

Russia
style and translation
age
love

“First Love” / “*Pervaia liubov*”

Isaac Babel

(1925)



Isaac Babel (1894-1940)

“The best Russia has to offer”
--(Maxim Gorky to André
Malraux in 1926)

1920 Diary (1920)

Red Cavalry (1926)

Odessa Tales (1926)

Sunset (1926)

Maria (1935)

147 short stories in total

Russia-Ukraine 1904-1905

- **Russo-Japanese War** (1904-5)
 - Russian Empire vs Empire of Japan over Manchuria and Korea, the former trying to acquire a warm-water port
 - Ended with the Treaty of Portsmouth, mediated by US President Theodore Roosevelt
 - First major victory of Eastern power
- **Russian Revolution of 1905**
 - Worker strikes, peasant unrest, and military mutinies
 - Causes: newly emancipated peasants (1861) impoverished with no social mobility without property; eugenics laws prohibiting political/military participation by ethnic minorities; growing working class; growing intellectual class in universities
 - Apex of autocratic fight over whether to Westernize or Russianize the empire—toward parliament or autocracy?
- **October Manifesto** (October 17, 1905) “The Manifesto on the Improvement of the State Order”
 - created the Duma (Russian elected parliament), limiting the autocracy and establishing basic civil freedoms like freedom of conscience, speech, and assembly

Fyodor Dostoevsky, “White Nights” (1848)

Anton Chekhov, “Lady With a Little Dog” (1899)

Isaac Babel, “First Love” (1925)

Vladimir Nabokov, “Torpid Smoke” (1935)





Pogroms 1971-1922

- **1791**
 - Catherine the Great establishes the Pale of Settlement
- **1821**
 - Odessa pogroms
- **1881**
 - Russian government blames Jews for assassination of Tsar Alexander II
- **1905**
 - 660 -887 pogroms across 626 villages occurred in Ukraine and in Bessarabia (modern Moldavia)
- **1903-1906**
 - 1897-1920: General Jewish Labour Bund in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia (aka the Bund), Jewish unification, and self-defense units
 - 1903: *The Protocols of Zion* and blood libel
- **1917-1918**
 - +1,200 pogroms in Ukraine = the greatest slaughter of Jews in Eastern Europe since 1648
- **1919**
 - Kiev pogroms = 30,000-70,000 Jews massacred across Ukraine
- **Russian Revolution + Russian Civil War (1917-1922)**
 - 70,000 to 250,000 Jewish civilians in all of Russian Empire, 500,000 left homeless
 - 31,071 in modern Ukraine
- **1881-1920**
 - 1,326 pogroms in Ukraine
- **Who enacted pogroms?**
 - Cossacks (Tsarist/White Army)
 - Ukrainian People's Republic
 - Ukrainian Green Army (peasant militias)
 - Ukrainian nationalist gangs

“Up ahead, at the corner of Rybnaya Street, thugs were smashing our store and throwing out into the street boxes of nails, tools, and also the new portrait photograph of me in my lycée uniform” (615)

«Впереди, на углу Рыбной улицы, громилы разбивали нашу лавку и выкидывали из нее ящики с гвоздями, машинами и новый мой портрет в гимназической форме.»

“For two weeks I did not go to my window and avoided Galina, until a coincidence threw us together. The coincidence was the pogrom that broke out in 1905 in Nikolayev and other towns inside the Jewish Pale. A crowd of hired killers ransacked my father’s store and killed my Grandpa Shoyl. All this happened without me. That morning I had been out buying doves from Ivan Nikodimich, the hunter.” (613)

«Две недели я не подходил к окну и избегал Галины, пока случай не свел меня с нею. Случай этот был еврейский погром, разразившийся в пятом году в Николаеве и в других городах еврейской черты оседлости. Толпа наемных убийц разграбила лавку отца и убила деда моего Шойла. Все это случилось без меня, я покупал в то утро голубей у охотника Ивана Никодимыча.»

”I imagined all this in order to make my loving her more bitter, hot, and hopeless, and perhaps because so much grief is overwhelming for a ten-year-old boy. These foolish fantasies helped me forget the death of the doves and the death of Shoyl. I would have perhaps forgotten these deaths if Kuzma had not come onto the veranda with that terrible Jew, Aba.”

«я вообразил себе все это затем, чтобы мне горше, горячей, безнадежней любить Рубцову, и, может быть, потому, что мера скорби велика для десятилетнего человека. Глупые мечты помогли мне забыть смерть голубей и смерть Шойла, я позабыл бы, пожалуй, об этих убийствах, если бы в ту минуту на террасу не вошел Кузьма с ужасным этим евреем Абой.»

Isaac Babel (1894-1940)

“The best Russia has to offer”
--(*Maxim Gorky to André Malraux*
in 1926)

“And yet today, sixty-two years after his arrest and the subsequent silence surrounding his name, Babel is considered, both inside and outside Russia, to be among the most exciting—and at times unsettling—writers of the twentieth century. [...] **Babel is not only one of the greatest storytellers of European literature, but also one of its greatest stylists.**”
--(*Peter Constantine, 2001*)

“What Kafka’s art hallucinates—trial without cause, an inescapable predicament directed by an irrational force, a malignant social order—Babel is at last condemned to endure in the living flesh. **Kafka and Babel can be said to be the twentieth century’s European coordinates:** they are separated by language, style and temperament; but where their fevers intersect lies the point of infection. Each was an acutely conscious Jew. Each witnessed a pogrom while still very young, Kafka in enlightened Prague, Babel under a Czarist regime that promoted harsh legal disabilities for Jews. **Each invented a type of literary modernism, becoming a movement in himself, indelible, with no possibility of successors.** To be influenced by Kafka is to end in parody; and because the wilderness is an astoundingly variegated experience is incised, unduplicatably, in the sinews of Babel’s prose, no writer can effectively claim to be his disciple.”
--*Cynthia Ozick*

“One of the great tragedies of twentieth century literature took place in the early morning hours of May 15, 1939, when a cadre of agents from the Soviet secret police burst into the house of Isaac Babel in Peredelkino, arrested him, and gathered up the many stacks of unpublished manuscripts in his office. From that day on, Babel, one of the foremost writers of his time, became a nonperson in the Soviet Union.”

(Peter Constantine)

“[I am] the master of a new literary genre, the genre of silence.”

(Babel, First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers, 1934)

Q: You have been arrested for treacherous anti-Soviet activities. Do you acknowledge your guilt?

A: No, I do not.

Q: How can you reconcile that declaration of innocence with the fact of your arrest?

A: I consider my arrest the result of a fateful coincidence and of my own inability to write. During the last few years, I have not published a single major work and this might be considered sabotage and an unwillingness to write under Soviet conditions.

Q: You wish to say you have been arrested as a writer? Does that not strike you as an excessively naïve explanation for your arrest?

A: You are right, of course. Authors are not arrested because they can no longer write.

“When a phrase is born, it is both good and bad at the same time. The secret of its success rests in a crux that is barely discernible. One’s fingertips must grasp the key, gently warming it. And then the key must be turned once, not twice. [...] I spoke to her of style, of an army of words, an army in which every type of weapon is deployed. No iron spike can pierce a human heart as icily as a period in the right place.”

(“Guy de Maupassant”)

“I saw those kisses from my window. They caused me great suffering, but it is not worth describing because the love and jealousy of a ten-year-old boy resembles in every way the love and jealousy of a grown man.” (613)

“I was horrified at her gaze, and looked away, shivering. In the two of them I was watching the strange and shameful life of all the people in the world, and I wanted to fall into a magic sleep to forget this life that surpassed all my dreams.” (612)

“With her haughty smile she smiles from that inaccessible opening [недоступного окна], her husband, the half-dressed officer, standing behind her back, kissing her neck.” (616)

“‘Drink, you little *shlemazl* [артист],’ he said, coming over to me. ‘Drink this water, which will help you as much as incense helps a dead man!’ And sure enough, the water did not help me in the least. My hiccups became stronger and stronger. A growl tore out of my chest. A swelling, pleasant to the touch, expanded in the my throat. The swelling breathed, widened, covered my gullet, and came bulging out over my collar. Within the swelling gurgled my torn breath. It gurgled like boiling water. By nightfall I was no longer the silly little boy I had been all my life, but had turned into a writhing heap. My mother, now taller and shapelier, wrapped herself in her shawl and went to Galina, who stood watching stiffly.” (617-8)

“Get your Papa to come home,’ she said. ‘He hasn’t eaten anything since this morning.’ And I leaned out the window. My father turned around when he heard my voice. ‘My darling son,’ he called out with indescribable tenderness.”
(Peter Constantine)

“Call your papa home,’ she said, ‘he hasn’t had anything to eat since early morning.’ And I stuck my head out of the window. ‘Papa,’ I said. Father turned round when he heard my voice. ‘My little son,’ he mouthed with inexpressible tenderness, and began to tremble with love for me.” (David McDuff)

«— Позови папку домой, — сказала она, — он с утра ничего не ел. И я высунулся из окна. Отец обернулся, услышав мой голос. — Сыночка моя, — пролепетал он с невыразимой нежностью.»

“But even if I could have held on, I wouldn’t have, because I no longer felt any shame at all. That was how my illness began. I was ten years old at the time. The pogrom continued, but no one touched us. The doctor, a fat man, diagnosed an illness of the nerves. [...] And I bade farewell forever to Nikolayev, where I had lived the first ten years of my childhood.” (Peter Constantine, 618)

“But even if I had been able to put up with it, I would not have done so, because I no longer had any feeling of shame. I tossed about on the bed and, falling to the floor, did not take my eyes off Galina. Fear was shaking the woman and making her writhe; I snarled in her face, so as to prolong my power over her; I snarled in triumph, in exhaustion, with the ultimate exertions of love. Thus did my illness begin. I was ten at the time. in the morning I was taken to see the doctor. The pogrom continued, but we were left alone. The doctor, a fat man, found that I had a nervous illness. ‘This illness,’ he said, ‘occurs only in Jews and among Jews it occurs only in women.’ [...] I said farewell for ever to Nikolayev, where ten years of my childhood had passed. And now, when I remember those sad years, I find in them the beginning of the ailments that torment me, and the causes of my premature and dreadful decline.” (David McDuff)

«Но хоть бы и можно терпеть, я не стал бы этого делать, потому что не испытывал больше стыда... Так началась моя болезнь. Мне было тогда десять лет. Наутро меня повели к доктору. Погром продолжался, но нас не тронули. Доктор, толстый человек, нашел у меня нервную болезнь. [...] я навсегда простился с Николаевым, где прошли десять лет моего детства.»

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In groups of two or three, discuss:

- 1. How does each translation affect your experience of the story? Of the ending?**
- 2. What is the relationship between the pogrom and love in the end?**
- 3. What is the 10-year old protagonist’s experience of love? How does it compare to other loves in the story?**
- 4. Why would we consider Russia/this story as part of European tradition? Why wouldn’t we?**

Аудиокнига

Валентина Вавель

Одесские рассказы

Первая любовь

Литература Николаевская бульвар
Espace du boulevard Nicolaiski