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The Hershele Maze: Isaac Babel and His Ghost Reader

Arguing
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*My reader lives in my soul,
but since he's been there for quite a long time,
I have fashioned him in my own image.*
Isaac Babel¹

Writing about *Red Cavalry* in *The Modern Jewish Canon*, Ruth Wisse comes close to hinting at one of the hidden clues in Isaac Babel's war stories. Like other critics, she sees Babel's narrator as a figure that belongs to, and is thus able to interpret, two seemingly antithetical historical milieus: Jewish and Cossack.² He can claim to be at home in both contexts, writes Wisse, "because the Revolution is in the process of crushing the differences between them, and yet he can interpret Lenin to the Cossacks and Hershele

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1. From Babel's meeting with his readers at the Union of Soviet Writers on September 28, 1937. The transcript of the conversation was published in *Nash sovremennik* 4 (1964), 96-100. For the English translation see Isaac Babel, *You Must Know Everything: Stories 1915-1937*, trans. Max Hayward and ed. Nathalie Babel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 205-221. The quotation is on page 100 in the Russian, and on page 220 in the English. Later in this essay the English text is referred to as Babel 1969.
2. Lionel Trilling was one of the first American scholars to speak of Babel's "forbidden dialectic" in his introduction to the 1955 translation of Babel's work: "For him the Cossack was indeed the noble savage, all too savage, not often noble, yet having in his savagery some quality that might raise strange questions in a Jewish mind." See the reprint of the essay: Lionel Trilling, "The Forbidden Dialectic: Introduction to *The Collected Stories*" in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Isaac Babel* (New York: New Haven, and

Ostropolier to the Jews."³ I read in Wisse's turn of phrase an implied comparison between the narratives of two stories in the *Red Cavalry* cycle. One is "My First Goose," in which the narrator, Liutov, while traveling with the Cossack division as a propagandist for a Red Army newspaper (as Babel himself did), conveys Lenin's message from *Pravda* to the illiterate Cossacks. The second story is "Rebbe," in which Liutov offers a puzzling response to a question posed by Motale Bratslavskii, the Hasidic rebbe in Zhitomir, when he describes his occupation as "putting into verse the adventures of Hershele Ostropolier."⁴

Liutov's occupation, as he describes it, is an act of both creativity and interpretation. The focus on interpretation as both an action and a product of that action is crucial to these stories, yet Wisse stops short of exploring this theme beyond the conclusion that "in his [Liutov's] search for meritment he is putting Hershele Ostropolier into verse."⁵ Efraim Sicher sees Liutov's answer to the rebbe as "a cultural referent which identifies Liutov as a fellow Jew rather than a marauding soldier from the invading revolutionary forces."⁶ However, the exchange offers more than a reference to a specific piece of cultural knowledge that identifies the ambivalent Liutov as a Jew to his Hasidic hosts; a great deal more than merriment is at stake here. Enough is strange and estranging in the story "Rebbe" to cast doubt on any straightforward interpretation of Liutov's seemingly straightforward answers to the *tsadik*.

In this essay I would like to explore the relationship between Isaac Babel and an ideal reader constructed in his stories. I intend to follow the puzzling clues set in the story "Rebbe," by tracing what I will call the "Hershele maze" of the Babelian text. Hershele Ostropolier, a trickster figure from Yiddish folklore, is central to Babel. The subtext suggested by references to

Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 29.

3. Ruth R. Wisse, *The Modern Jewish Canon: A Journey through Language and Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 113.

4. Isaac Babel, *Sozhimnita* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1990), vol. 2, 36. Throughout the essay, I quote from three separate editions of Babel's work: the above-mentioned two-volume Russian edition, against which the translations from two editions that are currently in print are verified and the best is given. This exchange is also translated in Isaac Babel, *Collected Stories*, ed. Efraim Sicher and trans. David McDuff (London: Penguin books, 1994), 124; and in Isaac Babel, *Red Cavalry*, ed. Nathalie Babel and trans. Peter Constantine (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 71. Below I refer to these three editions as, respectively, "Babel" 1990, Babel 1994 and Babel 2002. All translations from Babel 1990, and from other Russian and Yiddish sources, are my own.

5. Wisse, 113.

6. Efraim Sicher, "Babel's 'Shy Star': Reference, Inter-reference and Interference," *New Zealand Slavonic Journal* 36 (2002): 259.

Yiddish folklore adds a flavor of Hershele's trickery to Babel's persona in the Russian-language text of *Red Cavalry*. Babel constructs a figure of the reader inside the text who can understand the crux of his project: not so much the interpretation of Lenin by the Cossacks and Hershele to the Jews, but rather the interpretation of Lenin by way of Jewish discourse, and of becoming a Cossack as Hershele's act of trickery. This figure of the reader inside the text is neither equivalent to any actual readers outside the text, nor does it explain the entirety of the enigmatic and vast phenomenon that is Isaac Babel. In this article I hope to delineate a particular kind of reader constructed in Babel's text to understand one aspect of the author/narrator's own experience: being a disguised Jew during the Soviet-Polish War of 1920.

I.

The story "Rebbe" is inspired by the same entry from Babel's 1920 diary as the story "Gedali." Both resulting narratives are set on a Friday evening in Zhitomir, at the beginning of the Sabbath, but are separated in *Red Cavalry* by the story "My First Goose." All *Red Cavalry* stories were written separately and in retrospect, as a number of critics point out,⁷ yet the sequential arrangement of the stories in book form sets up a puzzle about the way these stories fit together in the larger cycle of *Red Cavalry*.⁸

7. Efraim Sicher writes, for example, that the *Red Cavalry* stories were composed in retrospect and "at some distance from the material collected in his 1920 Diary. Liutov [sic] is a composite figure who actually never fully develops, but remains a fictional persona used with irony by the implied author as an intermediary eye." See: Efraim Sicher, *Style and Structure in the Prose of Isaac Babel* (Columbus: Slavica Publishers, 1985), 12.

8. Of the critical works that deal with the sequence of stories "Gedali," "My First Goose," and "Rebbe" as a cycle, three are of note. Charles Rougle sees "My First Goose" as a rupture between the narrative thread that goes from "Gedali" to "Rebbe", noting that the latter picks up where the former left off, with "the abruptness of the break with the intervening narrative [My First Goose] serving to emphasize the duality of the narrator's consciousness." See Charles Rougle, "Isaac Babel and His Odyssey of War and Revolution," in Charles Rougle (ed.), *Red Cavalry: A Critical Companion* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 41. Edyta M. Bojanowska's approach to *Red Cavalry* as a cycle defines "three structural-thematic blocks": the first block of the initial ten stories establishes the whole cycle's themes and motifs by concentrating on life behind the front line; the second block of twenty-three stories deals with the front-line experience; and the final block of one to three stories, depending on the edition, "reconnects with the opening stories, thus foregrounding the work's cyclical structure"; see: Edyta M. Bojanowska, "E Pluribus Unum: Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry*: As a Story Cycle," *The Russian Review* 59 (July 2000) 373. Evgenii Dobrenko creates a very thorough reading of *Red Cavalry* as a cycle in his article "The Logic of the Cycle." Dobrenko sees the events of "My First Goose" as a trial of a person who must relinquish his individuality and merge with the "herd consciousness" [*iroevoe soznanie*]; the

The Zhitomir rebbe asks Liutov a number of questions when Liutov joins the Hasidim at their meal, but Liutov answers more in this story than he is asked. We must assume that the conversation between Liutov (the character) and his hosts takes place in Yiddish and is "translated" into Russian by Liutov (the implied author) for the sake of the Russian-language readers of Isaac Babel, the author of *Red Cavalry*. When Liutov-the-character answers the rebbe's questions, his answers reveal something about the implied author—who is strikingly similar to Babel—as well.

One of the rebbe's questions, "*Otkuda priekh'al eyrei?*" ("Where did the Jew come from?"),⁹ might be seen as a direct translation into Russian of the Yiddish idiom "*fun vanden kumt a yid?*" At first glance, the wording of the rebbe's question seems no more than a faithful rendering of the implied Yiddish original into the writer's native tongue. However, the Yiddish *a yid* of the idiom does not mean "*eyrei*" or "Jew": in a language that, in its traditional environment, assumes all its speakers to be Jews, *a yid* means no more than "a person" and is used in several idioms instead of the second-person singular pronoun. If the Yiddish idiom were to be idiomatically translated into another language, the translation would have been: "Where did you come from?" The difference is significant, because the rebbe's question, rendered in Russian, is the only instance in *Red Cavalry* when someone else explicitly refers to Liutov as a Jew. It is also the only instance in the cycle where by the mere fact of replying to such a question and engaging this literally translated idiom, Liutov unambiguously identifies himself as a Jew—not to the rebbe in Zhitomir, who must understand that his interlocutor is Jewish because he is linguistically and culturally conversant in Yiddish, but to the readers of *Red Cavalry*.

Upon hearing that Liutov comes from Odessa, the rebbe produces an unexpected reply: "A devout town [...]. The star of our exile, the reluctant well of our afflictions!"¹⁰ That a Hasidic rebbe would make such a reverent statement about Odessa, known in the Jewish world at the time as a city of sin,¹¹ is puzzling. Does the rebbe mean what he says? Should the reader

identity defines itself only after it has emerged from this trial. This trial is the reason, claims Dobrenko, why the unified narrative texture of "Gedali" and "Rebbe" is interrupted by "My First Goose." "Rebbe" becomes "My First Goose" in reverse: it speaks of the difficulty in entering not the new world, but the old one, not of succumbing to the "herd consciousness" but rather to the consciousness that is elegiac. See E.A. Dobrenko, "Logika tsyklia" in G.A. Belaia, E.A. Dobrenko, and I.A. Esaulov, "*Konarmia*": *Isaaka Babelia* (Moscow: Rossiiskii universitet, 2004), 55.

9. Babel 1990, v. 2, 35.

10. Babel 2002, 71.

11. Steven J. Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa: A Cultural History, 1794–1881* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 1.

assume that the rebbe's characterization of Odessa as a "devout town" [*blagochestivyi gorod*] is a sign of the decadence in this Hasidic court¹² or simply a game of pretense and a "fabric of lies" in which the rebbe does not really mean what he says?¹³ I suggest that the proper interpretation of the rebbe's words lies in the Yiddish subtext of his reply. The phrase "star of our exile" [*zvezda nashego izgnaniia*] could be approximately translated back into its implied Yiddish original: *likht fun goles*—"the light of exile" (in Hebrew, *ma'or ha-golah*). The phrase then becomes more than it literally means: the expression is an honorific applicable not to places, but to sages who distinguished themselves in the art of religious learning and textual commentary.¹⁴

Such a reading is confirmed in the cryptic phrase that follows in the rebbe's response to Liutov's assertion that he is "putting into verse the adventures of Hershele Ostropolier": "A great task [...]. The jackal moans when it is hungry, every fool has foolishness enough for despondency, and only *the sage* shreds the veil of existence with laughter..."¹⁵ Commentators of Babel's style have spoken about the poetics of the writer's prose and of the need to read his references on a level that cuts somewhere underneath the text and holds the text together.¹⁶ One of Babel's earliest critics defined this feature of Babel's style as "*vnubrennaia fabula*" or "*zakulisnata fabula*" ("internal *fabula*" or "backstage *fabula*")—a kind of internal development of the story that occurs beneath the surface of the text through the interlinking associations that separate words and phrases evoke.¹⁷ If there is such an internal *fabula* in the story "Rebbe," then the word "sage" (*nudrets*) can be read as a synonym of the implied Yiddish idiom *likht fun goles*.

Of course, an entirely different and, to the speakers of Yiddish, more obvious reading of the word "sage" is possible here. When translated into the implied Yiddish original that the rebbe must have used in Babel's story,

12. Wisse, 102.

13. Alice Stone Nakhimovsky, *Russian-Jewish Literature and Identity: Jabotinsky, Babel, Grossman, Galich, Roziner, Markish* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 95.

14. Yitshok Niborsky, *Verterbutkh fun loshn-koymesh-shtamike verter in yidish* (Paris: Medem-Bibliothèque, 1999), 145.

15. Babel 2002, 71 [my emphasis].

16. On the "ornamental" aspects of Babel's prose see, for example, James E. Falen, *Isaac Babel, Russian Master of the Short Story* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1974), 42–45; and an illuminating analysis of Babel's "poetic prose" in Efraim Sichel, *Style and Structure in the Prose of Isaac Babel* (Columbus: Slavica Publishers, 1985), 26–38.

17. Nik. Stepanov, "Novella Babelia," in *I.E. Babel: Statii i materialy* (Leningrad: Academia, 1928), 37.

the word in question becomes *khokhem*. As such the word can be interpreted as a mocking epithet; after all, the Yiddish idiom "er iz a *khokhem*" ("he is [such] a sage," or even "what a sage he is!") means precisely the opposite: the sage of the phrase is dismissed as a fool. Here, however, I have ventured to suggest a new reading that does not treat the puzzling exchange between the Zhitomir rebbe and Liutov as a mere joke. I would like to imagine that the rebbe means what he says, that Liutov understands the elder's cryptic message, and that the word "sage" is synonymous with the expression "a star/light of exile." I claim that the *khokhem* in question is linked with Odessa, and that the point of contact between this epithet and this toponym provides us with two crucial hidden meanings. The first of these meanings hints at an alternative etymology of the word *khokhem* that is not as dismissive and mocking as that of the folk idiom. I am thinking here of *khakhmey* Odes, "the sages of Odessa," as the prominent Russian-Jewish thinkers, artists, and men of letters residing in Odessa in the latter part of the nineteenth century came to be known.¹⁸

The second concealed meaning involves Babel's programmatic understanding of his native city as a place whence Russia's literary messiah would emerge. As Gabriella Safran noted, Babel's description of Odessans in his 1916 manifesto¹⁹—men of sunshine and youthful vigor—coincided with Maksim Gorkii's imperative to create positive new Jewish characters in Russian literature.²⁰ Though Liutov may wish to be more vigorous than he can actually be in his circumstances, he appears before the Zhitomir rebbe as a writer from Odessa, similar to those other Odessans who bring with them some vital "blood-freshening" spirit.²¹ With the Polish-Soviet war in the background and with Hasidism driven to the brink of extinction, the figure of a Jew from Odessa carries a glimmer of hope even for the Zhitomir rebbe. On June 3, 1920 Babel notes the following exchange between him and the Zhitomir rebbe, the clear prototype of the *Isaiah* in *Red Cavalry*:

"Where are you from, young man?"

"From Odessa."

"How do people live there?"

"People are alive there." ["*Tam litvdi zhitim!*"]

"And here it's terrible." ["*A zdes' uzhas!*"]²²

18. See, for example, Dan Miron's introduction in S. Y. Abramovitch, *Tales of Mendele the Book Peddler*, Dan Miron and Ken Frieden, eds., trans. Ted Gorelick and Hillel Halkin (New York: Schocken Books, 1996), xxiii.

19. See "Odessa" in Babel 1990, vol. 1, 62–65.

20. Gabriella Safran, "Isaak Babel's El'ia Isaakovich as a New Jewish Type," *Slavic Review* 61, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 257.

21. Babel 1990, vol. 1, 65.

22. Babel 1990, vol. 1, 363. Peter Constantine translates the exchange in Babel 2002 (p.

Zhitomir and Odessa are at the opposite ends of historical experience, one "here" and another "there," with a contrastive conjunction emphasizing the world of difference that lies between them. Yet, it is not Odessa's staunch secularism that is cast here against the rebbe's piety: Liutov is a *khokhem* from Isaac Babel's *Odes*, a sage from an idiosyncratically optimistic city who lightens the mood in the midst of destruction.

"Reb Motale says that while animals and simpletons may be able to express the misery of the human condition, only laughter can get beyond the limits of reality to ultimate freedom," writes Ruth Wisse in her interpretation of the puzzling passage from "Rebbe." She continues to state that "[t]he rebbe ascribes to Hershele Ostropolier a spiritual function as high as his own, and when Lyutov [sic] finds himself seated among the other Hasidim [...] he includes himself in their inspired brotherhood."²³ However, it is not Hershele, or, at least, not *only* Hershele, whom the rebbe credits with sagely wisdom for the ability to illuminate existence with his saving laughter. The sage of Odessa in this passage is Liutov himself, Liutov who claims to be the interpreter of Hershele's adventures, Liutov who doesn't so much adapt these adventures into verse, but rather adopts them into his own life.

Like Hershele Ostropolier, who entertained the melancholy rebbe of Medzhibozh with witty stories about his own trickery, Liutov must have earned the respect of the Zhitomir rebbe and his court by telling them similar stories. A "sage" from Odessa, Liutov would likely have told the Hasidim a story about Hershele—or a Hershele-like story—to earn his place at their table. Despite the fact that no such storytelling happens in the plot of "Rebbe," the internal *fabula* of the work suggests a possibility of Liutov's storytelling that may have been implied between the lines.

We might begin to understand Babel's conception of Hershele by looking at the one story in Babel's oeuvre that is explicitly marked as a Hershele narrative, "Shabos-Nakhamu."²⁴ That story, written in 1918 at the beginning of Babel's career, bears a subtitle: "From the Hershele cycle." Though no other stories explicitly belong to this "cycle," there is at least one other story that resembles a Hershele narrative: "My First Goose," which, as has been mentioned, precedes "Rebbe" in the *Red Cavalry* cycle. Babel does

202) but the last two lines of the dialogue translated as "People are alive" and "Here it's terrible" leave out the words "there" in reference to Odessa, and the conjunction "and," which, in the Russian original ("a ") expresses contrast rather than equivalence. Babel's diary entry is clear about the contrast between Zhitomir and Odessa that the rebbe is trying to capture and emphasize through his choice of words (or, rather, through the words that Babel the diarist puts in his mouth).

23. Wisse, 102.

24. The original publication according to Efraim Sichev's very useful bibliography is: "Shabos-nakhamu (Iz tsikla *Gershele*).," *Vechemnaita zvezda* [Petrograd] March 16, 1918.

have a "Hershele cycle" that implicitly runs through much of his total text. This cycle itself becomes a kind of internal *fabula* that illuminates the writer's many works.

II.

In order to define more precisely what a "Hershele story" is, we must take a brief look at the place of Hershele Ostropolier in the context of Yiddish folklore. In Nathan Ausubel's description, Hershele is one of the "wags and wits" of Yiddish folklore.²⁵ Hershele is a poor man whose wit originates not so much in his smarts as in the pressing economic and social conditions in which he must exist. As Ausubel puts it: "He was an impish likeable *schlimmazzl* [sic] whose misfortunes did not, by any means, arise from his own personal character weaknesses but rather from the illogic of the topsy-turvy world he lived in."²⁶ That is to say, Hershele is mischievous not only for the sake of mischief. His impoverishment and his hunger lead him to engage in a play of wits in order to deceive those who are capable of being duped and to obtain something that is forbidden to him.

In one representative Hershele story, Hershele finds himself in a pub, penniless and badly in need of food. The owner refuses to feed him without receiving payment, saying that she has no food left to put on the table. After a moment of thought, Hershele says, "In that case, I'm afraid I'll have to do what my father did." The owner, frightened, asks for clarification, but gets none. "Never mind," Hershele says, "my father did what he did!" In fear, the owner finds food and feeds Hershele a full dinner. After he has finished eating and the potential trouble has been avoided, the owner insists on clarification. "Oh, my father?" replies Hershele innocently. "Whenever my father didn't have any supper he went to bed without it."²⁷

25. Nathan Ausubel, ed., *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1949), 286. For a structural study of Hershele stories see: Toby Blum-Dobkin, "Yiddish Folktales about Jesters: A Problem in Structural Analysis and Genre Definition," *Working Papers in Yiddish and East European Jewish Studies*, no. 22 (New York: Max Weinreich Center for Advanced Jewish Studies, YIVO, 1977). For a useful introduction to Hershele stories, see commentaries in Dan Ben-Amos, ed., *Folktales of the Jews*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2007), 329-333.

26. Ausubel, 287.

27. *Ibid.*, 313. This particular story, as well as many other Hershele stories, shares its motifs with other narratives in the international repertoire of trickster tales. Some other Hershele stories could be placed into the specific cultural context of subversive narratives within the tradition of Hasidic storytelling. In one such story, Hershele tricks a devotee of Rebbe Borukh (who was Hershele's employer in the town of Medzhibozh) into believing that his worn-out shoes are, in fact, "holy" because they had once belonged to the rebbe himself. The ensuing exchange leaves Hershele with the wealthy Hasid's new boots: this feat is accomplished because Hershele exploits his interlocutor's blind devotion to and unquestioning reverence of Rebbe Borukh. The

On close examination, this model of storytelling is instructive for Babel. Hershele's inventiveness enables him to bypass the required means (money) to achieve the desired goal (food). Babel establishes a similar model of inventiveness in "My First Goose," a story that is placed between "Gedali" and "Rebbe." "My First Goose" is the story of Liutov's acceptance by the Cossacks, who are suspicious of and unfriendly to a bespectacled intellectual Jew with a typewriter who has entered their environment of masculinity, courageousness, and physical crudeness. However, the story is more than simply an initiation narrative. I propose to read it as a story, addressed to someone inside the text of *Red Cavalry*, in which Liutov hopes to justify his lesser act of violence through a narrative of trickery.

Liutov is given a hint on how to be accepted: he must "mess up a lady"—"and a good lady at that" in order to earn respect from the soldiers.²⁸ Rape here is the means that must be utilized in order to achieve the end-goal of acceptance. As it were, Liutov is presented with a kind of a riddle that he needs to solve or else be beaten. (His acceptance by the Cossacks rests on the expected act of cruelty and violence, which he is unwilling to commit.) Johan Huizinga, the author of the classic study of the elements of play in culture, comments on such riddles in the archetypal settings of play:

The answer to an enigmatic question is not found by reflection or logical reasoning. It comes quite literally as a sudden solution—a loosening of the tie by which the questioner holds you bound. The corollary of this is that by giving the correct answer you strike him powerless. In principle, there is only one answer to every question. It can be found if you know the rules of the game. These are grammatical, poetical, or ritualistic as the case may be. You have to know the secret language of the adepts and be acquainted with the significance of each symbol.... Should it prove that a second answer is possible, in accord with the rules but not suspected by the questioner, then it will go badly with him: he is caught in his own trap.²⁹

Only one answer is possible here: an act of violence must be committed. But, even though Liutov is trying to pass for a Cossack, he is an intellectual and a Jew who experiences pangs of conscience. He is morally incapable of committing the brutal act of rape and thus earning respect from the soldiers.

holy/holy shoes represent that kind of reverential narrative about Hasidic *tsadikim* that Hershele's witticism works against. For the complete narrative summarized above, see: Valerii Dymshutz, ed., *Erveiskie narodnye skazki: Predaniia, byichki, rasskazy, anekdoty sobrannye E.S. Raizze* (St. Petersburg: Symposium, 2000), 236-237. For other Hershele narratives, see, among others, the following collection: M. Stern, ed., *Hershele Ostropoler un Moike Habad: zayere anekdoten, ritsen, stsenes un shukkes* (New York: Star Hebrew Book Co., [n.d.]).

28. Babel 1990, vol. 2, 33.

29. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955), 110.

Instead, in an instant, he comes to understand that there is also a second answer "in accord with the rules but not suspected by the questioner." Liutov here engages in a kind of subversion as inventive as Hershels': instead of raping a woman, he kills a goose and asks the landlady to cook it for him. He subverts the soldiers' expectation because he is unwilling to commit an act of violence but is capable of playful invention. The killing of the goose earns him the respect of the soldiers and his goal is achieved.

Efraim Sicher observes that "[t]he colorful imagery and unusual metaphors conceal a deep concern for morality built into the structure of Babel's short stories."³⁰ If Liutov were to tell the story of his acceptance by the Cossacks to the Hasidim in Reb Motale's court, he would have proven to them that he was a Jew who was able to retain his sense of what is right even in the conditions of extreme violence. Only a certain type of reader would have understood the particularly Jewish plays of identity communicated through this Hershels-like story about acceptance by the Cossacks. I would like to propose that this reader, Babel's reader constructed in the text, was present at this imagined storytelling that Friday night in the court of Reb Motale Bratslavskii.

III.

A comparison between Isaac Babel and Nikolai Gogol may aid our understanding of certain elements in Babel's work. Babel himself perceived a literary kinship with Gogol, who preceded him by almost a century. He invokes Gogol when contemplating his own origins in the south of the Russian Empire. "Do you remember the life-giving [*plodorodiashchee*] bright sun of Gogol, a man who came from Ukraine?" Babel writes, "if there are such descriptions—then they are merely episodes. But 'The Nose,' 'The Overcoat,' 'The Portrait' and 'Notes of a Madman' are not episodes. Petersburg defeated Poltava [*Poltavshchina*] [...]"³¹ Thinking of himself as Rus-

30. Sicher 1985, 10.

31. Babel 1990, vol. 1, 64. Besides Babel's own professed affinity with Gogol's southern origins and his creative project, there is an ample amount of additional evidence for comparing the two writers. There is a degree of similarity in their relation to folkloric motifs, as I suggest in this essay. Much also remains to be said about the way that each came to represent urban spaces of Petersburg and Odessa (see note 32 below). An additional obvious commonality has to do with the way that each represented the Cossacks. Maksim Gorkii was among the first who has noted the common thread. Publicly defending Babel from the attacks of the Red Army general Semion Budennyi (who criticized Babel for the misrepresentation of Cossack soldiers in Budennyi's First Cavalry division), Gorkii positively compared *Red Cavalry* to Gogol's *Taras Bulba*; see Maksim Gorkii, "Rabselkoram ivoenkoram o tom, kak uchilsia pisat'." *Pravda* Sept. 30, 1928, 3–4. For the critical treatment of the Cossack myth in Russian culture in Gogol, Babel, and other writers, see Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, *The Cossack Hero in Russian Literature: A Study in Cultural Mythology* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

sia's literary "messiah" who arrived from Odessa, Babel sees in Gogol his literary forerunner whose "Poltavan" style succumbed to the linguistic demands of Russia's imperial capital.³²

Two elements of Donald Fanger's classic study of Gogol are applicable to my analysis of Babel: the notion of a cluster of themata that is woven through and thereby illuminates an oeuvre; and, second, the notion that a folkloric motif in literature can reflect a psychological state of the writer that is central to his works and text. The intersection of these two elements helps illuminate the Babelian text further.

Fanger proposes that all Gogol's works, as well as his biography, can be understood as one single text: "the text is Gogol and Gogol is the text, simultaneously compelling recognition and resisting definition."³³ Fanger elaborates further that the reader can recognize not merely particular Gogolian locutions and style:

What we rather recognize is the unique thematic resonance his phrases take on from their participation in the characteristic workings of the larger Gogolian text. By theme here I mean something more fundamental than those recurrent objects of concern—rank, stupidity, greed, moral vacuousness [...]—all of which may be found in "reality" and in his writings alike. Behind them, organizing the rival reality that is Gogol's poetic universe and expressing only its laws, are certain pervasive entities that cannot be reduced to propositional statements. In fact, they manifest themselves textually as dynamic tendencies, modalities of concern, patterns of relationship. Because they comprise key elements in Gogol's artistic code and because they are not to be confused with themes as usually construed, I propose to use the terms "thema" and "themata."³⁴

Fanger further speaks of "clusters of themata" organized around such large notions as "metamorphosis," "evasion," "identity," and "recognition" that are central to the Gogolian text and that can serve as loose cluster headings for a number of works in which "[n]one of its [the cluster's] members is clearly privileged" and in which "[e]ach of its shifting relations to the others contributes to an implication."³⁵ Each thema offers an entry point into the entirety of an oeuvre, and each cluster of themata allows for a number of individual works to be grouped in a particular way that reveals something

32. However, we should keep in mind that Babel hardly practices what he preaches. If his own stories that belong to the so-called "Childhood Stories" cycle are an indication, then we do not exactly find that southern sun that the writer claims to have associated with his native city. This idiosyncratic Odessa is nearly as grim, grotesque, and alienating as is Gogol's Petersburg.

33. Donald Fanger, *The Creation of Nikolai Gogol* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), 239.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*, 240.

about the properties of each cluster, as well as its implication for the entirety of the author's text.³⁶

Hershele, I argue, is one theme in a cluster of themata constituted by meta-literary situations. In their book-length study of three of Babel's stories, "A Note," "My First Fee," and "Guy de Maupassant," Mikhail Iampolskii and Alexander Zholkovskii argue that all three stories have in common a meta-literary setting, a situation that draws attention to the writing process and the relationship between a writer and a reader. In the case of these three stories, a writer or a writer figure takes advantage of a "reader figure" and receives both monetary and sexual favors from her by possessing or guarding knowledge that would help her understand the writer. By identifying this cluster of meta-literary themata, Iampolskii and Zholkovskii position these stories, generally viewed as marginal, at the center of Babel's oeuvre.³⁷

I would like to add the story "Shabos-Nakhamu" to this cluster of meta-literary situations in Babel by showing that the Hershele story contemplates the encounters between writers and readers. In the story, which is usually seen only as an adaptation of a Yiddish folkloric tale accidental in Babel's oeuvre,³⁸ Hershele Ostropolier encounters the pregnant wife of an absent tavern owner, who tells him that she is waiting for Shabos Nakhamu. Hershele realizes that the woman does not understand what Shabos Nakhamu is (the term "Shabos-Nakhamu," "the Sabbath of consolation," in fact refers to

36. Other critics also choose to approach Gogol's oeuvre by identifying a number of themes that are chosen as prisms through which one sees much of the writer's total text. Instructive for my particular interest in Babel's "folkloric imagination" is the treatment of Gogol's story "A Terrible Vengeance" included in his *Dikanka* cycle. Through his reading of the story, Robert Maguire identified the problem of "bounded space," the organic vitality of which is destroyed by the intrusion of outside forces; see Robert Maguire, *Exploring Gogol* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 9. Yuri Mann, in his *Poetika Gogolia* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1988 [1978]) also commented on the problem of an individual's separation from the organic community (41), as well as on the presence of uncontrolled evil forces that create a kind of pre-termination against which an individual's will is powerless (47). Both critics place the reading of this "folkloric" story (which Gogol wrote at the start of his career) at the beginning of their studies, identifying in it those themes (bounded space, intrusion of mythic forces) that would come to dominate much of the writer's oeuvre.

37. See A.K. Zholkovskii and M.B. Iampolskii, *Babel//Babel* (Moscow: Carte Blanche, 1994).

38. See, for example, Falen 1974, 31-33. I disagree with Falen's claim that Babel never continued the "Hershele cycle" because the circumstances of his life—his experiences during the war and working for the Cheka—made it inevitable that "the saga of Hershele may have ceased to occupy the forefront of his mind" (33). I claim in this essay that Hershele continued to be very much on Babel's mind during and after the experiences that Falen thinks to have displaced the writer's interest in the folkloric trickster. For a different treatment of folkloric themes in Babel, see Safran 2002, 253-272 (268-272 in particular).

the Saturday following the fast day of Tisha b'Av), and replies that he is in fact "Shabos Nakhamu." The woman understands her guest to be a visitor from the other world, serves him a lavish meal, and sends him away with a bag of clothes that he claims he will take to her dead relatives in the world-to-come. In this situation, Hershele exploits the woman's ignorance of Jewish ritual to gain the hospitality he desires.

The situation in "Shabos-Nakhamu" is typologically similar to the situation in two stories, "My First Fee" (and "The Note," which is a version of "My First Fee") and "Guy de Maupassant." In the former, the narrator invents a story about himself and withholds from his "reader," the prostitute Vera, the information that would enable her to understand that he is fabricating this story.³⁹ In "Guy de Maupassant," the narrator, who is hired as a helper in a translation project, is able to achieve material gain and sexual favors by understanding the nuances of French and Russian better than does Raisa Benderskaia, the hired translator of Maupassant's stories into Russian.⁴⁰ In all three of these stories we can see the same meta-literary thematic: the stories construct a reader who knows less than a writer and thus is forever incapable of understanding the irony of his or her situation. In "My

39. Babel 1990, vol. 2, 245-253. The story fabricated by the narrator of "My First Fee" presents him as a male prostitute—that is, Vera's "little sister"—who is utterly inexperienced with women. The prostitute believes his story and takes pity on the narrator, teaching him the tricks of her trade and charging him nothing for her services. The narrator, thus, earns his first literary fee, a payment for fabricating a story and making it believable.

40. Babel 1990, vol. 2, 217-223. Benderskaia's husband is a publisher, and it is clear from the story that she gets the translation job through her connections rather than through any special talent. It must be remarked that the gender relations in these stories are of crucial importance: in "Guy de Maupassant," "My First Fee," and "Shabos-Nakhamu" the duped readers and readers-figures are all women. In the same interview from which I quoted in the epigraph, Babel noted that he often imagined his reader as a woman: "Generally speaking, I feel that a short story can be read properly only by a very intelligent woman—the better specimens of this half of the human race sometimes have absolute taste, just as some people have absolute pitch" (in Babel 1969, 220). It is interesting to read this line in conjunction with Antonina Pirozhkova's reminiscences in her memoirs about Isaac Babel: in one of the entries Pirozhkova notes the way in which Babel, through his gifts of books to her and through his reading suggestions shaped her, as it were, into a kind of an ideal reader. See: A. N. Pirozhkova, *At His Side: The Last Years of Isaac Babel*, trans. by Anne Frydman and Robert L. Busch (South Royalton, VT: Steeple Press, 1996), 45-46. For an illuminating discussion of gender in Babel's oeuvre see Eliot Borenstein, *Men Without Women: Masculinity and Revolution in Russian Fiction, 1917-1929* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 73-124. Though gender is not my focus in this article, the noticeable coincidence between gender and Babel's ideal reader makes this a highly relevant matter that I would like to discuss on another occasion.

First Fee" and "Guy de Maupassant" the meta-literary theme is exercised straightforwardly: in "Shabos-Nakhamu" this theme is only implied.

Fanger writes, secondly, that the use of folkloric references in creative work can reveal a certain psychological state of the writer. Though the scholarship on Babel tends to ascribe his use of the Hershele trope merely to his familiarity with Jewish folklore, Fanger suggests through his reading of Gogol the possibility of a more nuanced reading of the folkloric elements in Babel's work. Quoting from Abram Tertz's/Andrei Siniavskii's *In Gogol's Shadow: [V teni Gogolia]*, he writes that "Gogol draws patterns of experience from his own psyche that are identical to those of folklore." By claiming folkloric origins for the stories that comprise, among others, the *Dikan'ka Stories* cycle, Gogol thus "signal[s] a kind of authenticity but seeks transparently to disown its intimate provenance by passing off as an impersonal product what is actually the objectification of a personal psychological state."⁴¹

For Gogol, the "personal psychological state" manifest in the usage of Ukrainian folklore in his Russian-language stories may concern the evasion, absence, and displacement that Fanger so eloquently contemplates in his monograph. In Babel, the Hershele trope is an indication of a "psychological state" of an entirely different variety. I have so far cited two of the three instances when Hershele is mentioned in the Babelian text. The third is a reference that comes from Babel's 1920 diary. One paragraph in Babel's entry for July 23, 1920 deserves to be quoted in full:

The Dubno synagogues. Everything destroyed. Two small anterooms remain, centuries, two minute little rooms, everything filled with memories, four synagogues in a row, and then the pasture, the fields, and the setting sun. The synagogues are pitiful, squat, ancient, green and blue little buildings, the Hasidic one, inside, no architecture whatsoever. I go into the

41. Fanger 1979, 100. Gogol himself was not particularly familiar with Ukrainian folklore. Having come to Petersburg at the time when stories about Ukraine were incredibly popular, Gogol implored his mother to send him detailed descriptions of folk customs and rituals in her letters from home. However, Tertz/Siniavskii claims that Gogol far surpassed his seeming lack of knowledge about folklore on a deeply personal level, achieving a kind of understanding that placed a certain folkloric imagination inside him as a kind of a "terrible pain that cuts through the heart of the writer." In a particularly illuminating passage, Tertz writes: "In Gogol, folklore is torn apart (and is justified) by the facts of the subconscious, and imagination is subjugated to truth that the author carries in his own soul while not making anything up but rather searching for the object of his visions. The assimilation of an existing tradition gives way to the unrelenting process of remembrance about it as a living event. The encounter with folklore takes place on the level of inner experience, whence the knowledge—identified as a fairy tale—is drawn. This knowledge is more reliable and deeper than the fairy tale itself; it supports it from below, from the inside as its authentic original or an underlying meaning." See: Abram Tertz/Andrei Siniavskii, *V teni Gogolia in Sobranie sochinenii i druzh tomakh* (Moscow: Start, 1992) vol. 2, 331–332 [my translation].

Hasidic synagogue. It's Friday. What stunted little figures, what emaciated faces, for me everything that existed in the past 300 years has come alive, the old men bustle about the synagogue, there is no wailing, for some reason they all run back and forth, the praying is extremely informal. It seems that Dubno's most repulsive-looking Jews have gathered. *I pray; rather, I almost pray, and think about Hershele, this is how I should describe him* [sic]. A quiet evening in the synagogue, this always has an irresistible effect on me, four synagogues in a row. Religion? No decoration at all in the building, everything is white and plain to the point of asceticism, everything is incorporeal and bloodless to a monstrous degree, to grasp it fully you have to have the soul of a Jew. But what does this soul consist of? Is it not bound to be our century in which they will perish?⁴²

A modification to this translation by Peter Constantine is necessary. When Babel mentions Hershele, the original Russian omits the direct object of the sentence's second part: "*Ia molitius; vernee, pochti molitius' i dumaitu o Ger-shelle, vot kak by opisat'*"⁴³ The correct, even if awkward, translation then should be: "I pray, rather, I almost pray and think about Hershele, *how would I [ever] describe*." Babel's language throughout the text of the diary is schematic; some sentences are mere sketches rather than complete statements. The clause that comes after his mention of Hershele's name signals not an assertive full stop but an obviated question mark. Babel is not thinking about how he *should* describe Hershele, as Constantine's translation has it; rather, he is invoking Hershele as he thinks about how to describe the collapsing state of the Dubno synagogues and of much of traditional Jewish life that he is witnessing around him.⁴⁴

Babel does not completely regret the passing of traditional Jewish life. After all, it is clear from the example quoted above that his diary is not so flattering in the way it describes the Jews of Dubno (and other towns). However, what is both regrettable and mournful to Babel is the disappearance of some elusive element of Jewishness nurtured by and rooted in the Jewish tradition. The quoted passage is one of Babel's frankest admissions not only of the fact that traditional Jewish life is in an utter state of disrepair, but that he laments the passing of *dusha evreia*, the "soul of a Jew" that is capable of understanding and, in fact, mourning, this destruction.

The entry is made two days before Tisha b'Av, the 9th of the Hebrew month of Av, on which the destruction of both ancient temples occurred (in

42. Babel 2002, 230 [my emphasis].

43. Babel 1990, vol. 1, 386.

44. Another extant translation of Babel's 1920 diary is equally misleading when it comes to the July 23 entry. H. T. Willets' version, which is very similar to Constantine's, goes like this: "I pray, or rather almost pray, thinking of Hershele and how to describe him." See Isaac Babel, *1920 Diary*. Carol J. Avins, ed. H. T. Willets, trans. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002 [1995]), 33.

586 BCE and in 70 CE respectively) and is traditionally observed. This resonance of this date does not elude Babel. He is conscious of it when, a day later, on July 24, he recalls remaining silent when his Cossack companion forces the Jews to fry potatoes despite the arrival of the fast the following day,⁴⁵ and again two days later, on July 25, when he writes of the "two torturous hours" (*muchitel'nye dva chasa*) when the Jewish women of Demidovka were awakened at four o'clock in the morning and forced to boil "Russian meat, and this on Tisha b'Av."⁴⁶

When Babel thinks of Hershele in Dubno, he is aware of the Jewish liturgical calendar and the period of traditional mourning over the events that had signaled that beginning of Jewish exile. The story "Shabos-Nakhamu"—the work explicitly about Hershele—is set either right before or right after Tisha b'Av. The story "Rebbe," in which the most enigmatic Hershele reference occurs, originates from the diary entry that precedes Tisha b'Av by a month. However, its setting in a Hasidic court comprising a space "empty as a morgue" amid the men who reassert vitality of the Jewish tradition despite the fact that "in the ardent house of Hasidism the windows and doors have been torn out"⁴⁷ makes a clear link to the kind of Jewish destruction mourned on Tisha b'Av. The "psychological state" that is signaled in Babel by references to Hershele Ostropolier is rooted in a specifically Jewish understanding of destruction that draws on traditional imagery and thus cannot be shared with the wider reading public.

I first linked the Hershele motif to the theme of meta-literary situations in Babel's oeuvre. Second, I established the permanent link between Hershele and the state of mourning for Jewish destruction that the folkloric trickster signals in Babel. Now the intersection of these two clusters of themata becomes apparent. Hershele-like trickery, implied by Liutov's exchange with Reb Motale, signals a veiled reference to Liutov's understanding of himself as a Jew who can mourn Jewish destruction despite his acceptance by the Cossacks. But this insight can be understood only in the eyes of the implied reader who, as in the story "Shabos-Nakhamu," is smarter than the deceived protagonist, the tavern owner's wife who is duped because she does not understand a crucial piece of cultural knowledge. The only person who understands the linguistic punning that eludes that female protagonist in "Shabos-Nakhamu" is outside the text: he or she is the reader who possesses enough knowledge about Jewish culture to laugh at the one who expects "Shabos-Nakhamu" to be a person rather than a day on the liturgical calendar. In "Rebbe" this implied reader is constructed as a character in the text itself: this character is Ilia, the rebbe's rebellious son, who profanes the

45. Babel' 1990, vol. 1, 386.

46. *Ibid.*, 388.

47. Babel' 1990, vol. 2, 35.

Sabbath by "smoking and twitching like an escaped convict."⁴⁸ Ilia is caught up in the same circumstances as Liutov (and Babel). As someone who understands both the Jewish and Cossack milieus, he is the kind of reader whom Babel counts on to understand the difficulty of being positioned between the Communist project that excites him and the Jewish world that still claims him.

IV.

In an oft-cited passage from the *Red Cavalry* story "Rebbe's Son," Liutov enumerates the possessions of the dying Ilia Bratslavskii, who was introduced briefly in the story "Rebbe":

Here everything was dumped together⁴⁹—the mandates of the agitator and the mementos of the Jewish poet. Portraits of Lenin and Maimonides lay side by side—the gnarled steel of Lenin's skull⁵⁰ and the tarnished silk of the portraits of Maimonides. A strand of female hair had been placed in a book of the resolutions of the Sixth Party Congress, and in the margins of communist leaflets swarmed crooked lines of ancient Hebrew verse. In a sad and meager rain they fell on me—pages of the Song of Songs and revolver cartridges.⁵¹

This passage has been interpreted as evidence of a Jew's ambivalent dual identity: he is inspired by the Revolution's cause but is still unable to break free from the Jewish tradition in which he was raised.⁵² These interpretations accuse Ilia twice: once for insufficient participation in the Soviet project, and again for half-abandoning his Jewish practice. I propose here, rather, to look more closely at Ilia's scattered possessions for the evidence of a positively construed double identity.

Besides the lock of a woman's hair and revolver cartridges—a pair of metonymic reminders of *eros* and *thanatos*—all Ilia's possessions are texts. Their owner, a rebbe's son who attempts to join the revolution, must have had the ability to read Lenin and Maimonides, the Party manifestos and the Song of Songs. Ilia shares the ability to read both kinds of texts with Liutov (and with Babel, who was exposed to traditional Jewish learning in his

48. Babel 2002, 71.

49. Babel 1994, 226. The two translations of Babel's work currently in print, the McDuff and the Constantine editions, differ considerably. Here I work with the Russian text to find the translation closest to the original. For the Russian text see Babel' 1990, vol. 2, 129.

50. Babel 2002, 168.

51. Babel 1994, 226–227.

52. For the discussion of this passage, see, for example, Nakhimovsky, 96–97; Wisse, 116–117.

childhood).⁵³ References to similar pairs of texts—Lenin's writings and Jewish commentaries—are scattered throughout the stories discussed in this article. In "Gedali," for example, Liutov is overtaken by "the dense sorrows of memory" on the eve of the Sabbath in Zhitomir, where he remembers how his "grandfather's yellow beard caressed the volumes of Ibn Ezra,"⁵⁴ a reference to the commentaries of the twelfth-century Spanish Jewish philosopher and exegete. In "My First Goose," Liutov reads "Lenin's speech at the Second Congress of the Comintern,"⁵⁵ first by himself and, once he is accepted in the Cossacks' midst, to the fighters of the First Cavalry. The kinship between Ilia and Liutov is first and foremost the kinship experienced among readers who had the ability to read both traditional Jewish and new Revolutionary texts. Such a group of Russian readers would have been limited to the generation of Jews transitioning from traditional life toward Communism.

On closer examination, the encounter between Liutov and Ilia in "Rebbe's Son" is facilitated by a text, and Liutov's appropriation of Ilia's possessions speaks to the porous nature of the boundary—and the kinship—between a writer and a reader who share a particular set of experiences and abilities. In "Rebbe's Son," Liutov speaks of the potatoes that he has been throwing from the train to defeated soldiers of the Soviet army: "And after twelve versts when I had no potatoes left, I threw a heap of Trotsky leaflets at them. But only one of them stretched out a dirty, dead hand for the leaflet. And I recognized Ilia, the son of the Zhitomir rebbe."⁵⁶ Implied here is a fact made clear in other stories of *Red Cavalry*: while many of the Cossacks in the Red Army were illiterate, at times asking Liutov to write letters for them and to read the newspaper to them, the dying son of the Zhitomir rebbe is both interested in and capable of reading a political text. The most explicit affirmation of Liutov's Jewish kinship in *Red Cavalry* is the moment when he extends a leaflet written by Trotsky to a fellow Jew who has forfeited his right to be the inheritor of his father's Hasidic court.

This kinship is affirmed not only through Liutov's receiving of his "brother's last breath" and his burial of the rebbe's son, but also by his appropriation of Ilia's possessions. Twice in *Red Cavalry* Babel mentions Liutov's trunk.⁵⁷ In "My First Goose," his trunk is thrown onto the street by one of

53. See, for example, Gregory Freidin, "Isaac Babel," *European Writers*, vol. 11, *The Twentieth Century: Walter Benjamin to Yuri Olesha*, ed. George Stade (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990), 1890–1891.

54. Babel 2002, 63.

55. Babel 2002, 68.

56. Babel 1990, vol. 2, 128–129.

57. Several readers of the passage that enumerates Ilia Bratslavskii's possessions have misread a crucial detail: the trunk into which the possessions are, in the end, collected

the Cossacks: "I went down on my hands and knees and gathered up *the manuscripts* and the old, tattered clothes that had fallen out of my suitcase."⁵⁸ In "Rebbe's Son," Liutov says: "I, who had seen him during one of my vagabond nights, began packing into the trunk the scattered belongings of the Red Army soldier, Ilia Bratslavskii."⁵⁹ This is a meta-literary moment: here, the political and the Jewish texts that belonged to Ilia join Liutov's manuscripts, which are also both political (his articles for *The Red Trooper*) and personal. We might assume that Babel's wartime diary, full of many reflections on the fate of the Jews, is also an item in Liutov's trunk.

But the "crooked lines of ancient Hebrew verse" that Ilia scribbles in the margins of a Communist pamphlet also comprise a part of these texts. The Jewish reader, caught between two worlds, is akin to the Jewish writer: Ilia interprets the Communist pamphlets through his Jewish mind and the lines of Hebrew verse through his affiliation with the Russians. Liutov and Ilia's shared cultural code is rooted in their ability to explain each of these two opposing cultural contexts in terms of the other: the Communist manifesto with the help of Hebrew verse, and the acceptance by the Cossacks through a particularly Jewish form of subversion, which I have identified as a Her-shele narrative. Liutov acknowledges this kinship when Ilia's texts—his own writings and others—join Liutov's conflicted manuscripts in one and the same piece of luggage. By the same token, Ilia is constructed in the text as the kind of a reader whom Babel, in his 1937 interview, describes as living in "[his] soul." "But since he's been there for quite a long time," adds Babel, "I have fashioned him in my own image."⁶⁰

It is fitting to remember what Babel writes in his 1920 diary about the destruction of Jewish life around him: "to grasp it fully you have to have the soul of a Jew. But what does this soul consist of? Is it not bound to be our century in which they will perish?"⁶¹ The Jewish soul that can alone comprehend this destruction in Jewish terms is Ilia's soul and, by extension, the soul of the ideal reader whom Babel anticipates and hopes for in *Red Cavalry*. Ilia alone can understand Liutov's trickery and his balancing act between his Jewishness and the Revolution. But the readers who are in possession of such a soul would, as Babel intimates, perish in "our century": the ideal reader that Babel constructs in his text exists in *Red Cavalry* as a mere trace

is Liutov's, not Ilia's. Liutov does not simply pick up Ilia's very carefully arranged trunk; rather, the various objects in Ilia's possessions are gathered by Liutov and paired next to each other in a seemingly dichotomous way by Liutov's language. This detail, I believe, is crucial; I explain it in the current paragraph.

58. Babel 2002, 68 [my emphasis].

59. Babel 1990, vol. 2, 129.

60. Babel 1969, 220.

61. Babel 2002, 230.

of someone who is already disappearing and of whose disappearance the writer is painfully aware.⁶²

A powerful hidden reference to impending Jewish destruction is also present in "Rebbe" and "Rebbe's Son." Maurice Friedberg writes about the paradox in these two stories: the stories mention the rebbe—a head of a Hasidic dynasty—and his son, who is referred to as "the last prince" of this dynasty, both of whom share the last name Bratslavskii. The last name implies that the rebbe and his son belong to Hasidism's Bratslav dynasty, which had not had a new rebbe since the death of the dynasty's famed founder, Rebbe Nakhman, in 1810. For this reason the Bratslaver Hasidim are often referred to as *di toyte khsidim*, or "dead Hasidim."⁶³ By placing the issue of inheritance of a Hasidic dynasty at the forefront of the two stories, Babel might be hinting at a hidden subtext. In Marc Chagall's 1908

62. Ilia Bratslavskii may be Liutov's ideal reader, but he is different from Liutov in at least one very important way. Liutov is an intellectual, an urban Jew from Odessa traveling through much more traditional areas in Poland; he is displaced from traditional Jewish context and estranged from traditional Jewish practice. His estrangement makes him the character that he is: he may have deeply personal reflections at times, but he is often a removed observer whose private feats of imagination do not translate into passionate action. Ilia, on the other hand, is a young man of the extremes, he is either the misbehaving "last prince" of a Hasidic dynasty or an engaged soldier of the Revolution. He is an active participant in events whereas Liutov is careful to always remain on the sidelines, not to compromise the much more stable middle ground that he may have already struck, and which Ilia might have yet figured out (were it not for his early death).

63. Leo Strauss's view on the matter in his *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988 [1952]) is illuminating here. In his seminal essay Strauss advances an idea that writers working under the threat or the experience of persecution create a kind of literature that is addressed "not to all readers, but to trustworthy and intelligent readers only" (25). It is a literature produced with the help of "a peculiar technique of writing" that relies on "writing between the lines" (24). But those to whom such writing is truly addressed are "neither the unphilosophic majority nor the perfect philosopher as such, but the young men who might become philosophers: the potential philosophers are to be led step by step from the popular views that are indispensable for all practical and political purposes to the truth that is merely and purely theoretical, guided by certain obtrusively enigmatic features in the presentation of popular teaching—obscurity of the plan, contradictions, pseudonyms, inexact repetitions of earlier statements, strange expressions, etc. Such features do not disturb the slumber of those who cannot see the wood for the trees, but act as awakening stumbling blocks for those who can" (36). This is a crucial point that I would like to investigate further on a later occasion: Ilia, the passionate young man of extremes, is the *potential* of an ideal reader in Babel's text; he is a reader who is to be guided away from these extremes to a more dispassionate middle ground that Liutov himself might already occupy. That Ilia is the potential of a reader whose development is halted by his death is the real tragedy of Isaac Babel and his creative oeuvre.

64. Maurice Friedberg, "Yiddish Folklore Motifs in Isaac Babel's *Konarmija*," in Bloom 1987, 192.

painting "The Dead Man," the dead person in the middle of the street can be seen as a metonymic realization of the idiom *di toyte shtet*, "a dead town," representing the collapse of a communal entity larger than any single man.⁶⁴ Similarly, Babel's Hasidim, celebrating the Sabbath in a room cold and empty as a morgue, realize the cultural idiom as the "dead" Hasidim. Ilia, Babel's ideal reader and the last prince of the dynasty that is already "dead," himself dies in the end. Still "alive" among the "dead" in the story "Rebbe," where Liutov needs him to understand the ambiguities communicated by his mentioning of Hershele Ostropolier, Ilia appears as a ghostly figure, a figure who makes the text possible and haunts it at the same time.

We may remember that the narrative of "Rebbe's Son" is framed as a monologue delivered by Liutov and addressed to one Vasilii, whom we have not met before and who is nowhere to be seen in the story itself. Liutov, telling Vasilii about the death of the rebbe's son, explores his enigmatic interlocutor to remember the night in Zhitomir when both had presumably first met Ilia at Reb Motale's court. But there is no character named Vasilii in the story "Rebbe" in which Ilia is first mentioned. Carol J. Avins argues persuasively that Vasilii (whose name is the same as Liutov's patronymic: Vasilievich) is another Jew of a background similar to Liutov's "who, like Lyutov, uses a conspicuously Russian pseudonym."⁶⁵ Avins reads Vasilii as Liutov's alter ego, as someone closer to Liutov than Ilia. I would like to propose that the existence of Vasilii may be somewhat further removed from reality than the distance of a literary character from his alter ego.

In the *fabula* of "Rebbe's Son" the death of Ilia Bratslavskii precedes Liutov's telling about this death to Vasilii. Addressing the enigmatic interlocutor about a death that happens in real time but also, as I suggested above, acts out a cultural idiom, is akin to addressing a ghost. Vasilii is, indeed, a ghostly presence, someone who is not a corporeal being, someone whose existence cannot be traced to anything but Liutov's imagination and his desire to continue addressing someone who could understand him after Ilia, the ideal reader, has died. Avins suggests that Vasilii may even be closer to Liutov than to the dead Bratslavskii because, unlike Bratslavskii, both Liutov and Vasilii are Jews hiding under gentile names and masks.⁶⁶ I suggest that Vasilii may be that ideal reader whom Liutov now seeks after Ilia has died.

64. Critics have observed that in some of his works Chagall often depicted a number of Yiddish idioms. See: Ziva Amishai-Maisels, "Chagall's Jewish In-Jokes," *Journal of Jewish Art* 5 (1982), 76-93; Seth L. Wolitz, "Vitebsk versus Bezalet: A Jewish *Kulturkampf* in the Plastic Arts," in Zvi Giteiman, ed., *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics: Bundism and Zionism in Eastern Europe* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003), 151-177.

65. Carol J. Avins, "Kinship and Concealment in *Red Cavalry* and Babel's 1920 Diary," *Slavic Review* 53, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 708.

66. *Ibid.*

Vasilii is identical to Liutov in what he can understand between the lines. He is, however, a reader who is merely imagined. The address to Vasilii reveals a confused Liutov--and, through him, a confused figure of a Jewish writer who feels compelled to narrate the death of his ideal reader to an imagined listener who is himself no more than a ghost. Liutov's words are addressed to someone who does not exist and are greeted by silence. In that moment at least there is no one who is even remotely close to talking back.

ARGUING THE MODERN JEWISH CANON
Essays on Literature and Culture
in Honor of Ruth R. Wisse

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