution, and to a mind shaped by Nietzscheanism, it could be "justified," made supremely acceptable, to use the formulation in *The Birth of Tragedy*, "as an aesthetic phenomenon."<sup>18</sup> An examination of the contemporary critical response to Babel's fiction shows that for them it did just that.

One of the first Soviet admirers of Babel's new fiction, Iakov Benni, saw this clearly and boldly declared that Babel managed to resolve the gaping antinomies of the revolution, indeed, to justify them through art, nothing but art:

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<sup>16</sup>A. Blok, "Krushenie gumanizma," in *Sobranie sochiennij*, 6 vols., vol. 4 (Leningrad, 1982), pp. 344 and 345.

<sup>17</sup>Their echo can be distinctly heard in Mandelstam's book of poetry, *1921-1925*, especially in the opening poem of the collection, "Concert at the Railroad Station": "The savage element of the night chorus" (*Nochnogo khora dikoe nachalo*).

<sup>18</sup>Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Section 24. Cf. A. Belyi's understanding of this thesis: "the ideal of beauty is the ideal of a human being and aesthetic creation, as it expands, inevitably leads to the transfiguration of human personality; Zarathustra, Buddha, Christ are as much the artists of life as they are life's law-givers; their ethics merges with the aesthetics and vice versa." A. Belyi, *Simvolizm* (Moscow, 1910), p. 10.

The abiding contradiction, especially powerful at the time of revolution, the contradiction between art and life is resolved by Babel simply through the sense of the inevitability and the ultimate completeness [*tselesobraznost'*] of art [...] The tormenting contradictions, greeting Babel the dreamer at the threshold of life cannot repel him even when life appears before him as the passionate, cruel, crude, seething struggle. Babel looks back, sees something and forgets himself... At that point Babel the artist remains alone, standing face to face with the radiant, seething, reality, magnificent in its self-generated legitimacy [*samozakonnost'*] -- reality, not a tiny shade of which, be it sound, color, pain, joy, tragedy as much as laughter can escape the artist, who has become all eyes. [...] His stories overwhelm one with their authenticity: a strange echo of the familiar laughter of a "little tiny Gogol" combined with the great intensity of the justification of sacrifice...<sup>19</sup>

Of all the Soviet critics, Benni was one of the least equivocal in praising Babel for establishing the revolution's Nietzschean credentials as an aesthetic phenomenon ("the self-generated legitimacy of reality," "completeness of art," etc.). Others, who came after him, were more or less oblique or, as happened often enough, were not even aware of their Nietzschean vocabulary. The question that I will address is how contemporary criticism managed to assimilate Babel's fiction -- an acknowledged post-revolutionary masterpiece yet patently Nietzschean in its language, sentiment, and emplotment -- to the ostensibly Marxist Bolshevik scheme for Soviet art. The story of this assimilation is, in a sense, a case study in the formation of the intelligentsia consciousness, its growing acceptance, however grudging, of the Bolshevik regime during the period of the "breather" (*peredyshka*), as Lenin so aptly christened the NEP.

## THE BABEL EXPLOSION

Proportion, symmetry, sense of scale and measure -- they are easily discarded under the spell of Babel's art. So it was with the critical response to the paradoxically hyperbolic and spare stories, which would later form the *Red Cavalry* and *Odessa* cycles following their first appearance in 1923. In Shklovsky's unfailingly astute phrase,

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<sup>19</sup>Ia. Benni, "I. Babel'," *Pechat' i revoliutsiia* 3 (1924):135-139. Citations are from pp. 136 and 139. It is tempting to trace the tradition to Igor Stravinsky's "Vesna sviashchennaia."

1923-1924 were the years of the first blush of the reader's "romance" with Babel.<sup>20</sup> And a romance it was, for what, short of an infatuation, can explain why G. Lelevich, one of the most blustering and unromantic critics of the *On Guard* (which is blustering and unromantic indeed), would so sweetly serenade Babel after debunking unceremoniously such giants of post-revolutionary Russian prose, as Ilia Ehrenburg, Vsevolod Ivanov, Nikolai Nikitin, and Boris Pil'niak.<sup>21</sup> "Of all the fellow-traveler fiction," Lelevich wrote in his "1923: Literary Summing Up,"

the fragments by Babel, which have appeared in the periodical literature during the past year, represent the most interesting phenomenon, one most deserving of our attention. [...] No one has yet conveyed in fiction the image of the Budennyi's troopers, with their heroism, their instinctive revolutionary consciousness, with their devil-may-care, guerrilla, Cossack spirit. There is not an iota of idealization. On the contrary -- an ever so slight smile is present everywhere, but at the same time the reader receives the impression of *enormous revolutionary power*.<sup>22</sup>

Coming from the pen of Lelevich, these were the words of love indeed (Babel was the only writer in Lelevich's survey to merit a whole separate section). What is more, Lelevich's panegyric was one of the earliest critical appraisals in which Babel was praised for presenting the revolution as an eruption of the primordial will to power, a motif that would receive its supporters and detractors later on.

Not to be outdone in patronizing a promising new talent, Aleksandr Voronskii, Lelevich's nemesis among the Bolshevik literati, argued, eschewing, as he put it, "all exaggeration," that Babel was "a new mile stone on the circuitous and complicated road along which contemporary literature was moving toward Communism."<sup>23</sup> The magnitude of

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<sup>20</sup>"I find myself somehow reluctant to take a close look at Babel. An author's success must be respected, and the reader must be given the opportunity to learn to love a writer before trying to figure out the reasons for his success." V. Shklovskii, "Kriticheskii romans," *Lef, zhurnal levogo fronta iskusstva* 6 (1924):152. Shklovsky's view of Babel was similar to that of Benni and Mirsky and lies squarely in the aesthetic sphere, i.e., in the category of the "justification of existence as an aesthetic phenomenon." Consider: "Russian literature is as gray as a siskin, it needs raspberry-colored riding breeches and leather shoes the color of heavenly azure. [...] What literature needs is concreteness and to be cross-fertilized with the new style of life."

<sup>21</sup>G. Lelevich, "1923 god: Literaturnye itogi," *Na postu* 5 (1924):82-87.

<sup>22</sup>G. Lelevich, "1923 god: Literaturnye itogi," *Na postu* 5 (1924):87.

<sup>23</sup>A. Voronskii, "I. Babel i L. Seifullina," *Krasnaia nov'* 5 (1924):281.

Babel's achievement was recognized by the emigre press as well,<sup>24</sup> most notably by Prince Sviatopolk-Mirsky. Mirsky, who was situated at the opposite end of the cultural political spectrum from his two Bolshevik colleagues and treated Babel as a consummate artist indifferent to ideology, unwittingly echoed Lelevich in a review of the first edition of *Red Cavalry*:

Among all the "Soviet writers" who have become famous since 1922, Babel, it seems, is the most famous, perhaps -- without any exaggeration -- the only truly popular author; for one, he is just about the only writer read outside Russia "for pleasure," not merely to keep abreast of what is happening "on the other shore." And this perception, one must admit, is fully justified: indeed, Babel, is the only fully mature craftsman among the "fellow-travelers," the only one writing "for the reader" as well as "for himself." Other craftsmen, such as Pasternak, think the least about the reader, concentrating on their new artistic goals, whereas popular writers, like Seifullina, think least of all about their duty as artists and write in order to satisfy the communist demand.<sup>25</sup>

And so it went. By 1926, when *Red Cavalry* appeared in its first edition, the volume of ink and newsprint devoted to the critical appraisal of his short fiction, as one contemporary acknowledged in amazement, had easily exceeded the volume of Babel's own published work.<sup>26</sup> For a while, it seemed as though Babel's star would remain permanently affixed at the apex of the Soviet literary horizon. In 1927, Viacheslav Polonsky, one of the most authoritative and least dogmatic Marxist critical voice of the late 1920s, pronounced with a somber finality:

In Soviet literature, Babel has rightly come to occupy an exalted position. The very existence of *Red Cavalry* is a factor that defines the development of literary art.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>M. Tseitlin, "Obzor zhurnalov," *Sovremennia zapiski* 20 (1924):434-435, and his "'Krasnaia nov'," *Sovremennia zapiski* 25 (1925):477-79.

<sup>25</sup>D. Mirskii (Sviatopolk-Mirskii), "I. Babel. *Rasskazy*. Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo. Moskva-Leningrad. 1925" (rev.), *Sovremennia zapiski* 26 (1925):485ff.

<sup>26</sup>A. Leznev, "I. I. [sic] Babel': Zametki k vykhodu 'Konarmii,'" *Pechat' i revoliutsiia* 6 (1926):82.

<sup>27</sup>Viach. Polonskii, "Babel," in *O literature (Izbrannye raboty)*, (Moscow, 1988), p. 78. Originally published as "Kriticheskie zametki o Babele," *Novyi mir* 1 (1927).

## BOLSHEVIZED NIETZSCHE: A CULTURAL MOTIF

All the vicissitude of Babel's literary career notwithstanding,<sup>28</sup> *Red Cavalry* and *Odessa Tales* have remained to this day the jewels in the crown of the post-revolutionary Russian literature. In this regard, the praise lavished on them at the time of publication has limited heuristic value for one studying Nietzschean elements in Soviet culture. It is another matter when this remarkably expeditious response is located in the context of the cultural debates of the 1920s. Highly politicized, these debates involved not only a sorting out of a variety of blueprints for building a new culture but, more important for the purposes of the present discussion, revolved around a determination of the status of the revolution in the eyes of the intelligentsia. Those who had accepted the revolution as a preordained (the Hegelian *gesetzmässig*) or, at least, complete and mature (*gesetzt*) event, i.e., the Bolsheviks and people close to them, were trying to convert to their faith those, the majority, who were possessed of varying degrees of doubt. As in the case of major philosophical systems which, since Kant, could not be considered complete without accounting for "aesthetics," for the Bolsheviks, Russia's "socialist revolution" was supposed to manifest itself in a radical transformation of aesthetic production and the birth of a new culture.

Whether they belonged to those who, in matters of aesthetics, put their trust in History and were more or less satisfied with "organic" cultivation of Soviet art (among them, Trotsky, Voronsky, Lunacharsky, Polonsky, the champions of the "fellow-travelers") or whether, like the LEFists or the "On-Guardists," they tended to rush History by using more intrusive, inorganic techniques, the agronomists of the Soviet culture garden became captives of their own cerebral expectations and schemes. There was a barely concealed anxiety that the revolution, more precisely, the authenticity of the Bolshevik version of it, could be put into question if the writers of Soviet Russia failed to produce new works rivaling in quality and profundity the best of the imperial achievement (cinema, a new art form, could escape the severity of this test).

To put it differently and compactly, the Bolshevik position regarding art, especially, literature, an authoritative and consecrated art form in Russia, combined two contradictory messages. On the one hand, art was able to express the very essence of social

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<sup>28</sup> Babel was arrested on May 16, 1939, and accused of belonging to a Trotskyist terrorist organization since 1927 as well as working as a spy for the Austrian and French intelligence services. He was to be put on trial with a multitude of other co-conspirators who included the cream of the Soviet intelligentsia in arts and letters. The planned show trial never materialized. However, Babel was convicted and executed on January 27, 1940. Fourteen years later, he was cleared of all charges "for lack of any basis" -- one of the first victims to receive a posthumous "rehabilitation." For the latest documents relating to Babel's arrest, incarceration and execution, see Arkadii Vaksberg, "Protsessy" *Literaturnaia gazeta* 18 (4 May 1988):12.

forces, "serving the purpose of analyzing," as Lunacharsky put it, "the reality of our milieu."

"For us, Marxists," continued the People's Commissar of Enlightenment, known to harbor a weakness for the "philosopher with a hammer,"

the freedom of a [major] artist implies his highest engagement with the social forces. After all, we do not believe in an abstract free will. When man expresses himself freely, he gives the optimal expression to those social forces which exert their influence on him.<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand, art *was* a social force in its own right:

Sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, a writer becomes a preacher. He can do so by resorting to the lyric mode, i.e., giving immediate expression to his thoughts and feelings. Or he can resort to the epic or the dramatic mode, that is, produce an objective, as it were, representation of reality, facts, as it were, speaking for themselves, but actually he selects his facts in such a way that they would move the reader toward a particular conclusions. Art, therefore, is a social force.<sup>30</sup>

The latter point is a clear evocation of Bogdanov's theories which assigned art pretty much the same function as the "sacred" possesses in Durkheim -- a force constitutive of a society.<sup>31</sup> The Russian intelligentsia's traditional privileging of belles-lettres, no doubt, played a crucial role in this theoretical elevation of literature to the lofty status of a civil (?) religion.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> A.V. Lunacharskii, "Znachenie iskusstva s kommunisticheskoi tochki zreniia," in O.V. Filimonov, ed., Nachalo puti: Iz sovetskoi literaturnoi kritiki 20-kh godov (Moscow, 1987), p. 10. First published in Rabochii put' (Omsk) 229 (21 December 1924).

<sup>30</sup> Lunacharskii, ibid., p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. the following discussion of Venus de Milo in Bogdanov's Iskusstvo i rabochii klass (Moscow, 1918): "The temple was the center of the community, and the goddess was the center of the temple. Therefore she was the center of organization of the collective." Such modern sociologists as Edward Shils, the author of The Constitution of Society, may very well agree.

<sup>32</sup> G. Freidin, "Authorship and Citizenship: A Problem for Modern Russian Literature" Stanford Slavic Studies 1 (1987). I develop my arguments further in a forthcoming article (The Russian Review), "Justification of Literature: Christianity and Authorship in the Modern Russian Tradition," based on a paper

The task that the Bolshevik culture mongers thus set before themselves was not merely to win writers over to their ideological position in order that they may preach, or prophecy,<sup>33</sup> the Bolshevik gospel, but also so that they may do so "freely" -- experiencing the forceful hand of the invisible hegemonic working class as their own inner compulsion. The former task represented an attempt at a political and ideological conquest of the intelligentsia. The latter involved subjecting the historical authenticity of the Bolshevik revolution to an ordeal by art. It is one of the more enigmatic qualities of the Bolshevik revolution that its leaders felt compelled -- for the sake of inner legitimation -- to subject the revolution and, by implications, themselves to the ordeal by art. It would have been far more convenient, and for the Marxists quite consistent, to treat belles lettres as an "autonomous series" (the Formalist term) only vaguely determined by the economic base, which is what the Formalists were proposing during their famous debate with the Marxists in 1924. But the Commissars, speaking in this case through Lunacharsky, would have none of that (emphasis is added, G.F.):

It is altogether self-evident that the task of ideology includes not only organization of thoughts but, more important, organization of feelings and therefore also the impulses of the will. [...] All art is ideological as long as it is prompted by a powerful feeling, which, as it were, compels the artist to invade, to seize souls, to expand the power of his dominant [dominanta] over them. We, Marxists, believe that these dominants are of a class character, are supported, adopted and rejected by specific classes at specific stages of their development and under specific conditions.<sup>34</sup>

As Trotsky put it in the opening of his *Literature and Revolution*: "Development of art represents *the highest* test of the vitality and significance of any epoch". This task, if we are to use a Nietzschean scheme, so transparently adopted by the Bolsheviks, belonged to the order of an aesthetic justification of the *October revolution* -- a justification deemed all the more precious if its source could be identified as coming from some one other than a brother-in-Marx. Isaac Babel -- the fellow-travelling author and his fiction -- fit the bill, if ever so ambiguously and imperfectly.

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presented at the Conference: "The Role of Christianity in the History of Russian Culture." University of California at Berkeley, May 1988.

<sup>33</sup>Lunacharsky used "preacher" and "prophet" interchangeably. See, e.g., A. V. Lunacharsky, "Formalizm v nauke ob iskusstve," Pechat' i revoliutsiia 5 (September-October, 1924), p. 21.

<sup>34</sup>A. V. Lunacharskii, "Formalizm v nauke ob iskusstve," Pechat' i revoliutsiia 5 (1924):23.

## THE PARADOX OF BABEL CRITICISM

As late as 1932, Sviatopolk-Mirsky, the same critic who five years earlier singled out Babel as an unrivaled star of Russian letters writing under, not to say, in spite the Bolsheviks,<sup>35</sup> was now declaring from the *Literaturnaia gazeta's* high rostrum that Babel's achievement was for him proof positive of the historical legitimacy of the Bolshevik revolution and one of the factors persuading him to return from the self-imposed exile in the West.<sup>36</sup> For those who followed Babel's reception in the 1920s, Mirsky's earlier insistence on Babel's supreme aestheticism -- "his stories create a purely literary, aesthetic impression; ideology for him is a constructive device" -- were not necessarily incompatible with his later view of Babel's fiction legitimating Soviet achievement.<sup>37</sup>

Apart from providing a basis for an aesthetic legitimation, Babel's writings functioned as an artistically perfect paradox, a device capable of generating an endless critical discourse on the contradictions of the revolution -- an oil stone on which various critics sharpened their theoretical and ideological knives. Indeed, critics experienced a virtual compulsion to explain, classify, dissect, and reassemble his stories, ostensibly to guide the "infatuated" reader and, implicitly, to assimilate the paradox of the revolution which seemed to have erupted with a mesmerizing force and undeniable authenticity in Babel's short fiction. They wanted the reader to get beyond what Victor Shklovsky called the "romance," and "serious." One practically hears the critics chide the infatuated reader: C'mon, get over it, get married, settle down, have children. Their words were as effective with regard to Babel as they have been with regard to Soviet Russia's everyday life. The critics pretended to preach and the readers pretended to listen.

Much of what was written about Babel in Soviet Russia in the 1920s was informed, if not shaped, by key ideas associated with Nietzsche's teaching:

- (1) that human existence may be justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon (*The Birth of Tragedy*), a motif popularized by the Russian Symbolists;<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>"Babel's fans have long awaited the appearance of his stories as a separate edition. There were rumours that the censor objected to its publication. I do not know whether this explains why it took so long for this book to get published, but I fully understand the suspicion with which Soviet authorities are treating the Babelian ideology. Be that as it may, the book has been published, and by the State Publishing House at that: apparently, the "liberal" Voronskies have once again achieved a victory over the rigorists from MAPP and VAPP." Prince D. Sviatopolk-Mirsky, "I. Babel'. Rasskazy" (rev.), *Sovremennye zapiski* 26 (1925):486.

<sup>36</sup>D. S. Mirsky, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, September, 1932.

<sup>37</sup>Prince D. Sviatopolk-Mirsky, "I. Babel'. Rasskazy" (rev.), *Sovremennye zapiski* 26 (1925):487.

<sup>38</sup>Valerii Briusov's "Kliuchi tain," Andrei Belyi, "Symvolizm"

- (2) that the Christian ethic, with its ascetic ideal and *ressentiment*, represents an insidious ploy of the weak and unhealthy to suppress "life" and thus dominate the healthy and the strong (*The Genealogy of Morals*) -- a critique assimilated in Russia thanks to, among others, Konstanin Leontiev, Vasilii Rozanov and Lev Shestov,<sup>39</sup> and often dear to the Bolsheviki Marxism<sup>40</sup>; and finally,
- (3) in a related argument made famous in the post-revolutionary Russia by M. O. Gershenzon,<sup>41</sup> that "life and action" must be served by history "to the advantage of a coming age," and not the other way around ("love of the distant one" in *Zarathustra*, elaborated in *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History For Life*).

Furthermore, a survey of Babel's reception by the contemporary Soviet Russian journals suggests that Nietzsche, or a Nietzschean paradigm, was a major component of the literary intelligentsia's mentality coexisting in a naive contradictory accord with the *narodoliubie*, the intelligentsia's commitment to the ethical imperatives of Russian Populism from Nekrasov and Chernyshevsky to Lavrov and Mikhailovsky, to the modernists,<sup>42</sup> down to Ivanov-Razumnik and Alexander Blok.<sup>43</sup> The same duality was manifest in among the Russian Marxists, who were known to vacillate between the humanist and voluntarist poles.<sup>44</sup> Even the conventional Marxist-Leninist dicta, as they were understood and practiced by the Bolsheviki (e.g., the critique of the bourgeois

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<sup>39</sup>See, e.g., Vasilii Rozanov, "O sladchaishem Iisuse i gor'kikh plodakh mira," in his Temnyi lik: Metafizika khristianstva (Petersburg, 1911). Lev Shestov, Dobro v uchenii gr. Tolstogo i F. Nitshe: filosofii i propoved' (Petersburg, 1900) and Dostoevskii i Nitshe: filosofii tragedii (Petersburg, 1903). Boris Schloezer (Shletser) could write in 1922 that a "genuine assimilation of Nietzsche took place only in Russia" thanks largely to Shestov's achievement. "Russkii spor o kul'ture," Sovremennye zapiski 11 (1922):195.

<sup>40</sup>A. Lunacharskii, "Simvolisty," in his Ocherki po istorii russkoi literatury (Moscow, 1976), p. 443ff.

<sup>41</sup>Mikhail Gershenzon and Viacheslav Ivanov, Perepiska iz dvukh uglov. For a "Nietzschean" reading of this celebrated volume see B. Schloezer (Shletser), "Russkii spor o kul'ture," Sovremennye zapiski 11 (1922):195-211.

<sup>42</sup>For a discussion of the Populist substratum in Russian Symbolism, in particular, its blend with Nietzscheanism in Viacheslav Ivanov, see my "In Place of a Biography," in A Coat of many Colors: Osipa Mandelstam and His Mythologies of Self-Presentation (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1987).

<sup>43</sup>For a good example of the use of the Populist paradigm, see R. V. Ivanov-Razumnik, "Gertsen o nashikh dniakh," in A. I. Gertsen: 1870-1920. Petrograd, 1920.

<sup>44</sup>George Kline, "Preface," and Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, "Introduction," in Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, ed., Nietzsche in Russia (Princeton, 1986), pp. XIV and 13-17, respectively. See, *ibid.*, the essays on Gorky (by Mary Louise Low), Lunacharsky (A.L. Tait), and Bogdanov (Sochor).

humanism, the notion of a vanguard party, the contingent conception of truth, the unity of theory and praxis) could and did converge with a Nietzschean perspective, as in the cases of Voronsky, Shafir and Veshnev.<sup>45</sup> In 1926, the year of publication of the book *Red Cavalry*, the Commissar of Enlightenment, Lunacharskii, had no compunction in acknowledging Nietzsche's appeal, specifically, his "militancy, his spirit of exaltation," and his own solidarity with Nietzsche's "contempt for petty bourgeois morality and Christian romanticism"<sup>46</sup> -- terms easily identified with the Populist humanism of Russia's cultural elite.

Babel's representation of the revolution, deriving its authority from the intelligentsia's privileging of verbal art, retained the revolutionary paradox of cruelty for the sake of happiness on the intellectual level, but Babel the artist was able to reconcile this contradiction mimetically at the plane of art, appealing to the heavily "Nietzscheanized," aesthetic sensibility of the intelligentsia (see Benni above). In Babel's fiction, to paraphrase the famous formula of Levi-Strauss, intelligentsia's "inability to connect two kinds of relationships" -- that is the human abyss of the present and the all-too-distant radiant peaks, was "overcome (or rather replaced) by the assertion that contradictory relationships are identical inasmuch as they are both self-contradictory in a similar way."<sup>47</sup> Applied to the reception of Isaac Babel, this formula might run as follows: the cruelty of the revolution and civil war was to the beauty, or sublimity, of art what backward ravaged Russia was to the super-modernity of socialism. To puzzle out this mythic grasp of experience, which *Red Cavalry* exemplified, was the Herculean, and ultimately thankless, task of the contemporary critic.

### ***DIE FERNSTEN-LIEBE AND THE POETRY OF BANDITRY***

"Love For the Distant One" (1924) was the title of an early essay on Babel, penned by a Bolshevik historian, Iakov Shafir.<sup>48</sup> This miniature critical meditation on the few *Red*

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<sup>45</sup> A. Voronskii, "Babel', Seifullina," *Krasnaia nov'* 5 (1924); Ia. Shafir, "Liubov' k dal'nemu ('Konarmii' I. Babelia)," *Zhurnal'ist* 10 (1924):30-32; V. Veshnev, "Poeziia banditizma (I. Babel)," *Molodaia gvardiia* 7/8 (1924):274-80.

<sup>46</sup> A. Lunacharsky, "Simvolisty" (1926), in *Ocherki po istorii russkoi literatury* (Moscow, 1976), p. 443.

<sup>47</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," in his *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York, 1963), p. 216.

<sup>48</sup> Ia. Shafir, "Liubov' k dal'nemu," *Zhurnal'ist* 10 (1924).

*Cavalry* stories that had appeared by 1924 has the distinction of being the only one in Soviet Russia to establish a direct link between *Red Cavalry* and one of Zarathustra's famous commandments which Shafir uses as his title, albeit ironically and in a Marxist key. The sacrifices in the name of the revolution, however harsh and inhuman they may have been, were made for the sake of the future generations, not at their expense, as in the Great War with its lip service to humanist ethics. To this extent, at least, one could use Nietzsche with profit. So went the drift of Shafir's position from which he proposed to examine Babel. The value of Shafir's observations cannot be overestimated for yet another reason: he was one of the more prominent students of contemporary Soviet readership and, rather than offer an aesthetic evaluation or elaboration of *Red Cavalry*, he treated the work pretty much as a slice of life served up *au naturel*, without any sauce of artistic mediation.<sup>49</sup>

In an observation that would become a common place of Babel criticism, Shafir pointed to a key aspect of Babel's Nietzschean strategy: to justify the perpetrators of cruelty by surrounding them with the "enormously heroic, in the best sense of the word, pathos." As far as I know Shafir was the only one to see this strategy as originating in a nexus of specifically Nietzschean motifs, namely, justifying existence as an aesthetic phenomenon, first broached by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, and the aristocratic ethic of the strong, elaborated in *On the Genealogy of Morals*. While lauding Babel's achievement, Shafir was enough of an orthodox Marxist to draw a line between a Nietzschean and Marxist justification of violence.

With the delicacy befitting a critic taking on a popular idol, he chided Babel for leaning too much toward the former, perhaps, even confusing the two as when he failed to denounce vengeance but treated it instead as an appropriate means for righting the wrong. For Babel, wrote Shafir, wreaking vengeance is tantamount to "restoring social justice."

Thereby vengeance becomes humanized. This attitude toward vengeance is profoundly "of the people" [*narodno*], but it has nothing in common with the attitudes of conscious proletarians, who are guided in their behavior and actions exclusively by the considerations of rational expediency [*tselesoobraznost*]. Alas, not only does our artist depict vengeance as an act of the greatest justice in the minds of the Balmashevs [the story "Salt," G. F.], but it would seem that he himself perceives vengeance as justice. If we

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<sup>49</sup>See his *Ocherki psikhologii chitatliia* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1927). The book deals with the popular attitudes to the work of selected "classics," i.e., Pushkin, Gogol, Lermontov, Turgenev, Goncharov, and Gorky.

are not mistaken on this point, this is where we must take issue with Babel's fiction. But this is just an aside.<sup>50</sup>

In the atmosphere of the ever-intensifying literary squabbles, even this gentle slap on the wrist drew blood, not much, but enough to attract a Bolshevik rigorist piranha from the journal *Molodaia gvardiia*, V. Veshnev. An astute and not entirely unsympathetic reader of Babel's stories, Veshnev had the interests of Soviet youth at heart, which compelled him to sound a note of caution amid the chorus of acclaim greeting the appearance of yet another piece of Babel's short fiction. Veshnev did not mince words. Babel's popularity among the young, who could recite by heart pages from *The Tales of Odessa*, could lead to dire consequences, propagating the ideals of "bestial banditry," a transparent allusion to Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. Hence, "The Poetry of Banditry" (1924), as Veshnev unceremoniously entitled his critique.<sup>51</sup>

Unlike other critics, who saw a supreme mastery in Babel's ability to balance the intelligentsia's humanistic morality with the Cossack justice "beyond good and evil," Veshnev insisted on Babel's privileging the former over the latter. In a surprisingly Nietzschean move, he accused Babel of insolence in his attempts to justify the revolutionary violence of the Cossacks with such petty bourgeois concepts as right and wrong:

Herein lies the key to the understanding of Babel's art. First of all, we must note that Babel approached the revolution with a moral criterion. This alone is bad enough. Morality has no jurisdiction over revolution. On the contrary, revolution has jurisdiction over ethics.

Veshnev was equally hard to please when it came to aesthetics.

Look how hard Babel is trying! In what luxuriant, colorful subtle poetry does he cloak the bloody cruelty of the red heroes of the civil war.

Indeed, Babel's greatest offense was in his trying to justify the revolution at all. How dared he, one can almost hear Veshnev exclaiming, to imagine that the revolution needs any justification at all: "Revolution is justified "immanently," by the meaning it

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<sup>50</sup>Ia. Shafir, "Liubov' k dal'nemu," *Zhurnal* 10 (1924).

<sup>51</sup>V. Veshnev (Vl. Przhetslavskii), "Poeziia banditizma," *Molodaia gvardiia* 7-8 (1924):274-280.

itself generates (*sobstvennym svoim smyslom*).<sup>52</sup> This was a tall Nietzschean order, one that even the author of *Red Cavalry* would find difficult to fill.

### A. VORONSKY: Life -- My Wench

The founder and editor of *Red Virgin Soil* and the guardian angel of the fellow-travelers, Voronsky was one of the first and most appreciative readers of Babel as well as one of the cleverest mystifiers of Babel's Nietzscheanism. Whether these mystifications involved conceit or were "unconscious" is beside the point. What matters is that they provide us with one of the best early examples of what we might call, the Soviet crypto-Nietzscheanism.

From the outset of his 1924 essay devoted to Babel,<sup>52</sup> Voronsky presented him as an author who is decidedly "Soviet" -- a metonymous qualifier that becomes a legitimating synecdoche once it is paired with such a potent term of the Sovietese as "achievement." "Babel," Voronsky was unequivocal, "is a new achievement of the post-October Soviet literature" (148). The same claim is repeated a few pages later: "Babel is a very big hope of the Russian, contemporary, Soviet literature and already a big achievement." The Bolshevik revolution could take credit for Babel and to that extent, at least, it was aesthetically justified. To drive his point home, Voronsky informs his readers that Babel became a serious author only recently -- an exaggeration, to say the least, since Babel's pre-revolutionary publications in Gorky's *Letopis'* had been singled out by contemporary critics as were Babel's regular contributions to Gorky's anti-Leninist *Novaia zhizn'*.<sup>53</sup> Let us now take a close look at the character of this "hope and achievement" of Soviet Russian literature, as Voronsky defined it.

The yardstick for measuring and the ultimate antecedent of Babel is Leo Tolstoy. Like Tolstoy, Babel's is capable of isolating an insignificant detail, making it "more expressive of the *essence*," than any amount of digression can achieve (150). Generically, too, Babel and Tolstoy share a penchant for the "epic," although Babel, Voronsky admits, did not intend to produce a "comprehensive, aesthetically precise [*sic*] epic representation of the actual Red Cavalry Army by means of emphasizing its essential spirit and qualities,

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<sup>52</sup>A. Voronskii, "Babel," in his *Iskusstvo videt' mir: Portrety, stat'i* (Moscow, 1987), pp. 146-162. Pages, given in parenthesis refer to this edition. The essay was first published as "Babel', Seifullina," *Krasnaia nov'* 5 (1924).

<sup>53</sup>Babel's contributions to *Novaia zhizn'* were reprinted in Nikolas Stroud, ed. and comp., *Zabytyi Babel': sbornik maloizvestnykh proizvedenii I. Babelia* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1979).

as, for example, Tolstoy had done in *War and Peace*" (155). Like Tolstoy, Babel works in the "classical, if modernized, tradition" (147, 149). To be compared to Tolstoy would be high praise for any author, and Voronsky's virtual insistence on the legitimacy of this comparison bestowed on Babel's controversial art a certificate of authenticity -- what Pasternak would later call "safe conduct" and Babel himself far more ironically, "spravka," in the story of the same title in which a beginning writer rakes up credit with a prostitute by practicing his art. Indeed for many contemporary Marxist critics, Tolstoy possessed such exemplary authority that his art was virtually allowed to transcend its class origins.<sup>54</sup> Hence Voronsky's flattering juxtaposition functioned as an implicit acknowledgment that in Babel criticism conventional "class approach" would not do.

No less important (whether Voronsky intended it or not), Tolstoy, whose name served as a draying horse hitched to most contemporary literary theories,<sup>55</sup> provided a cover for dealing with Babel's apparent Nietzscheanism, not as a liability, but as a most powerful asset. Like Tolstoy, Babel was a "physiological writer."

What is sacred for Babel is the immediacy [*dannost'*],<sup>56</sup> actuality, life, the primitive character of human interests, urges, passions, desires, psychology -- everything that is commonly referred to as crude animal instincts. The sacred immediacy [of life for Babel] has nothing to do with the acceptance of life according to the formula: 'everything real is rational and everything existing [*sic*] is real.'<sup>57</sup> Babel is a pagan, a materialist and an atheist in his art. He is alien to the Christian, idealistic worldview which treats flesh, matter as something base, sinful, while treating "spirit," "spirituality" as solely valuable essence of human life (151)

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<sup>54</sup> See, e.g., A.V. Lunacharsky's use of Tolstoy as ally in his polemic with the Formalists. Lunacharsky, "Formalizm v nauke of iskusstva," *Pechat' i revoliutsiia* 5 (1924):19-32

<sup>55</sup> E.J. Brown, *The Proletarian Episode in Russian Literature: 1928-32* (New York, 1971), pp. 66ff. Samuel David Eisen, "Fox to Fox : Viktor Shklovsky's appeal to Tolstoy in the twilight of NEP" (M.A. Thesis, Stanford University, 1989).

<sup>56</sup> Cf. H. Bergson, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (Paris, 1989), known in English as *Time and Free Will*. Bergson was an acknowledged influence on Voronsky. See "Estetika Bergson i shkola Voronskogo," *Literatura i iskusstvo* 1 (1930). The Russian word, *dannost'*, however, may as easily refer to Nietzsche's sense of life eliciting *amor fati*.

<sup>57</sup> This pointedly anti-Hegelian characterization of Babel, too, may suggest a Nietzschean subtext.

These qualifiers could have as easily been applied to Tolstoy (Tolstoy's "physiologism" was a topos of literary criticism in the 1920s<sup>58</sup>), and since Shestov's brilliant analysis, they could have as easily defined the philosophical ground that Tolstoy shared with Nietzsche. "As in *War and Peace*, so in *Anna Karenina*," wrote Shestov, not only does Count Tolstoy refuse to accept exchanging life for the Good, but he considers such an exchange unnatural, false, hypocritical, ultimately eliciting the opposite of the desired reaction even in the best human being.<sup>59</sup>

Reveling in the retelling of and quoting from Babel's famous anti-Dostoevskian parody, "The Sin of Jesus" and "A Tale About a Wench," Voronsky rehearses Nietzsche's categorical indictment of the "value of pity" (*GM* 1:6; *Z* 1:16, and 2:3) and the life-denying "fantasies" and "spirituality." True, Babel is an aestheticist, Voronsky is ready to concede, but his aestheticism, unlike that of the decadents, possesses a full-blooded Dionysian energy:

Babel's [...] aestheticism has already earned him the attribute of a semi-decadent. Babel is no decadent. The truth lies elsewhere: in his fiction, the dreamer clashes with the realist, who has intuited the deep truth of the immediate, actual life, perhaps, crude, but full-blooded and blossoming.

His characters are not mere brutes, murderers and marauders, but powerful men seeking their own version of justice -- "concrete, entirely earthly, unreflective and instinctive." These words, which deny the validity of the distinction of "good and evil" while affirming that of the "good and bad" for life, could have been lifted from *On the Genealogy of Morals*. But instead of crediting Nietzsche, Voronsky links these Babelian *Bestien* to the folk and literary tradition of Russia's "truth-seekers" (*pravdoiskateli*), having in mind most likely the itinerant "philosophers" from the lower depths à la Gorky's *boiaki*, Chelkash, Sharko and Mal'va.<sup>60</sup>

Whatever his cultural loyalties, Babel's narrator, according to Voronsky, also renounces the *ressentiment*. With great pathos, Voronsky quotes from the opening of "Pan Apolek," singling out for emphasis the attributes of *ressentiment*: "the sensuality of the

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<sup>58</sup>"Where will you find in the Tolstoy of *Anna Karenina*, who had absorbed the psychological power and order of a Flaubert's novel, the bestial sensibility and physiological intuition of *War and Peace*?" Osip Mandelstam, "O prirode slova" (1922), *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, 2d ed., eds. G. P. Struve and B. A. Filippov (Inter-Language Literary Associates, 1971), p. 244.

<sup>59</sup>L. Shestov (Shvartsman), *Dobro v uchenii gr. Tolstogo i Fr. Nitsche: Filosofii i propoved'* (Petersburg, 1900), p. 7.

<sup>60</sup>Cf. Platonov's *pravdoiskateli*, Voshchev in *Kotlovan*, Makar from the *Bedniatskaia khronika*, etc.

*dreamy anger*, bitter disdain for the dogs and the swine of humanity, the fire of the *silent and intoxicating* revenge -- I have sacrificed them to the new god" (153). That god is "life," in the Nietzschean, post-Darwinian understanding of the term, it is the immediate present that "does not live at the expense of the future" but itself is a payment for the *highest power and splendor* actually possible for the type man" (*GM*, Preface, 6). Like his character "Apolek," wrote Voronsky,

Babel treats the natural in man as the summit of creation, he writes about the truth of the "wenches" like Arina and Kseniia, about the truth of Afonka Bida, about the triumph of life in the moment of mortal battles. For he knows that Kseniias and Arinas are the fertile producers of life, but in the Alfreds, there is "plenty of play but ain't nothing serious," for one must be proud of the natural in human being, whereas disdain for the crude wench-life [*babishcha-zhizn'*], attempts to follow Jehovah's example and create out of oneself some little worlds amount only to "blasphemy and lordly arrogance" of the little Alfreds and spectators without the binoculars (153).

Voronsky stepped on the most dangerous ground when he turns to "Gedali," a story that echoes closely Nietzsche's demystification of the ethic of charity, equality, and, by implication, the socialist ideals as the slave morality of *ressentiment*. Even in their outward appearances as dark and out of the way places, Gedali's Dickensian "old curiosity shop" and the residence of his Braclav Rabbi ("Rabbi") come perilously close to Nietzsche's subterranean "workshop," a version no doubt of the satanic mills, "where ideals are manufactured" (*GM* 1:14). "They tell me," goes the famous anti-socialist passage in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, their misery is a sign of their being chosen by God; one beats the dogs one likes best." "Blesses is the Lord," announces Rabbi Motaleh of Braclav, as he "breaks the bread with his monkish fingers." "Blessed is the God of Israel for he has chosen us among all the peoples of the world" ("The Rabbi").

This is an intensely ironic moment -- to have the traditional blessing pronounced by a leader of a religious culture, just a hair's breadth away from a total demise. The "monkish fingers" and the "breaking of bread" allow Babel to conflate with a Nietzschean dexterity the Hebraic ritual of the Khasidim with the Christian Eucharist and have both echo in Gedali's vegetarian War-Communist wish for "the International of kind people where each soul would be registered to receive a ration according to the top category." Voronsky quotes this passage, which for Nietzsche would have been an expression of slave morality

par excellence,<sup>61</sup> and leaves it hanging with a brief comment saying simply that Gedali and his milieu belonged to times past.

"Babel's main theme," Voronsky summed up his appreciative critique, "is Man, with a capital 'M,' Man, who under the influence of the revolution, has emerged from the lowest depths" (160). It is more than tempting to see in this term of the Bolshevnik futuristic anthropology -- borrowed from Maksim Gorky's *The Lower Depths* and reminiscent of Trotsky's concluding vision in *Art and Revolution* -- a not so cryptic reference to Nietzsche's *Übermensch*:

More correctly, the shell in which the cultural construction and self-education of Communist man will be enclosed, will develop all the vital elements of contemporary art to the highest point. Man will become immeasurably stronger, wiser and subtler; his body 'will become more harmonized, his movements more rhythmic, his voice more musical. The forms of life will become dynamically dramatic. The average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx. And above this ridge new peaks will rise.

## CONFUSION OF TONGUES

Voronsky pretty much set the tone for the Bolshevnik reception of Babel. And while Babel's "Nietzscheanism" remained the focal point in criticism, some found it more unsettling than did Voronsky. Georgii Gorbachev, a critic who shared considerable affinity with Voronsky, commended Babel for his invaluable contribution to the creation of the "new linguistic culture" and his "service to the cognition of life, development of technique, new expressiveness." This was no mean achievement, "for language," as Gorbachev went on to explain in the spirit of Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*, "represents the most important tool of the enlightenment and communication among the masses, which have entered a period of great cultural and social ferment."<sup>62</sup> Still, Gorbachev was apparently too

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<sup>61</sup>"Now I can really hear what they have been saying all along: 'We good men -- we are the just'-- what they desire they call not retaliation but the 'triumph of justice'; what they hate is not their enemy, no! they hate 'injustice,' [...] what there is left for them to love on earth is not their brother in hatred but their 'brothers in love,' as they put it, all the good and just on earth." *GM* 1:14.

<sup>62</sup>Georgii Gorbachev, "O tvorchestve Babelia i po pobodu nego," *Zvezda* 4 (1925):270-286, p. 275. The article bears the date: "August 1925."

much of a dialectician to accept comfortably Babel's antinomial subject matter. According to him, Babel's penchant for sharp contrasts and paradox, the essential components of Nietzsche's individualism and his yearning for *distance*,<sup>63</sup> lacked any suggestion of the possibility of a resolution at a higher level:

The most interesting thing for Babel is combining in one person, group, or action the most contradictory qualities -- the paradoxical nature of existence. Almost all the stories by Babel are paradoxical, especially, in *Red Cavalry*. [...]<sup>64</sup>

And while one could find a certain consolation in the fact that "Babel's paradoxes were recouped by the dialectic of the revolution," Gorbachev chided the author for leaving no textual clues to that effect, indeed, even tempting the reader with a purely aesthetic treatment of the revolution.

Marxist strictures notwithstanding, Gorbachev the reader must have been deeply affected by Babel's fiction, and we see him slip eventually into a more appropriate analytical mode reminiscent of Nietzsche's Dionysian understanding of tragedy and its subsequent "reprise" in Bakhtin:<sup>65</sup>

Both style and structure of Babel's stories are pitched to a humorous key; his stories, as a rule, prompt laughter. But in the majority of Babel's stories, there gleams through the laughter a serious thought or a description of the tragic, terrifying and at the same time beautiful, powerful, burgeoning, and victorious life.<sup>66</sup>

As Gorbachev moves toward conclusion, however, the Bolshevik Marxist in him once again reasserts himself, even if the Nietzschean temptation is not altogether banished:

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<sup>63</sup> Georg Simmel, "Fridrikh Nitsche: Etiko-filosofskii siluet," trans. by N. Iuzhin, in A. Rihl and G. Simmel, *Nitsche* (Odessa, 1898), p. 148.

<sup>64</sup> G. Gorbachev, "O tvorchestve Babelia," p. 281.

<sup>65</sup> On Babel, Nietzsche, and Bakhtin, see G. Freidin, "Fat Tuesday in Odessa: Isaac Babel's 'Di Grasso' as Testament and Manifesto," *The Russian Review* 40, no. 2 (April 1981):101-21. Reprinted in *Isaac Babel*, edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987). See also G. Freidin, "Isaak Babel," in *European Writers: The Twentieth Century* (New York: Scribners, 1990), pp. 1906-1907.

<sup>66</sup> G. Gorbachev, "O tvorchestve Babelia," p. 276.

But, of course, most of all *Red Cavalry* tells the story of Babel the writer, the raconteur and the virtually irreplaceable protagonist of the stories: an *intelligent*, who has long ago become disillusioned about the old values; a skeptic, who has rejected old ideologies; a connoisseur of unusual situations, life's most exuberant manifestations, beautiful, strange and funny but always exuberant; an adventurer and the lover of the "spicy;" a cynic and aestheticist [...] a spiritual brother of the author of *Sentimental Journey* and *Letters Not About Love*, that adventurer, witty thinker, cynic, mischief-maker and aestheticist. (282).

What could have attracted this aestheticist to the Bolsheviks? Interestingly enough Gorbachev produces a catalogue of Nietzschean virtues possessed, he proudly insists by the Bolsheviks themselves:

life is on our side, and so is freshness, power [*sila*], and youth, [lack of] prejudice...

If Babel's public pronouncements in support of "us," Gorbachev went on, indicated the author's desire to make his art truly revolutionary, Gorbachev had a recipe for him. Instead of indulging in the sight of existence "laid bare," with its conjuncture of "primitive desires" and the revolutionary "ideology," Babel must convert his muse to a "revolutionary romanticism,"

the romanticism of a conscious struggle under the banner of communism, the world-view that bravely looks straight in the eye of reality, unblinking in the face of difficulties or mistakes, muck and blood partially covering its way, but also the world-view that dictates to its envoys a buoyant readiness for sacrifices of all kinds for the sake of that inevitable result of the struggle -- that "kingdom of the future" before whose might and joy pale all the miracles of the fairy tales and all romantic dreams ever created by mankind. (284ff.)

Abram Lezhnev, a prominent critic of the Voronsky camp (he belonged to "Pereval"<sup>67</sup>), begged to differ with Gorbachev's assertion of Babel's amoral aestheticism.

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<sup>67</sup>See G. Belaia, *Iz istorii sovetskoi literaturno-kriticheskoi mysli 20-kh godov: esteticheskaia kontseptsia "Pervala"* (Moscow, 1985). See also E.J. Brown, *The Proletarian Episode in Russian Literature: 1928-32* (New York, 1971), p. 97 and elsewhere.

Like Voronsky, and, if to a lesser extent, Gorbachev himself, Lezhnev used as his point of departure Babel's stupendous achievement, not its compatibility with a specific Marxist scheme. Where Gorbachev demanded that Babel transform at once the apparent antinomy of the revolution into a Bolshevik dialectic, Lezhnev was showing a far greater, Nietzschean appreciation for the irreconcilable paradox of the times. "Babel knows about the necessity of cruelty," wrote Lezhnev in 1926,

no less than those who criticize him. In his work, it is justified ("Salt," "The Death of Dolgushev"), justified with the revolutionary pathos. His cavalymen are no brutes; otherwise *Red Cavalry* would have amounted to a libel of the Cavalry Army. But the justification of cruelty -- in a strange and conflicting way -- exists side by side with his rejection of it. This contradiction cannot be resolved.<sup>68</sup>

Except, he might have added, in the Bolshevik will to power.

Lezhnev introduces another Nietzschean motif when he turns to Babel's penchant for achieving the effect of epiphany by presenting his characters at the moment of an unbearable nervous tension, or breakdown -- *proryvy* -- the moments when the cavalymen "lose control over themselves." In those moments, "what is dormant, what cannot be uttered, what we can only guess about" comes to the surface. That here Lezhnev reaches out beyond Freud<sup>69</sup> to Nietzsche can be gauged by what he includes in the list of the "repressed" that returns in the moments of the Cossack's Dionysian frenzy:

The elemental force of popular song that has been passed from generation to generation (the epileptics in Babel begin to speak in the figures and rhythm of a folk song), and the love the Cossack feels for his quiet native farmstead, and the enthusiasm of a participant in a revolutionary struggle... (84)

Curiously and characteristically, Lezhnev's acceptance of or, rather, tolerance for Nietzschean antinomies and his yearning for the primordial are intertwined with a naive biographical moralism with a Dostoevskian twist. Assuming, as we now know, quite erroneously that Babel's narrator and the author were identical, Lezhnev found an explanation and a psychological excuse for Babel's focus on cruelty in the author's alleged

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<sup>68</sup> A. Lezhnev, "I. Babel (zametki k vykhody 'Konarmii)," *Pechat' i revoliutsiia* 6 (1926):85.

<sup>69</sup> Freud and the "Pereval." 0000. Trotsky's [Art and Revolution](#).

childhood experience in a pogrom.<sup>70</sup> Lezhnev was referring to the stories, "First Love" and "The Story of My Dovecot" (dedicated to Gorky), published in 1925 and ultimately intended as part of a long autobiographical fiction in the Gorky mold.<sup>71</sup>

## BABEL'S RECEPTION OF BABEL, OR LIUTOV ROUTINIZED

Babel's turn to the theme of childhood, presented, as in *Red Cavalry*, in the first-person narrative voice, stemmed, I am tempted to think, from Babel's own attempt to assimilate his earlier success to the new expectations of the literary establishment and the reader under the NEP. Life, it seemed, was returning to normal. The extraordinary, not to say Dionysian, intensity of existence under the conditions of revolution and civil war, with its manifest self-legitimation (*samozakonnost'* as in Benni, Veshnev, above), were giving way, were intended to give way to the quotidian predictability. As a sociologist would put it, the charisma of the revolution was now being routinized, in part in the emerging "revolutionary tradition," in part in the developing institutions of bureaucracy and law which let back in some of the condemned "petty-bourgeois" values, including such hitherto inadmissible luxuries as an individual's psychological motivations.<sup>72</sup> One of the sure signs of such a routinization that involved the phenomenon of Babel directly was an article by I.

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<sup>70</sup>Natalie Babel, "Introduction," in I. Babel, *The Lonely Years: 1925-1939 (Unpublished Stories and Private Correspondence)* (New York, 1964). Lezhnev wrote: "After all, the author of *Red Cavalry* has, as a child, experienced a terrible Jewish pogrom: the murder of his grandfather Shoil, and the smashed pigeon on his cheek, and the convulsions of a nervous shock. He has told us about this in his stories, *First Love*," and "The Story of My Dovecot." (257)

<sup>71</sup>See my discussion of Babel's "autobiographical fiction" in "Isaac Babel," in *European Writers: The Twentieth Century* (New York: Scribners, 1989), pp. 188ff., 1892-93.

<sup>72</sup>Osip Mandelstam described the inadmissibility of psychological motivation in the post-revolutionary major fiction as follows: "The value of the psychological motivation, a device used by the decadent novel to rescue it from its total demise, has been radically undermined and discredited by the present impotence of psychological motives before the forces of reality which constantly subject psychological motivation to an ordeal with ever-increasing savagery." Osip Mandelstam, "Konets romana" (1928), *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, 2d ed., eds. G. P. Struve and B. A. Filippov (Inter-Language Literary Associates, 1971), p. 269. By implication, what was impossible in a novel was possible in cycles of lyric poetry or short-fiction cycles, bound -- as in lyric poetry as well as Babel -- by a single first-person narrator. This similarity of Babel's fiction and lyric cyclical poetry was recognized by contemporaries. See A. Lezhnev, "I. Babel," *Pechat' i revoliutsia* 6 (1926):82; Nik. Stepanov, "Novella Babelia," in *Mastera sovremennoi literatury II: I. E. Babel'*, eds. B. V. Kazanskii and Iu. N. Tyniainov (Academia: Leningrad, 1928), pp. 25ff. Tamara Ivanova, "Isaak Emanuelovich Babel'," in her *Moi sovremenniki, kakimi ia ikh znala: Ocherki*. (Moscow, 1984).

Il'insky, "Legal Motifs in Babel's Writings" (1927),<sup>73</sup> a study of popular conceptions of law and justice underlying the actions and sensibilities of Babel's protagonists.

The fictional continuity between the narrator of *Red Cavalry* and the narrator of the childhood stories, suggesting an identity between the boy victim and Liutov, makes this hypothesis especially plausible. If this was so, and I think it was, Babel was following his patrons and supporters among the critics in covering the Nietzschean tracks of *Red Cavalry* and *The Tales of Odessa* by having them blend with the more conventional mentality of the peaceful and "vegetarian" period of the NEP. What the "childhood" stories seemed to be saying was that Liutov the man, Liutov the boy, and, by implication, their creator were not merely Nietzschean "adventurers and aestheticists" (Gorbachev, Veshnev), inscrutably alien to the conventional view of life, but adult victims, scarred deeply by the cruelties of the old regime at the most impressionable time of life, their childhood. Thus the stock psychology and sociology of victimization, which was transcended with such exuberance in the *Odessa Tales* and *Red Cavalry*, were called upon to supplement Babel's original readers perceived as "complete art" (Benni).

Nietzschean motifs, individualistic, anti-statist, and aesthetic to the core, were growing ever fainter, no longer heard above the beat of the kettle drums of the Stalinist superstate.

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<sup>73</sup>I. Il'inskii, "Pravovye motivy v tvorchestve Babelia," *Krasnaia nov'* 7 (1927):231-240.