

BOOK REVIEWS/КНИЖНЫЕ РЕЦЕНЗИИ

Rebecca Jane Stanton. *Isaac Babel and the Self-Invention of Odessan Modernism*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2012. xi, 205 pp. \$45.00 (cloth). ISBN-13: 978-0-81012-832-3.

“This is a book about stories that come true.” (p. 3) So begins Rebecca Jane Stanton’s wonderful first book about Isaac Babel and his “successors” (Olesha and Kataev, in particular) in the so-called Odessa or South-West school, all of whom shared an “interest in stories that break free of their generic and epistemological territory and invade other spaces: other narratives, other people’s books, the ‘real world’.” (p. 144) Stanton argues persuasively that Odessan Modernism is less a species of regionalism than an allegiance toward what Foucault calls “heterotopia,” a place that is at once real and fictional. After a breezy history of Odessa as the sunny, roguish, Mediterranean-Levantine foil to the homogenizing gravity of Imperial Petersburg and later Soviet Moscow, the first chapter focuses on the ways in which this history is merely a thematic starting point for an “Odessa Text” that is equal parts myth and literary invention, a text that is always already nostalgia for a bygone “authentic” Odessa of yore. This yearning orients Babel, Kataev and Olesha toward narrative, albeit inflected by a modernist predilection for confusing the boundaries between fiction, autobiography, history, and myth – an inflection intensified by a revolution that shifted the bonds between language and reality.

Chapters Two and Three are primarily devoted to acutely rendered, meticulously linked, close readings of the stories Stanton characterizes as Isaac Babel’s *Bildungsroman*: “Childhood. At Grandmother’s,” “The Story of My Dovecote,” “First Love,” “In the Basement,” and “Awakening.” Having anchored her analysis in a history of autobiographical reception in Russia and the West, Stanton concludes that, “in order to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of [Babel’s] text, the reader must – paradoxically – indulge in the antiaesthetic drive to ‘get at the truth’.” (p. 57) What makes these readings particularly satisfying is their subtle engagement with Babel’s intertexts – Turgenev and Maupassant, in particular, – because the specific ways in which Babel invokes and “lies” about details of other fictions offer clues about his own “messianic” artistic ambition. As Stanton notes:

Only in prose – the stuff of our daily communication, a humble yet infinitely malleable clay, as Babel has shown – can an artist construct and mediate a reality capable of competing with “real life,” an extra-

textual reality (which is itself, after all, subject to representation by precisely the same sorts of text) in viability and depth. Babel's works, with their emphasis on the pursuit of "liberation" and autonomy, seem to equate "real life" with a sort of determinism; the seductive aspect of fiction is precisely its total submission to the will of the author. (p. 101)

My lone quibble with the Babel chapters is that I wanted more of them; Stanton does not apply her insights to the rest of Babel's oeuvre, to *Red Cavalry*, for example. Her perceptive decoding of Babel's poetics in the childhood stories deserves to be put into a more explicit dialogue with recent work (by Batuman, van de Stadt, Senderovich, myself, and others) on *Red Cavalry*, the *Odessa Stories*, and that other notorious meta-text "My First Fee."

But I am being greedy. Stanton's reticence is, of course, deliberate, since the book – having established the poetic and ethical contours of "Odessan Modernism" as shaped by its self-proclaimed "literary messiah" – moves from Babel to a final chapter on those who survived Stalin to claim Babel's mantle: Valentin Kataev and Iurii Olesha. (Konstantin Paustovskii's cloying attempts at discipleship get their due almost as a running joke throughout this book.) The long passages I have already cited should give one some idea of the quality of Stanton's writing. But it is perhaps this chapter where one gets the best taste of its acerbic glory, as she presents the Homeric "choice of Achilles' between long life and great renown" (p. 106) faced by Babel's literary survivors. Regarding Kataev's bravura attempt, in *My Diamond Crown* (1977), to "de-Messianize" and usurp Babel, she writes of the ways in which he "appropriates the very qualities that led to Babel's downfall – the equivalent of picking up the cross after the danger of crucifixion is over." (p. 116) All the more striking, then, is her decision to close with what I can only describe as a moving yet incisive encomium to Iurii Olesha's seemingly self-effacing prose. Even more interesting is the way Stanton shifts focus from Olesha's classic NEP novella *Envy* to his more problematic and – I had once thought – self-indulgent *No Day Without a Line*. Stanton concludes, however, that the latter book should not be understood as "Olesha's literal attempt 'to proceed backwards through my life, as Marcel Proust managed to do in his time' (if judged solely on the success of such a Proustian project, the book manifestly fails [. . .]) but rather as a book *about a character who wishes to do so.*" (p. 130) Indeed, Olesha's project – and that of Odessan Modernism broadly speaking – is to "capture and reassemble the floating fragments that make up the unitary self, [. . .] to solve the mystery of continuous identity." (p. 131) And moreover, in

Stanton's view, of all the South-West writers, it is ultimately Olesha, who "stubbornly continues to uphold" the Odessa sun of which Babel wrote (from Petersburg!) in 1916 – a sun that, as I have argued elsewhere, blurs the boundaries between body and soul, ethics and aesthetics, self and other, fact and fiction. It is a sun that invokes the power of inventive nostalgia as a force for authenticity – as evoked by Olesha's claim that Florentines would encounter Dante in the street and "recoil in holy terror: 'Oh my God, he was in hell!'" (p. 142) Stanton points out that this anecdote about the force of literary truth is itself an invention: Dante never returned to Florence after his exile in 1302. This is precisely the kind of playful texture that makes *Isaac Babel and the Self-Invention of Odessan Modernism* an essential book not only for specialists but for any lay reader interested in a marvelous work of well-researched, theoretically-savvy, old-school literary criticism.

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