



Babel' in Context: A Study in Cultural Identity by Efraim Sicher; ***Isaac Babel and the Self-Invention of Odessan Modernism*** by Rebecca Jane Stanton

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Slavic Review, Vol. 73, No. 1 (SPRING 2014), pp. 215-217

Published by:

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0215>

Accessed: 29/05/2014 12:24

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Union in order to profit from the quarrels that promptly ensued. Dobrenko's piece is a *Lehrstück* on ideological management and cultural-political strategy that acknowledges Stalin's talents as both political strategist and shrewd psychologist.

Katerina Clark's contribution, the first of the "Politics and Popular Culture" section, outlines a strong literary-architectural connection in the Moscow of the 1930s, a period of literalization in which the texture of written and writing culture intersected with state power and urban planning. The new Moscow reflected the consolidation of Soviet power and was supposed to model in stone what literature was required to produce as "master narratives" of Soviet heroism. Integrating music, text, and film with public debate and cultural-political shifts, Thomas Lahusen, Robin LaPasha, and Tracy McDonald extend Clark's material-cultural approach to the intriguing "accordion debate." It started in late 1926 with a poem by Aleksandr Zharov and posed the question of whether the instrument could still be used in a Bolshevik civilizing mission. Igor' Savchenko's film *Garmon'*, based on Zharov's poem, praised the instrument; it arrived in the movie theaters in 1934 but was quickly removed. Within the decade the instrument came to be seen as (too) rural and backward, and Savchenko's aesthetics had become obsolete. Finally, Konstantin Bogdanov broadens the popular culture theme to folklore in a big-picture approach. He emphasizes its central role in Soviet history, culture, politics, and ritual, even qua "fakelore," in mapping both physical and symbolic violence onto a historical trajectory that today, from beyond the end of the system, seems slightly absurd.

Overall, *Schrift und Macht* is a model of a closely coherent, sharply focused collection. It significantly deepens our understanding of the culture–power nexus at the time of its solidification into permanent Soviet structures.

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Babel' in Context: A Study in Cultural Identity. By Efraim Sicher. Borderlines: Russian and East European Jewish Studies. Brighton, Mass.: Academic Studies Press, 2012. 308 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Photographs. \$80.00, hard bound.

Isaac Babel and the Self-Invention of Odessan Modernism. By Rebecca Jane Stanton. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012. Studies in Russian Literature and Theory. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012. xi, 205 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. \$45.00, hard bound.

The city of Odessa is mythical in part because so many find its culture mysterious. It is a historically multiethnic city that fell within the boundaries of the Jewish Pale of Settlement in the nineteenth century and, as Steven Zipperstein shows in his now-classic *The Jews of Odessa: A Cultural History, 1794–1881* (1985), became a site of Jewish acculturation. It is also viewed as "a city of rogues and schnorrers," as Jarrod Tanny calls it in the title of his recent book (2011).

Odessa's myths enveloped Isaak Babel' in an aura of sunshine, apostasy, and roguishness. As he wrote in his 1918 essay "Odessa," "the Literary Messiah, for whom they have waited for so long and so fruitlessly, will come from there—from the sunny steppes, washed by the sea." Odessa was the stage for Babel's larger-than-life Jewish gangsters and his lachrymose "Story of My Dovecote," a story that poignantly details the clichéd coming-of-age of a young, overachieving Jewish protagonist who narrowly survives a pogrom. Through his stories, Babel' created the role of the Odessa Jew in the drama of revolutionary Russia.

Two recent books examine the myths and realities surrounding Babel' and his characters, each shedding light on his contributions to our understanding of early Soviet fiction. Efraim Sicher's *Babel' in Context* examines the writer's elusive cultural identity, excavating and explaining barely detectable accents for those who would not immediately recognize the impact of Jewish culture on his work. Rebecca Stanton, in *Isaac Babel and the Self-Invention of Odessan Modernism*, examines Babel' alongside other Odessa writers such as Valentin Kataev, Iurii Olesha, and Konstantin Paustovskii. Her book probes the relationship between fiction and reality, demonstrating that the former often finds its way into the latter.

Both Sicher and Stanton highlight the gap between Babel''s self-presentation and his biography. The protagonist in his fictionalized "Autobiography" claims to have grown up in the Moldavanka section of Odessa, whereas Babel''s family moved to Nikolaev soon after his birth; Babel' resided comfortably with the family of Lev Il'ich Slonim after moving to St. Petersburg, and not illegally in the cellar of a drunken waiter. Babel's notorious dissimulation underlies his unique brand of mythmaking, an observation that offers both Stanton and Sicher insights into the nature of fiction.

Stanton argues that "Odessa writers roguishly manipulate the boundaries of autobiographical discourse, subverting the logic of Socialist Realism for their own purposes" (41). She uses as a starting point Viktor Shklovskii's 1933 article "South-West," an idiosyncratic text in which the critic characterizes several Odessa writers, including Babel' and Eduard Bagritskii, as representatives of Odessan flavor, contrasting them with Nikolai Gogol', who was eventually subsumed into the Russian literary canon. Stanton questions Shklovskii's narrow emphasis on a south-west school that "strips these historical allusions of their original ethnic, religious, national, and imperial connotations, as it were sanitizing them for the new Soviet context" (11). Though Stanton's emphasis is on the twentieth century, her critique of Shklovskii could likewise be applied to the imperialist rhetoric of Vissarion Belinskii, who lauded Gogol''s local color while dismissing the value of his Ukrainian-language writer contemporaries.

Stanton convincingly argues that within the invented reality of Odessan modernism, stories can come true. Stanton demonstrates this in part by showing the interconnected nature of Babel''s invented (or embellished) characters. For example, she connects Great-Uncle Shoyl's dubious stories about the shooting of a certain Count Godlewski (in "Dovecote") to a story that the protagonist's grandmother tells in the much earlier "Childhood: At Grandmother's." Another important feature of Odessan modernism, as Stanton defines it, is the interaction of texts. When the protagonist in Babel''s "Dovecote" loses his hard-earned doves in a pogrom, there is a strong echo of Aleksandr Kuprin's "Gambrinus," in which the young fiddler Sashka's dog is killed in effigy. Sashka reappears yet again in Paustovskii's 1958 memoir, *A Time of Great Expectations*.

Stanton calls attention to the biographical discrepancies between Babel''s actual family members and those who appear in his fictional autobiography. She cites Babel''s daughter Nathalie Babel Brown, who responds to the characters in Babel''s childhood stories by recalling, "No member of the Babel family was redheaded . . . my grandmother's name was Fanny, not Rachel" (79). Stanton observes that by painting his father's hair red, Babel' is likening his own lineage to the redheaded Jews in Anton Chekhov's "Rothschild's Fiddle," Gogol''s *Taras Bul'ba*, and Ivan Turgenev's "The Jew." To the list of redheaded Jews Stanton might have added King David, who is described in the Bible as "ruddy." Moreover, by naming the narrator's mother "Rachel," Babel' tightens his protagonist's invented biblical lineage.

Where Stanton broadens our Russian literary context for understanding Babel', Efraim Sicher demonstrates the Jewish themes in Babel''s literary multivalences. Babel''s Odessan gangsters use Hebrew as code. In "The Sin of Jesus," the character

Deborah, whose name means “bee” in Hebrew, is referred to as the *pchela skorbi* (bee of sorrow). Of all of the writers of the so-called south-west school, Sicher claims, “for none of them were Jewish identity and Yiddish as natural and inbred as they were for Babel” (25).

Babel’ experimented with a range of Jewish types, from the nebbish to the muscular Jew. Liutov, the protagonist in *Red Cavalry*, is perpetually *chuzhoi* (the outsider). On the other hand, the Odessan gangsters exhibit some attributes of a burgeoning Jewish nationalism: “They represented a new pride in Jewish identity and a fearless independence that answered centuries of persecution, not with assimilation, but with national revival and widespread support for the Zionist movement” (113–14). Sicher’s scholarly excavation of Babel’s Jewish themes, grounded in his knowledge of both Jewish and Russian languages and reference points, helps us to identify the multiple cultural layers in Babel’s fiction. Ultimately this leads us toward a more sophisticated understanding of Babel’s messages.

Just as it is difficult to write about Odessa without becoming distracted by the myths surrounding the city, so too readers, from First Cavalry Commander Semen Budennii to American literary critic Lionel Trilling, have failed to approach Babel’s fiction without tripping over the thin line between his fiction and reality, or becoming distracted by the masks his narrators wear. “Why,” Stanton rightly asks, “are Babel’s readers so preoccupied—even to the point of readable anxiety—with getting at the truth?” (49).

Whether Babel’s first-person narratives are factually accurate is a question that has diverted attention from more important truths informing his compellingly multi-layered stories. In his final chapter, Sicher discusses Babel’s unfinished novels, in particular his cycle on collectivization, *Velikaia krinitsa*, of which we have two stories. These stories, while ostensibly welcoming a difficult but bright new era, nonetheless reveal a decisively dark vision of the future—evidence for Sicher that Babel “knew the truth about Stalinism” (227). Whatever truth Babel’ gleaned about collectivization, the increasing strictures on art, or the troubled relations between Russia’s subcultures which persisted after the revolution, would remain buried beneath carefully layered allusions and illusions.

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Stalin’s Ghosts: Gothic Themes in Early Soviet Literature. By Muireann Maguire. Russian Transformations: Literature, Thought, Culture, vol. 4. Pieterlen: Peter Lang, 2012. xii, 331 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$73.95, paper.

This book earnestly tries to make the case for the existence within Soviet letters of a relatively stable phenomenon that could be labeled *Soviet gothic*. It is an ambitious project that in its best moments aligns itself with a strand in Soviet literary studies that arguably extends back to Abram Tertz’s provocative 1957 essay “Chto takoe sotsrealizm” (“What Socialist Realism Is,” though the author makes the common mistake of misstating the title as a question), whose concern is to reveal the grotesque underside of Stalinism’s radiant surface. Eric Naiman’s pioneering *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology* (1997), Kevin M. F. Platt’s *History in a Grotesque Key: Russian Literature and the Idea of Revolution* (1997), Lilya Kaganovsky’s *How the Soviet Man Was Unmade: Cultural Fantasy and Male Subjectivity under Stalin* (2008), and the Moscow philosopher Mikhail Ryklin’s essay “Tela terrora (Tezisy k logike nasiliia)” (1990) are just a few of the better-known works in this line.