

From “Underground” to “In the Basement”: How Odessa Replaced St. Petersburg as Capital of the Russian Literary Imagination

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Anyone who sets out to learn about the topic of the city in Russian literature will find a great deal more written on St. Petersburg than on any other literary city. As Julie Buckler notes in *Mapping St. Petersburg*:

St. Petersburg has been comprehensively mapped in terms of the literary mythology created by Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Blok, Bely, Akhmatova, and Mandelstam, and by scholars who tease out allusions and influences within this select group of authors and texts. [...] This second literary-canonical Petersburg insistently inscribes itself upon human subjects and transforms them into textlike bearers of cultural legacy (Buckler 2004: 1, 5).

Petersburg is not the only city to have left an indelible imprint on Russian literature and culture, yet until recently it has enjoyed the lion’s share of attention from literary scholars interested in the city, as Buckler’s 33-page bibliography attests. Arguably, however, the celebrated “Petersburg text” was primarily a 19th-century one, simultaneously apotheosized and destroyed at the end of that “long century” by Andrei Belyi’s novel *Petersburg* (*Peterburg*, 1913–22); as Ekaterina Yudina (1999: 8ff.) notes, the idea of Petersburg lingered into the early years of the Soviet period, but as a signifier for necropolis rather than metropolis, a mirror image (urban decay, destruction, and death) of the tropes of construction that dominated mainstream Soviet literature in the 1920s and ’30s. (This cultural afterimage of imperial Petersburg persists in such texts as Aleksandr Sokurov’s film *Russian Ark* [*Russkii kovcheg*, 2002].) In fact, the semantic “destruction” of St. Petersburg as a city (encompassing its renaming to “Petrograd” in 1917 and to “Leningrad” in 1924) coincides almost perfectly with Belyi’s poetic construction of the city as a kind of literary ghost in successive versions of *Petersburg*, which made its first appearance in book form in 1916—a year before the Russian Revolution, and the same year in which a then little-known writer of the new generation, Isaac Babel’, published a short literary manifesto entitled, with equal simplicity, “Odessa” (Maguire 1978: viii–ix; Babel’ 1990 I: 62–65).

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By itself, of course, this four-page essay (which I shall discuss in more detail below) constitutes at best slight evidence for a major shift in Russia's geopoetics. However, the political and cultural upheavals that were about to take place in the Russian Empire would favor—at least briefly—the realization of Babel's project, a turn toward Odessa as a source of Russian literary renewal, and even salvation (he speaks of a "literary Messiah" to come from "the sunny steppe, washed by the sea" [65]). As I shall argue below, Odessa provided a model for the thematic and stylistic preoccupations that dominated Russian literature in the 1920s, only to be forced underground in the Stalinist period, and which arguably resurfaced again in the cautiously subversive prose of the post-Thaw era. If Petersburg stands for the abruptly terminated Russian literary tradition of the 19th century, Odessa can be seen analogously as representing the artificially interrupted Russian literary tradition of the 20th.

From a political perspective, it is hardly surprising that the narrative potential of Odessa in the 1920s should have furnished a viable alternative to the now-superannuated Petersburg text. Odessa in the early 20th century was, if not quite a melting-pot, at least a fascinating mosaic of diverse national, linguistic, and ethnic groups who interacted only selectively, sometimes clashing violently, sometimes finding intellectual and artistic communion within the shared discursive space of the imperial language. Like Petersburg, it was a city where grand traditions were confronted by political and artistic radicalism; in contrast to Petersburg, however, Odessa was seen as a multicultural, workingman's city, whose bustling port culture served as a rich source of precisely the characters and plots that the new Soviet culture was actively seeking: virile heroes of the underclass, defiance of the tsarist authorities, and a vibrant mixture of ethnic and national "types," including Russians, Ukrainians, and Jews. Where pre-Revolutionary Petersburg, crawling with government bureaucrats—Belyi's "grey human streams" and "human myriapod" (1978: 11, 52)—represented the rigid, rational hierarchy of Peter's Table of Ranks, Odessa was awash in smugglers, pirates, foreigners, and gangsters who thumbed their noses at the government and exemplified a rough-and-ready kind of egalitarianism. Where Petersburg's underclass supplied fictional characters who seemed neurotic, downtrodden, and painfully insignificant, Odessa's were able-bodied and picaresque; even their disregard for the law did not discredit them, since (as the director Sergei Eisenstein was to illustrate unforgettably in *The Battleship Potemkin* [1925]) the system of laws itself was inhumane and its enforcers brutal. And the city's multicultural profile, albeit marred by outbreaks of anti-Semitic violence, must have seemed a promising literary blueprint for the fraternity of nations to be known as the Soviet Union.

If, following Boris Briker (1994), we posit an "Odessa text" which, in a similar manner to the "Petersburg text" elaborated by V.N. Toporov (1984) and the Moscow-Tartu semioticians, encodes the collection of images and meanings—historical, literary, and vernacular—associated with Odessa into a culturally productive mythology,

we can make two preliminary observations about this text. First, its roots stretch back into the 19th century and span more than one literary tradition; and second, its three most prominent features are Odessa's ethnic diversity, its lawless (or even, as Victor Peppard [1989: 76ff.] suggests, carnivalesque) atmosphere, and its marginality vis-à-vis the capitals of the Empire, which made it a place outside the bounds of "normal" life, a destination of exiles and vacationers. The famous description of Odessa in "Onegin's Journey," Pushkin's discarded eighth chapter of *Eugene Onegin*, enshrines all of these features:

I lived then in dusty Odessa . . .
 There for a long time the skies are clear.
 There, hustling, an abundant trade
 raises its sails;
 there everything breathes, wafts Europe,
 everything shimmers with the South, and is colorful
 with lively diversity.
 The tongue of golden Italy¹
 Is heard along the merry street
 where walks the proud Slav,
 the Frenchman, the Spaniard, the Armenian,
 and the Greek, and the heavy Moldovan,
 and the son of Egyptian earth,
 the retired Corsair, Morali
 (Pushkin 1969: 180–81).

Almost as significant as the words themselves is the doubly marginal status of this text, as a description of a city Pushkin knew from the perspective of an exile, which is itself "exiled" from the final version of Pushkin's *poema*; standing outside the main body of the text, and describing matters not integral to its plot, this fragment seems to signify exile and otherness in multiple dimensions.

Meanwhile, in the Jewish folk imagination, Odessa stood for a break from the traditional life of the *shtetl*, which was circumscribed both by religious and cultural norms and by the constant awareness of one's neighbors' normalizing gaze. Two Yiddish proverbs, "*Er lebt vi got in odes*" ("He lives like God in Odessa," the assumption being that God's life in Odessa would be both luxurious and, so to speak, anonymous—free from the importunate attentions of conscientious Jews) and "*Tsen mayl fun odes brent dos gehenem*" ("Hell burns 10 miles from Odessa"), underline the popular Jewish image of Odessa as "a Russian El Dorado" (Weinberg 1993: 13), in

¹ Weinberg (1993: 13) notes that in the 1820s, street signs in Odessa appeared in both Italian and Russian.

which secularized Jews enjoyed both “maximum freedom from [religious] restraint” and “maximum access to comfort and self-indulgence” (Prager 2000). In his only explicitly Odessa-centered work, *The Letters of Menachem-Mendl & Sheyne-Sheyndl*, Sholem Aleichem iterates the same stereotypes of wealth, luxury, and religious permissiveness:

This town is so rich, and its Jews are so busy getting richer, that no one thinks about Sabbaths or Jewish holidays[...]. The Odessa synagogue is something to see. It's called the Choir Synagogue and everyone wears a top hat and sits on all sides of the cantor. His name is Pini and can he sing, even if he doesn't have a beard! [...] You can pass out from just listening to him. I tell you, they could sell tickets! (Aleichem 2002: 11).

In other words, the Yiddish Odessa text, like the Russian one, emphasized the alterability of Odessa (here in the context of mainstream East European Jewish experience); the apparent suspension there of laws that obtained elsewhere; and (implicitly) the marginality of Odessa in the larger context of the Russian Empire, since its location in the Pale of Settlement (where it was the largest town to which Jews were free to migrate) was what made it possible for Jews to participate so successfully in the economic life of the city.

It was the events of 1905, immortalized (and heavily fictionalized) not only by Eisenstein but also by Babel', Aleksandr Kuprin, and Valentin Kataev, that propelled Odessa from the margins of the Russian cultural narrative to center stage. Of course, Odessa was not the only city to experience the effects of the revolutionary unrest of 1905, nor even the only city whose 1905 uprisings were immortalized in a literary text: *Petersburg* centers on the same period in St. Petersburg, *Doctor Zhivago* remembers the contemporaneous events in Moscow. But the story of 1905 sanitized the Odessan tradition of lawlessness for the Soviet context. Eisenstein, famously, set out to make an epic film for Goskino under the title “The Year 1905”—but ended up with *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925), focusing narrowly on a single episode in Odessa that, the director felt, encapsulated the meaning of the 1905 revolution with no need for further elaboration (Leyda 1983: 194–95). The film's most famous scene—entirely fictional—inscribed the stirring narrative of injustice against honest workers on the very architecture of the city. The scene transformed an Imperial landmark (the Primorskii steps) into a national monument (the Potemkin steps) and commemorated the bravery of the proletariat and the callousness of the Imperial regime.

1905 proved to be an important moment in the homegrown literature of the city, too, immortalized in Kuprin's story “Gambrinus” (1907), in Babel's childhood stories (1925–37), and in the first volume of Kataev's “Waves of the Black Sea” (*Volny Chernogo moria*) tetralogy, *A White Sail Gleams* (*Beleet parus odinokii*, 1936).

Kuprin depicts a milieu in which the ethnic, cultural, and class diversity of Odessa's inhabitants and *habitués*, together with their lawlessness and sheer physical prowess, create the ideal conditions for political combustion:

All these people—sailors of various nations, fishermen, stokers, merry ships'-boys, harbor thieves, machinists, workers, boatmen, dockers, divers, smugglers—they were all young, healthy, and steeped in the strong [*krepkim*] odor of sea and fish; they understood hard work, loved the allure and terror of daily risk, and valued above all strength [*silu*], prowess and the sting of strong [*krepkogo*] language; when on dry land they gave themselves up with savage enjoyment to debauchery, drunkenness and fighting (Kuprin 1984: 205).

Kuprin's portrait of an uprising in the making differs from Belyi's in *Petersburg* not only in the social class of its putative participants but also in its emphasis on their diversity, brawn, and spontaneity. Kuprin adds a further note of local color by weaving his tale around the figure of a Jewish fiddler, Sashka. Like the narrator's Great-Uncle Shoil in Babel's "Story of My Dovecote" (*Istoriia moei golubiatni*, 1925), Sashka is beloved for his gifts as an entertainer, and like Shoil, he survives a number of earlier adventures only to become a target of the 1905 pogroms; unlike Shoil, however, Sashka himself is spared, his little dog dying as a surrogate:

[The pogromist] simpered like an idiot, spat, and wiped his nose with his hand. But suddenly his eye fell on a nervous little white dog that was huddled, trembling, against Sashka. Stooping swiftly, he seized her by the hind legs, lifted her up high, dashed her head against the paving stones, and took off running. Sashka stared after him in silence. He ran with his whole body pitched forward, arms outstretched, without his cap, his mouth gaping and eyes round and white with madness.

Brains were oozing out of Belochka's head onto Sashka's boots. He wiped up the mess with his handkerchief (Kuprin 1984: 224).

This incident, set at the same time as "The Story of My Dovecote," October 1905, is particularly interesting as a literary precursor to the one Babel depicts:

With a fat hand the cripple upended the [bag of] pigeons and pulled out a female dove. Her feet thrown back, the bird lay on the palm.

"Doves," said Makharenko and, his wheels squeaking, approached me. "Doves," he repeated, and struck me on the cheek.

He struck me a swinging blow with his palm, crushing the dove;
Katyusha's wadded behind swayed before my eyes and I fell to the earth in
my new overcoat.

[...]

I lay on the earth, and the entrails of the crushed bird trickled from my temple. They flowed down my cheeks, coiling, splashing and blinding me
(Babel' 1990, II: 149).²

Here we see Babel' engaging with part of the then-extant "Odessa text"—a literary work devoted to the events of 1905—in the context of his own *Künstlerroman*, a narrative woven around his own pedigree (Great-Uncle Shoil) and development (the story itself) as a writer. Characteristically, Babel' imports this fragment of canonical text only to improve upon it, moving the blood of the sacrificial animal from the boots to the face, intensifying the irony of the passage by substituting doves, an immediately recognizable peace symbol, for Sashka's pet dog, and by making the assailant himself a cripple.³ By combining these techniques with an autobiographical narrative voice, Babel' accomplishes the paradoxical feat of making the story simultaneously more fictional (an embroidery upon an embroidery) and more "true" (rooted in the personal testimony of "a single subject whose identity is defined by the uncontested readability of his proper name" [de Man 1979: 920]). Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, which appeared in the same year as Babel's story, performed a comparable maneuver by incorporating a heavily fictionalized account of Odessan history into the political biography of the Soviet Union.⁴

Konstantin Paustovskii offers his own revision of Kuprin's "Gambrinus" in his 1958 memoir, *A Time of Great Expectations* (*Vremia bol'shikh ozhidanii*). Like Babel', Paustovskii weaves the Kuprin story not only into his narrative of Odessa, but also into the personal mythology surrounding his own formation as a writer. He also, again like Babel', uses the story to demonstrate how nebulous the boundary can be between "real" and "fictional" events:

² All quotations from Babel's writing will be cited from this edition, and indicated in the text with volume and page number. Translations from the stories are based on the excellent translations by David McDuff in the Penguin Collected Stories (see References), with occasional modifications.

³ For similar examples of Babel's habit of adapting or deforming familiar texts, see "Childhood: At Grandmother's" ("Detstvo. U babushki," 1915), wherein he alters an event from Turgenev's *First Love*, and "Guy de Maupassant" (1932), wherein he cites an impossible "biography" of Maupassant.

⁴ It is noteworthy that in both cases this breach of the boundary between "history" and "story" is accompanied by, or occurs in relation to, an act of extreme violence signifying the breakdown of social order. This will be the subject of future work.

And so one day a death announcement was printed in the "Odessa News" for one Aaron Moiseevich Goldstein. It seems to me that that was the dead man's name. I don't remember exactly. No one would have paid any attention to the announcement if it hadn't said at the bottom, in brackets under the name Goldstein, "Sashka the Musician from 'Gambrinus.'"

Up until then I was convinced that almost all literary heroes were made up. Life and literature never flowed into each other in my imagination. So the announcement about Sashka the Musician's death confused me.

[...]

I was fortunate. I witnessed the true ending of the story "Gambrinus": the funeral of Sashka the Musician. Life itself wrote this ending in Kuprin's stead (Paustovskii 1977: 149).

This passage narrates nothing less than a conversion: having inhabited the living text that is Odessa, Paustovskii (a native of Moscow) has shed his assumptions that "all literary heroes were made up" and "[l]ife and literature never flowed into each other," and traveled to a new understanding of the fluid relationship between life and art. This understanding that allows him to make the previously unthinkable statement, "I witnessed the true ending of the story," and to consider "life" as a co-author of "Gambrinus," where previously he had attributed that story's "great art" to the specific talents of its human author, Aleksandr Kuprin. This journey, from the complete separation of "life" and "literature" to their complete interpenetration, represents in microcosm the conversion undergone by Paustovskii in *A Time of Great Expectations*—a conversion catalyzed by the merging of "real" and "fictional" narrative practised by Babel', who makes programmatic appearances as a character in Paustovskii's narrative. By modeling this conversion for the reader, Paustovskii positions himself as a kind of evangelist for the literary program set out by Babel' in his 1916 essay-cum-manifesto, "Odessa."⁵

The "Odessa" essay posits itself as something akin to a literary annunciation proclaiming the imminent advent of a "literary Messiah" who will arise from the southwest to save Russian literature from, well, itself. Babel' argues that Russian literature is suffocating from a lack of color, humor, and sunshine; that an earlier Ukrainian emissary to Russian literature, Nikolai Gogol', tried but failed to introduce these elements, instead falling prey himself to the depressing, foggy atmosphere of St. Petersburg; and that a "Russian Maupassant" will succeed where Gogol' failed. (Babel' nonchalantly sprinkles his text with gratuitous French phrases such as "*quand même et malgré tout*" and "*parole d'honneur!*," as if to assist the slow-witted in identifying

⁵ A fuller analysis of this text appears in my article "Identity Crisis: The Literary Cult and Culture of Odessa in the Early Twentieth Century" (see References).

this “national Maupassant.”) Needless to state, this Maupassant-like “literary Messiah” is to be expected from no other quarter than Odessa, where the “sunny steppe [is] washed by the sea.” The familiar elements of the Odessa text— sun, sea, dust, lawlessness, humor, and “lively diversity”—are thus retooled into a new program for Russian literature, whose aim will be to overcome the “mysterious, heavy fog of St. Petersburg” once and for all (Babel’ 1990 I: 64).

It was a self-fulfilling prophecy; as he no doubt intended, Babel’ went on to become this “literary Messiah,” filling the needs in the Russian canon that he had himself identified, and beating a path into the Russian literary canon that his fellow Odessans would shortly follow. Babel’'s manifesto thus set the stage for an “invasion” of canonical Russian literature by Odessan writers; it also exemplified two of what would become the typical features of an “Odessan” narrative: it was autobiographical, and it came true.⁶ A decade later Babel’, having catapulted to fame following the several and collected publications of *Red Cavalry*, found himself in Moscow surrounded by fellow-travelers in the literal, as well as in the literary sense. A veritable convoy of Odessan writers had made its way to the capital and stood on the brink of fame, including Yury Olesha, Valentin Kataev; Il’f and Petrov; Eduard Bagritsky, and even one convert to Odessan-ness, the Moscow-born writer and memoirist Konstantin Paustovskii. Born within a decade of each other, these authors laid claim to the rich literature about Odessa, penned by such visiting luminaries as Pushkin, Kuprin, Bunin and Gor’kii, as to their birthright, and drew on it extensively for their works. (Even works not explicitly about Odessa, such as Kataev’s *Embezzlers*, Olesha’s *Envy*, and Il’f and Petrov’s *Ostap Bender* novels, invoked familiar tropes of Odessa such as sunshine, criminals, carnivalesque antics, and colorful speech.) Moscow might have usurped Petersburg as the seat of the Soviet government, but Odessa was serving as capital of the Soviet literary imagination.⁷

⁶ See my Ph.D. diss., “Odessan Selves,” for a minute examination of these features. The use (or abuse) of the autobiographical mode to create narratives that straddle, challenge, or transgress the boundaries between truth and fiction, is probably the most striking characteristic of what I have dubbed “Odessan” narrative. Others include what I call multivocality (language that simultaneously describes opposite aspects of the same object, or conversely, that unites disparate objects under the same emotion, as in Babel’, whom Shklovskii [1990: 201] describes as “speaking in one voice about the stars above and gonorrhoea”); the empowerment of Jews and other “outsiders”; motifs of exile and nostalgia; and a Dantesque interest in literal, metaphorical, and pseudo-autobiographical journeys.

⁷ I have argued elsewhere that the Odessan writers, led by Babel’, used this “Odessa text,” a product of the exoticizing gaze of 19th-century Russian authors, to stage a “reverse invasion” of the Russian literary canon by associating themselves with the features of this already-canonical “text.” That is, they promoted their own myth in part by building their narratives of

The first critic to attach a name and a theory to the preponderance of Odessites among the first generation of Soviet writers was Viktor Shklovskii, in his 1933 article "South-West" [*Iugo-Zapad*]. Shklovskii's article, apparently intended to promote the Odessa writers as a group, sets out to describe the literary profile of the "Southwestern literary school, whose tradition has not yet been clarified" (Shklovskii 1990: 470). Shklovskii concedes that "geography does not define a literary school," but he nonetheless attributes the particulars of the "school" to the geographical features of Odessa. First, it is "a school of Russian literature, realized on Ukrainian territory"; second, "much can be explained by the fact that Odessa is a port" (470). Together, these two facts evoke for Shklovskii a comparison to Alexandria, a Greek port on Egyptian soil.

What are the literary features of this neo-Alexandrian culture, according to Shklovskii? They are "Mediterranean," which means that the Odessans, "moving toward a new thematics, tried to appropriate it via the West," a process Shklovskii likens to looking in the mirror of Till Eulenspiegel for images of the local Odessa smugglers (472). The hybrid reflection (half-Russian, half-Western) that the mirror returns to them materializes in literary fashion as the colorful characters of Southwestern literature, including Babel's Benya Krik, and Il'f and Petrov's Ostap Bender. These colorful characters become the prime movers of narrative (*siuzhetnye*) texts, and it is here that Shklovskii sees the greatest contribution of the retooled "Mediterranean" sensibility of the Odessans: they possess the "Southwestern knack, the knack of the Levantine and of the European, for creating a narrative poem [*siuzhetnaia poema*]" (474). This skill, Shklovskii implies, has been in danger of dying out under the "non-narrative" influence of the avant-garde and especially the Futurists (471). The necessity of reasserting the narrative strand in the literary fabric demands that the Southwesterners work as a "school," with a correspondingly amplified influence on the course of Russian literature: "The Southwestern school will have a very great influence on the subsequent narrational [*siuzhetnyi*] period of Russian literature. This is a literature, and not just material for memoirs" (475).

The reference to "memoirs" is hardly accidental, considering the marked inclination shown by the Odessans—especially Babel' and Olesha—toward the autobiographical mode (not to mention Shklovskii's own personal ties to the writers under discussion); but what is especially interesting here is the extent to which Shklovskii's arguments here mirror Babel's of 17 years before: the "Odessian invasion" is going to bring something (color and realism) to Russian literature that it has forgotten, in its formalistic fog, how to do; it will do this by emulating Western models; and yet it will be quintessentially Russian, despite the fact that Odessa is not located on the territory of Russia proper. And here we can note something curious: The Odessa text pressed

self around the myth of Odessa, in effect stepping into a niche carved out for them by metropolitan Russian writers of the previous century (see Stanton 2003:117).

upon us by both Babel' and Shklovskii exhibits a certain isomorphism with the Petersburg text it purports to supersede. "Much can be explained," says Shklovskii, "by the fact that Odessa is a port"—but so is Petersburg. Also, like Petersburg, Odessa serves Russia as a "window on the West"; further, it is a city founded on the outskirts of the Empire to assert the sovereignty of a ruler to whose name the sobriquet "the Great" is habitually appended. As we might expect, therefore, the Odessa text is founded, like the Petersburg text, on a duality, the contrast between the monumental architecture of empire and the little people who dwell in the shadows of the monuments—the Underground Men.

The poet of monuments is, of course, Pushkin, whose canonicity is so absolute that it works like a kind of Midas touch turning everything he touches into a classic. The "monumental" spaces of both city-texts—the classic architecture in which subsequent narratives take up residence—are provided by Pushkin. The marginal, "underground" domains are mapped, respectively, by Dostoevskii and Babel'.

Dostoevskii's *Underground Man*, writing from his "*podpol'e*," resolutely refuses to conform to any rules of logic, ethical convention, internal consistency, or coherent selfhood. His signature rhetorical device is the seemingly interminable (or at least unstoppable) syntactic expansion of the Liar's Paradox: "I was a spiteful official. [...] I was lying when I said just now that I was a spiteful official. I was lying from spite. [...] In reality I never could become spiteful" (Dostoevskii 1982: 401–02). He expresses his attachment to his spatial niche "under the floor" of the Petersburg text with equally determined illogic:

Now, I am living out my life in my corner, taunting myself with the spiteful and useless consolation that an intelligent man cannot become anything seriously, and it is only the fool who becomes anything. [...] I am told that the Petersburg climate is bad for me, and that with my small means it is very expensive to live in Petersburg. [...] But I am remaining in Petersburg; I will not go away from Petersburg! (402–03).

Despite the considerable agility with which he outmaneuvers all attempts at logical positivism, the Underground Man nonetheless finds something to write about—a topic as elusive as the language in which he clothes, or unclothes it: himself.

However, what can a decent [*poriadochnyi*] man talk about with the most pleasure?

Answer: About himself.

Well, so then I will talk about myself (403).

While at first glance Dostoevskii's gloomily "*poriadochnyi*" Underground Man might seem poles apart from Babel's giddily *besporiadochnye* protagonists, it is in-

teresting to note the structural similarities between the two. Like Dostoevskii's *Underground Man*, Babel's basement dwellers (himself, in the 1924 autobiographical sketch "Avtobiografiia"; "himself," in the pseudoautobiographical story "In the Basement" ["V podvale," 1929]) are of an autobiographical bent. Babel's "autobiographical" narrator is also fond of the Liar's Paradox, prefacing his "true" story with the confession, "I was an untruthful [*zhivyi*] little boy" (Babel' 1990, II: 179).⁸ He also insists on his ties to his highly symbolic city of residence (as I shall discuss below), but within that city he clings to his "underground" corner, even building a smaller enclosure for his nocturnal sojourns with literature within the stifling atmosphere of the family's basement apartment: "I read [...] at night, under the table, hidden by the tablecloth that hung down to the floor" (*ibid.*). However, he cannot sustain this quasi-solitary state for long: even having carefully banished all of his embarrassing family members on the day that his friend Mark Borgman comes over to tea, the young Babel' (or his textual representative) finds himself surrounded by friend, family, and neighbors—effectively, by a full theatrical audience—as he gives a desperate impromptu performance of Mark Anthony's speech from *Julius Caesar*.

Like Dostoevskii's *Underground* (and his garrets), Babel's "Basement" serves, then, as a realm in which human irrationality triumphs over law and order. But where Dostoevskii's protagonists live out this struggle between reason and unreason in decidedly unsplendid isolation, Babel's find themselves in the thick of a maddening crowd, deliriously spouting verses for an audience of eccentric relatives and bewildered guests, or (as in "Avtobiografiia") drinking Bessarabian wine with gangsters and truanting schoolboys:

I was born in 1894 in Odessa, on the Moldavanka, the son of a Jewish merchant. [...] My school was called the Emperor Nicholas II commercial College of Odessa. This was a cheerful, undisciplined, noisy and multilingual college. There the sons of foreign merchants, the children of Jewish brokers, Poles of noble descent, Old Believers and many overgrown billiards players were taught. In the intervals between classes we went off to the port, to the pier or to the Greek coffee-houses to play billiards, or to the Moldavanka to drink cheap Bessarabian wine in the cellars [*v pogrebakh*]. [...] After graduating from the college I found myself in Kiev and then, in 1915, in Petersburg. In Petersburg life was extremely tough [*mne prishlos' uzhasno khudo*], I didn't have a residence permit, I avoided the police and lodged in a cellar [*v pogrebe*] on Pushkin Street with a tormented, drunken waiter (Babel' 1990, I: 31).

⁸ For an alternative interpretation of the resemblances between *Notes from Underground* and "In the Basement," see Zholkovskii 1994: 90.

This text, designed to create an impression of Babel's past that suits the image he wishes to project of himself and his creative profile,⁹ depicts the budding writer in a series of carefully constructed spaces. First, Babel' makes a point of giving himself a Moldavanka pedigree, thus marking himself as a quintessential Odessan (Richardson [2006] notes that, in local lore, the Moldavanka serves as the core of the unique Odessan *kolorit*)—but then skips straight to his schooling, conveniently neglecting to mention that the first 10 years of his life were in fact spent in a separate municipality, Nikolaev (now Mykolaïv). Further, the description Babel' provides of his school, which we are clearly meant to understand as having been a formative milieu for the budding writer, exactly reproduces the vocabulary of the Odessa text: cheerful, undisciplined, noisy, and multilingual. Finally, one cannot help but note that in this brief excerpt alone (all of 25 lines in the 1990 *Sochineniia*) there are two basements. The first lies in the Moldavanka, the very heart of Odessa, and is, like the school, cheerful, multicultural, and rowdy. The second, in Petersburg, seems to be a much more classically Dostoevskian space, one whose "tormented" inhabitant drinks, we may infer, alone. Here, Babel' is getting to have it both ways: at one and the same time, he can mark the difference between Odessa and Petersburg for literary purposes, while also marking himself as a lawless individual who belongs in the basement wherever he goes.

In conclusion, Babel's basement, like Dostoevskii's *Underground*, remains on some level an image of confinement and separation from the "monumental," classic, refined world of the grand boulevards. It also serves as a space of irrationality that reflects the internal contradictions of the narrating self, but in Babel', this irrationality seems to take the form of a collective, public, and ecstatic madness, rather than the lonely and tormented kind. His immurement in literal and figurative basements does not completely isolate the protagonist in an *underground*, but marks his access to an alternative world of great literary possibility: the invigoratingly seedy *underworld* of the Moldavanka.

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⁹ In her Introduction to *Isaac Babel: The Lonely Years*, where this text appears in translation, Nathalie Babel plausibly suggests that Babel' aimed "to present an appropriate past for a young writer who was not a member of the Communist Party" (Babel' 1964: xiv).

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