Maxim D. Shrayer

The Jews of Russian Literature

“The representation of Jews by European artists and thinkers is monotonous and repetitive” (p. 1), states Leonid Livak in the opening sentence of his new book, and yet this does not prevent him from writing one of the longest and most polemical explorations of the subject to appear in the past two decades. An undergraduate reading Livak’s new book might formulate its thesis as follows: In writing of the Jews, classical and early modern Russian writers rarely went beyond preconceived religious and ethno-social notions dating to early Christian Europe, and Jewish-born writers who reached prominence in the first decades of the 20th century had to displace their Jewishness as the price of entering the Russian cultural mainstream. This twofold thesis is both true and not true, depending on what material one engages. Consider, for instance, the treatment of Jewish questions by Mikhail Lermontov or Leo Tolstoy, to say nothing of Nikolai Leskov and of the Russian neorealists and how they dealt with the burden of Russian guilt. Furthermore, the careers of such bicultural Jewish Russophone writers as Lev Lunts or Mikhail Kozakov in the prewar Soviet decades, and Fridrikh Gorenstein, Philip Isaac Berman or Leonid Girshovich in the postwar decades, demonstrate that it is possible not to shed one’s Jewishness to become—and be understood as—a Russian writer. (Livak concentrates on prose fiction, and so shall I in this essay, for argument’s sake, even though some of the most powerful articulations of Jewish identity have been in Russian poetry and drama, while a number of the past century’s dominant Russian-language poets were Jews—pace Marina Tsvetaeva.)

There are many firsts in this learned, meandering, and provocative book. “To sum up,” Livak announces early on, “the present study is not concerned with Europe’s so-called Jewish question […]” (p. 9). Among studies of Jewish culture and history in Imperial and Soviet Russia—and in Russia Abroad—it is perhaps the first one not to discuss the impact of the Pale of Settlement, pogroms, blood libel or the reforms of the 1860s on the representation of Jews in the Russian literary imagination. It is the first one to pay only meagre tribute to the prominence of Christian-Judaic dialogue in Silver Age Russian culture. And it is probably the first such study to make scant reference to the century-old debates about Jews in the Russian Revolution and to take little stock of the unprecedented influx of Jews into the literary mainstream during the early Soviet decades. Above all else, Livak’s is

the first book about Jewish aspects of Russian (and Soviet) culture to speak not of historical Russian Jews (some ethnographers, such as Natal'ia Iukhneva, have posited the existence of a subethnic category rусские евреи but of a theoretical construct, “the jews.” “This investigation, then,” Livak explains, “is not primarily concerned with Jewish individuals living in Christian and post-Christian societies. Its main interest lies with the cultural model generating the image of ‘the jews’ whose literary life is my preoccupation” (p. 4). Livak takes the notion of “the jews” (sic) from cultural theory and runs with it. Having acknowledged the borrowing of the term “the jews” from Jean-François Lyotard—and having allowed that the term is “jarring” and “does not refer to real people or groups in any historical period” (p. 4)—Lvak makes the Jews of Russia, where the span of Jewish history was brief as compared to the rest of Europe, the testing ground of his model. “A product of cultural modeling often reveals more about those who invoke it than those it describes” (p. 6), writes Livak as he critically dismisses prior approaches to Jewish themes and characters in European literature. Is Livak perhaps admitting the limitations of his methodology?

Given the absence of articles in the Russian language, and also given the non-capitalization of ethnic or religious categories, one wonders how Livak’s “the jews” would be rendered in Russian—and whether translation would not knock Livak’s ahistorical discourse off its feet by obliterating the difference between “the jews” and the Jews. The further in time we find ourselves from the partitions of Poland and the period when Russia suddenly gained about one million Jews, the harder it becomes to reconcile the notion of “the jews” with the overwhelming empirical evidence of the Jewish historical presence. The model of a Russian writer’s encounter with “the jews”—not the contemporary, historical Jews of the Russian Empire or the Jews encountered abroad but figureheads of the European (Judeophobic) imagination—becomes less and less productive as we move beyond the first third of the 19th century. Livak’s generative model functions with great difficulty once the Jewish question has entered the Russian mainstream in the era of the 1860s reforms. The growing ahistoricity of Livak’s approach is felt acutely when he leaps from Anton Chekhov all the way to Isaak Babel’. And where Livak does write of interplays between historical lives and literary lives (e.g., Chekhov’s involvement with contemporary flesh-and-blood Jewish women and men and Chekhov’s fashioning of Jewish characters), the empirical evidence flies in the face of the main theoretical argument. Are the writers in Livak’s book writing about the Jews or “the jews” of Russia?

Lvak engages many literary, religious, and philosophical works, but limits his detailed textual analyses to five authors: Nikolai Gogol’, Ivan Turgenev, Chekhov, Babel’, and Iurii Fel’zen. In justifying the selective focus of his investigation, Livak substitutes declaration for argumentation:

I am simply bound by the authors and texts I have chosen for analysis, a choice dictated by my personal view that ‘the jews’ in the writings of Gogol’, Turgenev, Chekhov, Babel’, and Fel’zen stand out (not least thanks to the complexity of their creators’ art
and personae) against the backdrop of the uncountable ‘jews’ in Russian letters who are as predictable, repetitive, and dull as only stock literary types can be (p. 23).

I doubt that many students of Russian literature would find Fyodor Dostoevsky’s Isai Fomich Bumshtein or Vladimir Nabokov’s Zina Mertz to be “predictable,” “repetitive,” or “dull.”

Collected here under the same cover are actually two, perhaps even three separate books. Livak’s first book-within-a-book is about applying literary and cultural theory to the study of Jews, generally in Europe and more specifically in Russia. He offers a stimulating application of the Proppian and Greimasian classic structuralist analysis of the fairy tale (or narrative, writ large) to Jewish characters and themes; Livak’s is the first such effort that I am aware of in Western Jewish studies. Livak’s second book-within-a-book concentrates on 19th-century Russian literature. The Turgenev and Chekhov sections are, to this reader, stronger and more original than Livak’s Gogol’ sections. Livak’s analysis of Turgenev’s Jewish intersections complements Elena M. Katz’s recent Neither with Them, Nor Without Them, while his nuanced (and least theoretically harnessed) Chekhov sections advance some of the ideas of Elena Tolstaia’s Poetika razdrazheniia [The Poetics of Irritation].

Perhaps Livak might have stopped with Chekhov and the 1890s, but he goes on to a third major area, to the 1920s and to Babel’, whom many students of Jewish literature in the diaspora regard as a paradigmatic bicultural author, and also to Babel’’s coeval Iurii Fel’zen (1894–1943), who has not been popular with students of Jewish-Russian letters. The third and most polemical book-within-a-book, devoted to “Russian-Jewish authorship,” might be Livak’s Achilles’s heel. Throughout the discussions of Russian-Jewish writers (or Jewish-Russian writers—this is not the place to debate terminology), Livak’s principal interlocutor is the shadow of the late Shimon Markish. Like Markish, Livak places an epitaph to Jewish-Russian letters on the boundary of World War II. Unlike Markish, Livak dismisses the idea of Jewish-Russian literature, which he had previously termed “an ideologically motivated critical construct validating the uneasy identity of an interest group known as the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia.” I recognize the temptation of an expert on Russian émigré culture to bring Parisian Jewish-Russian writers into the debate. I also appreciate Livak’s frustration over what he sees as Fel’zen’s absence from the canon of Jewish-Russian writing, even though Fel’zen

---

2 Elena M. Katz, Neither with Them, Nor Without Them: The Russian Writer and the Jew in the Age of Realism (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2008); Elena Tolstaia, Poetika razdrazheniia. Chekhov v kontse 1880-kh — nachale 1890-kh godov (Moscow: Radiks, 1994).

was Jewish, wrote in Russian, created Jewish characters, and died during World War II and the Shoah. And yet I find that Fel'zen hardly merits a paradigmatic comparison with Babel', both because as an artist he pales next to Babel' and because his exilic response to Jewishness was so muted.

Rhetorical self-affirmation is this book’s favoured way of making a point: “let me make clear” (p. 6); “it is my conviction” (p. 10); “this study enriches our understanding” (p. 15); “I contend” (p. 299; p. 327). Previously best known for his marvelously researched book How It Was Done in Paris, Livak elevates aphoristic defamiliarization to a mode of reasoning. Consider the titles of some of the book’s chapters and sections: “The Western Wall of Russian Literature”; “The Discreet Pleasures of Liberalism”; Uncle Iankel’s Cabin”; “Isaak Babel’s Portrait of an Artist As a Former Jew.” Some of the book’s cultural puns and terminological oxymorons work better than others (e.g., “semi(o)tic chaos” [p. 163]; “monologic dialogue” [p. 5]). Livak writes with zest and great conviction, but he (and his editors) do not always worry whether the punch lines—or whole sentences—make clear sense: “This European, as distinct from Russian, cultural apprenticeship is part of Reb Goethe’s recipe for allaying the salient contradictions of Russian-Jewish authorship” (p. 339). A theoretical overdrive—and polemical zeal stoking the arguments (consider Livak’s disagreement with Robert Louis Jackson about Chekhov’s “Skripka Rotshil’d” [Rothschild’s Fiddle])—does not prevent one from appreciating many of the book’s insights and evidentiary findings. Livak’s sections on Turgenev and Fel'zen showcase a very impressive comparative command of Russian and French literary texts. Among my favourite pages in the book is Livak’s sophisticated reading of Chekhov’s “Tina” [Mire] and his discovery, in the margins of a copy of Fel’zen’s book at the Bibliothèque Tourguéniev in Paris, of openly racist anti-Jewish notations made by an émigré contemporary. Having poured over The Jewish Persona in the European Imagination: A Case of Russian Literature, and having admired Livak’s erudition and his distaste for even the smallest shades of Judeophobia, I close his book with a feeling of relief. As an antidote to Livak’s insistence on seeing mainly “the jews” in both historical individuals and fictional characters, I turn to a passage in Ivan Bunin’s Zhizn’ Arsen’eva. Iunost’ [The Life of Arsen’ev. Youth]. Written in France in the 1920s and 1930s, The Life of Arsen’ev is hardly known in critical literature as a work with a Jewish agenda. In Chapter XVI, Book Five, Bunin describes a visit to Vitebsk:

I reached Vitebsk only by nighttime. The evening was frosty; bright. Everywhere around it was very snowy, soundless, and clean, virginal; to me the town looked ancient and un-Russian: tall houses fused into one whole, with not very large windows and deep and rough-hewn semicircular gates in the lower stories. Now and then one came across old Jews dressed in long [black] coats and white stockings with boots, their peyes looking like tubular, winding ram’s horns; [their faces] bloodless, their eyes

---

completely dark and sadly inquisitive. On the main street there was promenading; slowly moving along the sidewalks was a dense crowd of plump young ladies, dressed with a provincial Jewish exuberance in thick velvet coats, purple, blue and pomegranate. Behind them, but modestly, keeping the distance, there walked young men, all of them in bowler hats but also with peyes; with maidenly tenderness and roundness in their Oriental-candy faces; with silky youthful down around their cheeks; with languid antelope gazes […] Enchanted, I walked in this crowd, in this town that seemed so ancient to me in all its wondrous newness.5

I suspect that both Yehudah Pen and Marc Chagall, Bunin’s contemporaries and Vitebsk-inspired Jewish artists of very different sensibilities, would find something enchanting and familiar in this recollection by Bunin’s semi-autobiographical Russian protagonist. Here the émigré Bunin is writing of the Jews he had personally observed in his youth, reimagined through the prism of his 1907 trip to the Holy Land, and found strange and beguiling. In respectfully returning to Leonid Livak both the “generative model” and “the jews,” this hyphenated reader of Russian literature would prefer to stick with the Jews, the Jews both real and phantasmal, the Jews of whom writers of many different origins and backgrounds have written in Russian with such trepidation and esteem, such hope and disillusionment, such enmity and love.

Boston College

5 My literal translation—MDS; the Russian original is quoted from Ivan Bunin, *Zhizn’ Arsent’eva. Yunost’* (New York: Izdatel’stvo imeni Chekhova, 1952) 335.