

Performing “Bolshevism” or, The Diverse Minority Idiom of Isaak Babel

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DURING the 1920s and early 1930s, when Soviet nationality policy still consisted in encouraging ethnic diversity, semi-assimilated Jews like Isaak Babel (1894–1940) felt inspired to participate in various forms of linguistic experimentation, while telling their hitherto untold, individual “stories.” Like most Jews who joined Russian schools, literary circles and friendship networks, Babel sought admission, and was welcomed, not as an advocate of the Mosaic faith or *Yiddishkeit*, but as a fellow believer in Pushkin and the Russian cultural canon as well as in the Revolution. But Bolshevik multiculturalism was rather like politeness: nothing was valued so highly and cost so little (or so the Bolsheviks thought). Not only did the Bolshevik doctrine deny the existence of a national Jewish identity, it also acknowledged “Russian” and “Soviet” as the only two nationalities immune from nationality policy. Both were defined in class terms, and so were, *mutatis mutandis*, Babel and most other post-revolutionary Jews. From this perspective, Babel seems to belong to a nationality without form, a caste of exemplary Soviets. Or does he?

Urban, mobile, literate, articulate, intellectually intricate, physically fastidious and occupationally flexible—Babel is also one of the first major East European minority writers to develop and practice a particular literary idiom in the language of the dominant culture.¹ Scholarship on the place of Babel’s complex personality in the context of Russian literature can boast a fairly long tradition, and a definitive statement on this

1 Comparable are Franz Kafka (1883–1924) and Bruno Schulz (1892–1942) who wrote in German and Polish, respectively.

has yet to be written.² My essay, which is a preliminary study of some of the identity problems that arise when reading his *Konarmii* (1926, *Red Cavalry*) through the dual lens of linguistic assimilationism and majority acculturation, is not that statement. It proposes instead something at once more modest and more challenging: building on Babel's own interest in composite and, above all, subaltern identities, I shall conceive of his multifarious first-person narratives as reenactments of his hybrid sense of his own social and cultural position.

Babel and the style of the epoch

Considering the many autobiographical gestures performed in the writer's 1920s prose, my main interest will be in the pervasive "me" of Babel that remains an orchestrated puzzle, to which there is no one solution: who are the empathic storytellers who populate his work? To what degree are they "verbal masks" or stylistic shades of an authorial self? Here Babel's language—which contains an unusual richness of imagery and tropes linking him with the early Soviet experimental and ornamental trends—should be viewed in the context of the sudden profusion of Russian writings about language in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What binds these thinkers and writers, many of them of Jewish origin, is the effort to provide a model of the self in language;³ indeed, their endeavour to see in language the prototype of what self should be, is similar to Heidegger's better-known analysis of language as the *home of being*.⁴ Especially relevant to our purposes is Viktor Shklovskii's premise for his formalist theory of art, where he claims that consciousness arises from the arresting of the otherwise continuous stream of our psychic life. According to Shklovskii, himself an admirer of Babel's work,

2 More has probably been written about Babel's identity than about any other aspect of him. See, among others, Efraim Sicher, 1995, "The Jewishness of Babel," *Jews in Russian Literature after the October Revolution: Writers and Artists between Hope and Apostasy*, Cambridge, pp. 71–111; Ruth R. Wisse, 2000, "Literature of the Russian Revolution: From Isaac Babel to Vasily Grossman," *The Modern Jewish Canon: A Journey Through Language and Culture*, Chicago, pp. 99–129; and Ilan Stavans, 2002, "Other Diaspora Jewish Literatures since 1492," *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies*, ed. M. Goodman, Oxford, p. 626.

3 Consider here Thomas Seifrid, 2005, "Introduction: Russia's Preoccupation with Language in the Modern Era," *The Word Made Self: Russian Writings on Language 1860–1930*, Ithaca, pp. 1–5.

4 See Martin Heidegger, 1996, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Stambaugh, Albany, N.Y.

things flow along, until we stumble upon the unexpected, and consciousness arises; in this respect, Babel aims to create “defamiliarization” (*ostranenie*), a surprise effect accomplished by “roughening” his more or less conventional material in unconventional ways.⁵ His language appears to evidence stylistic technique rather than inspiration and transcendent value. As we shall see, among the devices of deliberate “roughness” that make up Babel’s technique are symbols, parody, puns, detours, double entendres and foreign words.

In so far as Babel has sacrificed the language of his “safe home” (Yiddish), he revels in the unlimited potential of his beloved Russian, as if it depended on the loss of home.⁶ When the multilingual Babel dreams, however, the impossible dream of going back to one coherent language (ego, nation), when he pauses to worry about missing pieces, he is not necessarily overwhelmed by romantic anxiety (as in Derrida);⁷ instead, as a writer who is competent in more than one language, he may be poaching a patch from a parallel code. Sometimes the sutures flaunt their seams to create an aesthetic or ideological effect, as Babel’s word-conscious prose of the 1920s is almost always marked by artifice. Here his multilingual playing with styles involves not only spoken language, abounding in homely Russian or Jewish-Yiddish colloquialisms, but also stiff, high-brow, old-fashioned religious or literary clichés, interspersed with courteous Polish expressions and bombastic phrases from Bolshevik propaganda literature. Add to this Babel’s mythologization of his own childhood in Odessa, a cosmopolitan and polyglot city that looked to the sea and beyond, as well as his love for Western European culture, and we have all

5 See Victor Shklovsky, 1988, “Art as Technique,” *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. D. Lodge, London, pp. 16–30; Viktor Shklovskii, 1924, “I. Babel’: Kriticheskii romans,” *Lef* 2, pp. 152–55; and, “Babel’: K vykhodu knig *Konarmii*, *Istoriia moei golubiatni i drugikh*,” *Nasha gazeta*, 12.06.1926.

6 Throughout his adult life Babel seems to have longed for the Yiddish of his upbringing. He befriended Shlomo Mikhoels, the Soviet Jewish actor, by whose performances in stage adaptations of Sh.Y. Abramovitsch’s *The Travels of Benjamin 111* and Sholem Aleichem’s *Tevye the Dairyman* at the Jewish State Theatre he was mesmerized. According to Babel’s second wife, Antonina Nikolaevna Pirozhkova, he was translating Sholem Aleichem’s work into Russian (to “feed his soul”) when the НКВД, Stalin’s secret police, came to arrest him in 1939. See A.N. Pirozhkova, 1996, *At His Side: The Last Years of Isaac Babel*, South Royalton, Vt., pp. 106–107.

7 Cf. Jacques Derrida, 1998, *Monolingualism of the Other, or, The Prostheses of Origin*, trans. P. Mensah, Stanford, pp. 16 ff.

the indications of a Russian writer whose unsettled selfhood is steeped in the experience of being “other,” of *not* belonging—politically, culturally, linguistically—to the larger Soviet society from which he wrote.⁸

With his harrowing experiences of the Russian-Polish campaign, Babel emerges as a reporter-of-the-senses beyond compare. During the summer of 1920, he kept a diary as he travelled with a pro-Bolshevik Cossack cavalry division on a mission that was intended to be the first step towards carrying the glory of communism to Europe and to the wider world, through the doomed cities and *shtetlekh* of eastern Poland and western Ukraine (Galicia), including the scenes of Jewish pogroms. Now in his Red Army prose,⁹ Babel’s claim to a Soviet identity seems to be modified by his minority position both as a Russian and as a Jew. On the one hand, there is the “closet” Jew, who, having joined the Russian Revolution, records, nostalgically as well as sympathetically, the atrocities committed against Central European Jewry, whose culture is both familiar and alien to him; on the other hand, there is the would-be practitioner of the “Bolshevik literary style,” a skilled performer who is never fully at ease with his Bolshevism and its dictates of ruthless transparency, but who has, in his heart, embraced a self-conscious multi-layered complexity. To be sure, this did not fit well with the dictates of the new, Soviet “classic” voice, whose main stylistic appeal was that language should not “get in the way,” thus allowing the reader to forget about the word. As Michael Gorham explains, the Soviet style would see “only the movement of the heroes, their travails, the psychological shifts taking place within those living people whom the writer creates into life [...]”¹⁰ For them, the word would never become an end in itself.

We could suggest here that ambiguous perception is the measure of Babel’s response to the linguistic liberalization of post-revolutionary

8 Thomas Seifrid (2005, p. 3) understands *sel fliod* “as the seat of subjectivity as well as the set of problems involved in establishing personal identity; such as whether a self has unity, and if so, whether that unity resides in the mind or in the body; the nature of self-knowledge and its role in anchoring identity; the nature of memories and their role in anchoring identity, and so on.”

9 Apart from the *Konarmii* cycle, I have in mind here Babel’s *Dnevnik 1920 g.* (*Diary 1920*), a few sketches for the *Konarmii* stories, five brief articles written for *Krasnyi kavalerist* (*The Red Cavalryman*), as well as selected items from his correspondence.

10 Michael S. Gorham, 2003, *Speaking in Soviet Tongues: Language Culture and the Politics of Voice in Revolutionary Russia*, Dekalb, Ill., p. 115.

Russia. Or better still, that ambiguity is his *cri de coeur* (small wonder, since few writers of the early Soviet period witnessed so much cruelty at such close range). In so far as his playful stylistics exhibit a distinct sense of contrivance or “constructedness” (*sdelannost*), a self-consciousness that he was creating a “roughened” work of art, it fell seriously short of Bolshevik expectations. As to Babel’s vulnerable position as a “fellow traveller” (*poputchnik*) as well as his dilemma of dual identity, consider his speech to the First Writers’ Congress in 1934:

Пошлость в наши дни—это уже не дурное свойство характера, а это преступление. Больше того: пошлость—это контрреволюция [...] мы, литераторы, обязаны содействовать победе нового, большевистского вкуса в стране. Это будет немалая политическая победа, потому что, по счастью нашему, у нас не политических побед нет [...] *Стиль большевистской эпохи— в мужестве, в сдержанности* [...] На чем можно учиться? [...] посмотрите, как Сталин кует свою речь, как кованны его немногочисленные слова, *какой полны мускулатуры*. (My italics, K.A.G.)¹¹

With the publication of *Odesskie rasskazy* (1924, *Odessa Tales*) as well as *Konarmii* (1926), Babel had become a star of the Soviet literary stage and “Russia’s most famous writer.”¹² And yet, in the end, he perished because of his writing. Or rather, he was executed for bad taste—for failing to master the style of the epoch, for not having enough manly fortitude and con-

11 Isaak Babel, 2002, “Rech’ na Pervom Vsesoiuznom s’ezde sovetskikh pisatelei” (1934), *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, Moscow, pp. 360–61. “In our day, bad taste is no longer a personal defect; it’s a crime. Even worse, bad taste is counterrevolution [...] as writers, we must contribute to the victory of a new, Bolshevik taste in our country. It will not be an insignificant political victory because, fortunately for us, we do not have victories that are not political [...] *The style of the Bolshevik epoch is calm strength and self-control* [...] On what should we model ourselves? [...] just look at the way Stalin forges his speech, how chiselled his spare words are, how *full of muscular strength*.” As translated in Yuri Slezkine, 2004, *The Jewish Century*, Princeton, p. 271.

12 As a matter of fact, Babel’s prose had been favourably received by both readers and reviewers since his debut story “Staryi Shloime” (1913, “Old Shloime”). His literary career took off in earnest when he moved from Odessa to St Petersburg, where he began to contribute stories and sketches to Gorky’s journal *Letopis’* as well as to other important periodicals. For a detailed description, see Gregory Freidin, “Isaac Babel (1984–1940),” *European Writers: The Twentieth Century*, ed. G. Stade, New York, pp. 241–74.

trol of self, for not being able to forge himself like Stalin.¹³ “Unfortunately for him,” says Yuri Slezkine, “there was nothing in Stalin’s Soviet Union that was not political and muscular.”¹⁴ In my opinion, the problem with Babel’s stylistic taste was not only its political vagueness, but also its indeterminateness in terms of ethnic and gender-related values. Throughout his Red Army prose, there is a clear tendency to blur the borders between assertive manliness, that is everything associated with Cossack and Bolshevik prowess, and deferential womanliness—that is everything connected with what is Jewish and/or Polish. The early Bolsheviks, who did not normally classify their enemies in ethnic (or gender) terms but used instead the abstract concept “the bourgeoisie,” were eager to liquidate individuals as members of the wrong “classes.” This meant that a Jew who wanted to be a true member of the Right Class had to engage in physical coercion against certain groups as a legitimate means of dealing with difference. Briefly stated, he had to cease being an itinerant, “Mercurian” Jew and become a settled, “Apollonian” Bolshevik.¹⁵ But in Babel’s prose fiction neither his Soviet-Russian Apollonianism nor his Right Class membership comes to rest. Instead, his *diverse minority idiom* brings him into disfavour with the establishment, which by the end of the 1930s had deemed it “cosmopolitanism” and a breach of political and linguistic decorum.¹⁶

13 As Stalin tightened his grip on Soviet culture in the early 1930s, and especially with the rise of socialist realism, Babel increasingly withdrew from public life. During the Stalinist campaign against “formalism” in art, he was criticized for alleged “aestheticism” and low productivity. At the first Congress of the Soviet Writers’ Union (1934), the writer famously noted that he was becoming “the master of a new literary genre, the genre of silence.”

14 Slezkine, 2004, pp. 271–72. Also, consider here Gorham, 2003, p. 159, who states that Babel “fails at creating the verbal web of meaning dictated by the generic or institutional context. Babel’s civil war narratives highlight discursive fissures far more than they celebrate the heroes of Budennyi’s First Cavalry Division.”

15 For Slezkine (2004) modern life is all about the opposite process: a transformation of settled agricultural (“Apollonian”) societies into mobile urban (“Mercurian”) societies, where everyone becomes a stranger and the most successful people are the followers of Hermes, above all the Jews, who get on through their cleverness and their ability to act as go-betweens.

16 Ironically, Tsarist censorship too had found Babel’s manner of writing “subversive” and “shocking,” that is involving too much sex, blood and other bodily functions. Already in 1916, the writer was charged with pornography because of the story “V shchelochku” (“The Bathroom Window”), but the charge was made moot by the political turmoil.

Babel doing identity

More often than not, the Babelian hero-narrator is an outsider whose experience of identity and non-belonging lacks “calm strength and self-control.” Of course, for the Soviet (Russian) cum Jewish reporter neither “belonging” nor “identity” is cut in stone, nor is it secured by any life-long guarantee, but is eminently negotiable and revocable. And so the narrator’s desire to “have an identity” would seem to arise because “belonging” no longer remains his fate but a condition with many alternatives.¹⁷ Let us, in this connection, consider the story “Moi pervyi gonorar” (1922–28, “My First Fee”),¹⁸ where the hero-narrator speaks in the voice of a young Jewish writer working in multinational Tbilisi. While yearning for love and passion, he befriends Vera, a Russian prostitute. During the couple’s first conversation, his Jewishness is established along with the Babelian “wandering theme”:

— В какие Палестины?

Широкая розовая спина двигалась передо мною. Вера обернулась.

— Вы что там лепечете?

Она нахмурилась, глаза смеялись.

— Куда бог несет?

Во рту моем слова раскалывались, как высокошие поленья. (227)¹⁹

Subsequently, he tells her an entirely fictional tale about his own life as a male prostitute. She, in turn, calls him а бляха... Наша сестра—стерва..., which he confirms:—Ваша сестра—стерва, after which she calls him:—Сестричка моя, бляха. (232).²⁰ The implication is then that they

17 I owe this phraseology to Zygmunt Bauman, 2004, *Identity*, Cambridge, pp. 9–15.

18 In 1920–24, Babel travelled in Georgia and the Caucasus, contributing stories and essays to Odessa periodicals. “My First Fee” cannot, however, be dated precisely and was not published during the author’s lifetime.

19 Page numbers in brackets refer to Isaak Babel, 2002, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1, Moscow. English translations are taken from Isaac Babel, 2002, *The Complete Works of Isaac Babel*, ed. N. Babel, trans. P. Constantine, intro. C. Ozick, London. “Off to Palestine?” Vera’s wide, pink back was moving in front of me. She turned around. “What?” She frowned, but her eyes were laughing. “Where does your path take you?” The words crackled in my mouth like dry firewood.” (711).

20 “a whore. Our sister—a shit...”; “Yes, I’m your sister—a shit”; “My little whorelet sister.” (716).

make love *as sisters*. For as the narrator explains to the reader: Я узнал в эту ночь тайны, которых вы не узнаете, испытал любовь, которой вы не испытаете, услышал слова женщины, обращенные к женщине. (230).²¹ It is significant that he is “paid,” as it were, by the prostitute for the services provided, as she gives him his first writer’s “fee” and becomes his “first reader.”

Here the story is characteristic of Babel’s minority idiom in that the self-conscious narrator challenges good Bolshevik taste by identifying with and performing “womanliness”; in so doing, he aligns his “Jewish” style with that of a Russian outsider, so that their joint word becomes an ambiguous end in itself. It is important that he does not trouble to make his story realistic, knowing that a хорошо придуманной истории незачем походить на действительную жизнь; жизнь изо всех сил старается походить на хорошо придуманную историю. (230).²² If this line is applied to the Red Army prose and read as a kind of response to the demand of having to conform and rewrite himself according to Soviet literary models, Babel does not seem to regret his inability to take on a single literary role—be it in terms of gender, nationality or ethnicity—and make it “stick.” Above all, as a war reporter he cheerfully acknowledges, and even celebrates, *the fluidity of his identity*.²³ Likewise, we could say that Babel’s word-conscious storyteller in *Konarmiia* delights in his bent for rewriting his own life at will, as a constant cultural “crossover.” Bearing in mind these considerations, my hypothesis will be that Babel entertains a subversive identity project in the form of a task to be performed over and over again, rather than as a “one-off.”

A word here on terminology. In asking “Who is Babel?” while, at the same time, indicating that the “implied” writer carries out an inadequate staging of a “Bolshevik” self, I play on the double sense of performance: instead of being understood as a role being acted out, I suggest we conceive of Babel’s multiple personae as an “act” which constructs the reality of such an identity entirely through its performance, as in a performative

21 “That night I learned secrets that you will never learn, experienced love that you will never experience, heard women’s words that only other women hear.” (716).

22 “A well-crafted story doesn’t need to resemble real life. Life itself tries with all its might to resemble a well-crafted story.” (714).

23 Cf. Gabriella Safran, 2000, *Rewriting the Jew: Assimilation Narratives in the Russian Empire*, Stanford, p. 196.

speech act.²⁴ By analogy, cultural identity is likewise a representation, while that very same representation, say of “Sovietness” or “Jewishness,” is at the same time its own construction. While such categories are not simply chosen but are rather command performances, the question as to *how Babel does his identity* through his first-person narrators is nonetheless important in understanding the power play that enables both the command and the performance. The problem is that as a thinking and feeling subject, the Babelian narrator is forced to perform a role that perpetuates the illusion of a complementary, dominant identity within a chauvinistic cultural economy “full of muscular energy,” with particularly destructive results for the “weak” and “emasculated” Jews. As we shall see, the conflict caused by the positioning of Babel’s subject—the recognition that he is defined by a culture seen by others as inferior, and by a superciliousness he may seem himself to have internalized—is actualized through the hero-narrator of *Konarmia*.

Kirill Vasilievich Liutov, Babel’s wildly unsuitable *nom de guerre*, is torn between revulsion from and attraction to the cultures that he encounters during the Polish Campaign, his perceptions having been transmuted by the internationalist culture and brutally masculinist Cossack militarism that he himself had espoused.²⁵ My intention is to read a selection of Babel’s war-zone stories in conjunction. Although Liutov’s Russian may be described as painstakingly economical, brief, unobtrusive and fastidious in its concision, there is more ambiguity involved here than first meets the eye. For the remaining part of this essay, I intend

24 I am inspired here by Judith Butler, whose gender-orientated theory asserts that because all categories and identities only exist in the ideal, all attempts to reconcile the ideal with the real result in performance; moreover, all bodies are produced in their particular form through the iteration of the norms that (in)form such categories as sex, race and—we may add—nationality. See Judith Butler, 1993, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’*, New York.

25 As a matter of fact, “Liutov,” meaning in Russian the “fierce one,” was the identity that Babel assumed in real life, when he wrote for the army’s daily newspaper *Krasnyi kavalerist* (*The Red Cavalryman*). As Babel/Liutov expresses both admiration for and horror of the Cossack Cavalry soldiers’ brutal strength and natural daring, he also enters the scene of the Jewish pogroms, namely the “ill-fated” Galicia. The people he meets, many of whom are “ill-fated Jews,” represent all layers of society. Most of them must have spoken Ukrainian or Yiddish, and sometimes Czech; actual Polish encounters appear to have been a rarity. It should be pointed out here that the *Konarmia* cycle offers a distilled, detached and “roughened” version of the detailed and poignantly direct narrative of tumultuous incidents contained in his incomplete *Dnevnik 1920 g.*

to explore Babel's diverse minority idiom as a destabilizing basis for his non-conformist performance of a "Bolshevik" self. I will argue that the unsettling, self-staging strategies of his central narrator are aimed at no single, absolute understanding of gender, culture and nationality, nor of his own literary persona.

In and out of Bolshevism

Наш обоз шумливым арьергардом растянулся по шоссе, идущему от Бреста до Варшавы и постороненному на мужичьих костях Николаем Первым (203)²⁶—already in the opening story "Perekhod cherez Zbruch" ("Crossing the River Zbrucz") the narrator establishes the dramatic conflict underlying his storytelling universe: the Soviet campaign against Poland. Liutov travels with General Budennyi's pro-Bolshevik Cossack cavalry on a hypermasculine mission that is intended to be the first aggressive step in carrying glorious communism to the entire world. A characteristic shift in tone comes with the anthropomorphic description of "Silent Volynia's" response to the famed march of the Sixth Division: Тихая Волынь изгибается, Волынь уходит от нас в жемчужный туман березовых рощ, она вползает в цветистые пригорки и ослабевшими руками путается в зарослях хмеля. (289).²⁷ After this *feminization* of the invaded landscape, Liutov crosses the river together with his brave fellow soldiers: Почерневший Збруч шумит и закручивает пенистые узлы своих водов (289).²⁸ Then follows another abrupt stylistic change, whereby the Jewish hovel where Liutov has been billeted is described in sordidly naturalistic detail: Я нахажу развороченные шкафы [...] обрывки женских шуб на полу, человеческий кал и черепки сокровенной посуды, употребляющейся у ереев раз в году—на пасху. (289).²⁹ At a stroke, the hero-narrator has opposed Cossack vigour and heroic power to the ugliness of Jewish suffering (они

26 "Our cavalry transport stretches in a noisy rear guard along the high road from Brest to Warsaw, a high road built on the bones of muzhiks by Tsar Nicholas I." (203).

27 "Silent Volynia is turning away, Volynia is leaving, heading into the pearly white fog of the birch groves, creeping through the flowery hillocks, and with weakened arms entangling herself in the undersbush of hops." (203).

28 "The blackened Zbrucz roars and twists the foaming knots of its rapids." (203).

29 "I find ransacked closets, torn pieces of women's fur coats on the floor, human excrement, and fragments of the holy Seder plate that the Jews use once a year for Passover [...]." (204).

прыгают в безмолвии, по-обезьяньи, как японцы в цирке, их шей пухнут и вертятся (290),³⁰ while the presentation has shifted from the viewpoint of the collective “we” to the personal “I” of his story.

Significantly, the narrator then dreams about the Commander of the Sixth Division, who гонится на тяжелом жеребце за комбригом и всаживает ему две пули в глаза. (290).³¹ The introduction of the violent commander—who, incidentally, goes under the Polish-sounding name of Savitskii—hints at an aspect of Liutov’s fascination with the Cossacks that prevails throughout the collection. Obsessed with the Cossacks’ display of martial virility, he tries to emulate them, become one of them, while eroticizing and fetishizing their culture as a whole. However, Liutov is woken from his Cossack dream by a pregnant Jewess. It turns out that the Jew lying next to him is the woman’s dead father:—Пане,—[она] говорит и встряхивает перину,—поляки резали его, и он молился им: убейте меня на черном дворе, чтобы моя дочь не видела, как умру. Но они сделали так, как им было нужно [...]. (290).³² The revelatory conclusion of this story resembles that of “Moi pervyi gonorar,” where the male narrator identifies with subaltern woman (or womanliness). While empathizing with the miserable Jewess, whose father lies murdered in the bed, Liutov records her last, heroic words: Я хочу знать, где еще на всей земле вы найдете такого отца, как мой отец... (290).³³ The initial repulsion with which the narrator reacts as he observes his poor fellow Jews—the victims of the Cossacks’ as well as the Poles’ bloodthirsty actions—is an example of his wavering disaffection, and relates to the typical Jewish dilemma of alienation so strongly felt in Babel’s stories.

More often than not, Liutov seeks to defect from his stifling Jewish past into the expansive, gentile world of physicality and nature, but, as mentioned above, in the initial story he actually reverses this process: from the “we” of the barbarous army rearguard, he crosses the boundary into

30 “They hop around in silence, like monkeys, like Japanese acrobats in a circus, their necks swelling and twisting” (204).

31 “[...] chasing the brigade commander on his heavy stallion, and shoots two bullets into his eyes.” (204).

32 “‘Pan’, [she] says, shaking out the eiderdown, ‘the Poles were hacking him to death and he kept begging them, ‘Kill me in the backyard so my daughter won’t see me die!’ But they wouldn’t convenience themselves.” (204).

33 “I want you to tell me where one could find another father like my father in all the world!” (204).

the “I” of the spiritual and cultural world of his past. And here Liutov’s multi-meanings (in themselves a breach of Soviet literary etiquette) appear to be part and parcel of Babel’s own project of belonging: the performance of an official self which is fluid and never comes to rest. In fact, Babel/Liutov may be said to go *in and out of a well-staged Bolshevik identity*, be it in terms of gender, culture or nationality. The question of how the hero-narrator performs such “Bolshevism,” and how it is reflected on the level of style, must be examined by tracing his ongoing interaction with three distinct spheres of culture: the Cossacks, the Jews and the Poles.

The Cossacks

In the narrator’s world, the Cossacks are perceived as an expression for “the people”—meaning Bolshevism in a hyperbolized version—while Jews and Poles are understood to be cultural minorities, and “bourgeois” at that. At the same time, however, Liutov, the closeted Jewish intellectual, sees the “Apollonian” Cossacks as his cultural opposite: heart as opposed to his head, body (and soul) to his mind, simplicity to his complexity, spontaneity to his consciousness, rootedness to his rootlessness.³⁴ This uneasy relationship is often expressed in erotic terms. A prime example is the story “Nachal’nik konzapasa” (“The Reserve Cavalry Commander”), where the Cossack hero represents ultimate manliness to which the narrator reacts with painful sexual envy as well as sincere wonder.³⁵ Performing a trick by sheer force of personality, Diakov, the remount officer and a former circus athlete, is described arriving on an Anglo-Arabian steed, deftly swinging his athlete’s body, stretching his magnificent legs; splendid and adroit как на сцене (214),³⁶ he is compared to a stock heroic character: седой, цветущий, молодцеватый Ромео (214).³⁷

34 As explained by Slezkine (2004, pp. 106–107): “The most prominent—and perhaps only—local Apollonians retained by the Jewish memory were the Cossack looters and murderers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the most frequently invoked of them all [...] was Bohdan Khmelnytsky—the same Bohdan Khmelnytsky whom most Ukrainian-speakers remembered as their deliverer from Catholic captivity and (for a short time) Jewish scheming and spying.”

35 As to the role of masculinity in the representation of the conflict between Cossack and Jew, Liutov’s relationship with his fellow soldiers may also be perceived as an ongoing “love story” between “comrades and enemies.” See Eliot Borenstein, 2000, *Men Without Women: Masculinity and Revolution in Russian Fiction, 1917–1929*, Durham, pp. 91ff.

36 “as if on stage” (214).

37 “a sprightly, grey, blossoming Romeo” (299).

Portrayed with suggestive irony, Liutov's hero smacks though just too much of an adolescent daydream; blown up into mythic proportions, the Cossack is simultaneously deflated into comic travesty, and subjected to a type of aesthetic play. It is as if the word-conscious narrator places, to use a phrase coined by Shklovskii, "a heading over his portraits—opera."³⁸ In fact, the narrator's "deification" of Cossackness is fraught with opposing and conflicting emotions.

Especially important here is Liutov's *quasi*-belonging to the community of Cossacks, with whom he longs for an ecstatic and redemptive union. In "Moi pervyi gus" ("My First Goose"), where he deals with such themes as initiation, sex and brute force, the narrator achieves for himself a preliminary "apotheosis" through his erotically loaded debut. He begins with a description of his infatuation with the virile Savitskii, but then concentrates on his softer and subtler features: От него пахло недосыгаемыми духами и притворной прохладой мыла (313).³⁹ The manly Cossack commander smiles at Liutov while smacking the table with his whip. During an interview with the same Savitskii, Liutov takes on the role of the attentive servant, who, in stark contrast to his "naturally" assertive master, is steeped in culture. Following an initial series of phrases that reveal the Cossack's manly attitude to Liutov's logocentric learning (Провести приказом и зачислить на всякое удовольствие, кроме передного. Ты грамотный? (313)),⁴⁰ the narrator establishes an important link between his own womanliness (—Ты из киндербальзамов [...] Какой паршивенький!... (313))⁴¹ on the one hand, and his Jewishness (очки на носу (313))⁴² on the other. At the same time, the commander of the Sixth Division expresses concern about Liutov's well-being (А тут режут за очки (313)),⁴³ but proposes a life together

38 Viktor Shklovskii, 1924, p. 154. The narrator uses the same *performance* metaphor in the story "Italian'skoe solntse" ("Italian Sun"), where he is waiting "with anxious soul for Romeo to descend from the clouds, a satin Romeo singing of love, while backstage a dejected electrician waits with his finger to turn off the moon." (223).

39 "He smelled of inaccessible perfume and the nauseating coolness of soap." (230).

40 "Have this man sign up for all the amusements except for those of the frontal kind. Can you read and write?" (230–31). Here the division commander is punning, substituting the word *udovolstvie* ("amusements") for *prodovolstvie* ("provisions").

41 "You're one of those little powder puffs!" [...] "You lousy little fellow, you!" (231).

42 "Spectacles on your nose." (231).

43 "You get hacked to pieces just for wearing glasses!" (231).

on rather precarious terms (Поживешь с нами, что ль? (313)).⁴⁴ In the rendering of this dialogue, Liutov's own desire to belong to the Cossack community (—Поживу (314))⁴⁵ while indicating, by extension, his own Bolshevik self, is undermined by the commander's allusions to his Jewishness. Subsequently, the hero-narrator relates how he is thrown out of the Cossacks' territorial confines, expelled from the open gentile space to which he feels so attracted (as opposed to the stifling confines of his Jewish past?), the suitcase full of manuscripts and spectacles being the labels of his outsider identity. The smell of a pot with boiling pork, makes him feel голод с одиночеством без примера (314).⁴⁶

Later, having experienced a rite of passage with strong sexual overtones (in killing a strutting goose by stepping on its virgin neck, he "messes up a lady") and become temporarily accepted by the Cossacks, Liutov behaves brutally toward an old woman who identifies with him as a victim. But he then goes on to describe his experience of nearly ecstatic elation, when he reads Lenin's speech aloud to his Cossack comrades: Вечер завернул меня в живительную влагу сумеречных своих простынь [...] Я читал, и ликовал, и подстерегал, ликуя, таинственную кривую ленинской прямой. (315).⁴⁷ It is important here that the narrator's apparent bid for Sovietness is seriously challenged by the gendered ambiguity of his minority idiom. As he suffers feelings of guilt and identifies with "the rape victim" (the goose whose head had cracked beneath his boot), Liutov also longs for maternal comfort (вечер приложил материнские ладони к пылающему моему лбу (315))⁴⁸ and invokes femininity when confronted by surroundings that are essentially masculine: Я видел сны и женщин во сне, и только сердце мое, обогрешенное убийством, скрипело и текло. (316).⁴⁹ On the level of style, we could say that Babel/Liutov blends here elements of a masculine majority-culture with those pertaining to an *other*, feminine one.

44 "So you think you can live with us, huh?" (231).

45 "Yes, I do." (231).

46 "hungry and intensely lonely at the same time" (232).

47 "The evening wrapped me in the soothing dampness of her twilight sheets [...] I read, and rejoiced, waiting for the effect, rejoicing in the mysterious curve of Lenin's straight line." (233).

48 "The evening placed her motherly palms on my burning brow." (233).

49 "I dreamed and saw women in my dreams, and only my heart, crimson with murder, schreeched and bled." (233).

A similar tension can be seen in “Istoriia odnoi loshadi” (“The Story of a Horse”), where Liutov, who himself masters and exploits all linguistic nuances, renders the words of one of his other, semi- or un-educated Cossack characters.⁵⁰ Again, the narrator’s concern is with Savitskii who has become involved in a struggle with Khlebnikov, the commander of the first Squadron, over the ownership of a white stallion. Having lost the struggle with the division commander, Khlebnikov writes a petition in order to withdraw from the Communist Party of the Bolsheviks, after which he is discharged from the First Division as an invalid. Conspicuously abounding in stiff, old-fashioned clichés and elements of Bolshevik propaganda literature (Описываю разные мысли согласно присяге,—[...] Коммунистическая партия [...] основана, полагаю, для радости и твердой правды без предела и должна осматриваться на малых (343–44)),⁵¹ the Cossack’s petition is also replete with overdramatic emotion:

[...] я имел силы выдержать тот резкий смех и, сжав зубы за общее дело, выходил жеребца до желаемой перемены, потому я есть, товарищи, до серых коней охотник и положил на них силы, в малом количестве оставшиеся мне от империалистической и гражданской войны, и таковые жеребцы чувствуют мою руку, и я также могу чувствовать его бессловесную нужду и что ему требуется [...] И вот партия не может мне возворотить, согласно резолюции, мое кровное [...]. (344)⁵²

50 Typically, when Babel’s less educated narrators are allowed to tell their stories, the tone, style, and grammar usually begin to go askew. Consider, for instance, “Pis’mo” (“The Letter”), in which a gross deformation of language generates an important irony: a certain Vasilii Timofeich Kurdiukov does not write the letter himself, but dictates it to Liutov, who re-presents it, the overall impression being one of clumsiness.

51 “I am describing various thoughts in accordance with the oath I have taken [...] The Communist Party [...] was founded, it is my belief, for the promoting of happiness and true justice with no restrictions, and thus must also keep an eye out for the rights of the little man.” (264).

52 “[...] I was strong enough to withstand that laughing of theirs, and gritting my teeth for the Common Cause, I nursed the stallion back to the desired shape, because, let it be said, comrades, I am a white-stallion enthusiast and have dedicated to white stallions the little energy that the imperial War and the Civil War have left me with, and all these stallions respond to my touch as I respond to his wants and needs! [...] And yet the Party is unable to return to me, according to the chief of staff’s decision, that which is my very own [...]” (264).

Lacking the ability to properly assimilate the various stylistic ingredients, the language of this *skaz* narrator forms a tragi-comical combination of disparate stylistic elements, a concatenation of highfalutin revolutionary bombast, interspersed with sentimentalized equestrian *non sequiturs*. Liutov's rendering of the Cossack's oblique petition amounts to parody, although he goes on to contrast the pretentiousness of his speech with the softness of his nature. Considering that Khlebnikov's love for his lost horse yields an *underdog* rhetoric as well as expressions of love and affection, the narrator is *not* morally disapproving. What is more, he clearly empathizes with the predicament of Khlebnikov, who, after all, had been similar to him in character (345/265) and served him tea (у него одного в эскадроне был самовар (345)):⁵³ [...] нас потрясли одинаковые страсти. Мы оба смотрели на мир, как на луг в мае, как на луг, по которому ходят женщины и кони. (345).⁵⁴ Again, in identifying so strongly with the discharged Cossack commander and his bent for emotional display, pastoral beauty and pleasant "domesticity," the narrator juxtaposes the stylistic register of a cultured femininity with that of coarse "natural" machismo. It is as if the narrator, as he lets his own outsider-self come close to that of the victimized Khlebnikov, stages himself as a "Jewish Cossack." Moreover, he performs a self which is unsettled and fluid, while undermining the Bolshevik "good taste" in the process. Indeed, Babel's hopeless craving for Cossackness may be read here as "a repentant Mercurian's love for his Apollonian neighbour."⁵⁵ Let us now consider Liutov's interaction with one of the two interrelated, marginalized spheres of culture.

The Jews

Central to the narrator's performance of "Bolshevism" is the story "Gedali," whose eponymous hero is one of the main figures connected with the Jewish congregation of Zhitomir, an important centre of Central European Hasidism. Repelled by the lonely, eccentric old man and his curiosity shop with its легкий запах тления (311),⁵⁶ Liutov, at the same

53 "he was the only one in the squadron who owned a samovar." (265).

54 "were rattled by the same passions. We both looked on the world as a meadow in May, as a meadow over which women and horses wander." (265).

55 See Slezkine, 2004, p. 141.

56 "gentle aroma of decay." (228).

time, turns to a fellow Jew who represents the values of a culture that belongs to the night, the moon and the lonely Sabbath star, and thus opposes the sunlight of the clamorous events of war. Nonetheless, Liutov tries his best to influence the Jew's understanding of revolutionary violence:

—В закрывшиеся глаза не входит солнце, отвечаю я старику,—но мы распорем закрывшиеся глаза [...] Революция не может не стрелять, Гедали,—говорю я старику,—потому это она —революция...

—Но поляк стрелял, мой ласковый пан, потому что он контрреволюция. Вы стреляете потому, что вы—революция. А революция—это же удовольствие. И удовольствие не любит в доме сирот. Хорошие дела делает хороший человек. Революция—это хорошее дело хороших людей. Но хорошие люди не убивают. Значит, революцию делают злые люди. Но поляки тоже злые люди. Кто же скажет Гедали, где революция и где контрреволюция? [...]. (311)⁵⁷

It is important here that following his own *Soviet-speak* about the workings of the Revolution, the hero-narrator has the old Jew equate, far more poignantly, the future well-being of the peoples of the Empire with their own experience of cultural belonging (“happiness does not like orphans in the house”). Then, Gedali compares the men of the Revolution to the violent Poles, both counterrevolutionary and fiercely anti-Semitic, while consistently addressing Liutov using the Polish word for “Sir”—*Pan*. I shall return to the narrator's treatment of Poles later; suffice it to note here that by allowing Gedali's humanitarian challenge to the Bolshevik “message,” he undermines his own authenticity as a heroic Bolshevik war reporter promoting communism worldwide. The vagueness of Liutov's stance is further amplified by images connected with peaceful domestic-

57 “—The sun cannot enter eyes that are squeezed shut, I say to the old man, ‘but we shall rip open those closed eyes!’ [...] ‘The Revolution cannot *not* shoot, Gedali; I tell the old man, ‘because it is the Revolution...’/’—But my dear *Pan*! The Pole did shoot, because he is the counterrevolution. And you shoot because you are the Revolution. But Revolution is happiness. And happiness does not like orphans in the house. A good man does good deeds. The Revolution is the good deed done by good men. But good men do not kill. Hence the Revolution is done by bad men. But the Poles are also bad men. Who is going to tell Gedali which is the Revolution and which the counterrevolution? [...]” (228–29).

ity, until he finally succumbs to the nostalgia of Jewish familial and communal traditions: Гедали [...] где можно достать еврейский коржик, еврейский стакан чаю и немножко этого отставного бога в стакане чаю...? (313).⁵⁸ By contrasting his own brutal comments on the exigencies of the Bolshevik revolution with the Jew's sensitive human ideals, the narrator highlights the ambiguity of his own identity in the mind of the reader.

Such uncertainty of meaning also characterizes "Rabbi" ("The Rabbi"). In this story, which takes place on a peaceful Sabbath night, Liutov is being taken by Gedali through the Zhitomir ghetto to meet Motale Bratyslavskii, the last rabbi of the Chernobyl dynasty:—Откуда приехал еврей?—спросил он [...].—Из Одессы, ответил я.—Благочестивый город [...] звезда нашего изгнания, невольный колодезь наших бедствий! (317–18).⁵⁹ The narrator's verbatim rendering of his conversation with the Hasidic spiritual leader is revealing, because he perceives Central European Jewry here as something miserable, doomed or at best pitiful. Or rather, while *othering* one Jewish culture, he stresses *his own* belonging to an Odessan one, which is cheerful, vibrant and at worst confusing, and which already forms an integral part of his "Southern Russian" self-mythology. However, Liutov neither negates nor fully affirms the Volhynian world through which he travels: while longing for affinity with these Yiddish-speaking Jews, he opts for an in-between position where he may posit his own identity as open and adaptable. Consider, for example, this fragment from his dialogue with the Hasidic rabbi:

[...] Чем занимается еврей?

—Я перекладываю в стихи похождения Герша из Острополя.

—Великий труд, прошептал рабби и сомкнул веки. Шакал стонет, когда он голоден, у каждого глуца хватает глупости для уныния, и только мудрец раздирает смехом завесу бытия...

Чему учился еврей?

—Библии.

—Чего ищет еврей?

58 "Gedali [...] where can I find some Jewish biscuits, a Jewish glass of tea, and a piece of that retired God in the glass of tea?" (229).

59 "Where have you come from, Jew?" he asked me [...]. 'From Odessa,' I replied. 'A devout town, [...] the star of our exile, the reluctant well of our afflictions!'" (235).

—Веселья.—Реб Мордхе,—сказал цадик и затряс бородой,—
пусть молодой человек займет за столом, пусть он ест в этот суб-
ботный вечер вместе с остальными евреями [...]. (318)⁶⁰

With Liutov's linking of his own work as a versifier-adaptor to the figure of Hershele of Ostropol, a famous trickster in Yiddish folklore, an intriguing tension is created in terms of identity formation.⁶¹ More precisely, the rabbi's stressing of the significance of laughter in Jewish culture, as well as Liutov's self-professed *need of fun*, points to the narrator's strategy of masking the anti-Jewish cruelty he has witnessed (and the cruelties he knows are coming) with a sense of comedy and fatalism—a classic pose of Jewish humour.⁶² An eccentric proponent of such comedy is seen in the idiosyncratic figure of Reb Mordkhe,⁶³ a hunchbacked, ragged, little old man, no bigger than a ten-year old boy, who reiterates the theme of Liutov's Southern background: Ах, мой дорогой и такой молодой человек! [...] Ах, сколько богатых дураков знал я в Одессе, сколько нищих мудрецов знал я в Одессе! (318).⁶⁴ Liutov then sits down with this larger-than-life figure to partake of the Sabbath supper.

In thus linking the marginalized Odessan Jews with the Volhynian Jews, the narrator makes a “carnivalizing” gesture, which is then followed by a puzzling description of Il'ia, the rabbi's rebellious son—a young Jew who has a combination of both male and female features: [юноша] с лицом Спинозы, с могущественным лбом Спинозы, с чахлым лицом

60 “[...] What is the Jew's trade?/I am putting the adventures of Hershele of Ostropol into verse./A great task; the rabbi whispered, and closed his eyelids. The jackal moans when it is hungry, every fool has foolishness for despondency, and only the sage shreds the veil of existence with laughter... What did the Jew study?/The Bible./What is the Jew looking for?/Merriment./Reb Mordkhe, the rabbi said, and shook his beard. Let the young man seat himself at the table, let him eat on the Sabbath evening with other Jews [...].” (235).

61 The half-legendary Hershele of Ostropol was also reputed to have cured his grandson Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, of melancholy. See Alina Cała et al., 2000, *Historia Żydów polskich: Słownik*, Warsaw, p. 119–20.

62 For evidence of Babel's good humour in a dark time, consider Pirozhkova (1996, pp. 97–96), who states that he “believed that people were born for merriment and the pleasures of life.”

63 “Reb” (Hebr. *rabi* “my master”) is a honorific form used by students when addressing elderly or respected members of the Jewish community. Cf. Cała et al., 2000, p. 280.

64 “Oy, my dear and so very young a man!” [...] Oy, how many rich fools have I known in Odessa, how many wise paupers have I known in Odessa!” (235).

монахини. (318).⁶⁵ In this way, the narrator contributes to the destabilization of his Bolshevik self. Towards the end of the story, however, we are pulled in the opposite direction, that is out of the old-world Jewish setting and into the present-day пустыня войны. (319).⁶⁶ In conjuring up the glory of Bolshevism, the narrator now gives a boost to his Soviet image: [...] в агитпоезде Первой Конной армии меня ждало сияние сотен огней, волшебный блеск радиостанции, упорный бег машин в типографии и недописанная статья в газету «Красный кавалерист». (319).⁶⁷ But Liutov has a second encounter with Il'ia.

In “Syn rabbi” (“The Rabbi’s Son”), the young Jew, who has now joined the Red Army, lies fully exposed and mortally wounded; or, as the narrator puts it: Казаки в красных шароварах поправили на нем упавшую одежду. Девицы [...] сухо наблюдали его половые части, эту чахлую, курчавую мужественность исчахшего семита. (408).⁶⁸ Having distanced himself from Jewishness by *othering* Il'ia's body, the hero-narrator gives a detailed description of the youth's belongings which he packs—into his own suitcase:

Здесь все было свалено вместе, мандаты агитатора и памятки еврейского поэта. Портреты Ленина и Маймонида лежали рядом. Узловатые железо ленинского черепа и тусклый шелк портретов Маймонида. Прядь женских волос была заложена в книжку постановлений Шестого съезда партии, и на полях коммунистических листовок теснились кривые строки древнееврейских стихов. Печальным и скупым дождем падали они на меня—страницы «Песни Песней» и револьверные патроны. Печальный дождь заката обмыл пыл с моих волос [...]. (408)⁶⁹

65 “a youth with the face of Spinoza, with the powerful forehead of Spinoza, with the sickly face of a nun.” (235).

66 “wasteland of war.” (235).

67 “[...] On the propaganda train of the First Cavalry, I was greeted by the sparkle of hundreds of lights, the enchanted glitter of the radio transmitter, the stubborn rolling of the printing presses, and my unfinished article for *The Red Cavalryman*.” (235).

68 “Cossacks in red Tatar trousers fixed his slipped clothing. The girls [...] stared coolly at his sexual organs, the withered, curly manhood of an emaciated Semite.” (332).

69 “Here everything was thrown together in a jumble, the mandates of the political agitator and the mementos of a Jewish poet. Portraits of Lenin and Maimonides lay side by side—the gnarled steel of Lenin’s skull and the listless silk of the Maimonides portraits. A lock of woman’s hair lay in a book of the resolutions of the Sixth Party Congress, and

Among Il'ia's personal belongings are Bolshevik-masculine and Jewish-feminine items lying side by side. Thoroughly described in androgynous terms, the Jew thus emerges, like Gedali before him, as a paradoxical figure. In his dying words, while arguing that in a revolution a mother is but an episode, he makes every effort to renounce the world of his minority childhood. But if the Red Army soldier Il'ia Bratyslavskii has indeed escaped the stifling narrowness of his own culture, it is only through the agency of death. Here Liutov, who might wish to break with his own Jewish cultural and traditional past (where his mother, too, forms an integral part), is unclear as to whether he prefers the active or the passive self-image: *И я, едва вмещающий в древнем теле бури моего воображения,—я принял последний вздох моего брата.* (408).⁷⁰

Note how Jewishness in the stories about Gedali, the rabbi and his son are presented as both repressive and ethically rich. True to type, the hero-narrator, who consistently makes the most of the mythic differences between gentiles and Jews, seems to develop his own multiple identity somewhere between a Jewish (feminine) past and a Soviet (masculine) future. In so doing, he "lays bare," as it were, the scheme underlying his own performance: *not* to reconcile the contradictions of cultural belonging, but to straddle and live these contradictions by pursuing an in-between course. At this juncture, we could say, at least provisionally, that the alternation between attraction and repulsion towards minority *as well as* majority cultures is the double pull of Babel's performance of "Bolshevism" in the collection of stories as a whole.⁷¹ This in-betweenness becomes even more apparent in the light of Liutov's interaction with the other sphere of marginalized minority culture, that of Polishness.

The Poles

There are numerous indications that the narrator associates Poles with Jews, except that his attitude towards the former is mostly one of devoted attraction: the battered Poles are viewed less as fellow victims than as *comrades in culture*. A prime example is the cycle's second story, titled

crooked lines of Ancient Hebrew verse huddled in the margins of communist pamphlets. Pages of *The Song of Songs* and revolver cartridges drizzled on me in a sad, sparse rain. The sad rain of the sunset washed the dust from my hair [...]" (332).

70 "And I, who could barely harness the storms of fantasy raging through my ancient body, I received my brother's last breath." (333).

71 See Milton Ehre, 1986, *Isaac Babel*, Boston, p. 76.

“Kostel v Novograde” (“The Church in Novograd”). Here Liutov is billeted in the house of a Polish Jesuit priest, who has fled the advancing Cossacks; while waiting for the Cossack commissar’s return, he rests for a few moments from the murder and destruction of the war around him. From the first passage onwards, the hero-narrator recreates a benevolent world of Polish culture into which he enters. In the Jesuit’s kitchen he meets *Pani* Eliza, the welcoming housekeeper, who serves him tea and cakes which have the aroma of

[...] распятие. Лукавый сок был заключен в них и благовонная ярость Ватикана [...] Был вечер, полный июльских звезд. Пани Элиза, тряся внимательными сединами, подсыпала мне печенья, я наслаждался пищей иезуитов. Старая полька называла меня «паном» [...]. (291)⁷²

As seen in “Nachal’nik konzapasa,” where the Jewish reporter fraternizes with his Cossack superior by drinking tea, the narrator reveals a soft spot for cultured home life. Now his concern is with the subtle accommodation of Polish domesticity. Although the description of Pani Eliza’s kitchen may have a slight sarcastic quality (“the aroma of crucifixion” and “the sap of slyness and the fragrant frenzy of the Vatican”), the Poles are not portrayed in clichéd images. More importantly, the narrator delights in the company of his Polish woman friend, while she, interestingly, shows him respect as an equal by using, like Gedali before her, the Polish word *Pan*. In this way, Pani Eliza emerges as a female repository of accommodated domesticity.⁷³

A different kind of femininity is presented by the description of the curate Pan Romuald: Гнусавый скопец с телом исполина, Ромуальд ве-

72 “[...] crucifixion. Within them was the sap of slyness and the fragrant frenzy of the Vatican [...] It was an evening filled with the stars of July. Pani Eliza, shaking her attentive gray hair, kept on heaping cakes on my plate, and I delighted in the Jesuitical fare. The old Polish woman addressed me as “Pan” [...]” (205).

73 The significance of the Polish woman as a hospitable and attentive mother-figure, who may also connote the *yiddische mame* of the East European *shtetl*, is stressed by her appearing in three of the collection’s thirty-five stories: “Kostel v Novograde,” “Pan Apolek” and “Solntse Italii.” For a general description of pre-1939 typologies, see Rachel Monika Herweg, 1995, “Zwischen Tradition und Assimilation,” *Die Jüdische Mutter: Das verborgene Matriarchat*, Darmstadt, pp. 133–88.

личал нас «товарищами». (291).⁷⁴ As to this case of Polish emasculation, Liutov finds it worthy of ironic contempt (Он стал бы епископом — пан Ромуальд, если бы он не был шпионом (291))⁷⁵ *as well as* highly enjoyable (Я пил с ним ром (291)).⁷⁶ The narrator, at this stage, appears to dissociate himself from this “un-Bolshevik” situation by linking the Pole’s womanish manner (вкрадчивые его соблазны обессилили меня (291))⁷⁷ to the symbols of his dubious religion (О, распятия, крохотные, как талисманы куртизанки [...] (291)),⁷⁸ so that an image is created of alien, dangerous femininity. Towards the end of his story, the narrator tells of how he is rescued from a crypt surrounded by sinister human skulls: Я вижу военкома, начальника особого отдела и казаков со свечами в руках. Они отзываются на слабый мой крик и выводят меня из подвала. (292).⁷⁹ The humorous implication here is that when Liutov first saw the Cossack commanders carrying candles, he had assumed that these hard-line Communist fighters had come to the Polish church to pray, while in reality they were just conducting a search for runaway locals. It is important that the narrator’s inverted Polish joke is achieved at the expense of his own Bolshevik “fierceness”: in his description of the fearless cavalrymen who hurry to his aid, he adopts the role of the eternally defenceless Jew whose quality of life depends on Cossacks and Poles alike.

In addition to the endearing housekeeper, Liutov is attracted to yet another Pole, the eponymous hero of “Pan Apolek.” Again, the action unfolds in a setting where one minority culture encounters another, but this time Polishness is described in clearer terms:

Прелестная и мудрая жизнь пана Аполека ударила мне в голову, как старое вино [...] Окруженный простодушным сиянием нимбов, я дал тогда обет следовать примеру пана Аполека. И сла-

74 “a eunuch with a nasal voice and the body of a giant, who addressed us as ‘Comrade.’” (205).

75 “Pan Romuald could have become a bishop had he not been a spy.” (206).

76 “I drank rum with him.” (206).

77 “Pan Romuald’s ingratiating seduction debilitated me.” (206).

78 “O crucifixes, tiny as the talismans of a courtesan!” (206).

79 “I see the military commissar, the commander of the special unit, and Cossacks carrying candles. They hear my weak cry and come down to haul me out of the basement.” (207).

дось мечтательной злобы, горькое презрение к псам и свиньям человечества, огонь молчаливого и упоительного мщения—я принес их в жертву новому обету. (300)⁸⁰

Not only is the Polish icon-painter an artist of concrete, sensual detail—as is the narrator when depicting the atrocities of war—but he also follows a private vision which sets him apart from the common run. Apolek emerges as a heretic: failing to subordinate his models of modest living to the biblical motif, he elevates or “deifies” living, breathing individuals. As indicated by the detailed description of his four paintings, he is strikingly *alert to otherness*: in his representation of “The Death of John the Baptist,” the hacked-off head is modelled on Pan Romuald, the unmannish curate; the red-cheeked, meaty face of the “The Virgin Mary” is a portrait of Pani Eliza, the friendly housekeeper; the Apostle Paul featured in “The Last Supper” is modelled on Janek, a lame Jewish convert; and, in “The Stoning of Mary Magdalene,” the central character is the Jewish girl Elka: дочь неведомых родителей и мать многих подзаборных детей. (303).⁸¹ Significantly, Liutov so softens in the presence of these secularized, culturally incongruous, even domesticated religious paintings that he vows to become a follower of their Polish creator and his aesthetics: укрытое от мира Евангелие. (300).⁸²

One is left with the distinct impression that both men are *at home* with Pani Eliza. We learn how Liutov enjoys Apolek’s evening company: пью по вечерам вино его беседы. (304).⁸³ What do they converse about? О романтических временах шляхетства, о ярости бабьего фанатизма, о художнике Луке дель Раббьо и о семье плотника из Вифлеема. (220).⁸⁴ In other words, here the narrator finds solace in delving into such “bourgeois” topics as aristocratic culture, womanliness, as

80 “The wise and wonderful life of Pan Apolek went straight to my head, like an exquisite wine [...] There, surrounded by the guileless shine of halos, I took a solemn oath to follow the example of Pan Apolek. The sweetness of dreamy malice, the bitter contempt for the swine and dogs among men, the flame of silent and intoxicating revenge—I sacrificed them all to this oath.” (216).

81 “a Jewish girl of unknown parentage and mother of many urchins roaming the streets.” (219).

82 “a gospel that had remained hidden from the world.” (216).

83 “I am [...] imbibing the wine of his conversation in the evenings.” (220).

84 “About the romantic days of the Polish nobility, the fanatical frenzy of women, the art of Luca della Robbia, and the family of the Bethlehem carpenter.” (220).

well as Judaico-Christian art and religion. At night, however, he returns to one of his other homes: к моим одворованным евреям. По городу слонялась бездомная луна. И я шел с ней вместе, отогревая в себе неисполнимые мечты и нестройные песни. (306).⁸⁵ As indicated by Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, the wandering moon may be said to echo the narrator's own overall homelessness during the Polish campaign, and, perhaps, "the wandering' nature of all his exiled brethren."⁸⁶ In this connection, Gedali forms an intriguing counterpart to Apolek, likewise a child of the evening: the narrator, amidst descriptions of wartime misery, internalizes a dual image of universal compassion, where Apolek's artistic vision as an icon-painter is but a Catholic variant of the Hasidic Jew's dream of the coming Revolution and the International of Good People.

At this point, let us dwell on three significant aspects of the Pole's quaintly sounding name. Firstly, *Pan* becomes something more than honorific: "pan" is also the Greek for "all," hinting at the Pole's ability to blend, through his art, what are commonly perceived as opposing realms of culture into an integrated and apparently authentic whole. Not unlike Liutov himself, Apolek transforms his collection of unconventional Poles and Jews "hagiographically," elevating them into some form of cross-cultural sainthood.⁸⁷ It is as though the Pole becomes Liutov's cultural mentor. Secondly, pointing to Pan the pastoral God of fertility, *Pan* implies a sublimation of his earthly namesake into a highly un-Jewish celebration of the sensuality of nature.⁸⁸ Thirdly, "Apolek" is an affectionate diminutive of Apollo, the name of the Greek God of the sun and all the arts of civilization; furthermore, the name connotes such "Apollonian" and tra-

85 "to my plundered Jews, to sleep. The vagrant moon trailed through the town and I tagged along, nurturing within me unfulfillable dreams and dissonant songs." (222).

86 Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, 2005, "At Home with Pani Eliza: Isaac Babel and His Polish Encounters," *Polish Encounters: Russian Identity*, eds. D.L. Ransel & B. Shallcross, Bloomington, Ind., pp. 160–71, p. 167.

87 As for the narrator's mixing of Jewish and Christian elements, Renate Lachmann stresses the carnivalizing perspective which, motivated by an "observing and experiencing consciousness," designates both the clash and the breaking of cultural symbols. Hence Liutov emerges as "a 'carnivalizer' who bumps into death." See Renate Lachmann, 1980, "Notizen zu Isaak Babels 'Perechod čerez Zbruč,'" *Voz'mi na radost': To Honour Jeanne Van der Eng-Liedmeier*, Amsterdam, pp. 183–92; p. 189.

88 For a in-depth analysis of the Pole's name, see Robert A. Maguire, 2000, "Ekphrasis in Isaak Babel," *Depictions: Slavic Studies in the Narrative and Visual Arts in Honor of William E. Harkins*, Ardis, pp. 17–18.

ditionally un-Jewish values as “masculine calm, strength and control of self,” all characteristic of Bolshevik “good style” as well as of an agricultural society. However, the narrator upsets any one-sided interpretation of the heretic’s cultural identity, for, as expressed by Apolek himself, the latter is: *а бродячий художник, крещенный христианским именем Аполлонария. (306, my italics, K.A.G.).*⁸⁹ And this may well be why the narrator, who calls himself *а мгновенный гость (304),*⁹⁰ elaborates so poignantly on his attraction to the Pole: he perceives him as being “one’s own” and “other,” simultaneously.

The hero-narrator’s way of describing multicultural relations should be understood in relation to his identity project, whose overarching aim it is to perform a “Bolshevik” self which remains elusive and in-between. In this process, Polishness has an intermediary function as a symbol of Enduring Culture. Consider, for example, this fragment from “Berestechko,” where Liutov, having roamed through the town, both Polish and Jewish, where everything smells of a *теплая гниль старины (350),*⁹¹ arrives at the abandoned castle of a certain Count Raciborski. It is important that Liutov, who poeticizes this Polish site (*спокойствие заката сделало траву у замка голубой [...] (350),*)⁹² also finds here a fragment of a yellowed letter with the following words: “*Berestechko, 1820, Paul, mon bien aimé, on dit que l’empereur Napoléon est mort, est-ce vrai? Moi, je sens bien, les couches ont été faciles, notre petit héros achève sept semaines...*” (351/272). With this reference to the Emperor of the French, we are, as Deutsch Kornblatt points out, “in the presence of history itself, written in the language of Western European culture, by someone who understands the delicate irony of valor: the seven-week-old ‘*petit héros*.’”⁹³ The narrator contrasts this bit of century-old domestic heroism (the attainment of seven weeks of life by a fragile baby) with the *official* “heroes” of his stories: the revolutionary Cossacks. Next, he describes the divisional military commissar, who harangues the plundered Jews and bewildered townspeople with a speech about the Second Congress of the

89 “a wandering artist, upon whom the Christian name of Apollinarius has been bestowed” (218).

90 “a passing guest” (304).

91 “warm rot of antiquity” (271).

92 “The silence of the sunset turned the grass around the castle blue [...]” (272).

93 Deutsch Kornblatt, 2005, p. 166.

Comintern: Вы власть. Все, что здесь, ваше. Нет панов. Приступаю к выборам Ревкома... (351).⁹⁴

Here as elsewhere, the lives of the Jews and the Poles in Galicia are intertwined in both passion and destruction. They are also *fellow wanderers*, except that the Poles differ from the archetypal Jew in that they remain stationary, their battered homeland, as it were, wandering away from them.⁹⁵ Characteristically, Liutov establishes again a Polish-Jewish cultural convergence while moving in and out of his own “Bolshevik” identity.⁹⁶ In this respect, his performance project can be understood as the inside story of his painful and never completed transformation—into a Cossack hero without fear or mercy. With his closeted Jewishness, his cultural affinity with “bourgeois” Polishness and his perplexing bid for Bolshevik stylistics, the hero-narrator continuously “lays bare” the performativity of his narratives.

Babel's minority idiom—a transculturalist dream?

A significant feature of Babel's *Dnevnik 1920 g.* is the comforting sense of affinity with and endurance of culture; on the other hand, there is the troubling sense of outsider-ness and of the destruction of culture. Now all this is clear in the writer's personal record, but less so in his cycle of stories where, in fact, relatively few of the multicultural encounters appear directly. And this is the crux of the matter: the author of *Konarmiiia* describes his quest for cultural belonging obliquely. The formation of a “Bolshevik-Cossack” identity is constantly challenged by descriptions of marginalized Jewish and Polish life-forms. Here Babel's diverse minority idiom becomes a manifestation of his incongruous attempt at the new Soviet “classic” voice, as well as of his staging of himself as a fully fledged Soviet writer.

94 “You are the power. Everything here belongs to you. There are no masters. I shall now conduct an election for the Revolutionary Committee.” (272).

95 Cf. Deutsch Kornblatt, 2005, p. 162: “Despite the dislocation of their home, the Polish characters in *Red Cavalry* ironically represent stability, continuity with the past, the endurance with Western European bourgeois and, as Babel saw it, ‘Jewish’ domestic values, all in the midst of a rapidly changing cultural and political landscape.”

96 Shklovskii (1924, p. 154), speaking of Babel's “discordant” idiom, writes that the world of *Konarmiiia* is estranged as though viewed by an outsider, as though Russia were being observed by a Frenchman in Napoleon's Grande Armée.

The reality of Babel's literary persona is constructed entirely through its performance of ambiguous Sovietness. As I have tried to show, Babel/Liutov enriches, complicates, subverts and semi-openly resists orthodoxies and fundamentalisms; in fact, his identity project implies a profound dichotomy between acceptance of the ideals of Bolshevism and affinity with its victims, a daring cross between critique and celebration. As indicated by the hero-narrator's unexpected accommodation of both Polishness and Jewishness into his "Bolshevik" self, he seeks a culture and society whose pragmatic feats exist not in delimitation, but in the ability to link and undergo significant transition. Here the figure of "in-betweenness" is crucial, for Babel's minority idiom can be understood as a subtle reenactment of the hybrid sense of his cultural position. We could say that the semi-assimilated Jew is striving to form his own kind of "resistance identity," where he attempts, as a literary as well as social actor, on the basis of whatever cultural materials are available to him, to build a new, multicultural identity that redefines his position in the new society, and thus seeks a "revolution" of the social structure.

In the end, Babel may be less about multiculturalism and more about transculturality, as *Konarmii* stands for so many crossings—the crossing of languages, cultures, genders, social positions and historical moments.⁹⁷ It would seem that he, too, conceived of a multi-meshed and inclusive "Russia" that might encompass the world. And so the figure of "in-betweenness" merges with the all-embracing metaphor of Babel's work, namely a great twentieth-century Jewish revolutionary experiment actualized in the communist Soviet Union.

97 I here follow the line of Wolfgang Welsch's thinking: whereas multiculturalism does not allow for hybridization, focusing as it does on the problems which different, clearly distinguishable cultures have within one society, the concept of transculturality aims for "a multi-meshed and inclusive, not separatist and exclusive understanding of culture." Wolfgang Welsch, 1999, "Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today," *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*, eds. M. Featherstone & S. Lash, London, pp. 194–213.