

MAILER AND BABEL

ON BEING JEWISH

V I C T O R P E P P A R D

ISAAC BABEL AND NORMAN MAILER ARE TWO WRITERS whose works explore many of the vicissitudes of being Jewish in a culture where Jews are in a minority. Babel's stories contain a rich cast of Jewish characters who deal with life in the Russian context, just as Mailer's Jewish characters cope with life in America. Neither of the two authors clings to one thematic line or another, or one or another character type. This way they are able to illuminate a wide range of the Jewish experience in a primarily gentile society, including the observation of certain traditions and cultural practices designed to preserve Jewish identity and values.

Both Mailer and Babel, for all of their manifest Jewishness, aspired to reach a wider audience, one might say even a universal one. That they both succeeded in this is obvious. Babel was one of Russia's and the world's greatest short story writers, and Mailer, who claimed he did not value short fiction very much, nevertheless thought highly of Babel's short fiction (*Short Fiction* 310). Babel was an innovator in that he created a narrative that is not just multi-leveled, and/or ambiguous, but may contain two or more stories that contradict each other within the same text. A brilliant example of this among others is "My First Fee" (*Complete Works* 709–717). As Peter Constantine points out, Babel had a very broad stylistic range and was able to implement just the right style and voice for the characters of a particular story (*Complete Works* 31–33). Another of Babel's distinguishing features is his ability to produce memorable and evocative imagery.

Establishing where Mailer ranks among American writers is a job for the specialists. As far as his international standing is concerned, *The Mailer Review* contains persuasive proof that it is in the ascendancy, as his work is

taken seriously in a whole range of countries, from China to Russia to Slovenia. Mailer, like Babel, was also the creator of memorable imagery and clever phrases in addition to his innovations in English grammar. One of his major achievements was to create his own version of a hybrid genre that combines investigative reporting and novelistic techniques of narration and character depiction, such as *Oswald's Tale*, *The Executioner's Song*, and *The Armies of the Night*, the last of which features personal involvement in the events.

The more I study and think about these two writers, the more I see in common between Mailer and Babel, including and beyond their Jewishness. They both wrote in a range of genres and forms, including short stories, plays, and film scenarios. Here we should note, as Gregory Friedin tells us, that although Babel began to write a novel called *The Jewess*, he never got past the start of it (*Complete Works* 1054). His genius, like Chekhov's, was firmly lodged in the short form, whereas Mailer's genius was in the novel and other long forms as just noted, try as he might to launch a career as a film writer and producer.

Babel and Mailer also shared a love of languages. Going to Hebrew school and learning Hebrew well was the beginning of Mailer's love affair with languages; in addition to Hebrew, he loved German, French, English, and Spanish, because "language is the marriage of intellect and the senses" (*On God* 139-40). Babel's mastery of languages also included Hebrew, which he studied in private lessons, as well as Russian, German, and French (Freidin 1053). His first stories were in French, and he was proficient enough to act as an interpreter of French and Russian. His fluency in French also gave him a common language with the well known French writers, Gide and Malraux, with whom he became a friend. The fact that Mailer and Babel both studied Hebrew speaks to their families' desire to inculcate in them a love for and knowledge of their Jewish heritage. In the case of Babel, the Jewish people and culture of his native city Odessa were not only the subjects of his fiction, but also an important part of his own character and world view. He describes the special character of his native Odessa in a story of the same name:

[Odessa is] the most charming city of the Russian Empire. If you think about it, it is a town in which you can live free and easy. Half the population is made up of Jews, and Jews are a people who have learned a few simple truths along the way. Jews get married so as not to be alone, love so as to live through the cen-

turies, hoard money so they can buy houses and give their wives astrakhan jackets, love children because, let's face it, it is good and important to love one's children. The poor Odessa Jews get very confused when it comes to officials and regulations, but it isn't all that easy to get them to budge in their opinions, their very antiquated opinions. You might not be able to budge these Jews, but there's a whole lot you can learn from them. To a large extent it is because of them that Odessa has this light and easy atmosphere. (*Complete Works* 75)

In just this short passage, we see that Babel has tremendous sympathy and affection for the Jews of Odessa. At the same time, he pokes fun at them and switches from what appears to be serious to humor in the blink of a phrase. Odessans, whether they are Jewish or not, consider themselves a special breed, and so do many others. Talk of Odessa invariably touches on "Babel's Odessa"—such was the imprint he made on the city.

In Mailer's case, we know that he grew up in a religious family which was not "dogma-driven" (*On God* 159). His mother prayed to *Shekhina* (Hebrew for the wife of God), and her father, who had been a rabbi in Lithuania, was a part-time rabbi and butcher in Long Branch, NJ. She was most proud of the fact that he was a rabbi which Mailer interpreted as an example of the "fundamental snobbery of the Jews . . . as a contrarian Jew I was delighted; it gave me two different strains to develop" (*On God* 160). His mastery of Hebrew allowed Mailer to retranslate the familiar words of Genesis, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" in his own way: "Out of the depths came being, the firmament above and the firmament below." He was not satisfied with the next sentence either which is "The breath of God moved upon the waters." As Mailer says, "it's not 'breath of God' at all . . . so the line really says, 'and the rage of God roared over the waters'" (*On God* 114–15). I find that beyond a love of language and the ability to use it for a purpose, what we see here is Mailer's fierce determination to get to the heart, the essence of things and to overturn commonly held notions and beliefs in order to arrive at the truth, often, of course, his own truth. In other words, Mailer was in the original, non-political sense, a radical.

Much excellent scholarship has, of course, been written on Mailer as a Jewish writer, including especially by Mashey Bernstein and Ezra Cappell. Employing a close, cogent reading of both Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*

and Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, Cappell shows that Hemingway, via the narrator Jake Barnes, sets a kind of template for the emasculated, unsympathetic Jew in the character Robert Cohen. In Mailer's novel, Roth and Goldstein, despite the fact that they are very different from each other, are also widely despised and emasculated. However, "Mailer's portrait of emasculated Jewish characters is designed to draw attention to the complex negotiation his Jewish characters must make with an outwardly hostile and clearly anti-Semitic US Army during World War II" ("Hemingway's Jewish Progeny" 218). Moreover, "Mailer is scrupulously careful to honestly portray the Army in all of its inherent bigotry" ("Jewish Progeny" 219).

I would like to borrow Cappell's term "complex negotiation," because this behavior is what virtually all of Babel's and Mailer's Jewish characters are forced to engage in on a regular basis in their seemingly vastly different societies that share pervasive anti-Semitism.

In his stories about Odessa, Babel writes about the life of the city's Jews, from the bandit Benya Krik to the social elite. His characters undergo a whole range of explicitly Jewish experience, from the horrors of a pogrom to the difficulty a young boy encounters in being admitted to the gymnasium, to the family expectations, if not demands not only to succeed but to stand out. I should note here that Odessan Jewish artists, such as Yasha Heifitz, the violinist, and Vladimir Horowitz, the pianist, both of whom reached the pinnacle of fame and virtuosity, set a very high bar for others to match. The characters in Babel's stories are often subject to such pressure, as we see in the story "At Grandmother's" in which the grandmother says to the clearly autobiographical narrator, "you must know everything" (*Complete Works* 52). And so he did in "The Story of My Dovecote" in preparation for the entrance exam for the local gymnasium by memorizing three books. At the exam he recited passages about the history of Peter the Great and Alexander Pushkin's poetry, Russia's most beloved writer. When he overwhelms the admission committee with his long recitation by memory they give in to this remarkable display of memory and industry and admit him. In doing so, one of them exclaims, "What a nation! The devil is in these Yids!" (*Complete Works* 602). This episode reflects both grudging admiration for the child narrator and the easy readiness of his examiner to call him by a powerful and noxious ethnic slur. Needless to say, as a Jew the boy was subject to a much more stringent set of criteria for admission than the Russians who attended the gymnasium. We also see here confirmation of what

Mailer says about the ghetto Jews who “gave everything they had to their schools . . . [and] put their emphasis on learning and intelligence” (*On God* 111). This tradition was, of course, maintained in Babel’s time in Moldavanka, the Jewish section of Odessa.

Babel’s characters are virtually all exceptional or outside the norm in one way or another, but not all of them live up to the demands of their families. A few of them are voyeurs, as in the story “The Bathroom Window,” in which a young man pays the madam of a brothel to spy on the women in her employ at work with their clients (*Complete Works* 117–18). The child narrator in “The Awakening” is in scandalous conflict with his family, particularly the father, because he refuses to become the *wunderkind* they expect him to become and goes off swimming with the Russian boys and their coach at the beach rather than assiduously practicing the violin (*Complete Works* 628–34). In a story called “In the Basement,” the narrator’s family is “not your typical Jewish family. There were drunks in our clan, we had run away with the daughters of generals . . . and our grandfather had forged signatures and written blackmailing letters for abandoned wives” (*Complete Works* 638). In “Basement” the narrator and his family try hard to impress the wealthy and well respected Borgmans, but when their son Mark Borgman comes to visit the narrator, his short stay ends abruptly and scandalously when the narrator’s uncle, Simon-Wolf, comes home drunk with a set of antlers and a trunk he has bought, and in response to protests at his outlandish purchases he curses in Yiddish expressions the young Borgman had never heard before (*Complete Works* 640–42).

If some of Babel’s characters tend to operate outside the norms and mores of Odessa’s Jewish society, others rebel against the practices of gentile society. One especially graphic example of this takes place in the story “Old Shloyme” when Shloyme curses out the Cossacks who are conducting a pogrom and they kill him for his audacity in defying them (*Complete Works* 43–46). Of all the rebels in Babel’s stories Benya Krik, the bandit who becomes a mafia boss and flouts all social conventions the most egregiously is a dramatic example, unless we count mafia practices as normal.

The story “How it was Done in Odessa” is literally loaded with the lore of Moldavanka’s mafia, control of which Benya Krik wrests from Reuben Tarkovsky, whose nickname is “Yid and a Half.” He does this by arranging consecutive funerals, the first for an innocent man, Joseph Muginstein, killed in a hold-up, and the second for the man who killed him, Sava Butsis, as

well as a pension for Muginstein's mother that Tartakovsky will pay (*Complete Works* 146–54).

In writing an earlier draft of this article I made the erroneous statement that, unlike Babel, Mailer did not write about a Jewish mafia, either in Long Branch, New Jersey or in New York City. In fact, as Michael Lennon pointed out to me, on commission by Sergio Leone, Mailer wrote a screenplay based on a novel by Harry Grey called *The Hoods* that described a group of Jewish gangsters in New York during Prohibition. The name of it was to be *Once Upon a Time in America*, however, Leone did not like Mailer's screenplay and wound up writing one himself with help from other writers for a film with the same name (*Double Life* 492), starring Robert De Niro in the lead as "Noodles," and also featuring James Woods as "Max," and Elizabeth McGovern as Deborah. Outside of the usual shoot 'em up robbery scenes, the film has a compelling plot that follows the characters from childhood, including the twice unrequited love of Noodles and Deborah, made more poignant by the marriage of Max and Deborah, who ascend to prominent positions in high (non-criminal) society, and finally, a dramatically powerful conclusion in which traditional mobster values are in competition with personal ones. Except for a handful of Yiddish words, such as *mazel* for *mazel toff* (good luck), however, it is hard to see very much of Jewish culture in the film, which looks like most cinematic depictions of the Italian-American mafia. Mailer was fascinated by people who lived either on the edge of or beyond the law, so it makes sense that he, like Babel, should have taken an interest in the world of Jewish Mafiosi.

Mashey Bernstein identifies "three basic ideas of Judaism that play a prominent role in his [Mailer's] *oeuvre*: 1) The concept of mitzvah; 2) The emphasis on the here and now; and 3) The prophet's role in society" ("Jewish Values" 377). Bernstein believes that much of Mailer's work is in essence prophetic, and he points to *Barbary Shore* in its examination of Marxism, and also *American Dream* and *Why are We in Viet Nam?* as graphic examples of this. He also writes that virtually everything Mailer wrote shows us "where we are at a particular moment in time" ("Values" 382–83). Here I would like to focus on the concept of the mitzvah, which Bernstein defines "in colloquial Hebrew as in Yiddish, to do a mitzvah is to do a good deed or favor, but Mailer's notion of mitzvah finds a clear expression in the writings of the philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel who sees mitzvah as a holy action, a deed that reveals and transforms a person" ("Values" 377). Bernstein also

points out that in his essay, "The White Negro," Mailer says very much the same thing when he describes a "life . . . directed by one's faith in the necessity of action" (*Advertisements for Myself* 341). Bernstein says further that "this notion of meaningful action motivates nearly all of Mailer's heroes from Sergeant Croft in *Naked*, to Rojack in *American Dream* and even one could argue to Jesus in *Gospel*. Action is "holy," a method for defining one's soul and not "secular" aimed at achieving material results in the external world" (378).

I would like to add another character to the list, Harry Hubbard, who is the narrator of *Harlot's Ghost* with the very Yankee sounding name who is nevertheless, as he tells us, 1/8th Jewish, "just enough never to know what to do about it" (*Harlot's Ghost* 76). Mailer, though, knew what to do with Hubbard, for he sends him on various purposeful, self-defining missions, including the infamous Bay of Pigs invasion and a quixotic trip to Soviet Moscow in an effort to discover the fate of Harlot at the end of the (unfinished) novel. Once again I borrow from Bernstein, who quotes Mailer in an interview with Nermeen Shaikh where Mailer says of the Jewish mind "We're here to do all sorts of outrageous thinking" (376). This notion of Mailer's is exemplified in so many ways and places in his fiction, for example in *Harlot's Ghost*, which contains a truly bit of outrageous thinking and writing in the form of Harry Hubbard's manuscript *The Imagination of the State*, originally supposed to be about the Soviet KGB, but it turns out to be a cover for an expose of the CIA in the USA. Mailer's propensity for outrageous thinking is another aspect of his writing and his philosophy of life that reminds us of Babel.

I acquired the notion that in the Jewish tradition it is much more commonly accepted to dispute with God than it is in the Christian tradition where I see—also from a distance—various degrees and types of reverence, with plenty of doubts, but very little if any disputation with God, having studied many decades ago at the tertiary level of education the "Judeo-Christian tradition" and having subsequently heard lectures by learned men who understand what that means and does not mean much better than I. My sense is that on a certain important level, much of Mailer's copious writing and thinking about the subject of God could be described as an extended, multifarious argument with God his/her very nature, especially God's powers and, crucially, limitations. Mailer and Michael Lennon conduct a fascinating colloquy on this subject in *On God*, where Lennon asks Mailer

questions about his religious beliefs. Special mention should be made here both of Lennon's ability to elicit illuminating responses, and his impressive knowledge of world religions. While Mailer never stopped being Jewish or identifying himself as Jewish, he was sympathetic with existentialism, and Gnosticism, and many aspects of Catholicism. He was, however, adamantly opposed to organized religion which he expressed thus: "All organized churches and synagogues are . . . obfuscations to separate us from a closer sense of the nature of God (*On God* 208). This suspicion of ritual and hatred of repetition goes back to Mailer's childhood, when "synagogue services left me bored. Most of it washed over me. I might have just as well been a shell on the surf's edge" (*On God*, 123).

I would like briefly to note two other things about Mailer's beliefs concerning God which may or may not jibe on some level with Judaism as a faith. In Mailer's conception of a God who is not omnipotent, his descriptions of God often make analogies with the life and capabilities of humans, including the ability to learn and make mistakes and the ability to create as an artist. Indeed, he believed in a complex triad in which God, the Devil, and people form a complex, variegated and variable nexus in which each part performs certain roles and functions, which may change with circumstances and events (*On God passim*). Mailer firmly believed in reincarnation and he thought that "the only judgment that comes to us—is by way of reincarnation. To wit, as a reward we can be given a better possibility in our next life. Or we can be born into a worse one, if that is what we deserve" (*On God* 20–21). Moreover, he thought that sudden death has no meaning for an individual who must prepare for death and that the Holocaust in effect flooded reincarnation and prevented people who died in it from preparing for their next existence (*On God* 170–71).

Early in *On God*, Michael Lennon remarks that "much of your thinking seems to be premised on the event of the Holocaust." Mailer replies that "since I'm Jewish, the fair answer to that is probably yes. But there still would have been the gulags. And, the failure of Bolshevism" (11). This answer, it seems to me, shows that Mailer welcomes the notion that being Jewish is an important part of his *weltanschauung*. Nevertheless, typically for Mailer, at the same time he will not let that be the sole determining factor in his understanding of the struggle between good and evil.

With that in mind, I would like to return here to my favorite Philosopher-King, Isaac Babel's Benya Krik, the mafia boss who in an awkward mo-

ment apologizes to Joseph Muginstein's mother, Aunt Pesya, at Muginstein's funeral by describing God's fallibility in "How Things Were Done in Odessa":

If you want my life, you can have it, but everyone makes mistakes, even God! This was a giant mistake, Aunt Pesya. But didn't God himself make a mistake when he settled the Jews in Russia so they could be tormented as if they were in hell? Wouldn't it have been better to have the Jews living in Switzerland, where they would've been surrounded by first-class lakes, mountain air and Frenchmen galore? (*Complete Works* 152)

Benya knew little or nothing about the French, but Babel, author of a story called "Guy de Maupassant," knew a great deal. In the 1930s, years after writing about Benya Krik, Babel traveled to France several times to visit his wife, Evgenia Borisovna Babel, (nee Gronstein) and daughter, Nathalie, who lived there. Both Babel and Mailer were masters at using a wide variety of narrative voices, ostensibly very different from themselves, to express heretical and blasphemous notions they believed in themselves.

In *Red Cavalry*, Babel's collection of stories about the Russian Civil War on the Polish border, where Babel worked as a reporter, his narrator is a man ironically named Liutov, from the Russian word *liuty*, which means "fierce" or "ferocious," because neither Babel nor his narrator is anything like fierce or ferocious. Furthermore, Babel's stratagem here is never explicitly to disclose the fact that Liutov is like himself Jewish, something we have to deduce from a mass of more than circumstantial evidence. In the story "My First Goose," when the narrator shows up at a house where a bunch of Cossacks are quartered, he is received by a quartermaster whom he tells he has a law degree from Petersburg University. The quartermaster advises him that mama's boys like him in glasses are liable to get cut up unless he is able to "ruin a lady, yes, the cleanest lady, and you're the darling of the fighters" (*Complete Works* 230–33). The complex negotiation Liutov works out, all the while knowing his very life may depend on it, involves crushing a goose's head with his boot and ordering the landlady to cook it for him, while pushing her around for good measure—a far cry from messing up a clean little lady but good enough to satisfy the Cossacks. For when they see Liutov's performance, they decide that he will fit in fine with them and invite him to share their meal. That night, though, the moon "was already hanging . . ." like

a cheap earring" (Reader 208) and the narrator's "heart, bloodstained from the killing, whined and dripped misery" (209). In other words, in order to carry out the negotiation to save his skin, Liutov had to radically compromise all of his values.

There are other places in *Red Cavalry* where Babel's narrator Liutov's values get him in trouble in the sense that he is unable to do things the soldiers are able to do. A dramatic instance of this takes place in the story "Dolgushov's Death," when Liutov finds Dolgushov mortally wounded holding his intestines in his hands. Dolgushov begs Liutov to shoot him to end his misery. However, Liutov is unable to perform this act of mercy killing, we presume because he has been taught all of his life not to kill. When a Cossack soldier, Afonka Bida, arrives he curses out Liutov for his inability to carry out Dolgushov's plea and performs the act himself (*Complete Works* 242–45). I describe this scene because Babel's graphic, naturalistic depiction of the war is an important aspect of his poetics—or if you like prosaics—both in *Red Cavalry* and in *The Odessa Stories*.

Here I would like to switch gears and get back to God, more accurately the son of god that both Mailer and Babel describe in their fiction. Mailer's aim in *The Gospel According to the Son* is much more ambitious than anything Babel does in that he undertakes to write his own full version of the Yeshua/Jesus story. Babel, as does Mailer, assumes we know the biblical basics of this tale, but instead of taking us from start to finish, he wants to add a couple of new incidents to the life of the hero. In the story "The Sin of Jesus," Babel writes a fantastic tale in which Jesus attempts to help a cleaning woman named Arina who keeps getting pregnant break the cycle. The ploy Jesus employs is to bring an angel named Alfred, who was complaining his life had been taken too early, back to earth to be with Arina. On their first night together, Arina accidentally crushes little Alfred's wings with her heavily pregnant stomach rendering him dead all over again. Jesus takes this "sin" upon himself, and in a parodic reversal of the "real" biblical scene of the sinner-woman who washes his feet, he washes Arina's feet and begs her forgiveness. Arina, however, does not accept his entreaty and thereby leaves the sin with Jesus unforgiven (*Complete Works* 104–08).

In Babel's "Pan Apolek" he creates another apocryphal story about Jesus in a tale Apolek tells about the wedding of Deborah. After eating and drinking too much, Deborah gets so sick she cannot consummate her marriage with her husband. Ostensibly to bail out poor Deborah from this disgrace,

Jesus steps out of his role as a bystander and performs the consummation himself with Deborah lying in her vomit (*Complete Works* 216-22). This gross naturalism is part of the real Babel, the blasphemer. For all of Mailer's willingness to stretch the bounds of taste and decorum, I do not believe there is anything in his works quite like this. While his Yeshua is wrestling with both the Devil and the assignment God has given him to be his son, Babel is portraying Jesus on his own, independently of either God or the Devil in both "The Sin of Jesus" and "Pan Apolek." However, many interpretations Babel encourages us to entertain of these stories as, like Mailer, Babel's Jesus is primarily a man and not a god.

I would like to take this point a little further by positing that whereas Mailer's Yeshua acts and behaves as a Jew, especially in his purposeful and self-defining acts—again a nod to Bernstein. Babel's portrayal of Jesus is neither as a Jew nor as the Jesus the Christians have subsequently fashioned him to be. In the story about Jesus' sin, he can perform the miracle of returning the angel Alfred to earth, but winds up being discrowned by Arina's refusal to forgive him his sin. In "Pan Apolek," Jesus, or I should say Apolek's apocryphal Jesus, he acts as an independent agent completely outside of the biblical tradition and breaks the conventions of holiness often ascribed to him.

As Mailer says in *On God*, "I can accept miracles—miracles don't bother me," and so he believes that it is possible that Jesus is the son of God (89). It is no surprise then that Mailer retains some of the miraculous aspects of the biblical story of Yeshua, such as the bread and fish in the desert, but for the most part his Yeshua is much more man than he is God. Mailer's telling of the tale of Yeshua also departs, if not as radically as Babel, from the usual Christian portrayal of the life of Yeshua and his disciples and of the character of Pilate and his dealings with the Sanhedrin. The story of Yehuda/Judas is that he is the ultimate or archetypal betrayer, the one whose name stands for betrayal. Yet, in Mailer's *Gospel*, Yeshua does not see him in that light because he loved him and he warned him of his imminent arrest by the authorities. Yehuda, however, opposed Pilate's corrupt dealings with the Sanhedrin, wanted to rebel against Roman rule, and was dissatisfied with Yeshua for not doing so. Mailer's version of the story here provides us with an intriguing turnabout in which Yehuda is not so much guilty, as Yeshua may feel guilty that he did not live up to Yehudah's desire to free the Jews of Jerusalem from the oppressive Roman regime.

In an echo of Babel's gangster-king-philosopher Benya Krik, who rules Moldavanka in Odessa, Mailer's Pilate accepts bribes in the form of gold from the Temple and is yet at the same time a corrupt procurator-philosopher whose philosophy, paradoxically enough, influences that of Yeshua. In *Gospel*, Pilate asks, "What is truth? Where there is truth, there will be no peace. Where peace abides, you will find no truth" (219). *Gospel* concludes with Yeshua recalling Pilate's words and says, as though in reply, "in peace there was no truth, and in truth, no peace. For that reason I do not bring peace but a sword. I would wage war on all that makes us less than we ought to be, less generous" (241). This, then, is Yeshua's central mitzvah, imbued as it is with a high and noble purpose, but not exactly the mission to save mankind that Christians traditionally ascribe to him.

For all of his rebelling against the different cultural traditions that surrounded him, and for all the ambiguity of much of his work, Babel believed that fiction should be imbued with important ideas, as we see in his speech at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934 where he said that, "without elevated ideas and without philosophy there is no literature" (my translation from *Sochineniia* 2, 381). This, too, is something Norman Mailer shares with Babel, as at the end of *Gospel* and, indeed, in virtually all of his novels. In so many of the works by Babel and Mailer, Jewish characters wind up as objects and/or victims of prejudice. However, there is one figure who ends on a note of triumph. In Babel's story "Saint Valentine" from *Red Cavalry* the local priest is unable to stop some soldiers from desecrating a church by mixing chicken bones with those of the saint. The person who comes in and shames the soldiers into stopping their desecration is a local rabbi who dresses them down in no uncertain terms! (*Complete Works* 286–89).

It is tempting to interpret this story and Babel's tales about Jesus as clever ways of desacralizing the (Orthodox) Christian society that surrounded him, a society that preached love of all and carried out pogroms at the same time. And so we may interpret as so, but with the caveat that it is always risky to attribute finalizing meanings to the mercurial Babel's stories. As we have already seen, Mailer's critique of Christianity, and all other organized religions, was largely based on their employment of dogma and doctrine that he saw preventing people from living creatively and without unnecessary inhibitions. Despite the Holocaust, the Gulags, and the failure of Bolshevism, for all of his assertions of God's limited powers, Mailer never denies

the existence of God, even as some people concluded after the Shoah that there simply was no God.

Babel was executed in 1940, one might say on the eve of the holocaust to come, so there is no possibility of his being influenced by it. Even so, in a short play by Babel called *Petlyura's Prison*, a young girl named Krista sees a young boy lying on the floor with a gash on his face and whispers, "People are saying there's no God . . . Can there be a God when people suffer like this?" (*Complete Works* 1022). Here we see that Babel, as does Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*, is raising the question of whether there can be a God in a world that permits the suffering of children.

As I hope that I have demonstrated, Mailer and Babel were both consistent contrarians and blasphemers on all manner of questions, who nevertheless valued their Jewish heritage. The political contexts in which they found themselves were, of course, fundamentally different. While Mailer took the initiative to protest against anything and everything he was opposed to, including *The Armies of the Night* against the View Nam war, Babel had to be more circumspect about the targets of his satire and/or criticism. In fact, he spent a number of years in the 1930s in a period of relative silence trying to find a way to write significant fiction without angering the Soviet authorities, or at least get his work past the avid, often paranoid censorship. Mailer also experienced periods in which he reevaluated where to go with his writing.

Babel's last years serve as an example of how unpredictable, actually bizarre the Soviet system could be in dealing with its greatest writers. In 1936 he received a dacha in Peredelkino, a writers' colony outside of Moscow, one of the highest rewards a writer could receive, and in 1938 he was presented a contract for a collection of his works. But in 1939 he was arrested, and on January 27, 1940 he was executed in the Lyubanka prison in Moscow (Freidin 1057–58). As his son, Mikhail Ivanov, told me, he was shot a day after taking back false evidence he had given against some other writers. There are a number of theories on why he was executed, including because he was Jewish. That certainly may have made his execution easier, but there is another explanation that should be taken into consideration as well. This has to do with another thing Babel shared with Mailer, and that is his propensity for engaging in numerous affairs with other women while married to someone else. Specifically, Babel had a long-running affair with the wife of Ezhov, the head of the KGB. Ezhov had been arrested when Beriia took his place in

1938 (Freidin 1057), so I believe that in desperation to save himself and also as a way of getting back at Babel for the affair with his wife, Ezhov accused Babel of spying for France. I think that this reason is ultimately the most plausible reason for Babel's execution.

Although Mailer's extramarital affairs got him in trouble, notably in his marriage to Norris Church Mailer, who made him vow to give up his womanizing or else she would leave him. He did not live up to his vow completely, but sufficiently for their marriage to survive.

In conclusion, both Babel and Mailer had planned to do much, much more at the time of their deaths. From the "Russian" chapter in *Castle in the Forest*, I conclude that after completing that novel, he fully intended, among numerous other projects, to tackle Russia in his next major novelistic venture. Nevertheless, Mailer and Babel left lasting, innovative legacies, residues that reach across world literature, especially American, Russian, and Jewish literature.

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