



**The Trace of Judaism: Dostoevsky, Babel,
Mandelstam, Levinas (Northwestern University
Press Studies in Russian Literature (Hardcover))**

Val Vinokur

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Recipient, 2008 Guggenheim Fellowship

The defining quality of Russian literature, for most critics, is its ethical seriousness expressed through formal originality. *The Trace of Judaism* addresses this characteristic through the thought of the Lithuanian-born Franco-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Steeped in the Russian classics from an early age, Levinas drew significantly from Dostoevsky in his ethical thought. One can profitably read Russian literature through Levinas, and vice versa.

Vinokur links new readings of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Isaac Babel, and Osip Mandelstam to the work of Levinas, to ask: How does Judaism haunt Russian literature? In what ways is Levinas' ethics as "Russian" as it is arguably "Jewish"? And more broadly, how do ethics and aesthetics inflect each other? Vinokur considers how the encounter with the other invokes responsibilities ethical and aesthetic, and shows how the volatile relationship between ethics and aesthetics--much like the connection between the Russian and Jewish traditions--may be inextricably symbiotic. In an ambitious work that illuminates the writings of all of these authors, Vinokur pursues the implications of this reading for our understanding of the function of literature--its unique status as a sphere in which an ethical vision such as that of Levinas becomes comprehensible.

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