

**Title:** Fathers, Sons, and Midwives: Maxim Gorky in Isaac Babel's *My First Fee*  
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Maxim Gorky's profound importance to Babel's career as advocate, mentor and political shield, is universally acknowledged, yet little substantive attention has been devoted to Gorky's influence on—indeed, his presence in—his protégé's creative output. In what ways did Babel acknowledge Gorky, and engage his writing, in the space of his own prose?

It is in "Odessa" (1916), his essay-manifesto, that Babel first salutes his mentor, whom he presents as a principal "harbinger" of the "Literary Messiah" destined to rescue Russian literature from current stagnation. (This savior is, of course, Babel himself.) Fifteen years later, in "Awakening," the first metapoetic childhood story published in his lifetime, Babel casts Gorky as Efim Nikitich Smolich, the benevolent, local "water god" who teaches the narrator to write as well as swim. But it is only in "My First Fee" (1933, published posthumously in 1963), his last and most optimistic metapoetic narrative, that Babel engages directly with one of Gorky's own works: "About First Love" (1922), a largely truthful autobiographical account of how Gorky came to publish his first piece, "Makar Chudra" (1892), after reading it to his first love, Olga Kaminskaia.

A masterful sexual and creative coming-of-age story, "My First Fee" can be read as Babel's liberation (by way of his narrative alter-ego) from the literary grip of Leo Tolstoy. In the proposed essay, I argue that the author is, in fact, emancipating himself from a host of literary forefathers, most importantly Gorky, whom he has essentially outgrown, and to whom he bids a tender, filial farewell. This story in no way marks the end of Babel's close friendship with his mentor, which would continue until Gorky's death in 1936; it is, however, a significant creative milestone.