PROPHETS FOR A COLD AGE:
ISAAC BABEL AND NATHANAEL WEST

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the similarities between two writers of Jewish origin. Although they lived in different societies and divergent national cultures, Isaac Babel and Nathanael West have many striking characteristics in common.

The immediately perceivable similarity between the works of the two writers is the highly charged terseness of their style, the aggressive imagery and the ironic and ambivalent tone. These are seen as a reflection of their vision, a particular state of awareness, marked by anxiety, alienation and tension.

The relentless contradictions, the irony and radical ambiguity and the dichotomous vision revealed in the examined writings of Babel and West are shown to be emanating from the writers' social experience (biculturality) and their Jewish historical heritage (election and exile).

The creative "journeys" of the two writers are traced, revealing a shift in attitude to their Jewishness. Both begin by rejecting the burden and restrictiveness

of their origin and conclude by accepting its inevitability and the enriching implications of its spiritual values.

The relevance of these Jewish writers to our 20th century is linked to their history. Because of their own experience of rejection and anxiety, and their imaginative intimacy with the inherited past, they are accurate diagnosticians of the modern malaise -- authentic "Prophets for a Cold Age."

RESUME

Cette thèse a pour objet de montrer la similitude qui existe entre deux écrivains d'origine juive. Bien qu'ils aient vécu dans des sociétés fort différentes et aient été imprégnés de la culture de leur pays respectif, Isaac Babel et Nathanael West ont en commun des caractères frappants.

En étudiant leurs oeuvres respectives, on découvre immédiatement un même style concis et dense, une imagerie agressive, un ton ironique et ambivalent qui reflètent leur vision du monde et sont les différentes manifestations d'une sensibilité douloureuse, teintée d'anxiété, voire même d'aliénation.

Les contradictions implacables, l'exploitation des situations ambigues, l'ironie qui demeure en filigrane et la double perception des choses sont autant de traits qui apparaissent à la lecture attentive des oeuvres de Babel et de West et qui proviennent, non seulement du contexte social dans lequel ils ont vécu (biculturalisme) mais aussi de l'héritage du monde juif auquel ils appartiennent (élection et exil).

Les "cheminements" des deux écrivains en sont un témoignage. Tous deux ont commencé par rejeter un passé trop lourd et qui les accablait pour en arriver, au bout de la route, à reconnaître comme inéluctable le fait que ce même passé juif, leur patrimoine légué par l'histoire, véhiculait aussi des valeurs spirituelles d'une richesse inestimable. Ce qui nous les rend proches, au XXème siècle est dû à leur expérience passée. Ayant connu et vécu, tour à tour, le refus, l'angoisse puis la connaissance intime de l'histoire du monde juif dont ils sont issus ils ont appréhendé le malaise qu'éprouve le monde moderne, et ce, en authentique "Prophètes d'un monde sans âme."

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CHAPTER I

FROM THERE TO HERE

"After all, my dear fellow,
life, Anaxagoras has said,
is a journey."

Bergotte

If one were to name the most frequently repeated critical references made to both Isaac Babel and Nathanael West they would be: compression, precision of syntax, supercharged nervous brevity, wit and ambiguity, irony which finds release in aggression or self-mockery, relentless use of violent imagery, juxtapositions and combinations of words and phrases which are unexpected and often bizarre.[1]

As contemporaries, the two writers did most of their writing in the nineteen twenties and nineteen thirties, and both were haunted by the theme of violence throughout their creative careers. Both met with violent deaths.

Isaac Babel was born in Odessa's Moldavanka in 1894; he perished in some Gulag, of "unknown" or at least unstated causes, in 1941.

Nathanael West was born in New York in 1903; he was killed in a car accident in California, the "dream-dump" which he helped to mythologize, in 1940.

There are many obvious differences in their backgrounds. The historical, sociological and political panoramas of their respective countries, Russia and

the U.S.A., varied considerably. Of the two men, Babel was the more poetic. His metaphors are exotic and startling; his language is lyrical and sensuous.

The comparisons between the works and lives of Babel and West are striking and significant. There is the similarity of style, structure and theme, for which literary influence is not likely to be responsible. There is the pervasive use of "explosive" imagery. There are the recurrent themes of alienation, anxiety and flight, poised against a persistent vision of the world as it "ought to be." All these suggest a compelling imaginative kinship between the two artists and express "a particularly Jewish formulation of a general spiritual predicament."[2] Both writers are Jews. Nurtured by Jewish values, haunted by Jewish dreams and nightmares, they are victims of exclusion, humiliation and scapegoatism.

Identifying "the distinctively Jewish note" in Kafka, Robert Alter says:

> If modern literature in general is a literature that adopts the viewpoint of the outsider, Kafka, as the alienated member of an exiled people, is the paradigmatic modernist precisely because he is a paradigmatic Jew.[3]

A similarly "distinctive" note and viewpoint is discernible in the writings of Babel and West. Both are keen diagnosticians of the "spiritual predicament" of

the 20th century, precisely because they have experienced anxiety and rejection as Jews. Centuries of exile and persecution have endowed them with a legacy of nervous fear and insights for a cold, dark age.

There is no simple formula for identifying the Jewish sensibility of a writer who is a Jew. The materials of art itself and their tangled connections with reality are too complex to be neatly categorized. The distinctiveness of the Jew, his unique cultural and traditional connections with a remote past, also escapes accurate definition. The Jewishness shared by Babel and West has less to do with the influence of a literary tradition than it does with certain key images and states of awareness which are a product of Jewish history (e.g. anxiety, self-consciousness, loathing for brutality) and some of the basic values and assumptions of Judaism (e.g. that man is a spiritual creature whose journey on this planet possesses purpose).

Divided by geography and ideologies, they are united by a collective history. As alienated members of an exiled people, they share the same dreams and nightmares, the same moral and intellectual concerns. They store in their consciousness the experience of rejection and self-estrangement and the negative awareness of Jewishness as a condition of being despised

and humiliated. They are haunted by images of a collective memory which resounds for many generations with the endurance of exclusion and persecution. To be a Jew, they know, is to be alienated, self-conscious, anxiety-ridden, a "painted bird" against whom the world has a grievance. Sooner or later the recollections of yesteryear become realities of the present, and some mighty hordes out of the past, dressed in new uniforms, and armed with new "reasons," demand the blood of the chosen scapegoat, the Jew.

In "good" times, i.e., the periods between pogroms and extermination, this dilemma of being, at best, on the periphery of existence, being "the marginal man" and pariah, has plagued many Jewish writers. Facing the challenge of having to choose between alienation and assimilation, many remained ambiguously divided, unable to totally accept either solution.

Others have consciously rejected their Jewish heritage, only to discover that they were unconsciously "stuck" with it. Heine, who considered his Jewishness an "affliction," chose assimilation and even baptism in order to escape his predicament. Yet he remained uncomfortably aware of himself as "the alien." Repelled by and drawn to the Jews, he confessed only later, in sickness and old age, that he Heine, "God become man,"

was

> no longer a fat Hellenist, the freest man since Goethe, a jolly, somewhat corpulent Hellenist with a contemptuous smile for lean Jews -- I am only a poor Jew, sick unto death, a picture of gaunt misery, and unhappy being.[4]

Eckerman in his recorded conversations with Heine, quotes his angry reaction to the mention of hunting. "If I had my way I would forbid it for once and all," he said. "Do not forget that my ancestors were never to be found among the hunters, but always among the hunted!"[5] Kafka comments on Heine's predicament: "An unhappy man, The Germans reproach him for being a Jew, and nevertheless he is a German, what is more a little German, who is in conflict with Jewry. That is what is so typically Jewish about him."[6] For Kafka himself, who "carried the bars [of a cage] within him all the time,"[7] to be Jewish implies being "a ghost of a vanished age," as well as wanderer and eternal stranger in the present one. A passage in his "Conversations" with Gustav Janouch explains this particular state of awareness which constitutes in part the peculiarly Jewish sensibility of Babel and West. When he was asked by Janouch if he remembers the old Jewish quarter of Prague, Kafka replied:

> As a matter of fact, I came when it had already disappeared. But .... In us all it still lives -- the dark corners, the secret

> alleys, shuttered windows, squalid courtyards, rowdy pubs, and sinister inns. We walk through the broad streets of the newly built town. But our steps and our glances are uncertain. Inside we tremble just as before in the ancient streets of our misery. Our heart knows nothing of the slum clearance which has been achieved. The unhealthy Jewish town within us is far more real than the new hygienic town around us. With our eyes open we walk through a dream; ourselves only a ghost of a vanished age.
>
> (Italics mine)[8]

This "inside" landscape, the "ancient streets of our misery," are part of Babel's heritage and West's as well. They rebel against it. Babel, examining his childhood "permeated with the smell of onions and Jewish destiny"[9] looks in it for the "seeds of the ills that torment [him] and the cause of his early decline."[10] He detests the Jewish persistent emphasis on learning, knowledge and achievement, and the denial of nature, play and high spirits. He wants to run away from that harsh destiny and those "stern commandments" which press down on his "weak, untried shoulders." He wants to run away, but at the same time, he wants "to stay there forever."[11]

West hates the Jewish "pants pressers" and also the superachievers, the intellectuals. The irony of a people who "are like a man sitting in a cloaca to the eyes, and whose brows touch heaven"[12] exasperates him. (This caustic note is tellingly reminiscent of the

Yiddish writer, Mendele Mocher Sforim, who refers to Israel as the "Diogenes of the nations; while his head towers in the heavens and is occupied with deep meditation concerning God and His wonders, he himself lives in a barrel ...")[13] Ironically, West discloses his Jewish identity most in the very effort to erase it. When he tries to win favor with those who exclude him, he sounds most typically Jewish. "If it had been possible for me to attract by exhibiting a series of physical charms," says his precocious protagonist in The Dreamlife of Balso Snell,

> my hatred would have been less. But I found it necessary to substitute strange conceits, wise and witty sayings, peculiar conduct, Art, for the muscles, teeth, hair, of my rivals.[14]

Both Babel and West are aware of a universe in which the lunacy of nature and the slaughterhouse of history support man's appetite for cruelty and malice. And yet, in their characteristically Jewish "rational madness," they cannot abandon the Messianic dream of a world ruled by order, harmony and justice, as summed up in the famous lines from the Bible:

> And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, And their spears into pruning-hooks; Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, Neither shall they learn war any more. And none shall make them afraid.
>
> (Micah 4:3)

It is the discrepancy between the myth of election and the reality of wretchedness and the impossibility of reconciling both that gives Jewish fiction an edgy intensity, its aggression and ambiguous irony. The verbal aggression provides the only means available to the Jewish writer to retaliate for the humiliation and assaults inflicted upon him by his inhospitable hosts and neighbours. The irony enables him to sustain his paradoxical insistence that the futility of daily life does not obliterate the sense of a larger reverence and the need for human affirmation, no matter at what price. It is at times a "means of indirect social aggression, and at other times it releases the sharpest, most mordant self-criticism."[15] Its source is in the very essence of Jewish survival which relies on a precarious balance of faith and scepticism. It is the kind of irony which results from a dichotomous vision about which Howe and Greenberg have the following to say in their Introduction to A Treasury of Yiddish Stories:

> Only if they took the myth of the Chosen People with the utmost seriousness, yet simultaneously mocked their pretensions to being anything but the most wretched people on earth, could the Jews survive.[16]

Babel autographed a photograph of himself for his friend Tatyana Tess saying "my life is spent in struggle with this man."[17]

Alternately rejecting and identifying with all that is weak, vulnerable and spiritual and then in turn, with all that is strong, indifferent and physical, he remains ambiguously divided. In a poignant story "Gedali," Babel confronts his two selves and engages them in dialogue. The voice which cries out on a Sabbath eve, "Oh, the moldering Talmuds of my childhood! Oh, the opaque sadness of memories!"[18] identifies with Gedali who believes in an "International of good men" and insists that "surely, Revolution means joy" and "good people don't kill."[19] The other self, the Bolshevik propagandist, speaks for an International "eaten with gunpowder and seasoned with the best blood."[20]

Steeped in the tradition of Jewish humanism, Babel yearns for Gedali's utopian Revolution; fascinated by the exuberance and promise of the foundation-shaking period in history and excited by the chance of participating in the shaping of an epoch, the Red Cavalrist says: "we will tear open the eyes that are shut."[21] This conflict between the "ineradicable imprint of his Jewish heritage and his passionate wish to rise out of its circumscribed environment,"[22] brings a note of relentless tension to Babel's work and makes his total commitment to either world impossible.

West likes to see himself as one of the profes-

sional "tough guys," the "boys in the backroom" in Edmund Wilson's phrase, but he never quite makes it. He resists Jewish self-consciousness and fights against the Jew's vulnerability, but as Fiedler says:

> West is, despite his own disclaimers, in a real sense a Jew. He is racked, that is to say, by guilt in the face of violence, shocked and tormented every day in a world where violence is daily. In Miss Lonelyhearts he creates a portrait of himself as ... the fool of pity whom the quite ordinary horror of ordinary life lacerates to the point of madness.[23]

The surrealistic Balso whose laugh always borders on hysteria, Lemuel the "shlemiel," the guilt-ridden, angst-filled Miss Lonelyhearts who has a "Christ-complex" and cannot understand how his "normal" girl-friend can laugh "naturally," unlike himself whose corrosive laughter is of the "sour-grapes," "a-broken-heart," "the-devil-may-care," "wry" and "ironical" kind;[24] they are all distinctly Jewish protagonists, and it seems inconceivable that they could have ever occurred to a non-Jewish writer. Like Babel, West is alienated, "in struggle with himself," ambiguously divided. In dress and manner he tried hard to be "all-American;" in spirit and thought he was a stranger, a "shit-disturber," a Jew.

The great themes of Yiddish literature which reflect the concerns of a community conditioned by faith

and morality, are: "the virtue of powerlessness, the power of helplessness, the company of the dispossessed, the sanctity of the insulted and the injured."[25] The writings of Babel and West are permeated with these themes, and also with their ambivalence toward them.

How could they ignore the pathetic inadequacy of these Jewish "survival tactics" and accept the notion of passive response to bestiality, violence and constant threat of impending disaster?

How could Babel, who saw the pogrom, witnessed the horror of Stalin's purges and was aware of Hitler's predictions of "the final solution," believe in the validity of "the power of helplessness?"

The Odessa Hassidim assured him that just as David defeated Goliath in the glorious days of the past, "our people by force of sheer intelligence, would triumph over the enemies that surround us thirsting for our blood."[26] Unfortunately, this optimistic perspective lacks credibility in view of the historical evidence of pogroms, Inquisitions and genocide. For the Jew in exile, David is but a marvelous dream. Goliath is real and impressive. He is a warrior, a Cossack; a nomad with torch and dagger, a technocrat with Cyclone B solution, "an efficient killer of lice in clothing and of men in gas chambers."[27]

Babel's and West's dichotomous vision can at least partly be blamed on their biculturality. The Jew in Diaspora, the "marginal man," is "neither completely in nor completely out." His Jewish heritage gives him the awareness of his unique role in history. His gentile "hosts" exclude him from historical events. His messianic dream calls for a world of order, justice and love. His daily reality demands an earthy concreteness and shrewdness; he has to drive a hard bargain for survival among malevolent hosts. At home, in his Jewish environment, he is intelligent, remarkable, a "prodigy;" in the outside world of school or in the street, he is a "dirty kike," detestable, a plague. At home he is loved and protected while outside he is hated and harassed. This sense of belonging to two worlds and not being completely committed to either, creates a particular state of awareness and shapes a distinct Weltanschauung. Babel and West share a unique way of looking at the world and express what they see in a similar manner and voice, because they are both nurtured by Jewish experience, values and traditions. The themes depicted by the two writers are eternally Jewish themes, informed by the Zeitgeist of twentieth century Russia and twentieth century America. Theirs are modern songs, universal in significance but inspired by an ancient

Hebrew melody, a nigun. Nigun is "not merely a melody but the tone, the inner feeling, the spiritual line .... nothing less, in fact, than the very moral essence."[28]

The most prominent characteristic of this nigun in the works of Babel and West is the tension which is a result of their dichotomous vision. Having the Hebrew prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah as forebears, their irony and wit sprang from the awareness of the abyss that yawned between the ideal and the real. This irony, the ambiguous "remedy" for a tension of opposites which cannot be resolved, questions God as it exalts Him, undercuts faith as it affirms it, loves the "Holy Fool" and hates him, admires nature and energy and distrusts it.

"If you want to give me advice, you should talk sense,"[29] says one of Babel's characters addressing the Lord. Another one muses:

> Wasn't it a mistake on God's part to settle Jews in Russia where they live like in hell? Why couldn't He have settled Jews in Switzerland where they'd be surrounded by first-class lakes, where they'd breathe mountain air ...[30]

The familiarity and irony do not invalidate faith. They suggest that perhaps, sometime, as Woody Allen says, "God is an underachiever;" He needs to be reminded.

West's protagonist who "submitted drafts of his column to God and God approved them,"[31] or "searched the

sky for a target" to throw a stone, a sky which "held no angels, flaming crosses, or olive-bearing doves,"[32] is as blasphemous as he is profoundly religious. He undercuts faith but does not cut it off.

The tempestuous powers of nature fascinate the two writers, but the Hebrew notion of non-violence and moral purpose calls for harmony and demands understanding. As Jews, they discover how "unfit" they are for the daily business of violence and killing. An intimacy and atoneness with nature is impossible for them for numerous reasons.

Historically, the Jews of the Diaspora are an urban people. An intimacy with the natural world calls for a stability which they, dispersed and landless people, were denied for many generations. Reminiscing about his confined ghetto childhood, Babel says:

> I was terribly late in learning to do the essential things. As a small child, I was chained to the Talmud and led the life of a sage; when I grew up, I started climbing trees.
>
> The art of swimming turned out to be beyond my reach. A fear of water inherited from my forebears - Spanish rabbis and Frankfurt money-changers - dragged me to the bottom.[33]

West finds no retreat in nature's calm. Miss Lonelyhearts marvels at Betty who "acts like an excited child" in the country, "greeting the trees and grass with delight."

> He was amused by her evident belief in the curative powers of animals. She seemed to think that it must steady him to look at a buffalo.[34]

The ground is generally "damp," "shady," full of decay; "the only connection between man and the earth is that men are buried there."[35]

Estranged from nature and anxious about all that is "savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust" in her, they find little solace in nature's embrace. They are city writers whose landscapes are literary and stylized. They are skilful at creating myths of urban alienation and discord, myths based on their own experience of exile and rejection. Their tone is restless, questing, sardonic, anxious, always dialectical, posing antinomies which can never merge.

Metaphysically, communion with nature implies a benign acceptance of the randomness and indifference of the natural universe. Such acceptance demands the surrender of one's insistence on a universe ruled by order and justice, in which the human qualities of a critical mind and moral conscience are of primary importance.

> Man has a tropism for order ... The physical world has a tropism for disorder, entropy. Man against Nature ... the battle of the centuries ... All order is doomed, yet the battle is worth while.[36]

The Jew, conditioned by his faith and tradition, as well as his historical experience cannot accept the

notion that the universe operates on chance. That same faith and tradition also assures him that God reveals Himself in history. But the Jew's experience with history has been singularly painful, one in which the march of God could be seen only by those blinded by faith.

> Again and again, he [Einstein] would say such things as "God does not play dice." Exasperated, the Danish physicist Niels Bohr, his friendly adversary, finally replied, "Stop telling God what to do."[37]

Ultimately, the Jew finds it difficult to accept the determinism in nature because it refutes the idea of a universe created and governed by a benevolent Creator. The Covenant -- "and ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" -- (Ex 19:6) his link with the past which "smells of poetry," is in the marrow of his bones. Daily survival in this world (which he stubbornly insists upon) amidst hatred and persecution -- his link with the present -- demands toughness and earthy realism. Consequently, the tone (<u>nigun</u>) of Babel and West, two Jews of the Diaspora, oscillates between quest and frustration, rationality and hysteria, hope and despair. Always edgy, anguished, refuting and aspiring.

The eternal disharmony of the world (inner and outer); the enduring tension between poetry and truth

(deed), myth and practice, revelation and reality, and the writers' yearning to impose some unity and order on the abiding chaos, is the recurrent theme in Babel's and West's work. As writers imbued with Hebrew moralism, they hold fast to the dream which places the emphasis on ethical conduct. It is not only a question of how one feels about one's neighbour, but how a human being acts towards his neighbour.

> ... In righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbour.
>
> ... neither shalt thou stand idly by the blood of thy neighbour;
>
> Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself:
>
> (Lev. 19:15-18)

"Jewry," says Kafka, "is not merely a question of faith," but the "practice of a way of life in a community conditioned by faith."[38] Hence, a human being should feel and show mercy, justice, kindness and compassion for his fellow humans and should demand the same of his community.

In his book The Essence of Judaism, Leo Baeck says the following:

> Above all other things Judaism has taught men to listen to the commandment; it has always preached the categorical nature of the ethical demand. Never has it accepted that fatal, two-faced morality which asserts a different standard of right and wrong for individuals and for nations. It has rejected

> that dualism of commandment which sets us different criteria for ethics and for politics in order to provide the state with a plausible excuse should its justice lag behind the justice demanded of its individual members. In a word, it has rejected the dualism by which all ethical right and wrong ultimately become mere fiction and all morality nothing but a glorification of power.[39]

Partly, the tension and agony in the work of Babel and West are due to their acute perception of the anti-order of our times. The brutality and dislocation of the twentieth century unleashed by politics and unregulated technology, are hostile to human self-fulfilment. Never on so vast and horrendous a scale have we seen destruction, extermination, genocide. The total disregard for human life, freedom and dignity in our century, has reduced everyone to the status of the helpless, anxiety-ridden Jew. The Jew, particularly the Jewish artist, is keenly aware of the alienation and insecurity, the malaise of our time, because he has been acquainted with it for centuries. "Inside we tremble just as before in the ancient streets of our misery." Of the threads of recollected past, he weaves a prophetic tapestry of future disasters.

Paustovski writes in his memoirs that Babel's recollections of the pogrom witnessed in his childhood remained remarkably vivid and ominous.

> "I did not choose my race," he said suddenly in a broken voice. "I'm a Jew, a kike. Sometimes I think there is nothing I can't understand, but one thing I'll never understand; the reason for this black vileness which bears such a humdrum name as anti-Semitism." He fell silent. I too was silent and waited for him to calm down and for his hands to stop trembling.
>
> ... "I went through a pogrom when I was a child and survived. But they twisted the head off my dove. Why?
>
> ... I work as hard as I can. I do my utmost because I want to be at the feast of the gods and I am afraid of being driven away.[40]

West never witnessed a pogrom. But according to John Sanford, an old friend and himself an American Jew, "it's not enough to say of him (West) that he was drawn toward art; you also have to understand what he was being drawn away from ... More than anyone I ever knew Pep writhed under the accidental curse of his religion."[41] "West threw off what he could of his Jewishness," says Stanley Edgar Hyman, "and suffered from the rest."[42] James Light links West's deep seated insecurity to his rejection, or rather attempted rejection of his "racial heritage" and sees the source of his tension and anxiety in his bicultural status in America. He stresses the importance of West's state of awareness (tension, desperate search for order and 'beloved balance,' deep anxiety and fear of violence) and the way in which the understanding of it illuminates his work. Light attaches much significance to

the recurrent themes of quest and flight in West's fiction. He cites the unpublished story "Western Union Boy," where West dramatized an autobiographical childhood incident which apparently left a deep mark on his consciousness. The incident deals with being chased by a hostile mob.

The crowd in pursuit of a scapegoat appears in A Cool Million and serves as the pivotal image in The Day of the Locust. The figure of the victim, the persecuted "other," hunted by his tormentors, real or imagined, is present or implied throughout West's work. Ultimately, the reason for West's preoccupation with this image cannot be known. But the presence of such Jewish memories, both personal and collective, is neither unusual nor surprising.[43] West was a Jew, after all; if not himself, his immigrant father, Max Weinstein and his grandfather before him, had fled before some rampaging hordes.

Raymond Rosenthal refers to Babel's art as "literally the product of a flight."[44] Both Babel and West began their respective "journeys" by an attempt to escape from the burden of their Jewishness. (Babel assumed the purely Russian pseudonym Kiril Vassilevich Liutov when he became correspondent for "Jugrosta;" Nathanael West changed his name from Nathan Weinstein.)

As they examined and assessed the cultures of the countries in which they lived, the post-revolutionary land of promise, U.S.S.R. and the American dream of success and opportunity, U.S.A., they became disillusioned with what they found. They also realized that they could never become indistinguishable from their gentile neighbours or be accepted by them as brothers. In the last Red Cavalry story Liutov (Babel's assumed name and persona) says wistfully:

> In my presence the Cossacks hardly spoke; when my back was turned, I felt they were lying in wait with the sleepy deceptive immobility of beasts of prey.[45]
>
> I was all alone amidst these people whose friendship I'd failed to win.[46]
>
> "Argamak"

In his last unpublished (in Russia) work, The Jewess, he addresses questions to himself on the margin: "More dialogue, less pathetic narration?" "Eternal Jew?"[47]

In 1957, when West's reputation was rising continuously, (posthumously) his four novels were reissued in one volume in America. Stanley Edgar Hyman remembers the occasion:

> ... There was general agreement that West was one of the most important writers of the thirties, as American as apple pie. West's picture appeared on the cover of Saturday Review, looking very Jewish.[48]

Fiedler refers to West as "a Jewish writer bent on universalizing his own experience into a symbol of life in the Western world,"[49] and credits him with beginning the "great take-over by the Jewish-American writers of the American imagination."[50]

For all his shouting denials and protests, and the all-American name, West remained an alien, a Jew in his deepest self-consciousness. He revealed a compelling kinship of the imagination with his East-European "heart-brother" Babel, and shared his fears, dreams, racial memories and vision.

Both Babel and West made it evident in their later works that they had become aware of the impossibility of escaping their heritage and character; they realized that Jewishness and the particular condition of exile which is chosen as much as imposed, deserved profounder re-examination.

CHAPTER I: FOOTNOTES

[1]This represents the consensus of critical opinion. For partially annotated bibliography on Babel, see: James E. Falen, Isaac Babel: Russian Master of the Short Story (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1974), pp. 239-266; Vasa D. Mihailovich, "Assessments of Isaac Babel," Papers on Language and Literature, 9.3, 1973, pp. 324-7.
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[2]Robert Alter, After the Tradition (New York: Dutton, 1969), p. 27.

[3]Ibid., p. 27.

[4]Heinrich Heine, Confessions, quoted by G. Karpelis in Jewish Literature and Other Essays (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1911), p. 362.

[5]Francois Fejto, Heine, A Biography (London: Wingate, 1946), p. 108.

[6]Gustav Janouch, Conversations with Kafka (London: Village Press, 1971), p. 96.

[7]Ibid., p. 20.

[8]Ibid., p. 80.

[9]Isaac Babel, Lyubka the Cossack and Other Stories (New York: Signet, 1963), trans. Andrew MacAndrew, p. 20.

[10]Ibid., p. 28.

[11]Isaac Babel, You Must Know Everything, ed. Nathalie Babel, trans. Max Hayward (New York: Delta, 1969), p. 8.

[12]Nathanael West, The Dream Life of Balso Snell. The Complete Works of Nathanael West (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1957), p. 8.

[13]"Introduction," A Treasury of Yiddish Stories, ed. Irving Howe and Eliezar Greenberg (New York: Faucett Premier Books, 1953), p. 59.

[14]Balso Snell, p. 26.

[15]Treasury, p. 33.

[16]Ibid., p. 33.

[17]Tatyana Tess, "Vstrechi s Babelem" ("Meetings with Babel"), Oktiabr (undated), p. 184.

[18]Lyubka, p. 124.

[19]Ibid., p. 125.

[20]Ibid., p. 126.

[21]Ibid., p. 125.

[22]Raymond Rosenthal, "The Fate of Isaak Babel," Commentary 2 (1947), p. 127.

[23]Leslie Fiedler, "The Jew in the American Novel," To the Gentiles (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), p. 94.

[24]Nathanael West, Miss Lonelyhearts, The Complete Works of Nathanael West (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1957), p. 80.

[25]Treasury, p. 46.

[26]Lyubka, p. 14.

[27]Tadeusz Borowski, This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen, trans. Barbara Vedder (New York: Penguin, 1976), p. 9.

[28]Treasury, p. 23.

[29]Lyubka, p. 82.

[30]Ibid., p. 62.

[31]Miss Lonelyhearts, p. 139.

[32]Ibid., p. 71.

[33]Lyubka, p. 41.

[34]Miss Lonelyhearts, p. 111.

[35]Max Apple, "History and Case History in Babel's Red Cavalry and West's Day of the Locust," Nathanael West: The Cheaters and The Cheated, ed. David Madden (Deland: Everett, 1973), p. 246.

[36]Miss Lonelyhearts, p. 104.

[37]Time (cover story), Feb. 19, 1979, p. 45.

[38]Janouch, p. 109.

[39]Leo Baeck, The Essence of Judaism (New York: Schocken, 1961), p. 228.

[40]Konstantin Paustovski, Povest' o Zhizni (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1968), p. 140.

[41]James F. Light, Nathanael West: An Interpretative Study (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1961), pp. 131-2.

[42]Stanley Edgar Hyman, Nathanael West (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962), p. 6.

[43]Light, pp. 133-7.

[44]Rosenthal, p. 128.

[45]*Lyubka*, p. 147.

[46]*Ibid.*, p. 150.

[47]*You Must Know*, p. 165.

[48]Hyman, p. 11.

[49]Leslie Feidler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Delta, 1967), p. 487.

[50]"Master of Dreams," *Partisan Review*, v. xxxiv, no. 3, p. 347.

CHAPTER II

"LE STYLE EST L'HOMME MEME"

"And He hath made my mouth
like a sharp sword,
And He hath made me a pol-
ished shaft"

(Isa 49:2)

> The most immediately striking similarity between the Russian's short stories and the American's short novels is the precision of their syntax and the imagistic speed of their sentences .... West and Babel drop periods like knives, using speed to avoid the "explosions" of sentiment.[1]
>
> Italics mine.

This stress on condensation was very much a part of their own sense of being a writer in the twentieth century. Their intensity and vision set them apart from the mainstream of their respective literary traditions.

> West and Babel, who resemble each other as highly self-conscious literary stylists, are even more closely aligned in their relationship to the past. Both writers are literally cut off from the traditional roots of fiction in time and place.[2]

Perhaps one can best begin by looking at what the writers themselves and their critics had to say about the peculiarity of their style, structure and tone and the uniqueness of what Irving Howe refers to as "disciplined explosions."[3]

To Babel himself "precision and brevity" were the sacred rules of prose writing.[4] When an interviewer asked him about the secrets of his "method," and about the way ideas should be presented in fiction -- "should they be spun out or only hinted at?" -- he replied firmly:

> They should be put precisely, comrade. One would like to see ideas conveyed intact, not "spun out."[5]
>
> Your language becomes clear and strong, not when you can no longer add to a sentence, but when you can no longer take away from it. ... Only a genius can afford to use two adjectives.[6]

Babel's stories are generally referred to as "miniatures," a term coined by himself and used by most Russian critics. Their terseness has become a legend. The prominent critic and editor of Novyi Mir (New World), Viacheslav Polonskii, saw in Babel "something of the ancient diamond cutter or polisher of optical lenses."

> Being a spiritual descendant of Baruch Spinoza, it is not by chance that he [Babel] remembers so well the once "powerful forehead" of the philosopher. Diamond cutting is a tedious and precise craft, and diamonds are not found in the streets. Babel takes a long time to grind and polish his material, and still longer to search for it.[7]

Ilya Ehrenburg, in a speech commemorating Babel's posthumous seventieth birthday, in 1964, in Moscow, puts it this way:

> I remember what Hemingway said to me in a hotel in Madrid. He had just read Babel for the first time, and he said, "I have been criticized for writing too concisely, but I find that Babel's style is even more concise than mine, which is more wordy. It shows what can be done. Even when you've got all the water out of them, you can still clot the curds a little more."[8]

West's own credo of "precision and brevity" sounds

very much like Babel's. In Some Notes on Miss Lonely-hearts, he says:

> Lyric novels can be written according to Poe's definition of a lyric poem. The short novel is a distinct form especially suited to use in this country ... For a hasty people we are far too patient with the Bucks, Dreisers, and Lewises. Thank God we are not all Scandinavians.
>
> Forget the epic, the master work ... Leave slow growth to the book reviewers, you only have time to explode.
>
> Italics mine.
>
> Violent images are used to illustrate commonplace events. Violent acts are left almost bald.[9]

West's novels were generally condemned by the American critics of the 1930s for their terse aggressiveness and bizarre imagery. A few perceptive reviewers, however, recognized West's distinctive talent and praised his precision of syntax and intense brevity. One of the most important critical notices West received in his lifetime came from Edmund Wilson, who found his fiction to be "quite unlike the books of anyone else."

> These people have been painted as distinctly and polished up as brightly as the figures in Persian miniatures. Their speech has been distilled with a sense of the flavorsome and the characteristic.[10]
>
> Italics mine.

Josephine Herbst makes the following comments about Miss Lonelyhearts:

> Its realism is not concerned with actuality but with the comprehension of reality beyond reality ... The entire jumble of modern society, bankrupt not only in cash but more tragically in emotion, is depicted here like a life-sized engraving narrowed down to the head of a pin.[11]
>
> Italics mine.

In his story "Guy de Maupassant," Babel pays homage to an artist he admires, and muses over the mysteries of the creative process.

> A sentence is born both good and bad at the same time. The whole secret lies in a hardly perceptible twist. The control handle must be warm in your hand. You must turn it only once, never twice.[12]

The "secret" implies control over "an army of words, an army using all types of weapons" (LC, 90) in order to produce volumes -- "land-mines, packed with pity, genius, and passion." (LC, 94) The punctuation must be just right, says Babel, not correct "according to some dead catechism, but so as to produce the maximum effect on the reader."[13] (Italics mine.)

> No iron can pierce the human heart so chillingly (ledenyashche) as a period fixed in the right place.[14]
>
> "Guy de Maupassant"

Questioned about the "audacious side" of some of his similes and incongruous metaphors, Babel replied:

> On the point of audacity -- this, as we know, is a virtue, but only if a man rushes into battle bearing the right weapons.[15]
>
> Italics mine.

In order to put his "arsenal" of words and phrases to best, most effective use, Babel devises an intricate strategy. Similarly to West's view of the writer's need and duty to "explode," Babel discusses his tactics designed to "stun" the reader. The reader in a curious way becomes both opponent and conspirator.

> I aim at a reader who is intelligent, educated and has good, exacting taste ... Just as I choose my reader, I also think of how I can best deceive and stun him ... You must aim at some serious critic or other and try to knock him unconscious. That's the sort of ambition you must have. Once this ambition is aroused, you have no time for tomfoolery.[16]
>
> Italics mine.

If "army," "weapons," "stun," "explode," "violent," are words used by Babel and West in discussion of their own works, the critics employ an armoury of equally fierce terms in their analyses of these authors' writings. The images are "biological, physiological and animalistic."[17] The hyperbole, paradox, penchant for the grotesque and bizarre, overwhelm and stun. The incongruous similes and juxtapositions, phrases charged with high voltage and delivered like blows, knives, bullets, are referred to as trademarks of Babel's and West's styles.

Irving Howe finds the Red Cavalry stories "Hard, terse, violent, gorgeously colored" and says that "their

primary impact is shock."

> ... there is an obsessive concern with compression and explosion, a kinesthetic ferocity of control, a readiness to wrench language in order to gain nervous immediacy. (Babel) uses language as if to inflict a wound.[18]
>
> Italics mine.

Stanley Edgar Hyman writes about West's "pervasive, desperate and savage tone, not only in the imagery of violence and suffering, but everywhere."[19] Of Miss Lonelyhearts he says that "the book's pace is frantic and its imagery is garish, ugly, and compelling," and its greatness unique, considering that "it came into the world with hardly a predecessor."[20]

Leslie Fiedler, who sees West not merely as an American writer, but also representing a curiously alien, "cosmopolitan" sensibility, comments:

> West's novels are a deliberate assault on the common man's notion of reality; for violence is not only his subject matter, but also his technique.
>
> ... It is not accidental that both these anguish-ridden comedians, (West and Kafka) as uncompromisingly secular as they are profoundly religious, should be Jews; for Jews seem not only peculiarly apt at projecting images of numinous power for the unchurched, but are skillful, too, at creating myths of urban alienation and terror.[21]
>
> Italics mine.

Comparing the writings of Babel and West, Max Apple says:

> Although West's novels are less bloody than Babel's stories, the overall effect of West's violence is at least as pervasive, since it is always gratuitous violence.[22]

The Red Cavalry episodes take place during a war. The killing and atrocities are actually taking place in front of the narrator's eyes. Entries in a diary which Babel kept through a period of the Polish campaign contain most of the events and characters later dramatized in the stories. But aside from the objective, factual reality and the violent subject matter, there is in the writing of Babel as well as of West the violence of technique (style). Out of the fragmented threads of observed reality, Babel weaves a tapestry of violence that expresses a conflict deeper than the war and much more complex.

An August 13, 1920 entry in Babel's diary reads:

> I lived for two weeks in complete despair. That was because of the ferocious cruelty that does not abate here for a minute, and because I clearly realized how unfit I am for the business of destruction; how difficult it is for me to break away from the past -- from that which was perhaps bad, but which smelled to me of poetry as the hive smells of honey.[23]
>
> Italics mine.

The conflict is intensely personal. The rift between the Jewish past which smells of poetry and the present which smells of gunpowder is characteristic for a child

of the ghetto confronting emancipation. The foundation-shaking events of the October Revolution and the civil war fascinated him but the chronicle of daily cruelties weighed on him like "heart disease" because of the "ineradicable imprint of his Jewish heritage."[24]

From the diary record it is evident that Babel was thinking of using his violent subject matter as building material for his future stories. It is also apparent that Babel's method of creating relies very much on authentic experience or what he calls "awkward auto-biography" in which "of course, there is much that has been made up and changed."[25] As he was recording the daily events and remarking on the impact they had on him, Babel addressed hints and instructions to himself: "pay attention to the story's discontinuity," "short chapters saturated with content," "short!" "dramatic," "no conclusion."[26]

West, who was born, lived, and wrote thousands of miles away from Babel's Russia, does not deal in his novels with the horrors of war or bloodbath of the Revolution. Yet, violence and brutality saturate his works. "Violence is not only his subject matter, but also his technique." "Violent images are used to illustrate commonplace events," events which are "commonplace" to the complacent. "Violent acts are left

almost bald" in order to subvert complacency and to alert the comfort-seeking, the smug, deadened by habit, all those whose "sureness was based on the power to limit experience arbitrarily,"[27] to the fact that an eruption, a massacre, an Apocalypse, can happen here and now. "I believe there is a place for the fellow who yells fire and indicates where some of the smoke is coming from," West writes in a letter to his friend, Jack Conroy.[28]

Like Babel, West wants to "stun" his reader. He tries to dislocate familiar patterns of language and uses words, phrases and images which are unconventional and shocking. Like Babel, he was a highly self-conscious stylist, an individualist writing in a manner distinct from his American predecessors and unique among his peers. Neither he nor Babel drew sustenance from the traditional roots of their national literatures. Rather, James Joyce's dictum that genius turns its very handicaps into "the portals of discovery," seems appropriate and well illustrated by Babel and West. Both converted their very rootlessness into the organizing principle of a fresh perception of reality.[29]

Asked in an interview about the reasons for his "more than lengthy silence," Babel tried to explain:

> ... I am among those people who are not concerned with the word "what" ... By

> temperament I am always interested in the how and the why.[30]

An attempt to examine the style of Babel and West must therefore take into consideration the "why" -- in the context of this dissertation, their culture, history and experience as Jews in the diaspora -- and the "how," the manner in which they maneuver their armies of words.

In his book, The Religions of Man, Huston Smith says the following about the tension and duality of the Jew:

> In Judaism, history is in tension between its divine potentialities and its present frustrations. There is a profound disharmony between God's will and the existing social order.[31]

In addition to the discrepancy between the ideal potentialities and painful realities the Jew has had to endure throughout history, in the diaspora he has also had to cope with the socio-cultural experience of biculturality. For centuries he has lived on the periphery, "a stranger in a strange land." The sociologist Stonequist comments on this phenomenon:

> They are divided in their social allegiance, drawn forward by the Gentile world but uncertain of their hospitality, restrained by sentiments of loyalty to the Jewish world but repelled by its restrictions. They are ... the real Wandering Jews, at home neither in the ghetto nor in the world outside the ghetto.[32]

Nearly all critics refer to Babel's "antinomies," his dichotomous vision and balanced opposites. Many have linked West's quest to his dual cultural allegiance and his ambivalence toward his Jewishness. Much of the discussion centers around the "conflict between life in a moral order alienated from nature and natural law, and life in a natural order antecedent to morality."[33] Babel, Trilling says, was

> captivated by the vision of two ways of being, the way of violence and the way of peace, and he was torn between them. The conflict between two ways of being was an essential element of his mode of thought.[34]

Babel's and West's style emanates from their unique awareness and vision. This awareness which to some extent is a cumulative result of their socio-cultural experience and a collective memory of exclusion and persecution, has taught them how precarious existence is. Not at home in the world, they are anxious and mistrustful of today's calm which may turn overnight to peril, of beauty which may turn to horror, festivity which leads to orgy, or chivalry which ends in bloodshed. Reflecting the essential discord and anxiety of the writers, their style is terse, violent and direct. They "only have time to explode," to "stun" and to assault the reader. Their language is calculated to rip through layers of apathy and habit in order to deliver their urgent warning

messages. The vivid, startling imagery, the juxtapositions and yoked antinomies, the staccato sentences -- they are all fierce and abrasive. Their aim is to break down conditioned responses and to unsettle the ignorant heart as much as the ignorant mind.

A look at some of the phrases and sentences in Babel's stories and West's novels should demonstrate the particularity and effectiveness of their stylistic strategies.

Babel:

> The gutted walls traced a broken line against a sky swollen with ruby blood.
> ... She stood there motionless with a furious dusty ray of sunlight drilling into her blinded face.
>
> "The Kiss," LC, 196

> The sun stood over his head like a sentry with a rifle.
>
> "How it was Done in Odessa," LC, 63

West:

> He grew frightened and looked up quickly at the monument. It seemed red and swollen in the dying sun, as though it were about to spout a load of granite seed.
>
> Miss Lonelyhearts, 89

> He walked into the shadow of a lamp-post that lay on the path like a spear. It pierced him like a spear.
>
> Miss Lonelyhearts, 70

> He searched the sky for a target but the gray sky looked as if it had been rubbed with a soiled eraser ... Only a newspaper struggled in the air like a kite with a broken spine.
>
> Miss Lonelyhearts, 71

The sentences are short, concrete, swift and aggressive as an arrow. The words which are harnessed to each other do not customarily appear together. Monuments do not spout seed, lamp-posts do not pierce, sunlight does not drill or stand watch "like a sentry with a rifle." The unexpectedness and vividness of the images conveys the immediacy of the threat and the depth of the anxiety. The imagery perceived by the senses drills its way into the reader's consciousness. He becomes aware of the nervousness and frantic insecurity of the speaker (writer) and cannot ignore his hectic and urgent call. He enters a world where all is marked "danger! high voltage." The inanimate objects attack, nature is treacherous and ominous, the sky where one looks for hope and mercy is swollen with blood or indifferently gray, rubbed with a soiled eraser. All is soiled and spoiled somehow. A "kite," a thing of grace and beauty when conceived of as soaring in space, has a broken spine; "ruby" which suggests opulence, beauty or lips of the beloved is joined to blood and aggression; "seed," the promise of fruit and growth is yoked to stone. There

are no signs in the sky where one can send a prayer or targets at which one can "throw a stone." (Miss Lonely-hearts, 71) "Existence down below," referred to in terms of "frightened," "spout," "pierce," "struggled," "broken," "gutted," "drilling" is jarring, violent and hazardous. The only "sign" from above, the drilling and blinding sun, a "sentry with a rifle" appears to be a messenger of a deity more bullying than merciful. In both Babel and West, however, there is the search, the expectant gaze directed upward at the sky, despite the lived experience which contradicts the theosophy.

As already noted, Babel and West are curiously and ambivalently obsessed with violence. They are fascinated by it when it expresses intensity and fullness of life, but they are exasperated at the senseless violence in nature and the brutal violent acts committed upon animals and birds. They examine with horror and scorn the bloodshed in history, but above all, they are lacerated by the cruelty man inflicts upon man.

> He buried his triangular face like a hatchet in her neck.
>
> Miss Lonelyhearts, 74

> "Let me pluck this rose" he said, giving [her nipple] a sharp tug. "I want to wear it in my buttonhole."
>
> Miss Lonelyhearts, 80

Love, beauty, tenderness and kindness are perverted and made impossible. Because of man's frustration, anxiety and self-hatred they are turned to aggression and cruelty. ("Like a dead man, only friction could make him warm or violence make him mobile," Miss Lonelyhearts, 90.)

"Rose" the symbol of love, romance, passion, beauty is harshly yoked to cruelty and pain. The adornment he wants to wear in his buttonhole must be obtained at the price of her suffering. His face on her neck is not an expression of tenderness, desire, warmth, togetherness, but a menacing weapon which aims to hurt, to violate, to maim. The fierce, vivid image makes the pain and the deliberate infliction of it palpable. The antinomies of beauty and terror, love and cruelty are welded together. The compression of language highlights the grossness of the act. The subjective tension of the writer is transmitted to the reader in sentences which are calculated to cut as blades and hatchets and to unsettle as "a sharp tug."

> "We're trying to talk to you like a human being," Chernyshev said and fired.
>
> "Sulak"[35]
>
> He went up closer to him and repeating "just right" in a whisper, stuck his saber in the old man's throat. The old Pole fell, his feet jerked, and a frothy, coral-colored stream poured out of his windpipe.
>
> "Troup Leader Trunov," LC, 225

"Chernyshev said and fired." The sound of the bullet

obliterates the words; it also makes them obsolete. Babel's sentence reproduces the rhythm of the machine gun and ends as abruptly as Sulak's life. The reader is "knocked unconscious" but he comes to with Babel's words glaring at him. If Sulak was a "human being," why was he fired at as though he were an inanimate target? If Chernyshev was a man, why did he act like a firing machine? If he was a machine, why did he try to talk like a human being? The incongruous elements fused together by Babel are like a deformed pair of Siamese twins; they cannot be torn apart or removed from the reader's consciousness. He must inspect this aberration that calls itself "human" and sort out the contradictions in his own mind. If conscienceless, malevolent firing and throat-cutting is welded to "human," "right," words which evoke moral associations which separate man from beast and matter, then what happens to the value these words supposedly express? If this is "human" and "right," what is the meaning of "inhuman" and "wrong?" Babel's sentences switch without transition from the metallic sound of a gunshot to the sensuous leap of a wildcat, to a lyrical phrase; all are aimed to disturb. A "coral-colored stream" suggests the loveliness and harmony of a pastoral scene, the reflection of the sun playing on the surface

of the water; but this frothy stream pours out of a murdered man's windpipe. Trunov "comes closer" to the old Pole and addresses him "in a whisper" as he prepares for the lethal stab. But "closer" does not imply human contact or friendship; "whisper" does not infer a shared secret or intimacy. Echoing the "whisper" of the frothy "stream," it is a hissing, sinister threat, a death sentence.

West never witnessed a war, nor did he write about the deeds of men at war. He did, however, share Babel's ironic vision of the absurdity and waste which mark this glorified ideal of bloodthirstiness and slaughter and of the misguided worship bestowed upon the illustrious warriors. Babel and West were well aware of the effectiveness and force of power. They were also aware that "All flesh is grass" (Isa. 40:6) and eminent warriors, princes of the earth are not idols but "a thing of nought." As Irving Howe puts it, "Jews could not help feeling that history was a little ridiculous."[36] This ironic half-smile is reflected in the tone Babel and West adopt when they write about history and its famous figures.

> I lit my flashlight and saw on the ground the body of a Pole drenched in my urine. ... Next to the corpse I saw a notebook and shreds of Pilsudski's proclamations ... I used Marshal Pilsudski's proclamation to wipe the stinking liquid off the face of my unknown brother.
>
> "The Ivans," LC, 160

> A man in a checked cap ordered Milhaud's cuirassiers to carry Mont St. Jean ... The man in the checked cap was making a fatal error. Mont St. Jean was unfinished ...
>
> It was the classic mistake, Tod realized, the same one Napoleon had made. Then it had been wrong for a different reason. The Emperor had ordered the cuirassiers to charge Mont St. Jean not knowing that a deep ditch was hidden at its foot to trap his heavy cavalry. The result had been disaster for the French; the beginning of the end... The man in the checked cap was sent to the dog house by Mr. Grotenstein just as Napoleon was sent to St. Helena.
>
> DL, 355-6

The impact, of course, is not the same. Babel is reporting from the battlefield, drawing attention to the grim contrast between Pilsudski's glorious ideas of heroism and the ugly sordidness of every-day war. West creates his own battlefield scene against the background of a Hollywood set where paint is substituted for blood. But the bitter mockery, the contempt, the reductive strategy which exposes this parody of glory in which grown men dress up in gallant attire in order to kill their brothers with "pomp and circumstance," the pity and the irony of this extravagant waste -- these are the feelings shared and expressed by both Babel and West.

The abysmal contrast between the miserable fate of the killed Polish soldier and the macabre image of his dead body drenched in urine for the sake of Pilsudski's

vainglorious proclamation of "honour and glory to the Fatherland" is shocking and grotesque. It carves itself into the reader's mind and erodes the complacency with which men swallow slogans. Babel's tone of contempt is chilling and vitriolic like the spilled urine. He makes sure that the reader understands whom he pities and whom he derides. He cleanses the soiled body of his "unknown brother" with the proclamation, a document instrumental in perverting human brotherhood into a bloody arena of struggle, but leaves the notebook, a meaningful memento of an individual life, intact. When he speaks about the soldier, his language is filled with tears and the rhythms of his words reveal a suppressed sob, a sigh, the pity of it all.

West, who sees in the piles of Hollywood's sets the metaphor for the "history of civilization ... in the form of a dream dump" (DL, 353), mocks history and its pretensions. He perceives it as a great hoax, a comedy of errors in which "there is nothing to root for."[37] His tone lacks the despair and immediacy expressed by Babel but the sarcasm and his "particular kind of joking" is as debunking and corrosive as Babel's.

In the land of the cheaters and the cheated, Napoleon is just another inflated fraud. Another "Dr. Know-All Pierce-All" who led those who followed him into a ditch

and his Empire to its undoing. The more disparaging than playful confusion of the Emperor's identity with that of "the man in the checked cap" ridicules Napoleon's glorified rise to myth and punctures his pretentiousness. The cult, the idol of millions is stripped of rank and reduced to the stature of a schoolboy sent out of the classroom for bad behaviour. In a style which combines the mock-heroic tone with one-liners of stand-up comedians, West reduces Waterloo, France, the rise and decline of classical Europe to mere folly and vanity.

On one hand, Babel's and West's hatred and contempt for war stems from their abhorrence of brutality and bloodshed. Having inherited a tradition of nonviolence and a collective memory of persecution and scapegoatism, they find the brutal mutilation of the human body and the desecration of human life excruciatingly painful and loathsome. It denies the basic assumptions of humanism in which they were steeped and reminds them of the precariousness of their own existence. "The prisoners are dead, I feel it in my bones," is Babel's mournful refrain.[38] But on the other hand, one could also suppose that their disdain is partly a "sour grapes" reaction to a socio-historical situation over which they had no control. Kept at a distance from history and

its monumental events, all they could do is watch the gallant warriors march off to their exalted battles. They could fear them, envy them and mock them. The ambiguity of this dilemma is evident throughout the works of West and Babel. Their protagonists are fascinated by the violence which surrounds them, yet, whenever they try to kill, they "miss the mark."

Liutov commits one act of violence in the Red Cavalry: he kills a goose in order to ingratiate himself with his fellow-cavalrists and to enter their "fraternity of men."

> The goose's head burst under my boot and its brains spilled out. The white neck was stretched out in the dung and the wings twitched.
>
> "God damn your soul," I said, digging the sword into the goose. "Cook it for me, landlady."
>
> "My First Goose," LC,144

The boot on the goose's head is an explicit accusation aimed at Liutov, the killer. The vivid image calls attention to the helplessness of the goose and the brutality of the oppressor. The second paragraph explores ("digs into") the nature of the killer and the manner in which he executes his deed.

"Digging" the sword into the bird implies a firm, clean stab, one that Babel so expertly performs in fiction. The Russian phrase used by Babel is more

expressive; "kopaias' v guse sablei" suggests poking around, messing up; it means a bungled job of killing which one ought to expect of Cavalrist Liutov who enters the battle with an unloaded revolver and gets "heart pains" at the sight of brutality. The man who is "beseeching fate to grant [him] the simplest of abilities -- the ability to kill a man" (LC, 172) fails in the simpler test of slaughtering a goose "properly." Lacking the "masterful indifference of a Tartar Khan,"[39] he remains, despite all his efforts, an inefficient, clumsy killer.

Miss Lonelyhearts' attempts at killing are equally unsuccessful and messy.

> ... He brought the knife down hard. The blow was inaccurate and made a flesh wound. He raised the knife again and this time the lamb's violent struggles made him miss altogether ... Steve and Jud pulled the animal's head for him to saw at its throat, but ... he was unable to cut through the matted wool.
>
> Miss Lonelyhearts, 77

Miss Lonelyhearts raises the knife repeatedly and gets more nervous with each attempt. The lamb suffers, the would-be killer is in agony. The reader perceives the stumbling, the awkwardness and the disgust. Miss Lonelyhearts' blundering suggests that he has had no experience in this activity -- his aim is inaccurate, he cannot control the lamb's struggling and his agitation prevents him from completing the task he has under-

taken. His state of mind indicates that he has no natural knack for the job; he feels guilt and remorse, he is involved. With "slimy blood" of the animal on his hands, Miss Lonelyhearts begs his companions "to go back and put the lamb out of its misery," (Miss Lonelyhearts, 77). Failing to convince them, he goes back to do it alone. The act weighs heavy on his conscience. West makes perfectly clear that Miss Lonelyhearts assumes personal responsibility for the brutal deed he has committed; he is aware of the implications of killing.

Liutov as well is plagued by contrition. Despite the gratifying reward of being admitted to the Cossack fraternity among whom he "dreamed and saw women in his dreams" (LC, 145), he cannot silence his "heart [which] whined and dripped misery." (LC, 145)

Interestingly, Babel uses the Russian word "teklo" for "dripped," thus repeating the term he employed in the act of killing the goose whose head "tresnula i potekla" -- burst and spilled. In other words, the misery overflowing Liutov's heart "bloodstained from the killing" recalls the brains flowing out of the burst head of the goose. Babel's use of this linguistic device confirms Liutov's awareness of guilt and his need for expiation.

By means of expressive and persuasive language, startling and evocative images and the mocking stance toward the bungler-killers, Babel and West make their pity for the victims so vividly explicit that the reader cannot help but feel compassion for the helpless lamb -- "the youngest was selected, a little stiff-legged thing, all head," (Miss Lonelyhearts, 77) or the goose who "placidly preening its feathers" could hardly suspect how useless her grooming was; "the white neck was stretched out in the dung and the wings twitched above the slaughtered bird." (LC, 144) Both writers show that they know how killing can be done efficiently and neatly by some of those who are aided by practice and unconstrained by disarming compassion.

> Earle caught the birds one at a time and pulled their heads off before dropping them into his sack ... Their feathers fell to the ground, point first, weighted down by the tiny drop of blood that trembled on the tips of their quills.
>
> DL, 330

Earle pulls the heads off with a single, agile twist. He is impersonally efficient, simply doing a job. "A mass of blood and motted feathers" (LC, 382) does not perturb him; it is something one ought to expect when live chickens get their heads pulled off. A cowboy, he is acquainted with nature's ways. He knows that some animals eat and some are eaten by others. He is

not appalled by the trembling "drop of blood" which West apparently feels "weighted down" by, since he returns to it so often in his works. Earle is accustomed to the killing done daily for the sake of survival and feels no anguish at its inevitability. But both West and Babel cannot avert their eyes from the drop of blood, the burst head, the spilled over brains, the intestines which "had slipped out onto his knees, and his heartbeats were plainly visible." (LC, 209)

Their attraction-repulsion to the "physiological, biological, animalistic" is complex and ambiguous. On one hand, the gory images, the savage and offensive words, the frantic sentences, seem to be an expression of the writers' subjective feeling of indignation and disgust. On the other hand, however, their language can be luscious, arousing to the senses, repeating the rhythms of jungle drums and setting a mood for the inviting mystery of unexplored adventure.

> Under the skin of man is a wondrous jungle where veins like lush tropical growths hang along overripe organs and weed-like entrails writhe in squirming tangles of red and yellow ...
>
> Miss Lonelyhearts, 74

> Sweat, pink as blood, as the foam round the mouth of a rabid dog, bathed the over-developed bulk of their sweetly stinking human flesh.
>
> "The King," (LC, 74)

The jungle, the lushness, the heat and fecundity, verbs like "squirm," "writhe," "tangle," suggest a sensuous, Dionysian frenzy. Sweat, blood, and flesh are overripe, gross and grotesque. The overpowering appeal to the senses confuses and stuns. The colors dazzle and blind: red, yellow, pink as blood. The opulent shapes swell, spill over and ultimately threaten to choke. The images and metaphors have an internal movement resembling a nest of maggots; everything throbs, collides, and tangles. The physiology of man, his sweat and blood is paired with the madness of "a rabid dog;" the anatomy of veins and entrails threatens to trap and to engulf. The dazzling images and incantatory rhythms of language create a mood which attracts and repels, entices and frightens at the same time. The crowded jungle of words appeals to and assaults the senses as eroticism and excess mix with animality, and excitement is joined to disgust.

In spite of the fear and loathing for brutality, this teeming violence in nature is somehow particularly attractive to Babel and West because it escapes from the austere constrictions of Hebrew moralism. It shouts to them that one can be strong, carnal, unselfconscious, i.e., that one can vigorously enjoy all the things which they, who "find it necessary to substitute strange con-

ceits, wise and witty sayings, peculiar conduct, Art, for the muscles, teeth, hair of [their] rivals,"[40] cannot engage in with lightheartedness and grace.

Lionel Trilling comments:

> This fantasy of personal, animal grace, this glory of conscienceless self-assertion, of sensual freedom, haunts our culture. It speaks to something in us that we fear, and rightly fear, yet it speaks to us.[41]

This something which Babel and West find themselves drawn toward and fear in the conscienceless sensual freedom, has its roots in the moral teachings of the Bible and in their own socio-cultural experience. Led to exalt the spirit, the Jew is aware of the ironic shadow which the unruly senses cast over the spiritual aspirations. Taught by history to beware of the underside of Dionysian ecstasy, he knows that the beauty of released energy can at any given moment turn to a nightmare of bloodshed, and the man whose unselfconscious abandon he so much admires can become, for no apparent reason, the executioner who will cut his throat with graceful and magnificent indifference.

> The old man squealed and struggled. Then Curly from the maching-gun platoon grabbed the Jew's head and tucked it under his left arm. The head disappeared there. The Jew grew quiet, spreading his legs apart. Curly took a knife in his right hand and carefully, without splashing himself, cut the old man's throat.
>
> Then he knocked on a shattered window. "If anyone is interested, come and pick him

up," he said. "You are free to do so."

"Berestechko," Izbr., 91-2[42]

The episode is recorded by Babel with seemingly impersonal precision. Immaculate attention is paid to detail and the reader, involved in each gesture of Curly's performance, almost loses sight of his purpose. The menacing quietness of Babel's voice matches the composure and self-possession of Curly's manner. The faceless, tucked away Jew means nothing to Curly; he neither loves him nor hates him. (Anyone "interested" can claim his body; he is "disinterested.") Hating or loving is not part of Curly's job, killing is. Killing to him is a profession, a skill; he does it with efficiency, dexterity and style, "without splashing himself." He is an expert. He does not make a mess like Liutov and Miss Lonelyhearts do, nor does he panic or whine. He is cool and unruffled and acts according to a plan. First, he must stop the hysterical Jew's agitation. Emotionality hinders efficiency. With one deft, practiced grip (no waste) he silences the tucked-in head and brings the body to stillness. The Jew, with his legs spread apart, looks clumsy and grotesque, but he stays quiet. Babel's voice also grows quiet, chillingly quiet like a time-bomb which may explode at any moment. The reader feels the tension and hears the ticking of the bomb. The restraint is more violent than a shriek.

It reflects the coldblooded self-assurance of Curly. Babel's knife comes in the form of the image. Pitted against the dead-pan impersonality of the neat killer, who cuts a human throat as a butcher does mutton, the old Jew with his legs spread apart is the epitome of vulnerability and helplessness. The image bores and drills into the retina and sticks there like a rusty fish-hook. The juxtaposition cuts as neatly and as swiftly as Curly's knife. Using distortion to get at the truth, Babel tells the reader the revolting tale of conscienceless self-assertion and the heart-rending story of conscience-ridden vulnerability.

Babel's verbal pyrotechnics, the "poetics of contrast" which characterize his style are part of something deeper and more complex -- they also reflect the contradictions inherent in the content. Beyond the verbal dissonance there is a disharmony and tension; the juxtapositions and collisions are not merely stylistic devices but essential aspects of Babel's dichotomous vision, indeed "two ways of being" between which he was torn. The sensualist-poet in him loves life and celebrates the world. He fondly thinks of it as "a meadow in May over which wander women and horses." (LC, 154) The moralizing Jew, however, has his "unrealizable dreams"[43] of the Promised Land, of the Revolution which means joy

and of the "International of good men" (LC, 126) who do not kill.

James Light traces West's insecurity and his obsessive search for order to his bicultural status in America. He feels that the reason for West's frantic quest is rooted in his rejection of a heritage, both familial and racial, a fact which burdened him continuously and caused his anxiety and self-hatred.[44] Directly or indirectly the dilemma of "not belonging and being rejected" affected West-Weinstein's awareness and his vision. His style, similar to Babel's, is a reflection of this vision. Like Babel's it is impatient, terse, savage and vivid. His sentences brief and fierce are an expression of his discomfort and searing indignation. The mocking irony which he uses defensively or offensively is a result of unreconciled antinomies. The abrasive and militant joke expresses the desire to inflict a wound in retaliation for his own vexation and angst, as well as a warning to the complacent: "beware!" Under the mask of the "tragic clown" who, "nevertheless refused to give up the role of Jeremiah," (DL, 335) one finds a man full of conflicts and contradictions which baffled his friends and perplexed his critics. Like Babel who says: "And I, who am hardly able to contain in my ancient body the storms of my imagination..."

(LC, 132) West says: "Clutching your bursting head with both hands, you hear nothing but the dull roar of your misfortunes ..." (BS, 51)

John Berryman, in his essay "The Mind of Isaac Babel," discusses the tone of some of Babel's stories. "Tone," he says is

> a term closely related to style, describes something which is a product of style but not quite the same thing and not lending itself readily to short definition. It corresponds rather to the tone of a man's voice in conversation - unmistakable, but not to be identified exactly with any combination of nameable elements. What adjectives shall we apply to Babel's tone here? Jaunty and dubious. He needs both these qualities at once, because they affect each other; neither would be the same in isolation. The combination is one of the richest of all literary tones and one of the oldest.[45]

Babel and West, preoccupied with analogous themes and dichotomies, employ a similarly complex tone, (nigun) to express the dualisms inherent in their vision of life. Both writers mix or use in quick succession the tragic and the comic tone, the sacred and the profane, the dubious and the aspiring and, as Shklovski observed about Babel, they speak "in the same tone of voice of the stars above and of gonorrhea."[46] Their ambivalent tone is due to the antinomies in their inner selves, e.g. nature versus culture, freedom versus morality, energy versus form, as well as to external circumstances of their biculturality. Unable to resolve the opposites

they confront, they accept the contradictions as "norm" and assume a literary tone of "two qualities at once." Juxtapositions, joined incompatible elements, the balanced and juggled contrasts which cannot be resolved -- all these are characteristic of the tone adopted by Babel and West. The tone, as well as the style, emanates from the authors' vision of life. The similarity of their points of view suggests an imaginative kinship between the two writers and shows once again that form and content are inseparable.

Besides the observed and discussed comparisons -- precision and brevity, the speed, intensity and violence of their phrases, vividness of images and juxtapositions, the antinomies of nature and morality, passion and compassion -- there is also to be considered the similarity in the way Babel and West structure their fictions.

In Some Notes to Miss Lonelyhearts, West speaks of "a novel in the form of a comic strip," saying that he intended to use it as a subtitle to Miss Lonelyhearts.

> The chapters to be squares in which many things happen through one action ... Each chapter instead of going forward, in time, also goes backward, forward, up and down in space like a picture.[47]

Max Apple links this technical device with the writers' relationship to the past. He sees both writers "literally cut off from the traditional roots of fiction

in time and place." "No character in their works," he says, "has a 'usable past:' each is 'boxed in' by the random violence of a particular moment."[48]

The construction of the Red Cavalry is episodic. The order and chronology suggested by Babel's dating of the stories is arbitrary and could be changed almost at random, without affecting the core of meaning that informs the whole. The homogeneity is maintained, as in a "comic strip," through the recurrent characters and the presence of an ironic narrator, the "four-eyed" Liutov. Although the continuity is maintained, the cycle is a flexible complex, a series of "boxes" each conveying an episode, or an insight. It is neither complete nor incomplete; Babel follows the instruction addressed to himself: "no conclusion!"

Throughout the cycle, Cossacks ride into the sunlight, gracefully and triumphantly; Jews exhort the Talmud under a "homeless moon," and get their throats cut, mournfully. Dead soldiers and horses are strewn over a barren land and "ominous gurgling streams." Towns reek of bereavement, "troops reek of fresh blood and human ashes." (LC, 114) All these events-pictures similarly to the chapters and episodes in Miss Lonelyhearts, go "backward, forward, up and down" in space. Only the violence, suffering and devastation are constant.

The "comic-strip" technique is fitting for West and Babel who are cut off from the traditional roots of their fiction (American and Russian) and are uneasy with their traditional heritage (Jewish). It enables them to present side by side contrasts and paradoxes in the form of "boxed" picture-events without having to reconcile the contradictions. It also reveals through hint and repetition that although the relation of the boxes to each other is tentative, their focal point of view, the core of meaning that informs the whole is constant.

The "comic strip" technique, with its sharp reductiveness, is also an appropriate literary form for the twentieth century where chaos, fragmentation and persistent violence have replaced continuity and order, and reality is generally perceived in episodes.

Another structural device employed by both Babel and West is the introduction of letters which they use as an alternate or additional narrative voice. The device in itself is not original but the conflicted tone of pity and irony adopted by Babel and West is characteristically Jewish. The lives and events portrayed by Babel differ from thosedescribed by West, but the technique, the motifs and effect the letters evoke in the reader are most similar.

All of the letter-writers in the works of both authors are illiterate. They relate tragic and horror-filled events in a syntax awkward and burlesque. They use clichés of love-story magazines or revolutionary pamphlets, jargon of cheap movies or propaganda newspaper articles, naively, without the awareness of their banality. They communicate an immediacy which sophisticated speech could not convey because the reader, unthreatened by being "outsmarted" responds with sincerity. The naked facts presented without reflection or editing and the primitive, colloquial language create an effect almost comparable to that of soap opera.

The author can remain aloof. He makes no critical judgements and draws no conclusions. The reader is brought face to face with the speaker: the father-murderer who loves his horse with tenderness, the light-hearted syphilitic who burns down a village in an act of filial revenge, the soldier who kills a woman smuggler "to wipe the disgrace from the toiling face of our Republic," (LC, 136) or the humdrum abuses inflicted and suffered by "Broad-shouldered," deaf and dumb thirteen year old Gracie who "plays on the roof and don't go to school ... and a man came on the roof and did something dirty to her," (Miss Lonelyhearts, 68) and "Desperate" and "Sick-of-it-all" and the "good catholic" who must go

on having children "irregardless of the pain." (Miss Lonelyhearts, 66-9)

As distanced observers, Babel and West cannot help but feel contempt for the crude one-dimensionality of their letter-writers. As Jews who have generally found themselves among the unlucky victims of history and human malevolence, they cannot help perceiving the melancholy pathos of these grotesque lives and feeling compassion for them.

> It is hard to laugh at the need for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless, even horrible, the results of that need are. But it is easy to sigh.
>
> DL, 262

Needless to say, Jews are not the only people in the world to feel compassion, but it is the peculiar constellation of often discordant emotions (e.g. contempt and compassion, pathos and mockery), which is typically Jewish.

That "sigh" ("oy"..) of pity for all the abused and the injured, the humble and the impotent is present throughout the writings of Babel and West. Along with the ambivalence and the irony, there is the sigh for all vulnerable, oppressed humanity, "all the broken bastards" (Miss Lonelyhearts, 81) whom they alternately reject and identify with, mock, yet shed a tear over.

The structural devices of both the "comic strip" and the letters allow simultaneously for detachment and involvement, undercutting and overreaching, and again confirm the dualities and ironic tension in the writers' attitude and their style.

The "disciplined explosions" of their style reflect "the discordant songs" of their vision. Babel and West are restless, anxious writers in a restless, anxious age, trying "to make of human fragments and a surreal environment, an ordered literary totality."[49]

CHAPTER II: FOOTNOTES

[1]Max Apple, "History and Case History in Red Cavalry and The Day of the Locust," The Cheaters and the Cheated, ed. David Madden (Deland: Everett, 1973), pp. 235-6.

[2]Ibid., p. 242.

[3]Irving Howe, "The Right to Write Badly," New Republic (July 4, 1955), p. 16.

[4]Isaac Babel, "Reminiscences of Babel," You Must Know Everything, trans. Max Hayward, ed. Nathalie Babel (New York: Delta, 1969), pp. 235-6.

[5]Ibid., p. 218.

[6]Konstantin Paustovskii, Povest' o Zhizni, v. 5 (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1968), p. 141.

[7]Viacheslav Polonskii, "Kriticheskie Zametki o Babele," Novyi Mir 1 (1927), p. 215.

[8]Ilya Ehrenburg, A Speech in honour of Babel, Nov. 11, 1964, in You Must Know Everything, p. 235-6.

[9]Nathanael West, "Some Notes on Miss Lonelyhearts," Contempo (May 15, 1933), p. 2.

[10]Edmund Wilson, "Postcript," Classics and Commercials (New York: 1950), p. 55.

[11]Josephine Herbst, "Miss Lonelyhearts: An Allegory," Contempo (July 25, 1933), p. 4.

[12]Isaac Babel, Lyubka the Cossack and Other Stories, trans. Andrew R. MacAndrew (New York: Signet, 1963), p. 90. Subsequent references to this edition will be found in the text in parentheses and identified by initials LC followed by page number.

[13]Paustovskii, p. 142.

[14]I. Babel, Izbrannoe (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1966), p. 273.

[15]You Must Know, p. 217.

[16]Ibid., p. 221.

[17]Polonskii, p. 212.

[18]Howe, pp. 16-17.

[19]Stanley Edgar Hyman, Nathanael West (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1962), p. 24.

[20]Ibid., p. 27.

[21]Leslie Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel (New York: Delta, 1966), pp. 486-7.

[22]Apple, p. 237.

[23]Isaac Babel, a letter dated August 13, 1920, found between the pages of the diary. Quoted by Livshits, "Materialy k tvorcheskoi biografii I. Babelia," Voprosy Literatury 4 (1964), p. 123.

[24]Raymond Rosenthal, "The Fate of Isaak Babel," Commentary 2(1947), p. 127.

[25]Isaac Babel, The Lonely Years, trans. Andrew R. MacAndrew and Max Hayward, ed. Nathalie Babel (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1964), p. 189.

[26]"Iz planov i nabroskov k Konarmii," Literaturnoe nasledstvo, v. 74, pp. 490-99.

[27]Nathanael West, The Complete Works of Nathanael West (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1957), p. 79. Subsequent references to this edition will be found in the text in parentheses and identified by initials:
- BS - The Dream Life of Balso Snell
- ML - Miss Lonelyhearts
- CM - A Cool Million
- DL - The Day of the Locust.

[28]James F. Light, Nathanael West: An Interpretative Study (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1961), p. 179.

[29]Rosenthal, p. 128.

[30]You Must Know, p. 212.

[31]Huston Smith, The Religions of Man (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 269.

[32]Everett V. Stonequist, "The Marginal Character of the Jews," Jews in a Gentile World, ed. Isaque Graeber and S. Henderson Britt (New York: 1942), p. 307.

[33]Stanley Edgar Hyman, "Identities of Isaac Babel," Hudson Review 8 (1956), pp. 62-3.

[34]Lionel Trilling, "Introduction," The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel (New York: Meridian, 1960), p. 14.

[35]You Must Know, p. 192.

[36]Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, "Introduction," A Treasury of Yiddish Stories (New York: Fawcett Premier, 1968), p. 13.

[37]Light, p. 156.

[38]You Must Know, p. 129.

[39]Babel, Collected Stories, p. 93.

[40]West, Complete Works, p. 26.

[41]Trilling, "Introduction," p. 29.

[42]I. Babel, Izbrannoe (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1966), p. 91-2.

[43]Ibid., p. 45.

[44]Light, p. 136.

[45]John Berryman, "The Mind of Isaac Babel," The Freedom of the Poet (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1972), pp. 127-8.

[46]Viktor Shklovski, "Isaac Babel: A Critical Romance," Major Soviet Writers (Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), p. 298.

[47]Light, p. 95.

[48]Apple, p. 242.

[49]Ibid., p. 247.

CHAPTER III

ISAAC BABEL 1894 - 1941

"Oh, the moldering Talmuds of my childhood! Oh, the opaque sadness of memories!"

Isaac Babel

> A poet has his images and symbols handed to him very early in life; his later poems are largely explorations he makes into the depths of his unconscious to unravel their meanings. Incontrovertibly my earliest impressions have coloured everything I've ever written.[1]

The childhood stories, The Story of my Dovecot, My First Love, In the Basement, The Awakening are such explorations. So is his earliest manuscript,[2] Childhood. At Grandmother's. In them, the first person narrator adopts most directly the confessional voice of autobiography. Babel does not give us a factual record of his childhood, but he does recreate for us the experience of his growing up; "he draws up not simply an adult's catalogue of tidy facts, but spills out the involved, pain-wracked, fear-heightened memories, impressions and feelings of the child."[3]

In a letter to his mother in which he describes the "Dovecot" series, Babel says:

> ... I make my debut, after several years of silence, with a small extract from a book which will have the general title of The Story of my Dovecot. The subjects of the stories are all taken from my childhood, but of course, there is much that has been made up (privrano) and changed. When the book is finished, it will become clear why I had to do all that.
> ... Fenyushka, once you've set out to do a

> thing, never give up.* There's no going back now. I must toe the line. Those who are dear to me and I myself will have to pay dearly because of that line, but I know that soon I shall be atoning for my sins before you. As you can see, the last act of the tragedy or comedy - I don't know which to call it - has started.[4]
>
> Italics mine.

One can only try to speculate what Babel means by "the last act," since his last words - "they didn't let me finish" (ne dali konchit) - (LY, 26) are shrouded in uncertainty. But the genesis of Babel the man and the writer is movingly revealed to us in the stories of his childhood in which he explored himself through his writing. It is there that we find elements which shaped his vision and attitudes. These stories contain the seedbed of Babel's images and symbols, his dreams and nightmares. Looking back he recognizes in them "the seeds of the ills that torment [him] and the cause of [his] early decline."[5] From these seeds and perhaps from the torments (as Heine puts it: "Aus meinen grossen Schmerzen mach' ich die kleinen Lieder")[6] sprang magnificent stories, profound, moving, disturbing.

The events of his childhood which provide the subject matter for the stories are filled with "tears

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* It is impossible to be certain if Babel completed the "Dovecot" cycle and it was seized at the time of his arrest or if his "cherished labour" (zavetnyj trud) never progressed beyond a project conceived by him.

and blood"[7] the kind of "building material" which Babel, the child of the ghetto, knew at first hand and mastered to perfection. Most critics, with the notable exception of Jiri Franek who is only concerned with Babel's "avantgarda" and not his genius, agree that the cycle is of immense importance to Babel and his readers.[8] It traces the author's journey from innocence to experience; from daydream to the awakening to art as his vocation.

Childhood. II At Grandmother's was written by Babel in 1915, when he was a student at the Saratov Institute. It predates the childhood cycle by about ten years, but because of the marked resemblance it bears to the subject matter of the later stories, and the nature of the narrator-protagonist, it can be considered a precursor of the childhood stories. Many of the themes which fascinated and plagued the mature artist can be found in Babel's early autobiographical work.

It goes back in time to Babel's days at the Odessa "gymnasium" and describes a Saturday spent in grandmother's room. The young boy, "a daydreamer, but with a big appetite," (YMKE, 7) is experiencing a conflict: he cannot choose between two worlds both of which attract him and he is torn by ambivalence.

> It was quiet - eerily quiet, with not a sound from the outside world. Everything seemed weird to me at that moment, and I wanted to run away from it all, but also to stay there forever.
>
> (YMKE, 8)
>
> Italics mine.

The hot, stuffy room, grandmother's bitter scepticism and harsh justice, the reverence for learning, piles of books and a procession of tutors, the rigid emphasis on achievement -- all these represent one world -- the austere world of the Jews, a world which is stern and confining and makes exorbitant demands on the sensitive boy. "Study and you will have everything -- wealth and fame! You must know everything," his grandmother tells him, in tears but "with great vehemence." (YMKE, 11) The boy is frightened by the expectations, by the faith placed in him, by the significance attached to his present and future achievements, by the "stern commandments [which] pressed down heavily - and forever - on [his] weak, untried shoulders."

> I was hot and stifled, and I wanted to run outside into the fresh air and escape, but I hadn't even the strength to raise my hand.
>
> (YMKE, 12)

The world "outside" is Odessa, the bustling port;

> ... There are boats hailing from Newcastle, Cardiff, Marseilles, and Port Said. There are Negroes, Englishmen, Frenchmen, and Americans. Odessa has known prosperity,

> and now it's in decline - a poetic, rather carefree and very helpless decline.
>
> (YMKE, 28)

It's this outside world which inspires the boy's dreams and excites his imagination. He knows the city "as one knows the fragrance of one's mother's skin" (YMKE, 5) and sees it in "some special way all [his] own." (YMKE, 5) He perceives the particularity of each sight and sound; the aura of each place is engraved in his poetic vision forever. Affected by the tart spring air ("a hint of passion with a cold edge to it" (YMKE, 6) the boy, on his way from school, stops to scrutinize all the marvels his eyes encounter. As he stares at Madame Rosalie's shop-window where pale-pink corsets with "crinkly" garters are on display, his daydreaming is interrupted by a student "with a large black mustache" who gives him a knowing pat on the back and a lewd grin, saying "keep it up, old fellow. Good for you!" (YMKE, 6) Startled and intimidated by the crudeness of reality so different from his dream world, he blushes, runs straight home, and never again stops to gaze at Madame Rosalie's window.

Upset and confused by the mysteries of the outside world, he returns to the safety and warm comfort of his Jewish home. There, he likes the silk of his grandmother's Sabbath dress, the taste of "gefilte

fish," the "long, long ago" stories about rich Polish counts and poor Jews and about God who protects his wretched children by striking their tormentors. And all is quiet, until it becomes eerily quiet and stifling. And then he wants to escape again.

The polarities and contradictions (objective and subjective) are there from the beginning: the world of daydream and the world of reality, the secure but confining coziness of the Jewish home, the seductive and threatening excitement of the big outside, the men and their countertype the women, in Babel's family, the ambivalent attraction and repulsion to sex and to violence.

Aware of the discomfort of division but unable to cope with the conflict, the ambivalent protagonist feels "awkward and upset." (YMKE, 12) His world of daydream and reverie is constantly intruded upon by overbearing reality. Yet, reality also fascinates the adolescent boy for without it he cannot discover "the essence of things." (YMKE, 5)

His grandmother's reverence for learning and her sense of justice, albeit stern and merciless, appeal to him, but the "frosty old woman's" bitter instructions: "Everybody must envy you. Do not trust people. Do not have friends. Do not lend them money. Do not give them

your heart!" (YMKE, 12) trouble the eager, inquisitive boy.

The boy's grandfather, in contrast, was a passionate and overbearing man, a fine story-teller. "He played the violin, wrote essays at night, and knew all languages. He was ruled by an insatiable thirst for knowledge and life." (YMKE, 11) "He didn't believe in anything, but he trusted people" and lent them money; they repaid, of course, with unkindness and malice.

This pattern of opposites, the poetic, enthusiastic men and bitter, sceptical women, is prevalent throughout the childhood stories. Babel intimates that the optimism and high spirits of the males are a result of self-deception. A defeated people, helpless in face of humiliation and pogroms, they console themselves with the "lie" of the superiority of learning and erudition. The women, closer to nature and earthbound, understand the prosaic realities of life and view their inspired dreamers with mocking and bitter compassion.

The oblique reference to sex, introduced in the story initially by the corset-shop incident, is reinforced by a scene taken from Turgenev's First Love where sex is linked to violence. When he first reads the passage, the boy is thrilled by "the vivid words and descriptions" but as the dramatized experience becomes

palpable to him and he can hear the swish of the whip and feel "the momentary keen and painful sting of the supple thong" he becomes upset in "some unaccountable way" and stops reading. (YMKE, 8) The ambiguous thrill of sexual desire lined with a shudder of disgust is present in many Babel stories and will be examined later. As for violence, Babel was obviously attracted to it inasmuch as it represents vitality and the fullness of life. When it expresses itself in cruelty, he abhorred it, since his inherited culture and his personal experience of the pogrom made his identification with the victim inevitable.

Childhood. II At Grandmother's is lesser in scope and mastery than the more mature stories, but the seedbed of themes and ideas, all that adds up to Babel's vision, can be found there. It reflects Babel's awareness of the "two ways of being," the opposites which he would continually attempt to reconcile and the tension caused by this dual vision. Sceptical women who "decorate their houses with tsores"* (LY, 112) and generous men who yearn for joy; the pleasure of sensuality and the accompanying guilt and shame; attraction to the glory and fear of the anarchy of passion; desire for escape and the impossibility of escape from the forces that molded him. These are the themes of Childhood. II At

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* Yiddish for troubles.

Grandmother's, as well as of the other stories in the Dovecot cycle.

Antinomies, the opposite poles to which Babel's protagonists are alternately drawn and between which they oscillate, are a fixed mark of Babel's fiction. The attempt to resolve them or to freeze the contradictions through art, is a recurring theme in his works.

The Story of my Dovecot, My First Love, In the Basement and The Awakening represent a journey into the past in a search for meaning. In an intimate, autobiographical tone which captures a truth fuller and deeper than factual accuracy, Babel tells us about the crucial events and emotions in the life of "the artist as a young Jew." The reflective inner quest leads through tests and initiations to an entrance into a world of experience and knowledge and through rifts and contradictions to a continuing dichotomous vision in which the warring opposites cannot be reconciled.

In The Story of my Dovecot the boy discovers the backside of Dionysian ecstasy -- cruelty and death. Leaving behind the narrow but supportive life of the ghetto and of daydream, he enters the world as it really is and comes face to face with its beauty and its terror. In My First Love, which is a continuation of the Dovecot, he discovers "that strange, shameful thing" (LC, 21) sex,

and that detestable thing, the humiliating impotence of the Jew. In In the Basement, the young "liar" wonders about the complex nature of truth and expresses his faith in imagination, intuition and passion and in their superiority over respectable, bourgeois values. The Awakening marks "the beginning of his emancipation." (LC, 40) Caught in "a tug of war between the rabbis and the sea," (LC, 41) Jewish morality and pagan nature, he hears the call of art. As will be shown later, he hopes to reconcile the contradictions in art and to find in the artist the affirmation of the total man.

If The Story of my Dovecot deals primarily with the youthful protagonist's breaking out of the "tiny and horrible" world of the ghetto and experiencing the "abandon and joy" of the outside world, it also leads to the discovery of brutality, terror and bloodshed. The boy becomes aware of the glory of exaltation and the price this glory exacts. The vivid, exuberant people outside the ghetto are energized by blood, he learns. To maintain their vitality and high spirits they must have a victim. "The elixir of life is the blood of the slain." The energy of the pogromshchik is the blood of the slain Jew. Thus the boy, while elated by the experience of liberation, is also terrified by the underside of glorious Dionysianism: killing. The awareness

that he belongs to the ones being murdered and not to the murderers determines his affinity and complicates even deeper his ambivalence to violence.

> He [the peasant] was breaking the glass with a wooden mallet, swinging his whole body with it, sighing and beaming around him with the kindly smile of intoxication, sweat, and hearty vigor. The whole street was filled with the singing of cracking and splintering wood.
>
> The peasant was banging away with his mallet only because he wanted to swing, to bend, to sweat, and to shout extraordinary words.
>
> Dovecot, (LC, 19)

The sheer vitality and joy of this tableau celebrates the fullness of life and expresses a childlike, unselfconscious rapture. It attracts the young observer to whom such pure delight is alien. Noticing a religious procession carrying "banners with pictures of sepulcheral saints," the peasant devoutly "pressed this mallet to his chest, and rushed after the banners." (LC, 19)

To the boy, stained by the pigeons' blood, this pagan mixture of violence and piety is incongruous and confusing. He has never seen it in the sombre, austere ghetto world, nor does he understand this creed which allows the peasant to cross himself with a mallet which a moment ago was used for plunder and destruction, or why the granting of the constitution to the Russian

people should be celebrated with pogroms against the Jews.

His mother understands.

> She looked at me with bitter compassion as if I were some sort of cripple, as if she alone knew how cruel and tricky fate could be toward our family... She never expected any of us to succeed in anything.
>
> Dovecot, (LC, 12-13)

If the mother's scepticism sounds hard and oppressive, it has its roots in bitter experience. Threatened from the outside by "the enemies that surrounded [her]" and having to deal with mad visionary dreamers in her immediate family, she was well aware of her son's potential destiny, i.e., the prospect of being a Jewish male in Russian Odessa.

On the other hand, the father was spontaneous, impulsive, full of enthusiasm, and trusted people. "He offended them by his immediate enthusiasm and easy affection. They never forgave him for it and unfailingly deceived him." (LC, 13) As soon as he heard the great news about his son's admittance to the Nikolaev Secondary School, where due to the Jewish quota of five per cent in a predominantly Jewish city, only two of the forty freshmen could be Jews, he invited his Hasidic cronies to celebrate this momentous "victory."

> I had bested the fat-cheeked gentile boys as well as the sons of our own uncouth Jewish moneybags. It was just as in ancient times

> when David, who was to become King of Judah, overcame Goliath and just as in the future, when our people, by force of sheer intelligence, would triumph over the enemies that surrounded us, thirsting for our blood.
>
> Dovecot, (LC, 14)
>
> Italics mine.

What is this "force" that the Jews exalt and chant about? How is it going to triumph over those "thirsting for [their] blood?"

It is the myth of the triumph of knowledge, of the mind and the spirit, of the glorious past, of a "chosen" spirituality. Because it ignores the existence of brute power, fists and muscles, the menacing present and gross animality, the author sees it as a poignant rationalization for weakness, ineffectuality and defeat. He has the boy rebel against this ghetto strategy of survival and reject the self-deceiving notion of superior moralism and the impotence which accompanies it.

Like his mother who "is not blinded," the protagonist realizes that one cannot fight a pogrom with erudition or disarm a pogromshchik with a Talmudic epigram. However, like his father and all men in his family, he loves joy, adventure, poetry and extraordinary tales of long ago and far away.

If his mother's view of imminent disaster reflects Jewish reality, the dream of the triumph of the spirit,

his father's view, speaks for Jewish idealism. The young narrator is equally attracted to both views, but ultimately discovers that both attitudes are useless in the face of the pivotal event and symbol of the story -- the pogrom.

To the Jew, particularly to the European Jew, the pogrom is a ghastly memory personal and collective and also a reality as stark and immediate as an exposed nerve.

To Babel, who recognized in it "the seeds of the ills that torment [him] and the cause of [his] early decline" (LC, 28) it was an ever present nightmare which caused him "days and nights of unquenchable anxiety and heartache" (LY, 160) and compelled him to search continuously and in vain for "the reason for this black vileness which bears such a humdrum name as anti-Semitism."[9]

Patricia Carden's comments on The Story of my Dovecot demonstrate how difficult it is for anyone who "has not been slapped" to understand the ramifications of this event in Jewish fiction and biography. Replacing the cursed, hideous word "pogrom" with an insipid euphemism "expression of freedom through the release of desire," she says:

> The giving of a constitution means only one thing to the illiterate poor -- freedom -- and they interpret freedom in the light of

> their own necessities and desires. To them freedom is not political in content. It means doing what one wants to do, getting what one wants. Babel shows that liberation lies in this as much as in more "noble" forms of expression.[10]

Italics mine.

Does she really mean to say: "Doing what one wants to do" (slaughtering Jews), "getting what one wants" (looting Jewish property), is self-expression, morally neuter "liberation?" Does she really suppose that Babel, who witnessed this bestiality and devastation as a boy and was exposed to the black vileness of anti-Semitism throughout his life, sanctioned this form of "liberation?" Is it not absurd to ascribe to Babel this sort of moral relativism and naive to expect of him this calm manner of aesthetic detachment? There is no evidence of either one in any of his works. Kafka's remark, "The man of faith cannot speak and the man of no faith ought not to speak"[11] should serve as warning against attempts to fit "pogrom" into "category." Patricia Carden's explanation of the "meaning" of Shoyl's murder, the "rationale" of looting or the "cause" of Makarenko's vicious attack on the boy and his doves,[12] is as futile as it is obtuse.

To the Jew,trembling before the torch or saber of his illiterate, savage attacker, the "causes" were quite familiar: the crucifixion of "their" Lord, the alleged

ritual murder of Christian children, the imputed conspiracy to take over the world, etcetera, etcetera. To the pogromshchik, also, the "rationale" was clear: "Beat the Jew - save Russia!" (Bej Zhidov - spasai Rossiiu!) "Their seed must be wiped out ... their stinking seed and their men." (LC, 18)

The child, "small, puny and subject to frequent headaches owing to excessive study" (LC, 13) does not understand his part in the diabolical "Jewish conspiracy." He is an outsider, a "painted bird." He is small and frail among "fat-cheeked gentile boys," (LC, 14) bookish among athletic robust boys, a Jew among Russians whose literature he knows and loves better than they do; a Jew whom they can humiliate but cannot "rob of his reasoning powers" and "avid memory." (LC, 10)

Disregarding his mother's warning, the boy leaves his sheltered Moldavanka home, the "tiny" world of his physical and emotional ghetto, to explore the immense "outside." In the midst of hatred and violence he experiences the euphoric sense of release. He has broken out. As he gets knocked down and the world "somersaults in his pupils," he becomes aware of the contradictory nature of things in the world. He sees a beautiful young mother, "her face aflame" calling her children in a "joyful, excited voice." (LC, 17) They all carry

bales of stolen goods. Plunder has put a lovely flush on her face and joy into her voice. Makarenko, whom children love and to whom the boy turns for help, hits him brutally and smashes his pigeons. Knocked down on the ground, with the "insides of the crushed bird running down [his] temple" (LC, 18), he hears Katyusha Makarenko's shrill harping, "their seed must be wiped out. I loathe their stinking seed ..." (LC, 18) and he closes his eyes, so as not to see his "tiny and horrible" world.

> I closed my eyes not to see it and pressed myself against the ground, which in its muteness was reassuring. The trampled ground was so unlike my life with its threatening exams and all.
>
> Dovecot, (LC, 18)

This earth "that was going nowhere" (LC, 19) made no demands on him. It did not urge him to "best" everybody and bring glory to his tribe and family. Smelling of "damp entrails, of graves, of flowers" the earth embraced all; fecundity, decay and death. The bond with earth (nature) implies freedom from the constricting Hebraic morality, the "puny" world of the ghetto. The boy receives gratefully "that smell" (of the earth) and "breaks into tears that had no fear in them." (LC, 19) He has been initiated into a world quite unlike the Moldavanka and is intoxicated by its energy and vigor. Wearing a "getup of bloodstained feathers," he cries

bitterly "with abandon and joy, as [he has] never cried since." (LC, 19)

At home in the ghetto, the boy finds his great-uncle Shoyl, an "old braggart" (LC, 13) who told untrue tales about wars and heroes, stretched out in the shed.

> Two perch had been stuck into the old man - one in his fly and one in his mouth. And although Shoyl was dead, one of the fish was still alive and flopping about.
>
> Dovecot, (LC, 19)

The house is empty and the doors are wide open. The grass by the dovecot has been trampled, proving that the ravagers have been there. The Dionysian orgy has now come to a hush after it has claimed its victim, Shoyl. The boy, covered by the bloodstained feathers of his slain doves, looks with a child's apprehension at the ghoulish event, at Uncle Shoyl with "his widespread ankles purple, dirty and dead," (LC, 20) at what is left of the pigeons and the promised dovecot, at all the "trampled" dreams of his childhood. Throwing his arms around Kuzma, the janitor, he whispers: "Save us ..." (LC, 20)

The story begins with a child's desire to own a dovecot, it ends with the discovery of cruelty, violence and death. The boy's odyssey from books and exams to trial and confrontation, from daydream and order to reality and chaos, from Hebrew passivism to Dionysian

ecstasy, leads to the attainment of knowledge based on experience. It also leads to the awareness that to the Jew the threat and fear of a pogrom is a permanent state of being, a way of life. He realizes the wretchedness of being weak and rebels against it. But he also discovers that in order to make oneself strong one must witness and commit cruel deeds. Unable to choose between the uncompromising alternatives, he perceives a world full of complexity and contradictions. He discovers a world of perplexing antinomies and tries to reconcile them or juxtapose the contradictory sides while holding the polarities in suspension.

In one world the protagonist sees impervious masters in splendid uniforms and "lemon-colored chamois gloves." They "sit dispassionately in their high saddles" (LC, 24) as they ride through the ransacked streets of the ghetto.

In the other world he sees pitiful wretches, kneeling in the mud, pleading. Among these is his father "crawling in front of the horse on his knees, rubbing himself against the animal's short, shaggy, reassuring legs." "They are smashing up everything I have ..." he entreats, "Why are they doing this, Captain?" (LC, 24) Italics mine. Looking straight ahead, the majestic riders disregard the cringing figures below them.

Against the background of gray misery, fear and sorrow, the resplendent Cossacks look bright and dazzling. Their grace and might are much more attractive to the young boy than the sombre endurance of the beaten Jew. He wants to be strong and proud too.

From the privacy of his window, the eleven year old Jew can observe his gentile neighbour, the Russian officer who has just returned from the wars. He admires the long legs in "gleaming knee boots and spurs" (LC, 22) (a recurring image in Babel's work) and stares in rapture at his wife, Galina, for whom he feels a passion. Galina's "swelling compressed breasts," her "swaying, breathing hips," (LC, 22) and her suggestive gestures mesmerize and terrify him.

> I turned away and shivered. I sensed in her eyes that strange, shameful thing that exists in every human life on earth. I longed to plunge into an enchanted sleep, to forget about that life which didn't fit in with my fancies.
>
> <u>My First Love</u>, (LC, 21)

The costly weapons, gymnastic apparatus, exotic silks -- the paraphernalia of pagan sensuality -- fascinate the boy. "Their" house is carefree, voluptuous and safe. "A cross had been chalked on their gate by organizers of the pogrom, and so they hadn't been molested." (LC, 22) "They" are soldiers and lovers, respected and adored. Their women are beautiful and seductive, their love games

full of alluring whispers and their war games heroic and triumphant.

The bookish small boy, the "little rabbi," has no chance of becoming the soldier or the lover he yearns to be if he remains in the ghetto. He can be a kind, loving man like his father who looks at his family helplessly, "smiling through his tears" (LC, 26) and who "mumbles with inexpressible tenderness, son - my little boy." (LC, 24)

Captivated by the world of might and action, he wants to escape from his reality (i.e., weakness and helplessness) but the bonds of his heritage are as insurmountable as they are confining. Torn by ambivalence and crushed by the "sorrows of that day" (the pogrom) he is overcome by an attack of uncontrollable hiccups. In a flight into fancy he sees himself as a member of the Jewish Self-Defence Organization where he can "return the fire of the murderous mob" with his "useless rifle." (LC, 25) However, even in the nightmarish daydream "the bearded killers, their white teeth flashing, are coming closer and closer." (LC, 25) (A very prominent and recurring dream in Jewish personal and collective consciousness and fiction.) The boy is "swept up by a feeling of pride and exaltation as death draws near" but in "the universal blueness," Galina,

the object of his passion, is out of reach. "She smiles her mocking smile" and her officer husband stands behind her; "he is half-dressed and kisses her neck." (LC, 25)

As the boy's hysterical breakdown gets progressively worse and he is reduced to a "writhing mass of dough" (LC, 27) beyond shame, responding to no entreaties, Babel presents us with a strange and significant reversal.

> My mother wrapped herself in a shawl and, grown suddenly taller and straighter, came up to Galina, who looked blank and petrified now.
>
> "Dear Galina," my mother said, in a carrying melodious voice, "we have been an awful imposition upon you all ... I feel terrible about it ..."
>
> My mother's cheeks were afire as she pushed Galina toward the door.
>
> My First Love, (LC, 27)
>
> Italics mine.

The mother's strength (alien to fair Galina) comes from the spirit, the "heart of our tribe, the heart that had withstood so well the struggle for existence" (LC, 32) through the years of hate, persecution and slaughter. This "force" is no match against the "bearded killers" and yet it challenges the identification of strength with physical power alone.

The world of the masters with its heroism, daring, health and survival of the fittest, is enticing. But the world of the Jews with its love and compassion and

the obsession to find meaning and purpose in life even in the madness of a pogrom, is compelling and profound. "The strength of their sorrow is full of gloomy grandeur; their secret scorn for the Polish landowners is limitless." (LC, 206)

How is a neurotic, sickly boy to resolve his conflict and bring together two incompatible worlds?

"As a boy, I was a liar," he tells us in his story, In the Basement. "It came from reading. My imagination was always on fire," (LC, 29) he hastens to explain. He realizes early in life the superiority of imagination and intuition. His classmate, Mark Borgman, is a brilliant and serious student. He is also a voracious reader, but when he re-tells a story he had read, his "scholarly mumbling" is erudite and boring. "There was no poetry in his words." Young Babel's "fantastic tales" to which he could not resist adding "plenty of his own," fascinate his classmates and they listen to him "with gaping mouths." (LC, 29)

Borgman's family is rich and worldly. His father, a "bloated banker" (LC, 30) reads the Manchester Guardian and has affairs with "bosomy prima donnas" of the visiting Italian opera company. A splendid career of learning awaits the young Borgman who intends to be an aircraft designer. And this "sober reserved boy" becomes deeply

attached to the protagonist, "a C-minus student" from a "penniless, ineffective family" because of his "knack for garbling everything." (LC, 30) Invited to the house about which he has heard so many fantastic tales, Borgman is filled with anticipation. The host entertains him with "all sorts of wonders;" (LC, 33) grandfather's Yiddish manuscripts, secret formulas for various inventions, "sixty-six volumes of the Talmud" and an assortment of sheer lies which "actually, if one understood it with one's heart, it was all true, but the truth was impossible to discern at first sight." (LC, 32)

While the elated host recited his favorite lines, Anthony's funeral oration, there was a banging at the door and the sound of drunk voices. Uncle Simon, the black sheep of the family whose "brassy voice caulked all the cracks in the universe" (LC, 35) has returned from the cafe prematurely. His curses and blasphemies were not intended for the bank director son's ears. He did not fit into the fanciful world created by the young liar-artist, who "at twelve still didn't have the slightest idea how to cope with the truth in the world." (LC, 32) To drown out frustration, fears and ultimately "all the evil of this world," (LC, 35) (i.e., reality) the boy shouts Anthony's words louder and louder. Once

again the attempt to escape from an actuality too painful for a child to cope with, fails. Perplexed by the contradictions he cannot reconcile, he "burst into tears and the world of tears was so huge and beautiful that everything except tears vanished from before his eyes." (LC, 37)

If The Story of my Dovecot and My First Love, where the pogrom is the central event and symbol, reveal what it was in Babel's childhood that created "the seeds of the ills that torment [him]," In the Basement and The Awakening depict the search for a way to overcome the destructive force of these "seeds" and to turn disaster into triumph. In these stories we get "the portrait of the artist as a young Jew." In Heine's words, "Aus meinen grossen Schmerzen mach' ich die kleinen Lieder," or in Layton's:

> Out of infirmity, I have built strength.
> Out of untruth, truth.[13]

The Awakening presents the picture of two worlds, both literally and metaphorically and hints at a possible way of reconciling them. Again, we are confronting the Jewish world, narrow and demanding, the Gentile world, open, carefree; the familiar circle of relatives and the young artist-to-be, the "dreamer but with a big appetite."

In the Jewish world,

> Our fathers couldn't see how they could get ahead in life themselves, so they organized a sweepstake. They built it on the bones of little people.
> ... As soon as a boy got to be four or five, his mother would lead the tiny, puny creature off to Mr. Zagursky's. Zagursky ran a child-prodigy factory, a factory of Jewish midgets in lace collars and patent-leather pumps.
> ... Mighty harmonies lived in the souls of these wizened little freaks with their bluish, blown-up heads. They became famous virtuosos.
>
> The Awakening, (LC, 38)

In the Jewish world where "child prodigies brought fortunes to their parents," (LC, 39) the exorbitant demands of the fathers are unreasonable and overbearing. In the Gentile world, the cheerfulness and play are attractive and delightful. There, the young protagonist meets Efim Nikitich who "loves the sun and the sea" and whose "gay, cheerful heart" is "free from ambition, greed, and worry." (LC, 41) The boy learns "to love that man with the love that only a headachy, hysterical boy can feel for an athlete." (LC, 42) From this "local water god" he learns the names of trees and birds, the side on which the sun rises or where the dew is heaviest. And mainly, how to defy a fear of water "inherited from [his] forebears -- Spanish rabbis and Frankfurt money-changers." (LC, 41) Awakened to the feeling for nature, the youngster, "late in learning to do the essential things," feels more acutely the confinement of the ghetto

and of his house "permeated with the smell of onions and Jewish destiny." (LC, 40)

> As a small child, I was chained to the Talmud and led the life of a sage; when I grew up, I started climbing trees.
>
> The Awakening, (LC, 41)

He hates his violin lessons and the burden of his father's expectations. He resents being part of the "freakish sweepstake," and although he is "a midget like them," he hears "a different call in the voice of [his] forebears." (LC, 39)

> During the day, I'd make up stories and tell them to the neignbourhood kids, and at night I'd put them down on paper. Inventing stories was a hereditary trait in our family. Levi Itzkhok, who went a bit off his head in his old age, worked all his life on a tale called The Headless Man. (The Man without a Head) I took after him.
>
> The Awakening, (LC, 39)

Realizing that he will never be the famous virtuoso his family expects him to be, but unable to persuade his father to abandon the ambitious dreams of glory for him, the budding artist takes his first step to assert his rebellious emancipation: instead of taking the dreaded violin lesson he wanders off to the waterfront to meet an old sailor, Mr. Trottyburn. Mr. Trottyburn sells pipes made entirely by hand.

> The Lincoln master craftsman's pipes exuded poetry. An idea had gone into each of them, a drop of eternity ... I tried to picture the

> kind of life Mr. Matthew Trottyburn lived in Old England, the last master pipemaker, opposing the trend of the times.
>
> "No doubt about it, gentlemen, these babies must be made with your own hands."
>
> The Awakening, (LC, 40)
>
> Italics mine.

If Nikitich's instruction, "a man who's not part of nature ... will never write two worth-while lines in his whole life," (LC, 43) alerts the boy's awareness to the natural world, the "master craftsman's" words awaken him to the unique world of art.

In The Awakening, as in the other childhood stories, the dualisms and ambivalence persist. The Jewish world is stern and restrictive. It stresses the value of respectability, success and achievement (money) which the "young artist" despises. The Gentile world outside is exciting and seductive, but the puny, sickly "midget" will never feel "at home" in it; he lacks a "gay, cheerful heart" and "massive bronze shoulders."

In art he can hope to mend some of the divisions and freeze the contradictions. He can reconcile antinomies which he cannot cope with in real life. He can weave out of the yarn of "blood and tears" a tale of many colors and glorious patterns; he can transform humiliation and helplessness into dignity and triumph. He can be Dionysian without being cruel, spiritual without being

weak and a virtuoso (of language) without being a "wizened little freak." He can make something with his own hands and put an idea into it, an idea which is his very own and also a "drop of eternity."

Resolved never to return to the violin lessons, the boy symbolically rejects the ancestral burden imposed on him and defies his father's will and authority. Locked in "his fortress," the lavatory, he listens to the moans and reproaches directed at him by his father. Amidst the wails, he hears father's "retreating footsteps" (LC, 44) and the house becomes quiet. When late at night his aunt takes him to his other grandmother's house, she holds his hand "in a firm grip in case I tried to run away. She was right. I was thinking of running away." (LC, 44)

The determination to "run away," to break out of the "puny, horrible world" of the physical and emotional ghetto, permeates Babel's work. Convinced of his calling, he knew that he had to throw off the hermetic restraints of his environment in order to write his "stories [which] were intended to survive oblivion." (LY, 22)

"It is not often that one sees such undisguised curiosity in the eyes of a grownup," says Nadezhda Mandelstam. "I had the feeling that Babel's main driving force was the unbridled curiosity with which he scrutinized life and people."[14] This curiosity, the

insatiable hunger for experience, the need "to have a sniff and see what it smells like"[15] in order to understand "the essence of things," led the boy in the Dovecot stories right into the heart of the storm, the pogrom. It also led Babel, the grown man (along with his persona-protagonist, Liutov) "into the world" where he "traveled over many roads and witnessed many battles." (LC, 99)

The "seeds of the ills that tormented [him]" sown in his childhood, in the ghetto, determined the nature of the "running away" chosen by Babel. Assuming the pure Russian name and patronym, Kiril Vassilevich Liutov, he embarked on a journey which led through trials and ordeals to new torments and new insights. Joining Budenny's Red Cavalry he was able to explore two subjects that fascinated him most: the Cossack and the Revolution.

"When a Jew gets on a horse he stops being a Jew and becomes a Russian."

Sunset

> Savitsky, the Commander of the Sixth Division, stood up when he saw me. I was struck by the beauty of his gigantic body. He stood up and his purple riding breeches, the crimson cap on the side of his head, and the ribbons pinned to his chest seemed to cut the hut in half, as a banner cleaves the sky.
>
> My First Goose, (LC, 142)

> Wrapped in a cloud of sunset, Afonka Bida was riding toward us.
>
> Afonka Bida, (LC, 209)

> Diakov, the former circus rider, rode up to the very doorstep on his fiery Anglo-Arab mount.
> Diakov gracefully jumped down from his Anglo-Arab. Straightening his well-shaped legs in boots fastened under the knees with a small strap, he walked springily, as if he were in a circus arena, over to the dying nag ... Immediately the exhausted animal felt a flow of energy emanating from the gray-headed, dashing Romeo.
>
> The Remount Quartermaster, (LC, 229-30)

Savitsky, Diakov, Bida, Pavlichenko, Kolesnikov -- the heroes of the Kniga, the book of masters; they are gorgeous, centaur-like giants whose animal strength and grace knows nothing of introspection and is beyond conscience. Liutov (in Russian: fierce, ferocious, cruel), so obviously Babel's ironical Doppelganger, admires the bold, mettlesome Cossacks, teeming with vitality and exuberance. Full of envy of "the iron and the flower of their youth," ("zhelezu i tsvetam")[16] the self-conscious bespectacled narrator yearns for their self-assurance, grace and Dionysian abandon. Just as the boy protagonist worshipped the suntanned "water-god," Nikitich, "with the love that only a headachy, hysterical boy can feel for an athlete," (LC, 42) so the squeamish Cavalrist Liutov, "with boils on his neck and bandages on his legs,"[17] admires the majestic, insolent horsemen. He wants, or

rather one half of him wants, to be one of them. As a result of the "warring halves," Liutov is a very peculiar "Budennovets." He joins the Cossacks in battle, but he does not load his revolver.

> "You never put cartridges in your gun," Akinfiev whispered elatedly in my face, trying to rip my lips with his thick finger, "and you believe in God, you lousy traitor!"
> ... The evening soared toward the sky like a flight of birds and the darkness crowned me with its wet garland. I was at the end of my tether and, bent under the weight of that funeral wreath, walked ahead, beseeching fate to grant me the simplest of abilities -- the ability to kill a man.
>
> After the Battle, (LC, 172)

He loves horses and dreams of becoming a good rider, but the stallion Argamak, trained to the "Cossack gallop - dry, crazy, and abrupt" (LC, 147) refuses to obey him.

> The sores on Argamak's back dried up, then opened again. I used as many as three saddle-clothes but as I still rode incorrectly, the sores wouldn't heal. The idea that I was sitting on an open wound made me shudder.
>
> Argamak, (LC, 148)

He enjoys their folkloric songs "full of ancient, moving tones," but along with the nostalgia, he is aware of a terrible truth:

> We were leaving a bloody trail on that path and the song floated above it.
>
> The Song, (LC, 192)

To win their friendship, he tries to be as they are, insensitive, casually brutal. "Glasses bring trouble around here and nothing can be done about it," he is warned by the quartermaster. "They make it a dog's life for an educated man. But if you mess up a lady - a real clean lady - then you'll see how popular you'll be with the boys." (LC, 143) Answering the challenge, Liutov "messes up" a "stern-looking" goose.

> I caught up with it and pinned it to the ground. The goose's head burst under my boot and its brains spilled out. The white neck was stretched out in the dung and the wings twitched above the slaughtered bird.
>
> "God damn your soul," I said, digging the sword into the goose. "Cook it for me, landlady."
>
> My First Goose, (LC, 144)

The Cossacks, "immobile and stiff like heathen priests," (LC, 144) are impressed with his "valiance" and invite him to join them. "That fellow'll fit in with us," one of them says. "Come and sit with us," (LC, 144) says the oldest Cossack taking a spoon out of his boot and giving it to the eager novice. Joining the most un-Jewish feast of cabbage soup and pork, he has passed the test (initiation) and been accepted to the new fraternity. "Is there anything in the paper?" asks one of the illiterate Cossacks, giving Liutov a chance to display his talents. Even though Liutov knows that his ability to read is marginal and his ability to kill crucial to the

way of life he seeks to join, he reads to them Lenin's speech "like a triumphant deaf man." (LC, 145) The intellectual in him "savored the words, and observed, as [he] savored them the concealed curve in Lenin's straight line." (LC, 145) The pagan in him rejoices over the acceptance: "We kept each other warm, our legs entangled, under the holed roof that let in the starlight. I dreamed and saw women in my dreams ..." (LC, 145) The Jew in him, to whom violence and cruelty are repulsive, can neither savor nor rejoice over his "victory." Dreaming or awake, he pays with guilt and sadness for the illusory, fleeting camaraderie. His heart "bloodstained from the killing, whined and dripped misery." (LC, 145)

Throughout the Red Cavalry cycle, Liutov oscillates between two worlds, never feeling completely at home in either. The "I" and "we" used by the narrator fail to clarify his identity. (E.g., "we were marching" implies Liutov the Red Cavalrist; "The prisoners are dead. I feel it in my bones," dissociates him from his soldier-comrades. (YMKE, 131) "Our division captured Berestechko," again, links him to the Cavalry; roaming "along the walls where nymphs with gouged-out eyes were dancing an ancient round dance," (LC, 181) sets him apart from them.) To the Poles, he is Russian, the invader; to

the Jews, he is an official in uniform, the enemy; to the Russian Cossack, he is the Jewish intellectual, a "four-eyed bastard," "lousy (parshivenkii")* squirt." (LC, 142) ("You have as much pity for the likes of us, you bespectacled bastard, as a cat for a mouse." (LC, 210) - "Why do you go around with a chip on your shoulder?" (LC, 224) "I see right through you," a Cossack tells Liutov with disgust, "you'd like not to have any enemies in life ... And you know what comes of that? ... It makes everything a lousy bore -- that's all." (LC, 150-1)

Liutov, like all Babel's narrators (and the author himself) is a divided, conflicted man, a knot of contradictions. In the Red Cavalry, he insists on joining the combat unit, "the most embattled division." (LC, 146) He is obviously fascinated by war, power, hubris, heroism, all these qualities which were not within the ghetto Jew's reach. With "spectacles on his nose and autumn in [his]heart" (LC, 56) he marvels at and envies "the masterful indifference of a Tartar Khan." (CS, 93) But the voice of his heritage -- "A nice fashion you're trying to start around here - killing live people" -- (LC, 61) refuses to be silenced, and Liutov

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* Literally translated, "parshivenkii-parshivyi" means "scabby," "mangy." Usually accompanied by the word "zhid" (kike), it is an epithet all too familiar to the Russian or Polish Jew.

the wishful Cossack says with an audible sigh: "The chronicle of our workaday offenses oppressed me without respite, like an ailing heart." (CS, 81)

Oscillating in most stories between two landscapes, The Red Cavalry Cossack world and the "shtetl" Jewish quarters, he finds them as antithetical and incompatible as the "discordant songs" within his own self.

> Outside the windows, horses were neighing and Cossacks let out their strident cries. Outside the windows, the desert of war was gaping.
>
> "Blessed be the Lord," came the voice of Rabbi Motale Braclawski, and he broke the bread with his monastic fingers, "blessed be the God of Israel who has chosen us from among all the peoples of the earth ..."
>
> The Rabbi, (LC, 129)

> The desert of war gaped outside the windows and Rabbi Motale Braclawski prayed by the eastern wall, his dead fingers clutching his prayer shawl.
>
> The Rabbi's Son, (LC, 130)

> Our entire troop leaped into their saddles and fired a salvo into the air, our three-inch cannon groaned its second salute, and we sent three Cossacks to get flowers. They dashed off at full gallop, firing their guns in full stride, leaping out of their saddles, performing all sorts of acrobatics, and returned with armfuls of flowers.
>
> Jews in long-floating, ragged garments were squabbling [there]. Some of them -- the orthodox Jews -- were extolling the teachings of Adassis, Rabbi of Belz. That made them the target of attack of the Hasidic Jews who preached the middle-of-the-road approach of the doctrine of Judah, Rabbi of Gussyatin.

> Forgetting the war and the salvos, the Hasidim cursed the very name of Vilno's High Priest, Elijah.
>
> Troop Leader Trunov, (LC, 223)

The salvos, horsemanship, flowers and rituals of the Cossacks are exhilarating, attractive, "macho." The Jews squabbling about points of doctrine while the world is aflame at war and throbbing with action, are ridiculous, unworldly, ineffectual. Surely, Savitsky who "seemed to cut the hut in half, as a banner cleaves the sky," (LC, 142) is a more striking and appealing figure than the Galician Jew whose "bony frame stood out against the hot radiance of the sky like a gallows." (LC, 223) But, is the choice that simple? Can Liutov (or Babel) the Jew with a bleeding heart and "confused poetic brains" (CS, 129) become a nonchalant, tough, brutal Cossack? And, if he could, is it actually his wholehearted aspiration?

"What is our Cossack?" Babel writes in his diary, July 21, 1920. "Layers of worthlessness, daring, professionalism, revolutionary spirit, bestial cruelty." (YMKE, 127)

As Liutov continues to observe his vigorous, spontaneous heroes, he discovers, as did the boy in The Story of my Dovecot, the underside of their Dionysian exuberance: their cruelty, senseless brutality, indifferent murderousness. He sees Afonka Bida staging an

attack against his fellow-soldiers, the infantry, "just for fun."

> The wretched infantry fled. But it was too late. The Cossack lashes were already working over their tattered coats. The horsemen circled around the field, their whips whirling in their hands with marvelous skill. ... The laughing Cossacks re-formed ranks. The infantry had vanished; the trenches were empty. Only the round-shouldered Jew stood where he had stood before, gazing intently and scornfully at the Cossacks through his glasses.
>
> Afonka Bida, (LC, 175)
>
> Italics mine.

He sees Curly from the machine-gun platoon "execute" an old, silver-bearded Jew.

> [He] grabbed the Jew's head and tucked it under his left arm. The head disappeared there. The Jew grew quiet, spreading his legs apart. Curly took a knife in his right hand and carefully, so as not to splash himself, cut the old man's throat.
>
> Berestechko, (LC, 179)

He listens to Pavlichenko's life story ("He was a swineherd, this general,") (LC, 213) of how this Red general, "illiterate to the bottom of [his] heart" (LC, 216), went on "kicking and trampling on [his] master for an hour or more, and in that time got to know all about life." (LC, 217)

He hears the saga of the Kurdyukov clan, where the father chops up his son, Fedor, and is in turn sliced up by his other son, Semyon.

> So Pa, he starts to cut up brother Fedor, he starts to slash Fedya with his saber, and he says to him: "You no-good bastard, you Red dog and son-of-a-bitch," and such things, and he kept slashing at him until it got dark and my brother Fedor passed away.
>
> Letter, (LC, 138)

He sees Lyovka the driver drag the wounded Commander's woman into the bushes right in front of the ambulance wagon, where her man lies dying.

> Lyovka was chewing on a piece of meat, smacking his lips and breathing noisily through his nose. When he finished his meat, Lyovka licked his chops and dragged Sasha down into a hollow.
>
> "Sash," he said, trembling, belching and gesticulating, "Sash, before God we're all sinful and naked anyway. We only live once, Sash, and we only die once. Give in and I will pay you -- with my blood if I have to.
>
> ... Twigs and leaves cracked and rustled in the bushes; Lyovka was panting. The haze-veiled moon loitered about the sky like a whore.
>
> The Widow, (LC, 233-4)

He sees the daily carnage which goes on senselessly and without an end and is oppressed by the deeds of his glamorous barbarians whose strength and friendship he so much desired: the inveterate bully, the lighthearted syphilitic, the revenger who leaves on his bloody trail "an old woman stabbed, a dog hanged over a well, an icon filthied with dung," (LC, 211) the ruthless killer of prisoners of war who is unmoved by conscience and merciless.

> He went up closer to him and repeating "just right," in a whisper, stuck his saber into the old man's throat.
>
> Troop Leader Trunov, (LC, 225)

> ... From a distance of twenty yards, Trunov shattered the young Pole's skull and the brains spilt onto my hands. Then Trunov walked up to me, ejecting the spent cartridges.
>
> "You'd better cross one of them off," he said, pointing at the list.
>
> Troop Leader Trunov, (LC, 227)

"Trunov died," Liutov says in the same story, "and there's no one left to judge him in this world, me least of all." (LC, 224)

Nevertheless, the reader, presented with the naked act of brutal, conscienceless murder, is forced to judge. The "heroic framework" in which Babel presented his legendary centaurs does not erase the fact that they were thugs and murderers; nor does it conceal the truth that he knew about it and was deeply disillusioned with his hero-idols. "Layers of worthlessness, daring, professionalism ..."

While to the Cossacks the war is a matter of professional fighting or atavistic vocation, to Babel, the Jew and member of the "intelligentsia," the ideological engagement in the Revolution is genuine and profound. The promise of a new just order means to him a brotherhood of men, a fraternity of equals where there is no

need for the pariah or the scapegoat. It means the emergence of the "new man," in whom there shall be no rift between physical exuberance and moral consciousness. It means the possible fulfilment of the messianic dream.

> The implication of the European and Russian Jew in Marxism had natural causes. As has often been said, the dream of a secular millenium -- which is still alive in Georg Lukacs and the master historian of hope, Ernst Bloch -- relates the social utopia of Communism to the messianic tradition. For both Jew and Communist, history is a scenario of gradual humanization, an immensely difficult attempt by man to become man. In both modes of feeling there is an obsession with the prophetic authority of moral or historical law, with the right reading of canonic revelations. But from Eduard Bernstein to Trotsky, from Isaac Babel to Pasternak, the involvement of the Jewish personality in Communism and the Russian revolution follows an ironic pattern. Nearly invariably it ends in dissent or heresy.18

Just as the dream of the glorious Cossack, gigantic and omnipotent, turned into a nightmare when Babel discovered that the vitality and exuberance of the graceful horsemen led to senseless cruelty and brutal slaughter, so his messianic dream of the Revolution turned into disillusionment when he learned that the "new order" brought regimentation, despotic bureaucracy and a disregard for human personality. An entry in Babel's diary reads:

> In the morning Bakhturov rides, his entourage after him, I observe the work of the war commissioner, a dull but proven Muscovite worker, therein lies his strength, he's a robot, but great goals ...[19]

In a later story (1932), a "dull but proven" troop leader is described thus:

> Baulin had never known any doubts. This trait, common to thousands of Baulins, became an important factor in the triumph of the Revolution ... His life's path had been laid down once and for all, and he had no misgivings about the correctness of his course.
> ... One could not hope to be spared under Baulin's command.
>
> Argamak, (LC, 146)

Ehrenburg refers to Babel's "remarkable story," At the Troitsa, which Babel read to him in the spring of 1938. "It is the story of the destruction of many illusions," he says, "a wise and bitter story. The manuscript of the story has been lost as well as the chapters of an unfinished novel."[20]

Babel's letters to his family speak repeatedly about the stifling censorship and regimentation, "the sickening professional environment devoid of art or creative freedom." (LY, 61) In August 1932, he writes, "I am not in control of my movements." (LY, 216) In 1933, he refers to "all sorts of absurd but sinister rumors" which have been circulating about him in Moscow. (LY, 239) His letter of November 14, 1934, says:

> I am incapable of compromise, be it internal or external, and so I have to suffer, retreat inside myself, and wait ... Nowadays, writing doesn't mean sitting at one's table. It means rushing all over the country, participating in active life, doing research, establishing close contact with some enter-

> prise, and suffering a constant feeling of impotence.
>
> (LY, 264)

More and more often, oblique hints of firings, disappearances, "entering sanatorium" (i.e., being arrested) appear in Babel's letters along with "reassurances" that "perhaps just to spite everybody" he is still feeling well. (LY, 374)

Seeing enthusiasm and hope replaced by the terror of the purges, and the Spring of creativity abruptly arrested by the Winter of fear and the reign of Cheka and GPU, Babel came to realize in the 1930s that his dream of the Promised Land was no more than a mirage. He could not become part of the new order in which the hypocritical and power-hungry bureaucrats ruled and the basic human values of freedom, dignity, compassion and creativity were denied. Nor could he write in the pedestrian style of "socialist realism," accessible to sluggish minds and serving crude, obtuse masters. Aware of the fact that "the inner search is no longer in fashion," (LY, 254) he retreated inside himself and became "the master of silence."

"We come into this world to enjoy ourselves, to enjoy our work, our quarrels, our loves," Babel says. (LC, 88) His sincere desire to experience and enjoy the world is evident in his work and in his life. He sought

to unite in himself the man of contemplation and the man of action, the moralist and the pagan, the Jew and the Cossack, the artist and the revolutionary. If he did not succeed in uniting or resolving the antinomies, he submitted them to the test of continuous dialectic, and he explored through experience the many profiles of his complex personality.

When he found the ferocious cruelty of the "worka-day offenses" among the Cossacks intolerable, he wandered off to the homes of his plundered Jewish landlords, looking for a "Jewish glass of tea, with a whiff of that retired God in it." (LC, 126) When the propaganda speeches of the commissars sounded hollow and false, he would leave the unfinished piece for the Red Cavalryman and join the Hasidim. The Rabbi would ask him:

> "And where does a Jew come from?"
> "From Odessa," I said.
> "A pious town," the rabbi said. "Odessa is the star of our exile, and, of necessity, the well of our troubles! And what is this Jew's occupation?"
> "I am putting into verse the adventures of Hersh Ostropol."
> "That's a great work," the rabbi whispered, lowering his lids. "The jackal howls when he is hungry; any fool has enough foolishness to despair; but only a wise man can tear the veil of existence with his laughter. What did the Jew study?"
> "The Bible."
> "And what is the Jew seeking?"
> "Joy."
>
> The Rabbi, (LC, 127-8)

If some of Babel's stories are ardent paeans to the Revolution or odes of awe and admiration to the Cossacks, the most moving ones are elegies for the dying shtetl. They express nostalgia for "the young Sabbath [which] came out of the blue darkness and mounted its throne," (LC, 126) for the "moldering Talmuds" of his childhood, for the old men with yellowed beards of prophets, fingering volumes of Ibn Ezra and Rashi's commentaries, for old women blessing the Sabbath candles with their knotty fingers.

Babel is impatient with "madmen and scholars" whom the ghettos engendered in prodigious amounts. He speaks with contempt and anger of the political impotence of the Jew, his non-participation in the world of action and power. Yet, when a Jew falls victim to the "real" world which he could not or would not join, Babel's tone undergoes a radical change. He does not merely vindicate the victim but awards him stature of a martyr transcending the world of causes, ideologies and all things transient.

Gedali, "tiny, lonely, and dreamy in his black top hat, with a big prayer book under his arm," (LC, 126) who "studied the Talmud, likes Rashi's commentaries and Maimonides' books," (LC, 125) towers over "Mr. Comrade" who speaks unconvinced and unconvincingly of the Inter-

national of "gunpowder ... seasoned with the best of blood." The narrow-shouldered, gloomy Jews of Volyn and Galicia are bony and tragic. "In their passionate features, carved in pain, there is no trace of fat nor a sign of the warm pulsation of blood." Their gestures lack restraint, "they are offensive to good taste. But the strength of their sorrow is full of gloomy grandeur; their secret scorn for the Polish landowner is limitless." (LC, 206) In a world where "all is mortal" they search for that which is "destined for eternal life." (LC, 127)

"Crossing the Zbruch,"* the first of the Red Cavalry stories, compresses into a two page prose poem the major themes and motifs which recur throughout the cycle. The title itself suggests several meanings. The "crossing" of the river Zbruch depicts a historical event, the Soviet counteroffensive of the 1920 war, the invasion of Poland. Symbolically, the highroad which was built upon human bones and the crossing, like the crossing of the river Styx, invoke a vision of gaping hell.

> The quiet Volyn snakes away from us into a pearly fog of birch groves; it creeps across the flower-covered slopes, and its weary arms get entangled in the hop vines.

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* The English translation of Isaac Babel: The Collected Stories, ed. and transl. Walter Morrison, has the story's title as "Crossing into Poland."

> The orange sun rolls down the sky like a chopped off head; a tender light lingers on in the gorges between the clouds; the banners of the sunset flap over our heads. The smell of yesterday's blood and of killed horses drips into the coolness of the evening. The blackened Zbruch growls, tying its rapids in foamy knots.
>
> ... The horses' backs are awash and the sonorous stream gurgles among the hundreds of horses' legs. Someone is drowning, loudly abusing the Mother of God. The river is strewn with the black squares of wagons; it is full of booming, whistling, and singing, floating above snakes of moonlight and gleaming pits.
>
> Crossing the Zbruch, (LC, 108)

Considering the fact that the protagonist is an Odessa Jew, comrade-in-arms to the Cossacks, the crossing implies a departure from one world (way of life) and an initiation and tentative commitment to a new one. On the other hand, because this Red Cavalrist is a Jew, well versed in the Bible and profoundly aware of Jewish history and values, the crossing resounds with echoes of a significant event in past history, when "the children of Israel walked on dry land in the midst of the sea" (Ex. 15:19), when they "crossed over," came forth out of slavery in Egypt and became a nation.[21]

Having reached his destination, the narrator enters the house where he is billeted. He finds there "a pregnant woman and two thin-necked, red-haired Jews. A third Jew is asleep, turned to the wall, his blanket pulled over his head." (LC, 108) In the room where he is sup-

posed to sleep, the closets have been turned inside out, the floor is littered with "scraps of women's fur coats, a human turd, and fragments of the special crockery that is used only once a year, at Passover." (LC, 108)

The plundered house, the Jewish world of misery, is something the protagonist knows from his own experience. It brings back the memory of the ancestral home which "smelled of onions and Jewish destiny." (LC, 40) It brings back the ineradicable past from which he was trying to "cross over." It brings back the pogrom. "Clean up this mess," says the Jew in Cossack uniform, with disgust. "What a way to keep a house!" (LC, 108) ("kak vy griazno zhivete" i.e. literally "how you live in filth.")[22] The sight of the two red-haired Jews who jump to their feet submissively, and hopping around "skip silently, monkey-like, like Japanese circus acrobats," (LC, 109) fills him with contempt. Their weakness and otherworldliness affront the Red Cavalrist who wants to forget his kinship with the past (impotence) having opted for a stake in the future (power). However, as he lies down on the "disemboweled featherbed" on the floor next to the sleeping Jew, "a frightened misery closes over [his] couch." (LC, 109) The mood changes abruptly. The landscape dominated by the "orange sun [which] rolls down the sky like a chopped-off head," (LC, 108) gives

way to silence in which "only the moon, gripping its round, shiny carefree head in its blue arms, roams in front of my window." (LC, 109)

G. Williams in his article "Two Leitmotifs in Babel's Konarmija" says the following about the sun's and moon's involvement in the affairs of man:

> The sun accompanies war, the means of the revolution, and it also acts as a leitmotif for the end - a Communist society. The moon, on the other hand, is associated with those factors which give rise to doubts about the justice of the revolution. The traditions of previous civilizations are associated with the leitmotif of the moon.[23]

The sun in Babel's stories is generally orange, swollen, aggressive; it chops, drills, gushes like "blood from a disemboweled hog." (YMKE, 145) The moon is beautiful, poetic, solitary; it roams, loiters, eavesdrops and "gleams like a deliverance." (LC, 115) Furthermore, whereas the sun is associated with the masculine principle, the moon, the weaker planet, is linked to womanhood. The feminine principles of compassion, tenderness and the giving of life are a negation of war and killing. "The influence of past cultures, of religion, and of the feminine principle are allied thematically as factors which give rise to doubt about the validity of a violent revolution."[24]

"All is mortal. The mother alone is destined for eternal life ... The memory of the mother feeds our

compassion, just as the immense ocean feeds the rivers that cut across the world," says the lonely and dreamy Jew, Gedali, "the founder of the unrealizable International." (LC, 127)

"The sun can't get into closed eyes, but we'll tear open the eyes that are shut" (LC, 125) says Bolshevik propagandist, Liutov, as he addresses the old Jew.

As Liutov prepares for sleep, in the midst of turmoil and "frightened misery," "the moon, gripping its round, shiny carefree head in its blue arms, roams in front of [his] window." (LC, 109)

Facing the moon, he slips into restless sleep and dreams of the commander of the Sixth Division:

> Riding a heavy stallion, he is pursuing the brigade leader and fires a bullet through each of his eyes. The bullets pierce the brigade leader's head and both his eyes drop out onto the ground. "Why have you turned back your brigade?" Savitsky, the division commander, shouts to the maimed man.
>
> Crossing, (LC, 109)
>
> Italics mine.

Liutov wakes up because the pregnant woman's fingers are groping over his face. The nightmarish dream is interrupted but what follows is an equally horrid reality. The woman offers to make his bed in another corner of

the room because in his fitful sleep he was tossing and "pushing her papa." She removes the blanket from the sleeping man. "A dead old man lies there. His throat has been torn out, his face chopped through the middle; blue blood lies in his beard like a piece of lead." (LC, 109)

> "Sir," the Jewish woman says, "the Poles were cutting him up and he begged them: 'Kill me outside in the courtyard,' he begged them. 'I don't want my daughter to see me die.' But they did it their way and he passed away in this room, worrying about me. "And now I want to know," the woman says, with terrible force, "I want to know whether it is possible to find another father like him anywhere in the world."
>
> Crossing, (LC, 109)
>
> Italics mine.

The pregnant woman's outcry of sorrow is also an assertion of dignity and pride. Amidst filth and desolation, among beastlike bipeds who call themselves people, her father remained a compassionate human being; he died affirming love, self-sacrifice.

The rapid shifts and contrasts in the story, place side by side the Russian Empire built upon human bones under Nicholas I and the Jewish hovel plundered and vandalized by bloodthirsty pogromshchiks; the splendid Cossack killers and the wretched Jewish victims; the sinister intimations of violence in nature, its senselessness and indifference and "the terrible force" of the spirit of

the pregnant Jewess; the heartlessness of "their" way (be it the maiming Cossack commander or the throat-slitting Pole) and the humane love of the Jewish father who dies worrying about his daughter.

The story is symmetrically poised on the "crossing over." On one hand we have the crossing of the river Zbruch; the charging forth of brute power, rampaging, maiming, killing, a descent into hell without conscience or mercy. On the other hand, there is the significance of the Passover story of the Jews who, led by Moses, crossed over paganism, cruelty and enslavement and in their declaration of nationhood repudiated the pagan world by which they were surrounded.

> And the Egyptians did evil unto us, and tormented us ... And it was not one alone who rose against us to annihilate us, but in every generation there are those who rise against us to annihilate us.
>
> The Haggadah of Passover

The Passover crockery is shattered and lies desecrated amidst filth and excrement, but not the meaning of Passover and of the Revelation of Mount Sinai which exalts love, justice, physical and spiritual freedom. The old Jew is dead, his face chopped through the middle, but not the values which guided his life and his death. You can break the special crockery, Babel seems to be saying in this story, you can humiliate and torture the

Jew, but what you cannot do is break his spirit and make him give up his affirmation of life, his compassionate heart and the moral values by which he lives and has given to the world.

Repeatedly, the comparison between "their" and the Jewish way of life is drawn to our attention. "Their" way is to build highroads upon human bones, to fight cruel, bloody wars, to fire bullets through the eyes of comrades-in-arms, to plunder Jewish homes, to kill a father brutally before the eyes of his daughter.

The Jews, meek and frightened are submissive and grotesque. They live in filth, poverty and gloom; their movements are awkward, their bodies lack grace. They are skinny and weak. But they feel and express love and compassion. The father's last concern is for his daughter and hers is to sanctify his name and to exalt his horrible death to the noble stature of martyrdom. The "round belly" of the Jewess "rises" from the floor, amidst the hodgepodge of fragments, sacred and profane (crockery and turd), it confirms the hope of redemption and asserts the Hebrew values of humane concern and moral conscience.

The brief, intense prose poem compresses into two pages Babel's "journey" which began as a flight from the burden of his Jewishness and led through "Cossackism"

and Bolshevism, to the disillusionment with both and the ultimate return to his "roots" and to the forces that molded him, "the vehement heart" and moral commands of the Jew.

The Rabbi's Son, originally the last story of the Red Cavalry* cycle, repeats the same conclusion in more personal terms. Here we find the "disobedient son" who looked in his ancestral home "like an escaped prisoner captured and brought back to jail," (LC, 128) in the last stage of his journey. The rabbi's son, Ilya, "the last prince of the dynasty," Italics mine, joins the Revolution and takes command of a scratch regiment after the "Twelfth Army withdrew and left the Kovel sector undefended." (LC, 130)

Amidst defeat, confusion and typhus-ridden peasants, Liutov spots "that prince, who had lost his trousers and was doubled up under his army pack." (LC, 131) Breaking the rules, he pulls him up onto the train. "The long, embarrassed body ... the wasted, curly virility of a starved Semite," bring back to Liutov the memory of that evening "when the young Sabbath slid in stealthily behind the sunset," (LC, 131) when he first met Ilya.

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*"Argamak," added in 1932 is merely a post-script to the cycle or a sad re-play. In this story Liutov achieves his dream; he learns to ride a horse "like everyone else," but he feels "all alone amidst these people whose friendship [he'd] failed to win." (LC, 150) In other words: "When a Jew gets on a horse ... he does not stop being a Jew."

Sadly, he examines the objects familiar to him, the scattered belongings of Red Army Private Braclawski. The "hodgepodge" he finds resembles strikingly his own "baggage" and it links Ilya not only with the narrator but with the author himself.

> A directive to a propagandist lay next to the notebooks of a Jewish poet. The portraits of Lenin and Maimonides were neighbors -- the gnarled iron of Lenin's skull and the dim silkiness of Maimonides' picture. A lock of woman's hair marked a page in a bound volume of the Resolutions of the Sixth Party Congress, and crooked lines of Hebrew verse were crowded into the margins of political pamphlets. In a sad and puny drizzle, the pages of the Song of Songs and revolver cartridges fell upon me.
>
> The Rabbi's Son, (LC, 131)

Viacheslav Polonskii discusses the tension of contrasts in Red Cavalry in terms of the contents of Ilya Braclawski's trunk. "The gnarled iron of Lenin's skull and the dim silkiness of Maimonides' picture, live side by side in Red Cavalry," he writes. "But they cannot continue to co-habit in peace. The iron of Lenin's skull negates (otritsaet) the silkiness of Maimonides. Maimonides is not reconcilable with Lenin." Aware of this, Polonskii goes on to say, Babel rejected the old "bourgeois" world and chose Lenin and the Revolution.[25]

The last paragraph of The Rabbi's Son leaves little doubt about the narrator's (and Babel's) sense of identification with Ilya, much doubt about his endorsement of Lenin.

> He [Ilya] died before we got to Rovno. He died, the last prince, amidst verses, phylacteries, and foot rags. We buried him at some forgotten railroad stop. And, I, who am hardly able to contain in my ancient body the storms of my imagination -- I was the only one there to receive my brother's last sigh.
>
> The Rabbi's Son, (LC, 132)
>
> Italics mine.

There is a "hodgepodge" at first. But Babel tells us explicitly that the choice has been made. Ilya, "the last prince of a dynasty" is "brother" to Liutov, brother to Babel and to myriads of Jewish dreamers who, obsessed with the utopian longing for an International of good men who do not kill, fought, died and are buried at some forgotten railway stop for the Promised Land which never became a reality.

When Ilya, "the last prince" dies and the cards are down, there are no propaganda pamphlets or revolver cartridges among his belongings. Babel sorts out the "hodgepodge". Lenin's iron skull is conspicuously absent. There are only "verses, phylacteries and foot rags," to remind us of the "human turd," the barbarous victimization which the Jew is subjected to in this senselessly hostile world. They also affirm life, celebrate the "crossing," the Passover and the reverence and love it teaches.

"I was the only one there to receive my brother's last sigh" is not a hurrah for the Revolution. It is a

Kaddish* for all Ilyas, the wasted princes, itself an ominous premonition of Babel's own fate. Where are the Cossacks, the comrades-in-arms? Where is the brotherhood promised by the glorious International? Why is Party member, Revolutionary Ilya Braclawski buried "at some forgotten railroad stop," and Cossack Troop Leader Pavel Trunov's remains "transported to Gothic Sokal and buried there in the place of honor -- among the flower beds of the public garden, in the center of town?" (LC, 228) There are speeches, salvos, salutes and the band plays the "International" at Trunov's funeral; there is only a solitary Jew "hardly able to contain in [his] ancient body the storms of [his] imagination," to receive "his brother's last sigh."

The "message" of the "Crossing the Zbruch" is repeated here in categorical terms: The unselfconscious grace and virility of the Cossacks is attractive, but at no point does Babel accept the price for this handsomeness and exuberance. The Revolution which promised (particularly for the ghetto Jew) emancipation from oppression and turmoil, is a lofty messianic dream put forward by Karl Marx; but the Cossacks in Red Cavalry as well as the Bolsheviks for whom they are fighting and killing, have both betrayed the dream. At no point does Babel accept the betrayal.

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* A mourner's prayer.

After having examined and assessed the meaning of the two historical "crossings," Babel has chosen. His identification with Judaism, "the practice of a way of life in a community conditioned by faith," is indisputable.

CHAPTER III: FOOTNOTES

[1]Irving Layton, "Foreword," The Collected Poems (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971).

[2]Nathalie Babel, You Must Know Everything trans. Max Hayward, ed, Nathalie Babel (New York: Delta, 1970) p. 3. Subsequent references to this edition will be made in parentheses in the text and identified by initials YMKE. Most of the quotes, unless otherwise indicated, refer to the English text; translations have been checked.

[3]Jerzy Kosinski, Notes of the Author (New York: Scientia-Factum, 1967), p. 15.

[4]Isaac Babel, The Lonely Years trans. Andrew R. MacAndrew and Max Hayward, ed. Nathalie Babel (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1964), p. 189. Future references to this edition will be made in parentheses in the text and identified by initials LY and page number.

[5]Isaac Babel, Lyubka the Cossack and Other Stories trans. Andrew R. MacAndrew (New York: Signet, 1963), p. 28. Subsequent references to this edition will be made in parentheses in the text and identified by initials LC and page number. All translations from the Russian have been checked.

[6]Francois Fejto, Heine, A Biography (London: Wingate, 1946), p. 49.

[7]Viacheslav Polonskii, "Kritichiskiie Zametki o Babele," Novyi Mir, no. 1, 1927, p. 215.

[8]Jiři Franek, "Babel a avantgarda," Československá rusistica 13, 1968.

[9]Konstantin Paustovskii, Povest' o zhizni, v. 5 (Moscow: Khudozhestevennaia literatura, 1968), p. 140.

[10]Patricia Carden, The Art of Isaac Babel (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 162-3.

[11]Gustav Janouch, Conversations with Kafka, trans. Goronwy Rees (London: Village Press, 1968), p. 165.

[12]Carden, p. 164.

[13]Irving Layton, "There Were No Signs," Collected

[14]Nadezhda Mandelstam, Hope Against Hope: A Memoir, trans. Max Hayward (New York: Atheneum, 1970), p. 321.

[15]Ibid., p. 321.

[16]Isaac Babel, Izbrannoe (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1966), p. 54.

[17]Isaac Babel, The Collected Stories, trans. and ed. Walter Morison (New York: Meridian, 1972), p. 129. Subsequent references to this edition will be made in parentheses in the text and identified by initials CS followed by page number. All translations from the Russian have been checked.

[18]George Steiner, Language and Silence (New York: Atheneum, 1970), pp. 147-8.

[19]Isaac Babel, The Forgotten Prose, trans. and ed. Nicholas Stroud (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1978), p. 135.

[20]Ilya Ehrenburg, Memoirs: 1921-1941, trans. Tatania Shebunina (New York: Universal Library, 1966), p. 111.

[21]Babel's knowledge of the Bible is evident from his biography and his works. References to Passover, "this best of all Judaic festivals" (LY, 359) can be found throughout his letters.

[22]Isaac Babel, Izbrannoe, p. 28.

[23]G. Williams, "Two Leitmotifs in Babel's Konarmija," Die Welt der Slaven, 17, 1972, pp. 308-17.

[24]Ibid., p. 311.

[25]Polonskii, p. 205.

CHAPTER IV

NATHANAEL WEST: 1903 - 1940

"If I treated you savagely, I
treated myself no gentler."

Nathanael West

"How fitting," says Leslie Fiedler, "that West's first book -- published in 1931, at the point when the first truly Jewish decade in the history of our cultural life was beginning -- be called The Dream Life of Balso Snell, and that it turn out to be, in fact, a fractured and dissolving parable of the very process by which the emancipated Jew enters into the world of Western culture."[1]

Balso deals with the troubled relationship between Hellenism and Hebraism, the tension between the two which has endured until our own time. The Greeks believed in experiencing everything and their discriminations were aesthetic; the Hebrews believed that salvation is found only in living according to God's commands and their discriminations were ethical.

It follows that the Jew (West) can never feel completely at home in Western civilization and explains why so frequently the Jew is found mocking and disparaging the very culture which half of him accepts and even admires. (Heine is an interesting example: in his earlier writings he rejected and opposed Hebrew spirituality in favor of the Greek cult of life. In his later works he says that he discovered "the wisdom

and fecund humanism" of his ancestors and found the Greeks to be mere boys, ephebi, compared to the Hebrews who were men, initiates.)[2]

Balso's journey begins as he examines the famous wooden horse, looking for a way in:

> The mouth was beyond his reach, the navel provided a cul-de-sac, and so, forgetting his dignity, he approached the last. O Anus Mirabilis![3]

"Not for him," Fiedler comments, "the High Road to Culture via the 'horse's mouth,' nor the mystical way of 'contemplating the navel;' only the scherontic Freudian back-entrance: the anal-sexual approach. 'Tradesmen Enter by the Rear.'"[4]

Balso marks the beginning of West's journey as a novelist and of the quest which he continued through his future protagonists. Although often referred to as schoolboyish and obscure, the book is important because it foreshadows many of the themes and ideas dealt with in the novels which followed and, being his first book, reveals much about its author.

"There is an element of self-revelation in West's writing so striking that it cannot be ignored," says Victor Comerchero. "The questers who populate every one of West's novels are merely personae writhing under the same curse as their author. Their suffering troubles the reader ... because he [West] was able to transcend

his personal involvement and render the quest in archetypal forms."[5]

In the interior of the Trojan Horse Balso encounters a host of weird characters. All are fake and ineffectual, but obsessed by the need for some heroic action. All are frustrated physical or emotional cripples, misfits, clinging to the "preposterous" idea that one must search for meaning and values in life. A Roman Catholic mystic is fascinated by a flea whom he transforms into "Saint Puce, the martyred flea who was born, lived, and died beneath the arm of our Lord" (BS, 11), a precocious schoolboy sees himself as Raskolnikov Gilson, who

> found it necessary to substitute strange conceits, wise and witty sayings, peculiar conduct, Art, for the muscles, teeth, hair, of my rivals.
>
> All this much-exhibited intelligence is but a development of the instinct to please. My case is similar to that of a bird called the Amblyornis inornata. As his name indicates, the Inornata is a dull-colored ugly bird. Yet the Inornata is cousin to the Bird of Paradise. Because he lacks his cousin's brilliant plumage, he has to exteriorize internal feathers.
>
> (BS, 26)
>
> Italics mine.

Miss McGeeney, using the pseudo-learned jargon of academic literary criticism, raves about her immortal "work in progress," "the biography of the man who wrote the biography of the man who wrote the biography of the man who wrote the biography of Boswell." (BS, 33).

Beagle Darwin (Beagle Dionysus Hamlet Darwin) the poet, wants to be "as was Christ, Dionysus, Gargantua!" but, alas! was "born from the womb, covered with slime and foul blood, 'midst cries of anguish and suffering." (BS, 55)

The Dream Life of Balso Snell, mocks, parodies and reduces to "BS," religion, culture, literature, art, dreams; it mocks not only Western man's pretensions and panaceas, but also his hopes and aspirations. The Trojan Horse, the classic symbol of deceit, hints from the beginning that all is bogus. But if this is so, and the book was written merely "as a protest against writing books,"[6] one is tempted to ask: "Why?" Is it merely the artist's revenge on the bourgeois audience; the desire to open the ceiling and cover the theatre-occupants (or readers) "with tons of loose excrement?" (BS, 31)

There are some contradictions. If West ridicules man's dreams and illusions, he also partly identifies with them. If he rejects all that adds up to Western culture, he also reflects it.

> The wooden horse, Balso realized, was inhabited solely by writers in search of an audience, and he was determined not to be tricked into listening to another story. If one had to be told, he would tell it.
>
> (BS, 37)
>
> Italics mine.

There is something mysteriously poignant in man's need to "tell his story." Heroes, victims, Othello, Hamlet, the corpse-like inmates of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen; they all wanted their stories told. West understood this intensely human need to make one's life, whether tragic or desolate, significant. Some of the pipe-dreams and self-delusions may be melodramatic and grotesque, but the desire "to render the pedestrian poetic,"[7] is moving and it invites compassion.

"I always find it necessary to burlesque the mystery of feeling at its source," (BS, 27) says the tragic clown in Balso, antecedent to Lenny Bruce, but also heir to Jeremiah when he declares: "if I treated you savagely, I treated myself no gentler." (BS, 47)

West dramatized in Balso many of his dualisms with which he was to wrestle continuously in his later works: his yearning for a transcendental view of existence and his profound awareness of chaos and futility; his love and hate for Art, Intellect, America, and his fierce ambivalence toward the Jews.

When the official "tour-guide" appears at the bowel-gate offering his services, Balso becomes "ferociously" angry. The guide is a Jew, according to Fiedler, "the archetypal father."[8] Malin refers to him as "the first figure of authority in West's works ... proud, defiant

and wise."[9] Light equates Balso's escape from the guide with his - and West's - rejection of Judaism.[10] Brand refers to him as "a poet of sorts." "The Jew," he explains, "euphemizes the rough of experience; he superimposes color upon the matter-of-fact ... It is fitting that the Jew should guide Balso through the horse, since he is one of the guides of our civilization, and should excel in the journey, especially in one across a wilderness, having no apparent end and demanding endurance."[11] The Jewish guide is aggressive and talkative (pushy and loud as the commonly used epithet goes). He tries to entertain Balso with an "old tale of my people, rich in local color." (BS, 6) But Balso is only irritated by this "typical" sense of humour. Coming upon a place where the intestine had burst through the stomach wall, he cries, "What a hernia!"

> Hernia Hornstein! Paresis Pearlberg! Paranoia Puntz! How much more pleasing to the ear (and what other sense should a name please?) than Faith Rabinowitz or Hope Hilkowitz.
>
> (BS, 7)

The touchy guide becomes agitated and shouts in "an enormous voice, 'I'm a Jew! and whenever anything Jewish is mentioned, I find it necessary to say that I am a Jew. I'm a Jew! A Jew!'" (BS, 8)

> "Oh, you mistake me," Balso said, "I have nothing against the Jews. I admire the Jews; they are a thrifty race. Some of my best friends are Jews."

> "... The semites, are like to a man sitting in a cloaca to the eyes, and whose brows touch heaven."
>
> (BS, 8)

Comerchero explains:

> That West himself probably could never have uttered the remark, "I'm a Jew ... A Jew!" should not lead one to dismiss his identification with the guide. Certainly he was not that "type" of Jew, and he probably felt ashamed and disgusted by such a person.[12]

To differentiate between the more "acceptable" (i.e., more assimilated) type of Jew and the "typical" one is no less nonsensical than the "some of my best friends are ..." cliché. Besides, if that indeed were the crux of it, West, who was the "congenial type," quiet-spoken, well-mannered, dressed in Brooks Brothers' best, surrounded by Gentile buddies and all the accoutrements of an ersatz-Vanderbilt, should certainly have been accepted by the snobbish fraternities at Brown -- but he was not. German Jews who had acquired titles, distinctions and the most Prussian accent and manners, should not have been gassed with the uncouth Ost-Jude of whom they were "ashamed," — but they were. If West was "disgusted," it was with the Jew in himself, and not with the lack of "savoir faire" of the unsophisticated fellow-Jews.

He rejected above all that with which he most identified: the intensity, "otherness," self-consciousness,

the repertoire of high parable "with a moral" mixed with low comedy, reminiscent of today's New York comedians -- all these characterize the Jewish guide and offend Balso. They also characterize and offend West. The Jew is dismissed and feared by Balso (and West) says Irving Malin,

> because he accepts the impossibility of grace -- it is nonexistent for him -- and the probability of irreconcilable earthly differences. He refuses to surrender dialectical thinking for easy circularity. He is full of tension; he needs no perfect circle to sustain him on earth.[13]

Balso is enraged by the madness of a people who insist on "Faith" and "Hope" amidst the "Hernia-Paresis-Paranoia" reality. Like West, he finds the paradoxical condition of "sitting in a cloaca to the eyes" with brows touching heaven, exasperating. Whatever the symbolic significance of Balso's violent "tearing loose" and fleeing from the objectionable guide-"censor" may be, West never again admits him into the world of his fiction. No character in his future works declares so explicitly and outspokenly that he is Jewish. But the dreams and conflicts which haunt his protagonists are peculiarly Jewish: the fears of alien pursuers, the pain of "otherness" and isolation, the pity and rage for the impotent sufferers, the violence and destruction culminating in Sodom burning, and the urge to continue the futile quest

for love and justice amidst defeat and chaos.

Asked by an interviewer about his plans after having published Balso, "a protest against writing books," West replied unhesitatingly that, of course, he had begun another book, "of quite a different make, wholesome, clean, holy, slightly mystic and inane."[15] The book, Miss Lonelyhearts, tells the story of a "priest of our time," a newspaperman who writes a daily sob-sister column for the New York Post-Dispatch. He is known to his correspondents as Miss Lonelyhearts, and is always identified only by his role. When he was hired he knew that the job was a circulation stunt treated by the whole staff as a joke. Miss Lonelyhearts also considers it a joke at first. But after several months he sees that the letters are "profoundly humble pleas for moral and spiritual advice, that they are inarticulate expressions of genuine suffering."[15] Forced to examine the values by which he lives, he can no longer see the hoax of phoney salvation as funny and finds himself "the victim of the joke and not its perpetrator." (Miss Lonelyhearts, 106) Italics mine. Unable to justify, explain or forget the pain and misery which he must face daily in the letters "stamped from the dough of suffering with a heart-shaped cookie knife," (Miss Lonelyhearts, 66) he tries various methods to come to terms with his helplessness, all of which fail.

The knowledge that nothing can be done about the suffering, paired with the simultaneous feeling that something must be done, drives him to despair and isolation. Defeated in all his attempted escapes (whisky, half-hearted sex, jokes) the man with "a Christ-complex" embarks on a "program for the attainment of salvation."[16] This program is alternately referred to as "sickness" or "religious experience" and it leads to Miss Lonelyhearts' complete alienation from the world which he can neither ignore nor mend. In the end, driven almost insane by his sense of messianic mission, he is murdered by one of his correspondents, a cripple whom he attempted to "save" with love.

Norman Podhoretz sees Balso as a "battleground on which West the sentimentalist is pitted against West the cynic, each party asserting his claim to superior wisdom and refusing to concede any value to the other."[17] In Miss Lonelyhearts the dual vision continues, but the two aspects of West take on separate identities. The cynic becomes Shrike, the sentimentalist -- Miss Lonelyhearts, "the fool of pity."[18]

The world of Miss Lonelyhearts is permeated by pain and violence. The landscape shows a scene of decay, disorder and struggle. The sky looks "as if it had been rubbed with a soiled eraser." (Miss Lonely-

> The decay that covered the surface of the mottled ground was not the kind in which life generates ... May had failed to quicken these soiled fields. It had taken all the brutality of July to torture a few green spikes through the exhausted dirt.
>
> (Miss Lonelyhearts, 70)

Threatened by the physical world which is senseless in its "tropism for disorder," (Miss Lonelyhearts, 104) and trapped in the human loneliness and isolation which twentieth century America has created for him, man feels impotent, alienated and irrelevant. His only escape - dreams - has been weakened by commercialization and stereotyping:

> Men have always fought their misery with dreams. Although dreams were once powerful, they have been made puerile by the movies, radio and newspapers.
>
> (Miss Lonelyhearts, 115)

Unable to delude himself successfully, man can only break out of the trap of passive suffering through active violence. In Miss Lonelyhearts violence is omnipresent. "Violent images are used to illustrate commonplace events. Violent acts are left almost bald."[19]

The letters are permeated with violence and pain. The relationships between the four chief characters in the book reek of cruelty and violence. Miss Lonelyhearts himself admits that "only friction could make him warm or violence make him mobile." (Miss Lonelyhearts,

90) The chapter, "Miss Lonelyhearts and the Lamb," revealed in a dream, has the overtones of the sacrifice of Isaac and Christ, but it ends in nightmarish slaughter. Miss Lonelyhearts succeeds only in maiming the animal and getting his hands covered with its "slimy blood." (Miss Lonelyhearts, 77) Miss Lonelyhearts' attitude to violence is ambivalent. Largely reflecting West's views, it also expresses his inability to resolve his dualities. West, who tried to see himself as "American Everyman," knew that "In America violence is idiomatic, in America violence is daily."[20] Weinstein, however,

> is enough the child of a long tradition of nonviolence to be racked by guilt in the face of violence, shocked and tormented every day in a world where violence is, of course, daily and most men are not at all disturbed. In Miss Lonelyhearts, he creates the portrait of a character, all nerves and no skin, the fool of pity, whom the quite ordinary horror of ordinary life lacerates to the point of madness.[21]

Miss Lonelyhearts knows that his compassion for and identification with "all the broken bastards" (Miss Lonelyhearts, 81) threatens to destroy him. He wants to twist the arm "of all the sick and miserable, broken and betrayed, inarticulate and impotent." (Miss Lonelyhearts, 88) The weakness and the passive suffering of these "nebbish" victims disgust him. He knows that to

be a "humanity lover" in an inhuman world and to try to keep faith alive in a world where all forces from within and without conspire to destroy it, is mad, ridiculous.

Yet the suffering, although purposeless, is unrelieved, permanent and real, and its mere existence makes a response necessary if one is to remain human. Miss Lonelyhearts' ultimate distinction from the other characters in the book is his determination to stay human in "a desert of rust and body dirt, surrounded by a backyard fence on which are posters describing the events of the day. Mother slays five with ax, slays seven, slays nine .... Babe slams two, slams three ...." (Miss Lonelyhearts, 97)

The other principal characters are William and Mary Shrike, Peter and Fay Doyle and Betty, Miss Lonelyhearts' girlfriend. The Doyles and Shrikes are symbols of an eternal dichotomy which fascinates West: the Doyles reflect the brutality and grossness of life dominated by an all-sexual (female) principle; the Shrikes, the sterility and mechanical quality of life under the dominance of an antilife, dry intellect. Miss Lonelyhearts, the natural target for the destruction latent in both, is assaulted by "moon-driven" Fay Doyle and cynical, life-deriding Shrike. Betty the Buddha, who "had often made him feel that when she straightened his tie, she

straightened much more," (Miss Lonelyhearts, 79) seems to have the answer at first. Her calmness, "her gingham apron, his slippers beside the fireplace," (Miss Lonelyhearts, 80) promise respite from pain and chaos. But he soon discovers that "her sureness was based on the power to limit experience arbitrarily. Moreover, his confusion was significant, while her order was not." (Miss Lonelyhearts, 79) (Betty is reminiscent of West's fiancée, Alice Shepard whom he never married. As Sanford explains it, "she - Alice - was tall and good looking, conventionally so, as are five million American girls of any generation.")[22] Betty's way of looking at the world excludes the letter-writers and demands the averting of one's eyes from human misery. She takes him to the zoo where he is amused by her evident belief in the curative power of animals. She seemed to think that it must steady him to look at a buffalo." (Miss Lonelyhearts, 111) She takes him to the farm in order to make him forget his "city troubles." (Miss Lonelyhearts, 106) But Miss Lonelyhearts is an urban man and his "city troubles" are a part of the essence of his internal self, just as Betty's country serenity is a part of her "Connecticut farm" self.

All Miss Lonelyhearts sees in the country is the same irrationality and struggle; the inevitable Darwinian

fight for survival; those who eat and those who are eaten.

> [They] watched a heron hunt frogs. Just as they were about to start back, two deer and a fawn came down to the water on the opposite side of the pond. The flies were bothering them and they went into the water and began to feed on the lily pads.
>
> (Miss Lonelyhearts, 113)

At the local gas-station, an attendant whom Miss Lonelyhearts asks about the deer, answers that "there is still plenty of deer at the pond because no yids ever went there. He said it wasn't the hunters who drove out the deer, but the yids." (Miss Lonelyhearts, 114) "When they reached the Bronx slums, Miss Lonelyhearts knew that Betty had failed to cure him and that he had been right when he had said that he could never forget the letters." (Miss Lonelyhearts, 115)

Betty cannot comprehend Miss Lonelyhearts' involvement and identification with the "miserable, broken and betrayed, inarticulate and impotent" (Miss Lonelyhearts, 88) victims, or the mixture of pity and disgust that he feels for them. When she asks him simply, "are you sick?" he becomes hysterical.

> "Wife-torturers, rapers of small children, according to you they're all sick. No morality, only medicine. Well, I'm not sick. I don't need any of your damned aspirin. I've got a Christ complex. Humanity ... I'm a humanity lover. All the

broken bastards ..."

(Miss Lonelyhearts, 81)

Italics mine.

When she smiles at him rather helplessly and simply, he becomes suspicious and touchy.

> On the defense, he examined her laugh for "bitterness," "sour-grapes," "a broken-heart," "the-devil-may-care." But to his confusion, he found nothing at which to laugh back. Her smile had opened naturally ... a smile that was neither "wry," "ironical," nor "mysterious."
>
> (Miss Lonelyhearts, 80)
>
> Italics mine.

The words in West's quotation marks provide a catalogue of terms applied to Jewish humour and describe the kind of laughter which is neither carefree nor gay; the laughter of the Jewish clowns and fools, who try to find in mocking irony a psychic relief from an insufferable reality, the laughter of a people humiliated and persecuted and yet holding a firm grip on life and insisting that to be alive is good; the laughter of all the lonely hearts full of compassion and indignation; West called it "my particular kind of joking."[23]

"Why don't you let me alone?" Betty says and begins to cry. "I felt swell before you came, and now I feel lousy." (Miss Lonelyhearts, 82) Indeed, a people who carry on a tireless campaign to make the world human,

who talk constantly about conscience, self-searching, and morality, makes the world "feel lousy" and is understandably resented. In Red Cavalry the Cossacks express their view of this disagreeable phenomenon:

> "Why is it always agitating, looking for trouble? Why is it always on the way somewhere, that nation of yours?"[24]

> "You'd like not to have any enemies in life. ... And you know what comes of that? It makes everything a lousy bore - that's all."[25]

Rejecting the Betty alternative of uncomplicated cheerfulness and clean country air, Miss Lonelyhearts must return to his "city troubles" and human odours, which Betty finds offensive. (Miss Lonelyhearts, 112) Back on the job he confronts Shrike, the feature editor, a city man as well. Shrike is the mocker, the embittered cynic who finds every human aspiration absurd and is out to destroy it. Named after the bird of prey that impales its victim on thorns, Shrike taunts and lacerates Miss Lonelyhearts. He makes brilliant speeches, garish and sterile masterpieces of evocative rhetoric. Man's pretentious attempts to find happiness in the Soil, The South Seas, Hedonism and Art are extravagantly described, jeered at and rejected for their laughable inadequacy. In conclusion, he offers the seekers one hope: "the First Church of Christ the Dentist, where He is worshiped as Preventer of Decay. The church whose symbol is the

trinity new style: Father, Son and Wirehaired Fox Terrier." (Miss Lonelyhearts, 110) Although his verbal attacks are savage, his face is blank and the practiced expression - the dead pan - never changes. "His features huddled together in a dead, gray triangle." (Miss Lonelyhearts, 72) He is malignant and cold. Hiding behind his permanent jeer is a horrible truth: he can neither give nor receive love. His cynical wisecracking is hollow and reveals a stunted intelligence which covers "with a thick glove of words," (Miss Lonelyhearts, 107) the wasteland of his spirit. No, surely Shrike's way is not the answer.

If West portrays Miss Lonelyhearts as a sentimental fool of pity, he does it with compassionate irony, whereas he deals with Shrike's dissociated cynical intellect with harshness and disapproval. Shrike's destructive mockery is satirized and disqualified as a response to human pain and loneliness, whereas Miss Lonelyhearts' feeble attempts to find some way out, although inadequate, are the only evidence in the book of a man's poignant struggle to remain human.

The accidental shooting of Miss Lonelyhearts, lacking even the significance of a deliberate act, reflects the sense of gratuitous and mechanical human destruction, and makes a point of the pointlessness and absurdity of

loving in a world where love seems dead and irrelevant. If a vulnerable sentimentalist insists on pursuing a Christ-dream amidst the sordidness, violence and futility, his dream must lead to pain, intense alienation and a useless death. If Miss Lonelyhearts rejects sentimentality, spiritualism and the messianic aspiration of the Jew, it does it with much ambivalence. True, there is no promise of redemption or any divine intervention in Miss Lonelyhearts. Things are as they are: unrelenting and absurd. The hysteria and pity of a Miss Lonelyhearts cannot save or heal the world. It makes him only miserable, self-conscious, pathetic. His spirituality makes him impotent. Not capable of maintaining any distance from the world or from his own self-corrosive psyche, he can only become fragmented by the broken world he seeks to mend.

Yet, when we consider the alternatives -- the "Gospel according to Shrike," the callous "joke-machine," or the retreat from experience and the moral shallowness that underlay the surface harmony of Betty's "formula" -- we find in Miss Lonelyhearts the only moral alternative.

The desperate need for faith and a demonic lucidity that resists it; the endless quest for meaning, affirmation and love, harnessed to an awareness of irrationality, chaos and hostility; the disparity between secular facts

and the suppressed religious ideals; the ambivalent love-hate attitude to the anti-heroic "fool of pity" who although pathetic is the most worthwhile human being in the book -- these are the themes of Miss Lonelyhearts. These are also the themes with which most Jewish writers have been singularly obsessed.

In his chapter on West, "The Author Reveals Himself," Comerchero says:

> The most striking example of West's true voice unintentionally emerging is found in his treatment of Jewish characters. In every one of West's novels, even in his finished masterpiece, Miss Lonelyhearts, there is a Jew to be found who is unsympathetic. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that West has created only offensive Jewish portraits.[26]
>
> Italics mine.

Yet, the same critic is found saying two pages away, "he had a certain prophetic Jewish idealism and intolerance that prevented him from extenuating man's frailty."[27] Robert Coates, West's friend and critic, says: "West, first and last, was a moralist, and an Old Testament one at that."[28] John Brand writes, "Nathanael West remained Nathan Weinstein. Readers have noted but seldom explored West's essential Jewishness ... Critics have allowed themselves the privilege of describing and interpreting West in terms which are understandable only in relation to the faith of Israel."[29] A host of critics refer to

West as the modern Jeremiah. All this confirms the conviction that West's "Jewish problem" is not simple.

Balso, it has been said, "tries very hard to mock Western culture out of existence."[30] It rejects the aesthetic discriminations of the Greeks as well as Judaism with its notions of sanctification and holiness -- in short, the whole deceitful enterprise of Western civilization. The protagonist's initials, B S, the prevailing scatology and the book's resolution in which even the "climax" is fake, a dry dream turned wet, seem to confirm this view. Balso's "ineffectual ejaculation" in the end is interestingly related to the words he carves on the horse's posterior in the beginning: "O Byss! O Abyss! O Anon! O Anan!"

"O Anon! O Anan!" sounds like Onan.[31] "And Onan knew that the seed would not be his;" (Gen. 38:9) I find this to be pertinent to my statement on page 129 regarding the Jew's (West's) unease in Western culture and his ironic mocking of his own aspiration to become part of it.

In Miss Lonelyhearts, however, it is only Shrike who mocks and rejects all. It is he who rejects the Hebrew value of compassion when he says, "Miss Lonelyhearts, my friend, I advise you to give your readers stones," (Miss Lonelyhearts, 71) or life's sanctity when he speaks of

"prayers for the condemned man's soul offered on an adding machine." (Miss Lonelyhearts, 73)

It is Betty and not Miss Lonelyhearts who is the super fake in this novel. It is Betty who represents "all the things that went with strawberry sodas and farms in Connecticut." (Miss Lonelyhearts, 137) Betty is the gentile America which Miss Lonelyhearts (and West) wanted to mate and for whose sake he would (if he could) be "simple and sweet, whimsical and poetic, a trifle collegiate yet very masculine." (Miss Lonelyhearts, 137)

If West mocks the vulnerable, sentimental fool whose sympathy for the "underdog" destroys him, he rejects the other characters categorically. If he rages against the burden of being "his brother's keeper," he does not sneer at:

> ... ye were strangers in the land of Egypt. Ye shall not afflict any widow or fatherless child.
>
> Ex 22:21

There is no denying that an array of disgusting Jewish characters appear in West's novels. Particularly in A Cool Millior, there is the greedy lawyer Abromovitz, "member of the chosen people,"[32] the obnoxious decorator, Goldstein who furnishes a brothel suite in "perfect colonial." (CM, 170) There is even an Indian Chief with the extraordinary name Israel Satinpenny.

But, at the center of this story is "The Pageant of America or a Curse on Columbus," which consists of

> a series of short sketches in which Quakers were shown being branded, Indians brutalized and cheated, Negroes sold, children sweated to death.
>
> (CM, 239)

None of these evils are shown being done by Jews.

Aside from the savage and burlesque indictment of American materialism and the Horatio Alger legendary success, the book's deeper concern lies with the precariousness of American freedom and with the potential indiscriminate violence stored up in the restless, anonymous crowd. This is a very Jewish nightmare, fed by the collective memory of pogroms and autos-de-fe.

Writing the book just after the accession to power of Hitler, West was clearly aware of the vulnerability of America to totalitarianism disguised as chauvinism and America-firstism. Whipple's slogan "America for Americans!" free of "aliens" -- "Jewish international bankers and Bolshevik labor unions" (CM, 187) -- sounds frightening to West, the Jew.[33]

Addressed by Whipple, leader of the "Storm Troopers," the mob, trapped by a set of beliefs which have little relation to reality, is seething with frustration. Lacking insight into their discontent and unable to combat it, they leap to violence at the sign of a random scapegoat:

> ... the crowd ran off in all directions, shouting "Lynch him! Lynch him!" although a good three-quarters of its members did not know whom it was they were supposed to lynch. This fact did not bother them, however ... It gave them a great deal of leeway in their choice of a victim... As time went on, the riot grew more general in character ... The heads of Negroes were paraded on poles. A Jewish drummer was nailed to the door of his hotel room. The housekeeper of the local Catholic priest was raped.
>
> (CM, 245-6)

Lemuel Pitkin, the shlemiehl protagonist, coached like Candide by a "philosopher," Shagpoke Whipple, does not understand what hit him, as he goes from one disaster to another. Nor does the mob understand that it is being manipulated by slogans of "freedom," "open competition," "fair play;" "parasitical international bankers" vs. "creative American capitalists, like Henry Ford." (CM, 242)

Pitkin is "dismantled" and eventually assassinated in "the service of his lord," as he begins his political speech in support of the "leather shirts:" "I am a clown, but there are times when even clowns must grow serious." (CM, 253)

The final ironic twist in the novel comes when Whipple addresses the Fascist Party of America in a speech paying tribute to their "martyr," Lemuel Pitkin:

"Why are we celebrating this day above other days?"

(CM, 254) he begins. The sentence is taken from the Haggadah, the Passover service, that celebrates the Jews' flight from Egypt and their deliverance from slavery.* Lemuel's pilgrimage was not in vain, says Whipple, for he "purged (America) of alien diseases." (CM, 255)

"Hail, Lemuel Pitkin!" shout the "youthful hearers," ominously reminiscent of the Hitler Jugend.

"All Hail, the American Boy!" (CM, 106) On this note the book ends.

It is difficult to believe that West, a Jew, was indifferent to "Hail America" nationalism and super-patriotism, or oblivious to "Heil Hitler" Nazism and its implications. To what extent he wanted his book to be a warning to all who, complacent and smug, averted their eyes from reality, one can only guess and speculate. They did not listen anyhow. Recently, a spokesman for the American Nazi Party announced on National TV that "all those stories about death camps and mass murder aren't true. But ... I wish they were."[34]

A Cool Million foreshadows the pivotal theme of West's next and last book: the violence and destruction

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* It reads: "Ma nishtana halailah hazeh mikol haleilot?"
-"Why are we celebrating this night above other nights?"

latent in the frustrated mob. The Day of the Locust, written in Hollywood where West worked as script-writer, was published in 1939, a year before his death. Using the unreality of Hollywood as a dramatic symbol for the barrenness and meaninglessness of modern life, it sums up a demented civilization and foretells its doom. Leitmotifs of apathy, lechery, frustration and brutal violence dominate all episodes; time and space are dislocated, mixing up the events of history with those in the movie sets, and blurring the distinction between reality and artifice and nightmare. Disjunctive as the scenes may seem, the recurring movement in each leads from dream through disillusionment to chaos and violence.

Every relationship, social meeting, ritual occasion, turns to turmoil, bedlam, riot. The pressure towards disorder takes its final form in the apocalyptic mob-scene with which the book ends. A radio announcer stands above the crowd, asking in a high, hysterical voice "like that of a revivalist preacher whipping his congregation toward the ecstacy of fits ... 'Can the police hold them? Can they? It doesn't look so, folks' ...."[35] The mob grows, shoving, bulging, pushing. Within, it stumbles and swirls, releasing the most primitive powers -- lust, suspiciousness, hostility and hatred for anyone "different," and the desire to break and kill in an in-

sane attempt to avenge a life of emptiness.

The landscape of the Hollywood "dream-dump" is crowded with garish ugliness and monstrosity. The architecture is incongruous, make-shift and ghastly; it reflects the people, the freaks. "Only dynamite would be of any use against the Mexican ranch houses, Samoan huts, Mediterranean villas ..." (DL, 262) An inner voice, however, calls for charity:

> It is hard to laugh at the need for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless, even horrible, the results of that need are. But it is easy to sigh.
>
> (DL, 262)

In Hollywood, where men are "eating cardboard food in front of a cellophane waterfall," (DL, 351) where imitation mountains collapse under imitation armies, and Eros lies "face downward in a pile of old newspapers and bottles" (DL, 351) in a papier mache temple, people are lured by dreams which can never come true. The Cheated* who people the dream-factory are denied the heroics played up by the movie tabloids and must turn to lesser excitements to satisfy their thwarted emotional hunger. Betrayed and disillusioned by perverted dreams, they are bored and can only find a brief sense of reality and aliveness in violence. For a moment, a plane crash or

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* The original title of the novel. (Richard Gehman, Introduction to the Day, xlx)

a bloody cock-fight can satisfy their "drained-out feeble bodies and the wild, disordered minds;" (DL, 365) when it disappears, emptiness returns and the hysterical craving for "something" to happen begins to gnaw at them again.

> The sun is a joke. Oranges can't titillate their jaded palates. Nothing can ever be violent enough to make taut their slack minds and bodies.
>
> (DL, 412)

The people in The Day of the Locust are nearly all deformed, dried up, slovenly and malicious. Apart from the regular film-colony grotesques, The Day of the Locust parades witless cowboys, failed actors, emotional cripples, a dwarf and a memorable mindless Hollywood Blonde. All characters are shown to be hopelessly trapped.

Tod Hackett is a painter who was hired to learn set and costume designing in Hollywood. "A very complicated young man with a whole set of personalities, one inside the other," (DL, 260) who grabbed the job "despite the arguments of his friends who were certain he was selling out and would never paint again," (DL, 262) Tod bears much resemblance to West. Like West, he is interested, above all, in "the lonely crowd," in those who "had come to California to die," (DL, 261) and is planning to put them in his painting, The Burning of Los Angeles. Tod

is self-aware and aware of his predicament. He is afflicted with a moral impulse at a time when the traditional forms to articulate it have collapsed. The standards of compassion and decency which he tries to maintain are vitiated by his own disbelief in their authority. He knows that he is powerless and ineffectual as a moralist. He feels threatened by the mob-monster's force and overwhelming numbers but is also aware of sharing their frustration and violence. In his ineffectual ambivalence he resembles Miss Lonelyhearts, but unlike him, Tod combines his concern with detachment. He "would not satirize them," as Balso did, "nor would he pity them," (DL, 365-6) as Miss Lonelyhearts did. He makes explicitly clear that "he had never set himself up as a healer" (DL, 388) but as an artist who

> ... would paint their [the crowd's] fury with respect, appreciating its awful, anarchic power and aware that they had it in them to destroy civilization.
>
> (DL, 366)

Despite his disbelief in all the self's poses, "nevertheless, he refused to give up the role of Jeremiah" (DL, 335) the prophet of the coming destruction. Preparing for his painting, he draws sketches of the main performers: Claude Estee, Faye Greener and her father Harry, Homer Simpson, and Abe Kusich.

Claude Estee is a successful screen-writer who lives in one of the monstrous villas with a "realistic, lifesize reproduction" of a dead horse at the bottom of his swimming pool. (DL, 274)

> He was master of an involved comic rhetoric that permitted him to express his moral indignation and still keep his reputation for worldliness and wit.
>
> (DL, 276)

While ridiculing the movie colony and their false idols, Claude participates in their phoney existence. His clever jokes, although less savage and more sophisticated than Shrike's, resound with echoes of the latter's mocking cynicism.

Harry Greener, an aged "bedraggled Harlequin" (DL, 282) is the epitome of the failed actor who, having found in clowning his sole method of defence against life, never parts with his stage-pose. His face "like a mask" (DL, 336) shows only the rehearsed, gross vaudeville stance. Even on his deathbed he groans "skillfully a second-act curtain groan, so phony that Tod had to hide a smile." (DL, 336) A smile mixed with compassion, because "Harry suffered as keenly as anyone, despite the theatricality of his groans and grimaces." (DL, 337) Practiced as his laugh was, it was "a victim's laugh." (DL, 300)

Faye Greener is another of West's fake Venuses. She

is pretty and enticing, but "her invitation was not to pleasure, but to struggle, hard and sharp, closer to murder than to love." (DL, 271) Her "subtle half-smile uncontaminated by thought" drives men to submission, madness and violence. (DL, 364) Going from childish make-believe stories of fame and "loads and loads of money," (DL, 318) -- "any dream was better than no dream" (DL, 317) -- to sordid reality -- a job as a call-girl to pay for her father's funeral -- Faye retains her buoyancy and the invulnerability of "a cork" floating on the sea, to the very end.

Homer Simpson, the clerk from Iowa, impresses Tod as "an exact model for the kind of person who comes to California to die." (DL, 285) In his lethargy and total alienation from his body, his intelligence and the very experiences he undergoes, he is the perfect product and paradigm of the cheated crowd's sterility and latent murderousness.

> For all his size and shape, he looked neither strong nor fertile. He was like one of Picasso's great sterile athletes, who brood hopelessly on pink sand, staring at veined marble waves.
>
> (DL, 290)

Homer's suffering, which he cannot articulate, is "basic and permanent." Unable to find an escape in dreams or poses, he resorts to sleep and listless "baking" in the sun.

> ... whether he was happy or not is hard to say. Probably he was neither, just as a plant is neither. He had memories to disturb him and a plant hasn't, but after the first bad night his memories were quiet.
>
> (DL, 298)

The only sign of life about Homer is his hands. Their exaggerated but ineffectual gestures are the mute expression of what Homer has no words for. His hands itch, burn, jerk "as though troubled by dreams" and their fingers twine "like a tangle of thighs in miniature." (DL, 313) Sex inspires terror of pain and humiliation in Homer. He accepts Faye's arrangement which permits him to worship her like a devoted eunuch, and for her to abuse him and eventually leave him. Abandoned by the object of his adoration, Homer turns to the one place where he can find a secure home: the womb. Assuming the position of "uterine flight," he withdraws into the "warm, rich darkness." (DL, 404) His body emerges from the foetal position to join the crowd massed in front of a Hollywood premiere, but his mind never resumes even its former minimal functioning. Carried by the mob he walks "like a badly made automaton and his features were set in a rigid, mechanical grin." (DL, 412) When a stone thrown by a little boy hits his face, Homer is shocked out of the inactivity of his grief and withdrawal and tries to trample the

child to death. The crowd takes its cue from the incident, and in a moment the lethargy of the bored, flabby "cheated ones" disappears and the brutality of the race emerges. Homer, "his jaw hanging as though he wanted to scream but couldn't," is caught by "his open mouth and pulled forward and down" into the seething mob. (DL, 415)

Homer represents "all the broken bastards," the passive, hurt, victimized humanity. But he also stands for the mob; an instinctive force, potentially cruel, violent, murderous.

In a sense, all the characters in The Day of the Locust are actors manqués; in the supporting cast: Cowboys with "two dimensional faces that a talented child might have drawn with a ruler and compass," (DL, 323) Indians named "Chief Kiss-My-Towkus,"* (DL, 404) cultists of all sorts ("What do you follow?" I'm a raw-foodist, myself,") (DL, 361). The main performers: Claude Estee, Harry and Faye Greener, Homer Simpson and Abe Kusich.

Abe Kusich is "an important figure in a set of lithographs called 'The Dancers'" on which Tod is working in preparation for his magnum opus, The Burning of Los Angeles. (DL, 263) Kusich is a dwarf, loud, tough and pugnacious; a deformed, grotesque figure, desperately

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* Yiddish for "Kiss-My-Ass."

trying to assert himself as "normal." Tod's feelings for him are mixed:

> Despite the sincere indignation that Abe's grotesque depravity aroused in him, he welcomed his company. The little man excited him and in that way made him feel certain of his need to paint.
>
> (DL, 264)

When Tod meets Abe for the first time he mistakes him for "a pile of soiled laundry" or perhaps, "a dog wrapped in a blanket." (DL, 264) But he soon discovers that the tiny man with "his slightly hydrocephalic head" (DL, 264) has a roaring voice, "a powerful grip," (DL, 266) and enormous vitality. ("No quiff can give Abe Kusich the fingeroo and get away with it.") (DL, 267) Being a dwarf, Abe is the obvious "outsider;" nevertheless, he refuses to accept his inferior status. He is independent, tenacious and pursues fun and women with a glee and vitality lacking in the "normal" males in the book. He is likened to "a terrier in harness," (DL, 376) "dashed against the wall, like ... a rabbit against a tree," (DL, 394) but he also comes back charging "like a tiny ram." (DL, 394) Italics mine. His typical pose is: "fists clenched and his chin stuck out." (DL, 393) Despite his size and position, he generally gives as much as he gets. He wants no favors, but refuses to tolerate abuse.

> "I don't forget nothing. I remember. I remember those who do me dirt and those who do me favors. I don't want anybody going around saying Abe Kusich owes him anything.
>
> (DL, 267)

Abe Kusich is not a "humanity-lover;" he has no Christ-complex. He is not Lemuel dismantled, providing amusement for a cruel audience he is trying to please; he is no pushover scapegoat. He is not a hero defying fate or hoping to change it. But he is a human being, unable not to respond to suffering or not to feel compassion. He is the only such human being in The Day of the Locust. Ontological arguments and metaphysical dichotomies are beyond Abe's reach. To survive among Goliaths three times his size, who need so little stimulation to hate anyone "different," is for him precarious enough. To survive with exuberance and passion and to continue to fight for dignity, love, sex and life itself, is nothing short of miraculous.

Abe Kusich is a survivor. He doesn't "run to succor humanity," but "remembers those who do him dirt and those who do him favors." When attacked, he has learned to defend himself. Knocked unconscious by the big cowboy, he comes to quickly with a curse, applies ice to his injured head and goes "on the town" to have fun. (DL, 394) His "indestructibility" is not a natural gift, but a

strength he has forged out of weakness. His pugnacity is not an outcome of nature's generous endowments, rather it is a result of his daily struggle to survive, a contemptuous sneer at the surrounding ill-wishers and an urgent need to affirm life in spite of any odds.

Named after the moral and religious "leader of the Chosen People," Abe is an ironic replica of the great patriarch. But placed among unfeeling mockers, lifeless automatons and demented sensation-seekers, he is the only compassionate and life-celebrating character in the novel. He whose affliction is so undeniably real, resists self-pity and resignation. West's intention to identify Abe with the ultimate in human suffering is made clear in Tod's comment to Homer Simpson -- himself a heap of misery -- that Homer could learn about agony from Abe. While trying to respond to Homer's appeal for sympathy, Tod hears "four short sounds, ha-ha and again ha-ha, distinct musical notes made by the dwarf. '<u>You could learn from him</u>,' Tod said." (DL, 388) Italics mine.

Abe refuses to bow to defeat or to be constricted by his handicap. While the others continue the cliché pipe-dreaming or submit to corruption and violence, Abe defies adversity and confronting pain and suffering responds with courage, spunk and compassion for others.

Nervously observing the preparations for the cock-

fight in which the odds are absurdly uneven, Abe comments on Juju, the splendid "six-time winner," with "a triangular head, like a snake's:" "he's a nice bird, but looks ain't everything" (DL, 378) and on the red plain-looking rooster with a cracked beak, "he may have been a good one once." (DL, 380) Italics mine. Nevertheless, he begs to be allowed to handle the "undercock." The fight soon turns into massacre.

> The little man moaned over the bird, then set to work. He spit into its gaping beak and took the comb between his lips and sucked the blood back into it. The red began to regain its fury, but not its strength.
>
> (DL, 381)

They pit the birds and the red with his beak broken off and a "large bubble of blood where the beak had been," is repeatedly mutilated despite his stubborn efforts to fight back.

> Abe, moaning softly, smoothed its feathers and licked its eyes clean .... Juju went into the air again and this time drove a gaff through one of the red's eyes into its brain. The red fell over stone dead.
>
> The dwarf groaned with anguish, but no one else said anything. Juju pecked at the dead bird's remaining eye.
>
> "Take off that stinking cannibal!" the dwarf screamed.
>
> (DL, 382-3)
>
> Italics mine.

It is interesting to note the circumstances under which Abe Kusich enters and leaves The Day of the Locust.

In both instances he is seen as unwanted, humiliated, beaten, but not ultimately defeated. In the first scene, Tod finds him sleeping on the corridor floor ("a pile of soiled laundry"). He has been thrown out of an apartment by a woman ("A lollapalooza - all slut and a yard wide") (DL, 265) who had accepted his money and favors but rejected his advances. In the last scene he is asked to leave Faye's house, for approximately the same reason, only this time he fights back ferociously enough to send big cowboy Earle, "fugitive from the Western Costume Company ... louse in a fright wig," (DL, 376), groaning with pain. "We'd better take the homunculus with us or he's liable to murder the whole household," says cool Claude Estee (DL, 395). But "homunculus" Abe has other plans.

> "No," said the dwarf, "let's go see some girls. I'm just getting started."
> "To hell with that," snapped Tod. "Come on." He pushed the dwarf toward the door. "Take your hands off, punk! roared the little man. ... They went with the dwarf to his car and watched him climb in behind the wheel. He had special extensions on the clutch and brake so that he could reach them with his tiny feet.
> "Come to town?"
> "No, thanks," Claude said politely.
> "Then to hell with you!"
> That was his farewell. He let out the brake and the car rolled away.
>
> (DL, 395-6)

With this Abe leaves the book and the loveless "hell," the corrupt Babylon the others are doomed to

remain in. Significantly, the final canvas, The Burning of Los Angeles, depicting "the people who come to California to die," (DL, 420) does not include Abe Kusich. Faye, Harry, Homer, Claude and Tod are there, trying to escape the "crusading crowd."

> ... all those poor devils who can only be stirred by the promise of miracles and then only to violence. A super "Dr. Know-All-Pierce-All" had made the necessary promise and they were marching behind his banner in a great united front of screwballs and screwboxes to purify the land.
>
> (DL, 420)

Abe is conspicuously absent. He does not fit into the apocalyptic vision where the chief emphasis is on failure of nerve and a determination to opt out of the challenges, complexities and threats of life and history. He has to do "his thing" with courageous engagement despite contradictions and frustrations.

Obviously, Abe's leave-taking of the disgusting mess and his resilient staying power is only an ironic victory. Since he is by definition the deficient one in terms of "normal" social judgment, he cannot be considered a winner in practical terms. His physical disadvantages and external situation do not change one whit because of his moral strength or compassion or his faith in life. Abe is an ambiguous hero if only because of his size and external stature, but he is the only one in the book who

excites Tod's creativity -- he "made him feel certain of his need to paint," (DL, 264) -- the only one who identifies himself with the suffering cock and tries to preserve its life, the only one who keeps saying "yes" to life, regardless of constantly adverse circumstances. His deep awareness of life's futility and daily frustrations, does not invalidate his urgent insistence on joy, irrational as such emphasis may be. He gets kicked and beaten, but he retains his zest for living. He gets humiliated and rejected, but he retains compassion for other sufferers. He stumbles and fails, but he retains his affirmation of life.

Abe Kusich does not have to say "I'm a Jew! A Jew! A Jew!" He is the personification of the Jew, "the stranger in a strange land." His vitality, tenacity, guts, emotionalism, bragging, vulgarity, pushiness, etcetera, are epithets so commonly used wherever the presence of a Jew is as much as insinuated, that they do not require an explicit declaration. His name, Abe, not only refers to the Biblical patriarch, but has been incorporated into the American image of the Jew in everything from the principal character of anti-semitic jokes to the sentimentality of Abie's Irish Rose.[36]

West, as a Jew, could not help but see the descendent of sages and warriors dwarfed by centuries of the

Diaspora and reduced by history to a ridiculous, puny travesty of the magnificent Biblical past. West, the twentieth century man, realized that spirituality and the moral commandments of the Jews could do little to affect a community for which nothing can be sacred, because they have lost their capacity to love and revere.

> Thou wilt render unto them a recompense,
> O Lord, According to the work of their hands.
> Thou wilt give them hardness of heart,
> Thy curse unto them.
>
> (La. 3:64.5)

West does not shout "halleluja! Abe Kusich!" Abe is not a saint. Nor is he naive. He knows evil, for he has been a victim of it. But he is committed to the world of daily human experience and unwilling to concede the absurdity of an apparently absurd universe or to be soured by it. His determination and resilience create an aura of some secret spiritual independence around what would otherwise be just a bleak tyranny of circumstances.

It is impossible to doubt West's admiration and affection for Abe. By making him the sole custodian of compassion, mercy and life in The Day of the Locust and saving him from the flames of burning Sodom-Los Angeles, West must be saying something about his "anti-Semitism reviewed."

Tod Hackett who does not aspire to "save" or "heal,"

nevertheless refuses "to give up the role of Jeremiah." (DL, 335) Jeremiah along with other Hebrew prophets believed that actions could determine what the future would be and tried to affect the people's action by their prophecies. No matter how horrible they found reality to be, they did not withdraw from it because "the End is near," but only intensified their concern and passionate engagement.

West is often referred to as a modern Jeremiah. It is the prophetic not apocalyptic version of the messianic longing that he expresses in The Day of the Locust. He believes that men must be warned "for they have wrought evil unto themselves." (Isa. 3:9) He does not offer a panacea to dispel the darkness, but he rejects the determinism of the Apocalypse which shuts off the possibility of being open to fresh experience. He does not merely predict The Burning of Los Angeles, but confronts man with alternatives of decision. Abe Kusich is one such alternative. He is not "an instrument of redemption." He is only an example of human fortitude, courage, and an eager acceptance of the world as it is, with all its contradictions, injustices and evil. He adheres to his values despite all obstacles and limitations. If these don't gain him much more than an inner sense of human worth and a deep empathy for others, in a cold, unfeeling

world they are a triumph of the heart.

Perhaps Abe, the created character,[37] has helped his creator to come to terms with his own complex Jewish self and see beyond the materialistic Jew, the aggressive Jew, the fat Jew or the lean Jew; in short, beyond all the fake reasons for real hatred which the world has been inventing for centuries. Whatever the reason, West's portrait of Kusich suggests that his views have undergone re-assessment and significant change. "You can learn from him," West seems to be saying, echoing Tod's instruction to Homer, how to convert adversity into triumph; you can learn how a man or a people, through heroic endurance and mad insistence on life's savor and worth has outlasted pogroms, Inquisitions and constant threats of annihilation.

CHAPTER IV: FOOTNOTES

[1]Leslie Fiedler, "Master of Dreams," Partisan Review, v. 34, no. 3 (Summer 1967), pp. 339-59.

[2]François Fejtő, Heine, A Biography (London: Wingate, 1946), p. 264.

[3]Nathanael West, The Dream Life of Balso Snell, The Complete Works of Nathanael West (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1957), p. 3. All subsequent references to this edition will be found in parentheses in the text, identified by initials BS and page number.

[4]Fiedler, p. 341.

[5]Victor Comerchero, Nathanael West: The Ironic Prophet (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1964), p. 11.

[6]Richard B. Gehman, "Introduction," The Day of the Locust (New York: New Directions, 1950).

[7]Comerchero, p. 68.

[8]Fiedler, p. 354.

[9]Irving Malin, Nathanael West's Novels (S. Illinois Univ. Press, 1972), p. 13.

[10]James F. Light, Nathanael West: An Interpretive Study (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1961), p. 179.

[11]John M. Brand, "A Word is a Word is a Word," The Cheaters and The Cheated, ed. David Madden (Deland: Everett, 1973), pp. 63-4. Brand, a former Presbyterian minister, teaches literature at the Univ. of N. Colorado.

[12]Comerchero, p. 18.

[13]Malin, p. 13.

[14]A. J. Liebling, "Shed a Tear for Mr. West," New York Telegram (June 24, 1931), p. 11.

[15]Nathanael West, Miss Lonelyhearts, The Complete Works of Nathanael West (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1957), p. 106. Subsequent references to this edition will be found in parentheses in the text, identified by initials ML and page number.

[16]Light, p. 75.

[17]Norman Podhoretz, "Nathanael West: A Particular Kind of Joking," Doings and Undoings (New York: Farrar, Strauss, 1964), pp. 68-9.

[18]Leslie Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel (New York: Delta, 1966), p. 487.

[19]Nathanael West, "Some Notes on Miss Lonelyhearts," Contempo (May 15, 1933), p. 2.

[20]Nathanael West, "Some Notes on Violence," Contact, (October, 1932), p. 132.

[21]Love and Death, p. 487.

[22]Light, p. 74.

[23]Gehman, "Introduction," p. xxii.

[24]Isaac Babel, Lyubka the Cossack and Other Stories (New York: Signet, 1963), p. 102.

[25]Ibid., p. 151.

[26]Comerchero, p. 16.

[27]Ibid., p. 14.

[28]Robert M. Coates, "The Four Novels of Nathanael West, That Fierce, Humane Moralist," New York Herald Tribune Book Review (May 9, 1957).

[29]Brand, pp. 57-8.

[30]Podhoretz, p. 67.

[31]Brand, p. 63.

[32]Nathanael West, A Cool Million, The Complete Works of Nathanael West (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1957), p. 209. Subsequent references to this edition will be found in parentheses in the text, identified by initials CM and page number.

[33]See West biography regarding the possibility of Fascism in America, p. 210.

[34]Elie Wiesel, A Jew Today (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 43.

[35]Nathanael West, The Day of the Locust, The Complete Works of Nathanael West (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1957), p. 410. Subsequent references to this edition will be found in the text, identified by initials DL and page number.

[36]C. Carrol Hollis in his article "Nathanael West: Diagnostician of the Lonely Crowd," Fresco (Fall, 1957), says that "West's names for his characters are carefully chosen to suggest the roles allotted to them." (p. 18) It is interesting to note that "Kusich" contains the Greek "kuu" meaning "to conceive, to be pregnant with" and the Yiddish "sich". In view of God's instructions to Abraham and West's fascination with names, it is curious to speculate on Abe Kusich's "allotted role."

[37]Jay Martin, Nathanael West: The Art of his Life (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1957), p. 266. Martin refers to the existence of a "real Abe," a dwarf who cared for West when he was sick and alone in Hollywood and "brought him chicken broth."

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored the similarities between two writers of Jewish origin. Resemblances in style (terseness, precision, intensity), imagery (violent contrasts), tone (anguish, tension, irony), structure (disunity in unity) and themes (ambivalency and alienation) were noted.

Although they are large enough to warrant a separate study, some things have only been touched on and others omitted. For instance: both authors are fascinated with the figure of Jesus. Babel deals with the subject directly in his stories "Pan Apolek," "The Sin of Jesus," "Sashka the Christ," "In St. Valentine's Church," and refers to it peripherally in other stories and plays. West's Miss Lonelyhearts, a parable about a "priest of twentieth-century America," who has a Christ complex, begins with a mock prayer:

> Soul of Miss L, glorify me.
> Body of Miss L, nourish me.
> Blood of Miss L, intoxicate me.
> Tears of Miss L, wash me.[1]

It ends with a mock crucifixion. Saint Puce in The Dream Life of Balso Snell lives "in the curled brown silk, sheltered from all harm by Christ's arm. Eating

the sweet flesh of our Saviour; drinking His blood; bathing in His sweat."[2]

Another interesting subject which was not examined is Babel's and West's view of woman. Significantly enough, both revealed similarly reductive attitudes in their portrayal of female stereotypes; grotesque caricatures or chunks of anatomy, they never reach the status of human beings. Babel's depiction of breasts "stirring like an animal in a bag,"[3] nipples "moist and wide eyed like a baby-calves,"[4] (LY 281) legs "fat, brick-red, swollen like globes [which] gave off a sickly-sweet smell like freshly sliced meat,"[5] are matched by West's description of breasts "like balloons," nipples "like pink-tipped thumbs,"[6] "legs like Indian clubs" and "hams" like "two enormous grindstones."[7] Both authors equate woman with an instinctive, primitive force, devoid of an inner life and oblivious of conflicts besieging mankind (i.e. men).

Finally, the difference between Babel's poetic fiction and temperament and West's satirical predilection has not been explored. In Babel's lyrical celebration of life, in his ability to yoke the antinomies of experience in telling metaphors, one cannot help but mark a joyful acceptance of life and its contradictions. His joie de vivre never deserts him, he says repeatedly in letters to his mother as he commands her to cut short

her "snivelochondria." "There are happy as well as sad days in life," he writes, "so there's no need to daub black over everything. We should be sad about what is sad and enjoy what is enjoyable."[8] In West, on the other hand, there is a sense of distaste, a turning away. As his biographer, Jay Martin puts it:

> There is no Falstaffian humour, no genial all-dissolving laughter, in Mr. West. His satire is wry, piercing, painful. His humour is a way of getting revenge for the indignities which one suffers.[9]

Babel's and West's dichotomous vision was here attributed to the Jewish dilemma of "election and exclusion" ("sitting in a cloaca to the eyes with brows touching heaven") and to the actual and objective dualism which biculturality inflicts on the Diaspora Jew.

The similarities in their sensibilities and Weltanschauung were shown to be a result of their having a cultural and historical heritage in common. Both men were religious writers, inescapably Jewish, with a lineage tracing back through the centuries of exclusion, persecution and genocide, to the Revelation at Mount Sinai where the Jews were covenanted as a separate people with a specific mission to fulfill.

Their creative "journeys" proved that both Babel and West realized that the Jew whom, along with their

gentile non-neighbours, they had rejected and scorned, is not only an inhabitant of the stultifying ghetto or "shtetl," but has left the traces of his spiritual journey on the entire world.

They realized that spirit itself is in exile on this earth and the Jew's exile is its embodiment here and now. Thus having re-examined the uniqueness of this lonely role, they accepted their Jewishness as an enlarging rather than confining experience and affirmed its "vehement passion" and its significance.

Ultimately, both writers resisted the pressures of conformity which each of them found in his own country, Babel in Communist Russia and West in Capitalist America. In an age notorious for its uniformity and fetishism, where power, state and money are worshipped and dictators arrogate themselves the powers of divinity and are venerated by the Massenmensch, these writers, nurtured by Jewish values and traditions were the paradigmatic iconoclasts and dissenters; men who asked awkward, searing questions and refused to accept facile alternatives; men whose sense of life's potentialities and a desire to encourage these potentialities harks back to a legacy which declares what life could be like, for "What is man, that Thou art mindful of him?" (Ps 8:14) Affirming the human values of love, freedom, creativity and dignity, Babel

and West rejected a world in which "there are no longer any marvels, only regulations, prescriptions, directives".[10] Their indignation and protest were directed against all false man-made idols, against any system which seeks to warp human minds, to lobotomize them with terror, and manipulate them with lies in order to possess them and to rule them.

The importance of these Jewish writers in our twentieth century was linked to their history. Their universal significance was related to the particularity of their Jewish experience.

Jews, who only briefly enjoyed nationhood and then were dispersed all over the world and exposed to hatred and persecution have lived with danger and viciousness for centuries. Because they have seen what man can do to man, they know how fragile the supports of culture are when frustration and violence are unleashed. Their collective memories contain rich alluvial deposits of fear and horror. It is not surprising therefore, that they are insecure and alienated; nor is it surprising that they express a longing for peace and brotherhood which they have not found on this earth. Babel explains:

> My thirst for tranquility and happiness remained unsatisfied during my waking hours, so I had to cater for them in my dreams.[11]

The unique history and precarious experience of the Jew has helped him to develop a sixth sense - for calamity. Because his anxiety is constant and always with good reason, his nerve-endings, not covered by custom, serve as barometers of the human atmosphere predicting moral shifts and cataclysms. The barometric reading for the twentieth century, as it was seen by Kafka, Babel and West flashed warningly: BEWARE.

Kafka's fearful premonitions of a controlled technology of death factories, of man reduced to vermin and the grim prediction that no one will care, came true in the twentieth century.

> Nobody will read what I say here, no one will come to help me; even if all the people were commanded to help me, every door and window would remain shut, everybody would take to bed and draw the bedclothes over his head, the whole earth would become an inn for the night.[12]
>
> (The Hunter Gracchus)

The fact that the Holocaust - a cool, deliberate, scientific extermination of millions - happened in the heart of civilized, Christianized Europe, with few expressing any qualms of conscience, calls for a redefinition of the present status of humanistic values. "In righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbour ... neither shalt thou stand idly by the blood of thy neighbour;" (Lev. 19:15).

Norman Mailer writes in The White Negro:

> The Second World War presented a mirror to the human condition which blinded anyone who looked into it. For if tens of millions were killed in concentration camps out of the inexorable agonies and contractions of super-states founded upon the always insoluble contradictions of injustice, one was then obliged also to see that no matter how crippled and perverted an image of man was the society he had created, it was nonetheless his creation, his collective creation and if society was so murderous, then who could ignore the most hideous of questions about his own nature?[13]

Indeed, in the darker and sterner mood of the twentieth century, the prophetic warning "he who strikes at the Jew murders Man"[14] ("Man schlagt den Juden und erschlagt den Menschen") can no longer be ignored by the world. The Angst and alienation of the Jew has become the predicament of insecure humans everywhere. Technology and science, divorced from compassion and social vision, could spell the destruction of the human race. If, blinded by comfort and greed, we acquiescently avert our eyes, we are opting for "final dissolution," for "we have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we in agreement." (Isa 28:15)

But ultimately the choice is ours. Mankind is free to make its own heaven or hell. Civilization, after all, is Man's own show and he would be foolish to ignore the insights into the human condition given to him by

prophets and religious teachers whether given in the form of tracts, parables or stories.

> Nay, but if ye thoroughly amend your ways and your doings; if ye thoroughly execute justice between a man and his neighbour; if ye oppress not the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and shed not innocent blood in this place, neither walk after other gods to your hurt; then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers, for ever and ever.
>
> (Jer. 7:5-7)

CONCLUSION: FOOTNOTES

[1]Nathanael West, Miss Lonelyhearts, The Complete Works of Nathanael West (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1957), p. 66.

[2]Nathanael West, The Dream Life of Balso Snell. The Complete Works of Nathanael West, p. 11.

[3]Isaac Babel, Lyubka the Cossack and Other Stories (New York: Signet, 1963), p. 65.

[4]Isaac Babel, The Lonely Years (New York: Farrar, Straus,. 1964), p. 28.

[5]Isaac Babel, The Collected Stories (New York: Meridian, 1972), p. 278.

[6]Miss Lonelyhearts, p. 114.

[7]Ibid., pp. 100-101.

[8]The Lonely Years, p. 91.

[9]Jay Martin, The Art of his Life (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1970), p. 246.

[10]Gustav Janouch, Conversations with Kafka (New York: Village Press, 1971), p. 23.

[11]Lyubka, p. 148.

[12]Franz Kafka, "The Hunter Gracchus," Selected Short Stories of Franz Kafka (New York: Random House, 1952), p. 187.

[13]Norman Mailer, "The White Negro," Dissent (Summer 1957).

[14]Conversations with Kafka, p. 111.

APPENDIX I

"My life is spent in struggle with this man. I.B."

There is no comprehensive biography of Issak Babel. A pastiche of memoirs, letters and comments by friends, supported by shreds of records and rumour, provide suggestive fragments; the whole remains elusive. Conflicting statements may be due to certain political restrictions, inaccuracies of hearsay or a deliberate desire to conceal or distort the truth.

Of the available materials Babel's own letters,[1] which have been preserved, offer some clues to the personality and life of the man and the author. The writings of his daughter, Nathalie Babel, supply some factual information and illuminate the silhouettes in the family portrait, endowing them with the authenticity and intimacy of "real" people.[2] They also correct the more blatantly false and, at times, willfully pernicious statements by various critics.

Of the reminiscences, the recorded conversations and "remembrance of things past" by Paustovski[3] are most revealing and most convincing. Through him we meet Babel the brilliant raconteur and debunker, the sad and anxious dreamer, the devoted son, husband, brother, friend and mentor. We are also introduced to

the remarkable man of genius, the writer of immense intelligence and sensitivity whose vision of life and art is ambiguous and complex and whose striving for perfection in his work is extreme and uncompromising.

From Babel's "Autobiography"[4] we know scarcely enough to satisfy our curiosity. Although a bona fide document, it is inadequate primarily because of its brevity. In view of the fact that it fails to mention some events which singularly affected the fate of Babel the man and the writer, one is tempted to assume that what is omitted is more significant than what is told. He begins:

> I was born in 1894 in Odessa in the Moldavanka district, the son of a Jewish shopkeeper. My father insisted that I study Hebrew, the Bible, and the Talmud until I was sixteen. My life at home was hard because from morning to night they forced me to study a great many subjects. I rested at school.

Indeed, he was born in Odessa's Moldavanka on June 30 (July 13 according to the new calendar), 1894. Both his parents came from Jewish families who had lived in the Ukraine for many years. The family of Emmanuel Babel (Man' Bobel according to a certificate issued by the Odessa archives) came from Svirsk where his father (Babel's grandfather) pursued rabbinical studies. The Shvehvels, the mother's side of the family, were from Odessa.

The family moved to Nikolaev shortly after Babel's birth. It was there that he attended elementary school and also, from the age of six, the cheder. The study of "a great many subjects" began early in his life. He was tutored, in addition to Hebrew and the Bible, in English, German, French and Yiddish, languages which he knew well all his life. The reverence for learning by which young Babel was surrounded is notoriously common among the Jews. It motivates some and ruins others. Babel obviously accepted the challenge to "bring glory" to the family. In a letter to his mother, in 1927, he writes:

> When I go through moments of despair, I think of Papa. What he expected and wanted from us was success not moaning. Remembering him, I feel a surge of strength, and I urge myself forward. Everything I promised him, not in words but in thought, I shall carry out, because I have a sacred respect for his memory.
>
> (LY 87)

It is likely that he also resented the burden of these "ancestral" expectations. Some of his childhood stories testify that he did.

> Our fathers couldn't see how they could get ahead in life themselves, so they organized a sweepstake. They built it on the bones of little people.
>
> (LC 38)

In spite of his love and talent for languages and his

immense hunger for reading, the barrage of work and responsibility presented a problem: it left him no time or option to be a child and prevented him from expressing "the other side" of his personality, the one that yearned for sunshine and the sea.

In Nikolaev, in 1905, the nine-year old Babel witnessed the pogrom. The horror of the event left an ineradicable mark on the sensitive, impressionable boy and the nightmarish images of violence and brutality continued to haunt him throughout his adult life. He dramatized the experience in his most moving and unforgettable stories, The Story of my Dovecot and My First Love. The latter he concludes saying:

> And now, remembering those painful years, I recognize in them the seeds of the ills that torment me and the cause for my early decline.
>
> (LC 28)

It was also in 1905 that Babel entered the Commercial School of Odessa. This school in which he "rested" was "gay, rowdy, noisy and multilingual,"[5] and it was there that he met his French master, Mons. Vadon from whom he first learned to love language and literature. Inspired by Vadon, Babel wrote his first stories, in French, at the age of 15. (None have been known to survive.) The stories failed to meet his desired standards of excellence - "my peasant characters and my

various reflections as an author turned out to be colorless. I was successful only with dialogue."[6]

The school Babel describes represents a microcosmic picture of the macrocosm - Odessa. Unique among Russian cities, Odessa was a lively port, worldly and European in flavor. Because of its heterogeneous population (Ukrainians, Russians, Jews, Greeks, Rumanians, etc.) and extensive trading connections, it was a cosmopolitan center where many cultures met and interacted. Along with its famous violinists and writers, "Odessa-Mama's" outstanding sons included also pick-pockets, smugglers, pirates, extortionists and assorted "luftmenschen"* all of whom fascinated Babel and fired his imagination. In his own words,

> In Odessa there is a very poor, crowded, and much suffering Jewish ghetto, a very self-satisfied bourgeoisie, and a very "Black Hundred"** city council.
>
> "Odessa" (YMKE, 28)

Emmanuel Babel, the writer's father, a sales representative for a manufacturer of agricultural machinery, later established his own business in Odessa.

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* Literally, "people of the air", those living without visible means of support.

** An extreme group responsible for pogroms.

According to Nathalie Babel, he was a "dandyish, elegant, good-looking man of imposing physique. His rages were legendary." (LYxvi) He had great hopes and a "scarcely concealed preference" (LYxvi) for his only son.

Fenya Babel, the mother to whom most of Babel's surviving letters are addressed, was evidently a devoted and loving parent. "In my life there has been one true, unchanging love - and that's for Fenya" (LY193), Babel says in one of his letters. He urges her to live a carefree life and to "abandon these 'Jewish ailments'" (LY112) of fretting and worrying. He himself, however, is constantly worried about his family's health, mood, state of mind and financial comfort. The figure of the mother that appears in his fiction as motif or symbol, confirms the depth of his filial emotions. Indeed, in the narrow gallery of his female figures, she is the only one portrayed with genuine love and tenderness.

In 1911, unable to continue his education in Odessa because of the numerus clausus, Babel was sent to Kiev. There, he attended the Institute of Financial and Business Studies from which he graduated in 1914. It was in Kiev that he was introduced to the family of Boris Gronfein, an old friend of his father's. The Gronfein household was sophisticated and elegant.

Their children, a son and two daughters, were brought up in an atmosphere of affluence and Western savoir faire. Evgenia (Zhenia), the youngest daughter who later became Babel's wife, was a sensitive and romantic girl, who was contemplating a career as an artist. Nathalie Babel comments on the nature of the bond between her parents:

> My mother and father, from adolescence on, shared a commitment to art and a belief that one ought to sacrifice everything for it.
>
> LY(Int. xv)

In the "Autobiography", the Kiev period is barely mentioned. In one lean paragraph, Babel tells about the Institute from which he graduated, his trip to St. Petersburg in 1915, and his meeting with Gorki to which he owes "everything." It was Gorki, he informs us, who first published his stories in the November 1916 issue of the Letopis, a journal edited and published by Gorki (January 1916-December 1917). This is not so.

Babel's first known published story, "Old Shloime," appeared in a Kiev periodical Ogni (Flares), in February 1913. It deals with an eighty-six year old Jew who "never washed, seldom changed his gown and gave off a bad smell." Tucked away into a corner of the house by his son and daughter-in-law, Shloime lives unobtrusively, forgotten and useless. He eats and sleeps. Until one

day, the seemingly less than human being, perceives trouble in the house. With horror, he discovers that his son, threatened by expulsion from the village, is planning to "leave his God, the God of a humiliated and suffering people" and to convert to the Christian faith. Shloime, himself not a believer, sheds his "first tear in many, many years." His forgotten faith is suddenly rekindled. Unable to stop his son's decision and incapable of complying with it, he hangs himself in front of the house "in which he had left his warm stove and his father's greasy Torah."[7]

To what extent Babel was motivated by his own ambivalence toward his Jewishness in writing the story, is ultimately unknown, but the fact that this theme continues to recur throughout his works suggests how crucially significant the conflict was to him.

The second story written during Babel's stay in Kiev, Childhood. At Grandmother's, was discovered in the Soviet Union only in the 1960s. A handwritten manuscript, dated "November 12, 1915, Saratov," it was written by Babel during the last year of his studies at the Institute which had been moved to Saratov at the start of World War I. Babel was twenty-one. The story belongs to the "childhood cycle" and, as the title suggests, portrays Babel's grandmother, an ominous old

lady whose love and "stern commandments pressed down heavily - and forever - on [his] weak, untried shoulders."[8] The young protagonist's dilemma, which does not appear to be entirely resolved in the mature man or writer: he wants to leave the stifling and familiar room, to escape "into the fresh air," but he also wants "to stay there forever."[9]

There is no doubt that the meeting with Gorki and the lifelong friendship which followed, were very important to Babel, but the stories which predate this event indicate that Babel saw himself as a writer from his very early years. Gorki recognized his talent and encouraged its growth and development. He sent him "into the world, to the people." 1917-1924 represent Babel's years "in the world," where he "traveled over many roads and witnessed many battles."[10]

Although exempted from military service in 1914, Babel volunteered for the army in October 1917 and served on the Rumanian front. He was sent back to Odessa after having contracted malaria. There, in 1919, he married his teenage sweetheart, Zhenia Gronfein.

In 1920, a cycle of stories entitled "On the Field of Honor" appeared in the Odessa journal, Lava. Based on the facts described by the French Captain Gaston

Vidal which deal with World War I and record "authentic" events witnessed by the Captain,[11] Babel's adaptation bears his own signature and style. With terse precision and clarity it portrays the cruelty and horror of war, thus foreshadowing the Red Cavalry stories.

Later the same year, Babel was assigned to Budenny's Red Cavalry to serve as correspondent for Jugrosta (predecessor of Tass). Assuming the pure Russian name Kiril Vassilevich Liutov, he wrote propaganda sheets for the Krasnyi Kavalerist (Red Cavalryman). He also kept a diary in which he recorded the daily atrocities and his reflections on man's inhumanity to man. Most of the entries were transformed into stories.

He returned from the campaign suffering from exhaustion and asthma and had to go to the Caucasus for a cure. There, he began to work on his stories. He wrote and re-wrote painstakingly, reading each version to his wife, Zhenia, until she knew them by heart and could recite them to her daughter thirty years later. (LYInt xix)

"Only in 1923 did I learn how to express my thoughts clearly and concisely. Then I set about writing once again," Babel says in his "autobiography." Actually, the appearance of his stories in LEF, early

in 1924, marks his instant rise to prominence on the literary scene. He became an overnight sensation in Moscow, where the family moved following the death of Babel's father, and was surrounded by fame and adoration. This glory also brought heartache and controversy. Critics saw him as an imperfect Revolutionary, a Bolshevik manqué, an "erotomanic," decadent petit-bourgeois and a "deliberate and arrogant slanderer of the First Red Cavalry." (LY 387) Cavalrist Budenny, a not very literate General himself, led the vicious attack against Babel. Gorki opposed him and defended his friend and protégé with courage and loyalty.

In 1925, amidst the acclaim and success, much sadness came into Babel's personal life. His wife left for Paris, ostensibly only for a visit. She never returned. His sister, Meri, left for Belgium to get married and his mother followed shortly after. Babel suffered from this separation and continued to hope and plead for the family's reunion until nearly the very end. For fifteen years his letters express frantic concern for his family's health and well-being and his unwaning devotion to them.

Babel was able to spend some time in France in 1928, but in 1929 his request for permission to visit his pregnant wife in Paris was refused. As conditions

worsened and censors became more suspicious of complexity and originality, Babel's star began to fall. He tried to avoid Moscow which was bad for his health and his morale. He travelled to collective farms and industrial developments, he lived in austerity and discipline, he even took a job as the secretary of the village soviet. One thing he could not do is write to order. His letters repeatedly state:

> I am incapable of compromise, be it internal or external, and so I have to suffer, retreat inside myself, and wait.
>
> (LY 264)

> I am not one of those you can bend into a ram's horn.
>
> (LY 87)

> I've completed a Herculean task - a play. As, of course it does not fit in with the "general Party line", it can expect rough going.
>
> (LY 232)

It was not until 1932 that Babel could see his daughter Nathalie who was born in Paris in 1929. By then he was fully aware of the dangers he was facing in the Soviet Union. Yuri Annenkov whom Babel often visited in Paris states categorically in his memoirs that Babel had decided not to return to the USSR.[12] Ervin Sinko, a Yugoslav writer, who shared Babel's house during his stay in Moscow, sees his joviality as

a mask to deceive himself as well as others. He thinks that Babel was conscious of the fact that his turn to be destroyed along with others who preceded him was inevitable. His silence was a deliberate expression of protest. Sinko quotes Babel:

> Day after day I read idiotic screenplays and review them. I do anything. As long as I don't write.[13]

The reason for Babel's resolution to stay in the Soviet Union until his end can only be conjectured. Was it because the only likely option, France, was too narrowly bourgeois and confining? Was it money? A threat from Moscow? Or, was it, as Nathalie Babel says, that "Babel was convinced that a writer mutilates himself and his work when he leaves his native country," and since his life centered on writing, he "sacrificed everything to his art?" (LY, xxi) There is a portent of fatal premonition in the words Ehrenburg jotted down about Babel when he saw him in 1936: "When in danger, an octopus ejects ink; all the same they catch it and eat it - a favourite dish - 'an octopus in its ink'."[14]

In 1935 a Congress was organized in Paris, the intention of which was to present a united front of intellectuals against Fascism. Babel was not among the Soviet delegates. It was only after the intervention

of French writers that he was hastily flown in, several days after the Congress had begun. He spoke extemporaneously with his usual masterly wit and ambiguity:

> This collective farmer has bread, he has a house, he even has a decoration. But it's not enough for him. Now he wants poetry to be written about him.[15]

This was Babel's last trip abroad. He had by then given up the hope of being reunited with his wife and daughter and had begun a new family in Moscow. Antonina Pirozhkova, a construction engineer born in Siberia, shared with him the difficult period of the 1930s. In 1937 she bore him a daughter, Lydia. Both women live in the USSR.

The death of Gorki in 1936 was a severe blow to Babel. In him he lost not only a friend but also a protector. According to most sources, Babel spent his last years in secrecy and anxiety. Neither his caution, however, nor his wisdom saved him from the police who came to arrest him on May 15, 1939, at ten o'clock in the morning.

This is yet another and final irony in the fate of a man who knew the power of absurdity (and vice versa), so well. In 1939, at the time of his arrest, the excesses of Yezhovshchina were supposedly brought to an end and mass arrests were no longer in vogue.

Aside from the play Maria and several short stories, Babel's published writing during the last years consisted mainly of screenplays and translations from the Yiddish (Sholom Aleichem) and the French. His "real" and unpublished work to which he referred continuously, disappeared as mysteriously as he did. His wife, Pirozhkova knew that he was working on several manuscripts, and had completed a full length novel. In the last letter to his mother, dated May 10, 1939, Babel says:

> I will soon devote myself to the final polishing of my true work. I reckon to hand it in to the publishers by the fall.
>
> (LY 379)

The "Fall" came early. Those who were the last to see him after his arrest, heard him say calmly and with a smile, "They didn't let me finish". The statement, characteristically Babelian, is enigmatic and open to interpretation. An official certificate delivered to his family in France, gives the date of death as March 17, 1941. Another document rehabilitates him posthumously "in the absence of elements of a crime". (LYxxviii)

During the "thaw" some of Babel's books were republished and he was hailed (by Ehrenburg) as "the glory of Soviet Literature". As a token of willingness to

make amends, three limited editions of Izbrannoe (Selected Works) were published in the USSR (one in 1957, two in 1966). None are available in the book-stores. No edition has been published since 1966. Most of the literati are reluctant to discuss him. The older ones, at best, seem distrustful and embarrassed; at worst, like Valentin Kataev in his recent memoir - roman-à-clef, reveal envy, pettiness and sycophantic catering to the current "party line" tendencies.[16] The younger ones are merely indifferent.

A few isolated efforts by Babel scholars are, without doubt, sincere and valuable (e.g. Livshits, Polyak, Levin, Smirin) but they have not reinstated Babel in the rank and stature he unquestioningly merits.

APPENDIX I: FOOTNOTES

[1]Isaac Babel, The Lonely Years, 1925-1939, trans. Andrew MacAndrew and Max Hayward. Introduction and ed. Nathalie Babel (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1964). Subsequent references to this edition will be found in the text in parentheses and identified by initials LY followed by page number.

[2]Ibid., "Introduction" pp. ix-xxvii.

[3]Konstantin Paustovskii, Povest' o zhizni, v. 5 (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1968).

[4]Isaac Babel, "Autobiography" in Lonely Years, p. xii.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Isaac Babel, "Old Shloime," in Isaac Babel: Forgotten Prose, trans. and ed. Nicholas Stroud (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1978), pp. 17-21.

[8]Isaac Babel, "Childhood. At Grandmother's," You Must Know Everything, trans. Max Hayward, ed. Nathalie Babel (New York: Delta, 1970), p. 12.

[9]Ibid., p. 8.

[10]Isaac Babel, Lyubka the Cossack and Other Stories, trans. Andrew MacAndrew (New York: Signet, 1963), p. 99.

[11]Gaston Vidal, Figures et anecdotes de la Grande Guerre (Paris: La Renaissance, 1918).

[12]Yuri Annenkov, Dnevnik Moikh Vstrech, v. 1 (New York: Inter-Language Literary Associates, 1966), p. 305.

[13]Ervin Sinko, Roman eines Romans (Cologne: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1962), p. 346.

[14]Ilya Ehernburg, Memoirs: 1921-1941, trans. Tatania Shebunina (New York: Universal Library, 1966), p. 115.

[15]*Memoirs*, p. 117.

[16]Valentin Kataev, "Almaznyi moi venets", *Novyi Mir* 6 (1978), pp. 137-145.

APPENDIX II

> All my books fall between the different schools of writing. The radical press, although I consider myself on their side, doesn't like my particular kind of joking, and think it even Fascist sometimes, and the literature boys whom I detest, detest me in turn. The highbrow press finds that I avoid the big significant things and the lending library touts in the daily press think me shocking... I've never had the same publisher twice - once bitten, etc. - because there is nothing to root for in my work and what is even worse, no rooters.
>
> (Nathanael West, letter to George Milburn)

Nathanael West was born Nathan Weinstein in New York City on October 17, 1903, the child of Jewish immigrants. His mother, Chana-Mindel Leizerovna Vollenstein ("Americanized" to Anna Wallenstein upon her arrival in USA), married his father, Max Weinstein in an orthodox ceremony. Max, a building contractor, was a gentle, kind man, dedicated to his family and their fashionable well-being. They lived in "the Gilded Ghetto," kept away from "the wretched refuse of the teeming shore"[1] (i.e. presumably "more Jewish" Jews) and endorsed the "melting pot" notion of becoming instant Americans. Of West's two sisters, he was fond of the younger one, Laura. Their friendship continued into adulthood, when Laura married West's college friend, S.J. Perelman.

West received his early education at two Manhattan grammar schools, where he was a mediocre and indifferent student. He was remembered as a thin, awkward, ungainly child, "something of a dreamer." A former counselor at Camp Paradox in the Adirondacks, where West spent several summers, also recalls him as a "quiet chap and not much of a mixer."[2] Bookish and withdrawn, he admired athletic achievements and was greatly interested in and attracted to sports. Baseball particularly was his passion, but his hopes for a major league career were brought to an abrupt end by an episode recorded by a childhood friend, John Sanford.

> He was pitching for Camp Paradox that day ... because he was one of the three campers who owned a fielder's glove. He sure-God hadn't made it because he could field, and neither could he hit far or run fast. The game stayed tight till the late innings, when Pine Tree loaded the bags with two down. The third out looked like a cinch. A long high fly was heading straight for Pep, who didn't have to budge to make the catch. Pine Tree chalked up four runs and the game, though, when the ball hit Pep on the head and rolled away for a homer ... He wasn't Nate after that, not to anybody. He was Pep.[3]

The incident left a deep mark on West's consciousness and he dramatized it much later in an unpublished story, "Western Union Boy." The story is concerned with the recollections of a middle-aged man who feels that his life has been a failure. Trying to remember when it all

started, he thinks of his boyhood flop -- the dropped fly ball at the baseball game he ruined. He was as a result chased from the field by a mob of angry spectators. Miraculously, he managed to escape the pursuers and hide in the woods through the night, but he could never escape the terror and he continued to dream about the episode "regularly about once a week." West retold the autobiographical baseball incident frequently. Wells Root, a close friend in West's later years remembers that West was convinced that "if they (the mob) had caught him, they would have killed him."[4] The crowd in pursuit and the figure of the victim hunted by his would-be tormentors is present and implied throughout West's work.

After graduating from grammar school, West enrolled at the DeWitt Clinton High School, where he soon distinguished himself as one of its weakest students. He left Clinton without graduating.

According to his sister's recollections, West had begun reading Tolstoy when he was ten. By the time he was thirteen he had gone through a great number of Russian authors, of whom Dostoevski impressed him most; had read Flaubert, whom he admired, Henry James, whom he respected, but whose artificialities of language he deplored.[5] Such literary precocity implies that there

existed potentials in the young West which Clinton was unable to arouse.

In 1922, he enrolled at Brown University as a transfer student from Tufts (where he only stayed for two months), on the basis of the transcript of another Nathan Weinsten from Boston. The miraculously inherited credits and an apparent change in his attitude, (he now attended some classes) enabled him to graduate from Brown in two and a half years.

West's enthusiasm for classwork was sporadic. He disliked "middle-of-the-road realism ... middle class writers writing on the middle-class."[6] Generally ignoring what he should have been reading for classes, he was deep in Dostoevski, Huysman, Baudelaire, Verlaine and Rimbaud.

Socially, the "quiet chap, not much of a mixer," underwent an amazing metamorphosis at Brown. Described by his roommate, Philip Lukin as "a typical college type of the sophisticated variety,"[7] he became an Ivy-League fashion plate. Despite his slightly quaint appearance and awkwardness, West was friendly and kind to fellow-students and extravagantly generous with the large allowance received from home. With a group of drinking and high-living adolescent Bohemians, he attended dances, parties and beer-parlours and was <u>persona grata</u> with the

elite of the college: Quentin Reynolds, Frank O. Hough, Jeremiah Mahoney. Except for one thing - the fraternities. They did not accept Jews. At Hough's fraternity, "the snootiest and most anti-Semitic one on the campus," West was a welcome visitor, because "nobody ever thought of Pep as being Jewish."[8] But he was not pledged.

Both Reynolds and Hough claim that the fact that Jews were not admitted to fraternities "never bothered Nat." This sort of complacency, however, is entirely inconsistent with West's character and behaviour. West's roommate, Lukin, is closer to the truth when he surmises that the exclusion from the Brown fraternities generated a deep-seated and long-lasting bitterness in West. With Lukin, also a Jew, he often discussed this sensitive subject, ticking off the fraternities - "one of the better ones" - he might agree to join. Even years later he confided to Lester Cole that "he had wanted not to belong to a fraternity so much as to be pledged."[9] Obviously, he was deeply hurt by this exclusion. He was nineteen when he entered Brown, an age when a man faces the problem of self-definition and identity. This is particularly difficult for a second-generation American Jew, whose parents are embarrassed by "excessive" Jewishness and try to "tone down" their

ethnicity. For West the plight centered around the challenge of alienation and assimilation. Possessing intelligence, good breeding and a wardrobe from Brooks Brothers, he did not have to endure the insults and misery to which the "uncouth" Jew was subjected. (Or so it might have appeared). Jay Martin's explanation that "his [West's] feelings about his minority status as a Jew had been translated into a sense of his superior status as part of the elite minority of well-dressed men"[10] is unconvincing. According to John Sanford (Shapiro), West "writhed under the accidental curse of his religion":

> ... he changed his name, he changed his clothes, he changed his manner (we all did), in short he did everything possible to create the impression in his own mind - remember that, in his own mind - that he was just like Al Vanderbilt. It never quite came off.[11]

West had nothing to do with any organized Jewish activity on campus, shunned Jewish girls ("bagels" he called them), hung around Gentile fraternities hoping to be pledged, and desperately resisted the truth: that he cannot be one of "them."

Although none of West's college friends seemed to have taken his literary aspirations seriously, some of the material used in The Dream Life of Balso Snell began to take shape in his final college years. The name of

a Brown professor was Snell. Amused by its closeness to "smell," West used the name in some tales he made up.

After his graduation in 1924, West persuaded his father to send him to Paris, where he visited bookstores, grew a beard and played a Bohemian dandy.

> ... long hair and a rapt look wouldn't get you to first base. Even dirt and sandals and calling Sargent a lousy painter was not enough. You had to be an original. ... I wore carefully pressed Brooks Brothers clothing, sober but rich ties, and carried gloves and a tightly rolled umbrella. My manners were elaborate and I professed a great horror at the slightest breach of the conventional. It was a success. I was asked to all parties.[12]

The turmoil of Surrealism and Dadaism interested West but did not overwhelm him. He returned to New York in early 1926.

With his father, like so many others, ruined by the crash, West found himself for the first time without money. He got a job as assistant manager at the Kenmore Hotel on East 23rd Street, where he provided free shelter for many of his homeless friends and acquaintances. (Erskine Caldwell, James Farrell, among many.)

In 1931, fed up with the trivial hotel job which made writing impossible, West took a leave and rented a place in the Adirondacks. Soon after this vacation, his first novel, <u>The Dream Life of Balso Snell</u> was

privately printed in a limited edition of five hundred copies. The book listed "Nathanael West" as author, thus marking West's official change of name. (Asked how he got his name, West explained to William Carlos Williams: "Horace Greeley said, 'Go West, young man.' So I did.")[13] The book was ignored by critics and public.

In 1932, West had become co-editor with William Carlos Williams of a little magazine, Contact, and later associate editor of Americana. In the latter he published excerpts from Balso and a short story "Business Deal" which condemned the Hollywood "pants pressers," i.e. Jews. What some call West's anti-Semitism had by then become considerable.

> He hated loud talk, ostentation, sharpie clothes, public display of emotion ... Bronx intellectuals (meaning Jews), Jewish girls, sentimentality, and perhaps above all himself.[14]

West was working on the sixth version of Miss Lonelyhearts, when his friends Josephine Herbst and John Hermann persuaded him to settle in Bucks County, where he could devote all his time to writing. In 1933, Miss Lonelyhearts was completed, published and reviewed enthusiastically. With West's "luck" and God's help, as the Jews would say, the publisher went bankrupt and by the time a new one was found, the

reviews were forgotten and the book sold fewer than eight hundred copies.

At about the same time, West announced his engagement to Alice Shepard, a Roman Catholic who had secretly been his fiancée for three years. He bought a marriage licence in 1929, but the marriage never took place. West blamed it on poverty but Sanford explained it thus:

> She [Alice] was ... tall and good looking, conventionally so, as are five million American girls of any generation. She was Christian, and Pep, of course, was Jewish, and as I gathered it from him, that was the all-important difference. I believe it caused the ultimate break between them.[15]

After the republication of Miss Lonelyhearts, the book was sold to Twentieth Century Fox and West received a writing contract at the studio. Given little to do and watching his novel being turned into a banal thriller, he left Hollywood after several months, depressed and embittered. Back in New York, he wrote A Cool Million. It appeared in 1934, was unfavorably reviewed and sold poorly. West felt that the book flopped because "no one in this country, except a few Jeremiah's like (himself), took seriously the possibility of a Fascist America."[16] He was deeply concerned about the implications of Nazism in Europe and sympathetic to causes sponsored by the Communist Party of America. Although he never joined

the Party, he showed leftist leanings in New York and in Hollywood. (He was arrested for marching in a picket line in front of Ohrbach's and became a member of the notoriously to the left, Screen Writers Guild.) However, whereas the Marxists emphasized only the Revolution, West was also aware of the betrayal of its hopes. An Americana editorial declared that its editors, of whom West was one, were "neither Republicans nor Democrats; neither Socialists nor Communists," adding: "We are also unconditionally opposed to Comrade Stalin and his feudal bureaucracy at Moscow."[17]

Without money and with no possibilities open - he applied for a Guggenheim fellowship, but his project was rejected - West had to return to Hollywood as a script-writer in 1935, where he stayed on until his death in 1940. He was a competent but detached screen-play-writer, reserving his true dedication for his novels. (It is interesting to note that both West and Babel wrote for the movies and both continued to stress the crucial distinction between their "true work" and necessary employment, keeping the two activities apart.) The Day of the Locust was written between studio assignments.

With his Hollywood salary, West was able to live in comfort for the first time since 1929 and to devote

weekends to his favorite passtime, hunting. There is something tragi-comic in West's determination to be a stylish outdoor man, be it Babe Ruth or Nimrod. With his ornate hunting outfits, his imported hunting dogs, who generally turned out to be shivering "biscuit eaters," he seems to be equally miscast as country squire or athlete. Edmund Wilson, who enjoyed discussing guns and hunting with West, feels that he talked about hunting far better than he hunted. In conversation he exhibited "a quick Jewish sense of humour and the quality of his imagination was both Russian and Jewish."[18] "He told me once about shooting a bear in the Adirondacks," Wilson recalls, "the whole note of the story was one of pity for the bear and disgust for himself." This, Wilson feels, was "absolutely typical" of West's imagination.[19] Sanford, remarking on the "danger" of being in the woods with West, says: "It wasn't that he didn't know guns were meant for killing. It was simply that he was too bloody fumble-fingered to put the knowledge to use."[20]

In 1939, West published his last novel, The Day of the Locust, hoping its success would get him out of Hollywood. It was not a commercial triumph. Critics objected to its morbidness and surrealism, demanding "more documentation - most of all, perhaps, a few ordinary people".[21] It sold fewer than 1500 copies.

In 1940, West met Eileen McKenney, the protagonist of Ruth McKenney's My Sister Eileen. She was vulnerable, hurt, guilt-ridden and "called forth the same deep sympathetic response that the Miss Lonelyhearts letters had".[22] They were married after two months and seemed very happy. Elated, West said in a letter to Bennet Cerf that he intended to write simple and warm books in the future "full of the milk of human kindness."[23]

It is cruelly ironic that the predilection for no happy endings in his fiction, prevailed also in West's personal story. On December 22, he and Eileen were returning from a hunting trip in Mexico, when West, a poor driver, went through a stop sign near El Centro, California. Their car collided with another automobile. Eileen died instantly and West an hour later, on the way to the hospital. His body was shipped to New York and buried in Mount Zion Cemetery in Queens.

Thirty-seven years old at the time of his death, West was practically unknown. The report of his death in the New York Times featured Eileen's name in the headline and appeared in the amusements and movie section.

West's reputation has risen continuously after his death. His books have sold over a million copies and been translated into many languages. Critics have

praised him extravagantly. As Stanley Edgar Hyman puts it:

> All reviews were favorable, and there was general agreement that West was one of the most important writers of the thirties, as American as apple pie. West's picture appeared on the cover of the Saturday Review, looking very Jewish.[24]

Two good biographies (Light and Martin), two comprehensive bibliographies (White and Vennetta) and numerous books and articles have been written about West. Movies (which would probably make him shudder) bore the titles of his novels (re-make of Miss Lonelyhearts and the more recent The Day of the Locust). He is being read by discriminating audiences and has had an impact on contemporary film makers.

The "pity and the irony": in 1939 the last year of his life West summed up the reactions to his writing: "The box score stands: good reviews - fifteen percent, bad reviews - twenty-five per cent, brutal personal attacks - sixty per cent."[25]

APPENDIX II: FOOTNOTES

[1]Jay Martin, The Art of his Life (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1970), p. 25.

[2]James F. Light, Nathanael West: An Interpretative Study (Evanston: Northwestern U. Press, 1961), p. 4.

[3]John Sanford, "Nathanael West," The Screen Writer (December 1946), p. 12.

[4]Nathanael West, p. 133.

[5]Ibid., p. 5.

[6]Ibid., p. 28.

[7]Ibid., p. 9.

[8]Ibid., p. 16.

[9]The Art of his Life, p. 56.

[10]Ibid., p. 81.

[11]Nathanael West, p. 132.

[12]Nathanael West, "L'Affaire Beano," quoted by Richard Gehman, "Introduction," The Day of the Locust, (New York: New Directions, 1950), p. xiv.

[13]Nathanael West, p. 69.

[14]Ibid., p. 63.

[15]Ibid., p. 74.

[16]The Art of his Life, p. 323.

[17]"Editorial," Americana (November 1932), Front page.

[18]Nathanael West, p. 66.

[19]The Art of his Life, p. 141.

[20]Nathanael West, p. 69.

[21]Luis Solomon, The Nation (July 15, 1939), p. 78.

[22]The Art of his Life, p. 372.

[23]Ibid., p. 392.

[24]Stanley Edgar Hyman, Nathanael West (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1962), p. 11.

[25]Nathanael West to Scott Fitzgerald, June 30, 1939. (Letter in the possession of Princeton U. Library).

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