

return to the Western civilization.⁵¹ Moreover, a number of scholars were prominent actors in the transition itself in the late 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. But the most important and interesting aspect of the combined role of the Estonian scholars-intellectuals is their ability to participate in the nation- and state-building process as *scholars*. The most telling example is the Estonian Civil Society Development Concept. Its cooperative spirit and the unproblematic role of social scientists as scholarly experts in its preparation are in a striking contrast with the ambivalence of the most spectacular Russian attempt to regulate the relationship between the NGOs and the state, the Kremlin's Civic Forum in 1991.⁵²

All in all, the discourses on civil society seem to display, on the one hand, yet another example of the ambivalence of the Russian intelligentsia in relation both to the state and the West, and on the other hand the state- and nation-building role of Estonian intellectuals, a role that is not unfamiliar in other small European latecomer countries.

Jews, Sex, and Revolution in Eduard Bagritskii's "February"

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Eduard Bagritskii wrote his long narrative poem "February" in 1933–1934, shortly before dying of complications related to chronic asthma. Upon his premature death, Bagritskii's brain was removed and stored at the Moscow Institute of the Brain, where his widely acknowledged genius was studied physiologically (see Spivak 2001). This act crowned the official recognition and popular success that this remarkable Soviet poet enjoyed in his last years even as he was growing increasingly disabled and practically immobilized by his disease. The morbid circumstances in which "February" was conceived may confirm the perception of this posthumously published work as a poetic statement summing up the author's fading life.

Here is a brief summary of this poem's plot: The lyrical protagonist recalls two episodes in his life, both of which occur in his birthplace, an Odessa-like southern city full of blooming cow-wheat (*Ivan-da-mar'ia*) and falling leaves. The narrator-protagonist describes how he grew up in an oppressive traditional Jewish household, an awkward, sickly, and shy Jewish youth. On leave from the front during the first world war, he falls in love with a beautiful, red-haired and green-eyed girl, a high school student (*gimnazistka*) he had never seen before. He follows her "like a killer", ineptly approaches her in the street, and experiences a quick and traumatic rejection. The February revolution makes him a deputy commissar in the local militia. Raiding a gangster den, the hero recognizes his beloved in the prostitute he finds sleeping with a bandit. He has the gangster arrested, then rapes his erstwhile beloved "without pulling off [his] high boots," or his "holster," "without taking off [his] trench coat" (Bagritskii 2000, 174, "February" is cited from this edition throughout my essay). The poem ends with the narrator's declaration to the girl that he is taking her to avenge his humiliated forefathers and requite his own timidity in the hope that his seed might fertilize her "desert."

Over the last two decades, "February" has caught the interest of literary scholars, historians, and ideologues. The latter are attracted by what they see as the poem's candid treatment of the theme of Jews in the Russian revolution.

⁵¹ R. Alapuro, 'Estonian views of collective action and democracy', *Journal of Baltic Studies* 34:4 (2003), 457–469.

⁵² A. Nikitin & J. Buchanan, 'The Kremlin's Civic Forum: cooperation or co-optation for civil society in Russia?', *Demokratizatsiya* 10 (2002), 147–165; I. Kharitchev, 'Grazhdanskoe obshchestvo v podarok', *Nezavisimaya gazeta* 2001, 13 September.

Anti-Semitic writers, led by Stanislav Kuniaev and Igor Shafarevich, have drawn especial attention to the poem, interpreting it as a Zionist manifesto of the Jews' vicious revenge on the Russian people. Responding to these accusations, the American Slavist Maxim Shrayer developed his own reading of the poem as "a dream [...] of the harmonious synthesis" between the Russians and the Jews (Shrayer 2000, 74). Russian philologists Leonid Katsis and Valery Shubinsky critiqued Shrayer's reading of "February" as naive and tendentious. Most recently, the historian Yuri Slezkine has cited "February" extensively in his book *The Jewish Century*. Slezkine employs "February" as an emblem of "the Jewish revolution within the Russian revolution", and a reflection of "a violent attempt to conceive a world of Mercurian Apollonians, a Russia that would encompass the world" (Slezkine 2004, 203).

The first problem with the existing interpretations of "February" lies in their treatment of the poem as a straightforwardly historical, even autobiographical document. I believe that in attempting an historical interpretation of this elaborately constructed modernist text, one needs to begin with a close textual and intertextual analysis. "February" is densely interlaced with literary references that have to be accounted for in any strong reading of this poem. Some of these references recur, forming leitmotifs crucial to the poetic, as well as ideological, structure of the poem. These leitmotifs are commonly overlooked by scholars, who are more interested in interpreting the poem as a political allegory. In this essay, I will explore the poem's rich intertextual layers and in doing so reconstruct a number of intellectual contexts that should help elucidate the poem's meaning.

A further problem that I see in the existing readings of "February" is their failure to address the thematic heart of the poem, namely, its focus on issues of gender and sexuality. "February" is one of the most sexually explicit texts in the Russian poetic tradition (where else in this tradition do you find a reference to the smell of human sperm?). It openly and obsessively addresses themes of frustrated lust, defective masculinity, sexual inferiority, envy, and violence. Even today, the poem is quite shocking in its candidness. Sexuality as a literary theme (or "polovukha" as Leonid Katsis calls it) still has little place in serious *literaturovedenie* in Russia, where disdain for Western scholarly fads has superseded Soviet philological puritanism. However, in the case of "February," a

contextualization of Bagritskii's treatment of sexuality and gender is absolutely necessary if one is to make any historical sense of the poem's meaning.

Two (mis)interpretations of "February" are common and need to be corrected. First, "February" is *not* an autobiographical confession. There are too many dramatic discrepancies between the facts of Bagritskii's life and that of the protagonist to take the latter as Bagritskii's complete *alter ego*. Despite the emphatically lyrical style of the poem, its hero differs from the author in several important points: unlike his character, Bagritskii did not serve in the military during WWI; unlike his shy and inexperienced protagonist, Bagritskii was a sexually adventurous and successful youth (Spivak 2001, 134); further, the poet was raised in a rather assimilated, petit bourgeois family, not the traditional Jewish family of his protagonist.

A second correction is in order: the relations between the red-haired girl and the protagonist *cannot be* a simple allegory of relations between the Russians and the Jews. It is tempting to read this tale of rejection revenged by rape as a trope for the humiliation of Jews in the Pale of Settlement required by the Jewish-led revolution. However, such a projection does not work for a strictly textual reason: the reader, as well as the protagonist, does not know whether or not the red-haired girl of Bagritskii's poem is Russian. The *gimnazistka* could easily be Jewish, especially in Odessa, where many upper-class Jewish girls studied in Russian schools. Or she could be of any other ethnicity in this cosmopolitan city. Bagritskii carefully avoids any direct reference to or even hint about the girl's ethnicity. Therefore, Maxim Shrayer's reading of the narrator's first encounter with the *gimnazistka* as an "experience of anti-Semitism – the rejection of the Jewish protagonist by his prejudiced and haughty non-Jewish beloved" (Shrayer 2000, 52) makes little sense. Not only does Bagritskii provide no reference to the girl's ethnic background, she is also found, in the last scene, in a brothel serving *Jewish* gangsters: she holds no prejudice toward them. Refusing to talk to our protagonist in the street, the *gimnazistka* acts as any poised upper-class girl would when approached in the street by a rough young man who wears a dirty uniform and "mumbles nonsense." I am not persuaded by the interpretations of the poem's female as an allegorical intercourse with Russia, performed viciously (according to Kuniaev) or idealistically (according to Shrayer). Mikhail Kuzmin remarked once that Bagritskii conceived each of his

poems as a "lyric and epic dissection of a certain philosophical and psychological complex" (Kuzmin 2000, 9). Let us ask ourselves what philosophical and psychological complex Bagritskii dissects in "February".

The poem begins with images, in blank verse, of the protagonist's return to the land of his youth – an obvious allusion to Pushkin's "...Again I visited..." (...*Vnov' ia posetil...*). The first stanza creates the expectation that the waning Bagritskii might follow his beloved poet and declare his reconciliation with the natural circle of life and death. However, this initial promise is never fulfilled. Instead of a serene meditation on the passage of life, Bagritskii tells a most violent story of hurt ego, humiliation, and retribution. His account of a narrator who suffers deeply from his sense of inferiority and takes revenge on a defenseless prostitute borrows heavily from Dostoevskii, Bagritskii's favorite prose writer, and specifically from his *Notes from Underground*. The first allusion that catches the eye: both the Underground Man and Bagritskii's protagonist inflict extra humiliation on their victims by offering them money. To be rejected by a prostitute, the supreme humiliation that Bagritskii's hero experiences in the brothel, may also be seen as a Dostoevskian motif: the Underground Man was memorably denied service by the prostitute Olympia ("Cursed Olympia! She laughed at my face once and refused me [отказанася от меня]. I will pull Olympia by the hair...", Dostoevskii 1988, 513).

Like Dostoevskii's *podpol'e*, Bagritskii's Jewish household stands for a mental and metaphysical space, marked by a humiliating sense of one's own inferiority. In representing traditional Jewish life (which he never quite experienced) as detestable, Bagritskii follows the Dostoevskian pattern by using a spatial notion as a metaphor for an incurable and crippling psychic wound. Dostoevskii describes his "underground" as a place of fetid smell: "*yoniuchee podpol'e*" (Dostoevskii 1988, 458); in Bagritskii, sickening odor becomes an attribute of the traditional Jewish life (*Nad preslovutym evreiskim chadom / Gusinogo zhira...* [154]). According to Konstantin Paustovskii's memoir, Bagritskii believed that asthma, the chronic and lethal disease of his lyrical subjects and himself, was a typical illness of traditional Jews, resulting from the mysterious poisonous smell that saturated every item in old Jewish homes (Paustovskii 1973, 127).

I would argue that Bagritskii's lyrical subject is a version of the Underground Man, locked in his Jewishness as Dostoevskii's hero was in his underground condition. The crucial element of this Jewish condition for Bagritskii's hero is that it undermines his masculinity. Tormented by shyness and vertigo, stooped and coughing, this Jewish boy never loved "as one should": "*Ia nikogda ne liubil kak nado / Malen'kii iudeiskii mal'chik*" (153). This image of the weak and emasculated Jewish youth corresponds to the European stereotype of Jewish men as devoid of proper masculinity, much discussed in the early twentieth century. This stereotype was popularized and developed into a theory by the Austrian Jew Otto Weininger in his *Sex and Character*. Translated into Russian in 1908, Weininger's book was an enormous success in Russia, where his ideas influenced the writings of Vasilii Rozanov as well as many others. Rozanov claimed that

The whole spirit of their law forbids Jews not only war but also hunting. A Jew with a rifle, lying in the forest in wait for a snipe, is an improbable and ridiculous sight, and so is a mounted Jew, chopping the air with his saber. It is laughable, impossible. The Yid is essentially a woman (an old one); nothing masculine becomes him. And they are beaten up just like peasant women are: with a note of contempt, pleasure, and laughter; it is done as something natural and expected. ... In confidence, I even think that the Jews don't dislike getting a beating: they only assume a protesting air to imitate men and Europeans or to pretend that they are men and Europeans (Rozanov 1998, 286, translation is mine).

Leonid Katsis has pointed out the relevance for Bagritskii of the above passage from Rozanov's notorious book *Jews' Offactory and Tactile Relationship with Blood* (Katsis 2000). It has not been noticed, however, that the opening stanzas of "February," depicting the state of the hero's world before the Revolution, contain five direct references to fallen foliage. This leitmotif cannot help but recall Rozanov's most significant book *Fallen Leaves*, in which the author claimed that "the womanly nature of the Jews" was his *idée fixe* ("*bab'ia natura evreev, – moia idée fixe*" [Rozanov 1990, 99]). The device of weaving important references to Rozanov into the description of nature had a precedent in Boris Pil'niak's 1922 story "Cow-Wheat" (Ivan-da-Mar'ia). This early Soviet classic features repeated images of fallen leaves as it focuses on the Rozanovian question of the Revolution's sexual nature. Its heroine, a Cheka operative, muses:

[Karl Marx] took into consideration only physical hunger. He did not take into account another thing that moves the world: love, love as blood, in the name of childbirth. Sex, the family, the species – mankind did not err when it deified sex. – Oh, yes – physical hunger and sexual hunger. That's very inaccurate: better to say – sexual hunger and the religion of sex, religion of blood. Sometimes I feel acutely, to the point of real, physical pain – I begin to feel that the entire world, all culture, all mankind, all things, chairs, chests of drawers, dresses – are permeated by sex, no, that's not right, permeated by sex organs [...] I feel that the entire Revolution – the entire Revolution smells of sex organs (cited in Naiman 1997, 61).

It is worth remembering that Bagritskii describes his autumnal southern city through an image of blooming Ivan-da-mar'ias juxtaposed with falling leaves. (The yellow and blue flowers of Ivan-da-mar'ia, associated in Russian folklore with tragic love, appear in July). This combination of the autumn leaf-fall and mid-summer flowers does not make much botanical sense. However, as a literary description, it is very significant: it points out two pretexts for the problematic of "February" – Rozanov's *Fallen Leaves* and Pil'niak's "Ivan-da-Mar'ia" – and connects the poem to the debates on the Jewish gender and the sexual nature of the Revolution.

The second, transitional part of the poem prepares the historical context for the final rape scene. It addresses the events of February 1917 in a strikingly gendered and sexualized language. The revolution is changing the world (*Oblit mira meniaetsia*) in the direction of increased masculinity (*Po nocham uzhe nachinalos' taino / Muzhestvennoe isveten'e kashtanov* [166]); it also pours "the blood of manliness" into the hero (*Krov'iu muzhestva nalivaetsia telo. / Krov'iu muzhestva obduvaet rubashku. Iunost' konchilas'... / Nachinaetsia zrelost'...* / *Griani' o kamen' prikladom! Sorvi furazhku!* [162]). The protagonist is no longer a stooped and neurotic boy: he is a thuggish fellow who stands erect like a tower (*detina, stoiashchii podobno bushne* [168]). Like "an angel of death" (*kak angel smerti*), he leads a team of blond, blue-eyed, and muscular young sailors (*lkh polosaiye fufatki/ Morshchilis' na muskulature.../ Rozovye rozovatost' iu detstva./ Bol'sherukie, s golubymi glazami...* [169]). The protagonist bonds almost physically with these exemplary males (*My vzgromozdilis' na drozhki./ Obnimata za talii drug druga* [169]). His new-found masculine power is so great that it sends erotic waves even to a tsarist police sheriff who greets the

revolutionary delegates "Ulybais', taia, iznemogaia / Ot radushiia, ot nezhnosti, ot shchast'ia" (165). In a word, Bagritskii depicts the February Revolution as an explosion of virility in his previously emasculated hero.

The final rape scene completes the revolutionary transformation of the neurotic Hebrew boy into a hypermasculine soldierly man. On the one hand, the hero defies and belies Weinger, Rozanov, and the popular view of defective Jewish masculinity by committing an act of sexual violence. This soldierly Jew proves himself not to be a *baba* after all. On the other hand, the rape is the hero's "revenge on the world" which he "could not get away from" (*Ia beru tebia kak mshchen'e miru/ Iz kotorogo ne mog ia vyiti* [174]). Ideologically motivated and mixed with incessant self-reflection, his sex act is still miles away from the simple fun his pink-cheeked muscular sailors are having with "full-breasted whores/girls" (*s polnogradymi devkami* [167]). As Maxim Shrayer has shown, Bagritskii's *gimmazistka* is written in the Symbolist poetic idiom reminiscent of Aleksandr Blok's lyrical poetry (Shrayer 2000, 58–60). Blok's Unknown Lady (*Neznakomka*) may be a prostitute but she is also the Eternal Feminine revealing herself to the poet. That the *gimmazistka* is both the ideal feminine and a whore should not surprise a reader of Blok. Nor will it surprise a reader of Weinger – and virtually every Russian Jewish student was a Weingerian in the 1910s (Bershtein 2004). The Austrian philosopher claimed that whoredom was the essence of the Absolute Feminine who was the metaphysical Nothing, devoid of any value without the Masculine. The final lines of Bagritskii's poem stress the hollowness of the *gimmazistka*-turned-prostitute (*pustiye nedra, tvoiu pustyniu* [174]). This rape is imagined as the hero sharing his overflowing masculinity with the dry emptiness (*pustynia*) of the woman; compared to a rain in the desert, the rape is presented as a charitable deed.

The Jew liberated by the Revolution from his womanly "shtetliness" is a common motif found in the works of Bagritskii, his friend Isaak Babel', and other Jewish writers and artists of their generation. It goes hand in hand with these artists' attraction to the ideal of Slavic manhood embodied in Cossacks, sailors, and soldiers. So widespread a psychological complex deserves a historical explanation, and I will suggest one based on Daniel Boyarin's study of Jewish masculinity. Boyarin argues that the European model of normative masculinity, chivalric and martial, was dramatically opposed to the shtetl model

of ideal manhood, embodied in the figure of the scholarly Mensch. Boyarin points out that the shtetl culture looked at the gentle masculine ideal with about as much contempt as gentiles expressed for unmanly Jews. The shtetl approach to gentle masculinity is best expressed by the notion *goyim naches* "which might be translated as 'games goyim play', a [...] term of opprobrium for European Christian culture and its 'masculine' values such as warmaking, dueling, and adulterous courtly love that ends in *Liebestod*" (Boyarin 1997, 38). Bagritskii's poem documents the clash of these two models, or, rather, the incomplete and traumatic replacement of the Jewish model of masculinity by the Russian. This process seems to be a part and parcel of the psychological history of Russian Jews.

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