ODESSAN SELVES: 
IDENTITY AND MYTHOPOESIS IN WORKS OF THE "ODESSA SCHOOL"

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ABSTRACT

Odessan Selves: Identity and Mythopoesis in Works of the “Odessa School”

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“Odessan Selves” explores the literary cult and culture of Odessa in first-generation Soviet literature through a close reading of influential and problematic “autobiographical” works by prominent Odessa writers, including Isaac Babel, Yury Olesha, Valentin Kataev, and Konstantin Paustovsky. Issues of identity, selfhood, genre, canonicity, and narrative are also explored in an attempt to answer the vexed question: “What, if any, aesthetically significant characteristics did these writers have in common, beyond the city they claim as their collective point of origin?”

The Introduction discusses theoretical trends in the treatment of autobiography and identity poetics in Russia and the West, and lays the groundwork for the subsequent exploration of unconventional “autobiographical” works by Babel, Olesha and Kataev.

Chapter One examines the image of Odessa projected by nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian literature, posits the existence of an “Odessa text,” comparable to the “Petersburg text” articulated by the Moscow-Tartu semioticians, and ponders the exploitation and transformation of that “text” by early Soviet writers. Characteristics of “Odessan discourse” are identified, including multivocality, the empowerment of Jews and other “outsiders,” motifs of exile and nostalgia, and a predilection for narratives that straddle, challenge, or transgress the boundaries between truth and fiction.

Chapters Two and Three discuss the childhood tales of Isaac Babel, which combine autobiographical narrative with the short-story form. The relationship between
the works of Babel and those of Paustovsky is also explored. Chapter Four examines Yury Olesha’s fragmented “autobiography,” *No Day Without a Line*, and Valentin Kataev’s anti-memoir, *My Diamond Crown*. The strategies each author uses to negotiate (and breach) the nebulous boundaries dividing fiction and autobiography, “literature” and “memoirs,” “invention” and “authenticity,” are analyzed.

It is concluded that the Odessan writers examined share an interest in stories that break free of their generic and epistemological territory to invade other spaces and texts, including the “real world,” and that the “self” served as the canvas on which they created a literature that came to be seen as quintessentially “Odessan.”
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For Edward Tayler, who taught me to read.
A NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

Throughout my text, I give quotations from Russian works in English translation, to avoid the jerky effect of frequent switching between English and Russian. The footnotes and bibliography indicate where the quotations may be found in their original Russian. Where an existing English translation has proved exact enough for my purposes, I have used it; where existing translations are insufficiently faithful to support a close analysis, I have provided my own.

In the notes and bibliography, I have used the Library of Congress transliteration system, without diacritical marks. In the body of the text, I have modified the LC system in proper names only, by substituting \(-y\) for \(-ii\) (Gorky, Kamennoostrovsky); by substituting \(-ye\), \(-yu\), and \(-ya\) for \(-ie\), \(-iu\), and \(-ia\) where I felt this would assist pronunciation; and by giving all personal names in their most familiar English forms (Isaac Babel, not Isaak Babel’).
INTRODUCTION: LITERARY SELVES

The texts I examine in the following study are, by the definition I shall unfold below, autobiographical. This is not to say that they are conventional memoirs; on the contrary, each is, in its own way, a frankly belletristic, imaginative work that departs from the expected autobiographical practice of narrating its author’s *bios*, or life, in a basically chronological and factually accurate manner. Yet each also invites an autobiographical reading, as the history of their readership attests: readers have repeatedly engaged with these texts as if they were intended to be true, either by mining them for information about the writer’s life, or by reproaching them with their failure to adhere to rigorous standards of accuracy. In the case of Isaac Babel’s childhood tales, for example, Lionel Trilling falls into the first trap when he writes:

Babel had seen his father on his knees before a Cossack captain on a horse, who said, ‘At your service,’ and touched his fur cap with his yellow-gloved hand and politely paid no heed to the mob looting the Babel store

--which refers to an event from Babel’s story “First Love” (*Pervaiia liubov’*), not from his life. The second tendency—to denounce the text for its factual inaccuracy—is exemplified by Nathalie Babel’s terse clarification, “Babel’s father did not own a store. He owned a warehouse, which was neither broken into nor looted,” which exposes the folly of mistaking story for truth. Similarly, when Tamara Ivanova accuses Valentin Kataev of “lying from start to finish” in his Mavist memoir à clef, *My Diamond*

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Crown, she (perhaps deliberately) overlooks Kataev’s vehement denial of memoiristic intent in the pages of that work. What both the accusations and the excesses of credulity reveal, however, is the power exerted by a little bit of truth in combination with a first-person narrative. Underwritten by the author’s witnessing “I,” an account of dimly historical events tends to be read as a sincere autobiographical gesture, even if it is not explicitly designed as such. Narratives of this ilk, deliberately or not, open the door to ethical as well as aesthetic critique; they invite belief, and when belief is shown to be unfounded, they may be charged with fraud. With these risks, however, come potential rewards, among them the opportunity to write oneself into a literary tradition.

THE ART OF SELF-CANONIZATION

The writers with whom the present study is concerned form the core of an extraordinary group, often referred to as the “Southwestern school” or as the “Odessa school.”

Writers whose names are most often mentioned in connection with this group include prosaists Isaac Babel (1895-1940), Yury Olesha (1899-1960), Valentin Kataev (1897-1986), and Konstantin Paustovsky (b. Moscow 1892; d.1968), with whom the present study is concerned; the humorist duo Ilf (pseud. of Ilya Fainzilberg, 1897-1937) and Petrov (pseud. of Evgeny Kataev, 1903-1942); the Constructivist poets Eduard Bagritsky (pseud. of Eduard Dziubin, 1895-1934), Ilya Selvinsky (1899-1968), and Vera Inber (1890-1972); and less celebrated writers Lev Nikulin (1891-1967), Vladimir

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3As reported by Carl Proffer in The Widows of Russia (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1987), 94; quoted in Borden, Writing Badly, 112. I wish to make it clear that I am not ridiculing Ivanova’s remark. In common with others whose memories of beloved and justly celebrated writers, Kataev’s contemporaries, were outraged by his fictionalizing and self-centered approach, Ivanova had ample personal reasons to feel betrayed by Kataev’s deliberate misrepresentation of events she remembered quite differently. However, the example illustrates the point at hand.
Narbut (1888-1938), Sergei Bondarin (1903-76), Georgy Shengeli (1894-1956), and Lev Slavin (1896-1984). Born in or near Odessa at the turn of the twentieth century, so that their coming-of-age coincided with the revolutions of 1917, these dozen or so writers became fellow-travelers in the literal as well as in the literary sense, migrating from marginal Odessa to metropolitan Moscow in the early 1920s, where they attracted the attention of the great Formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky. Shklovsky, the first to designate the Odessan group a distinct “school” in Russian literature, insisted: “This is a literature, and not just material for memoirs.” Yet it is precisely the memoiristic aspects of the Odessan literature that underpin Shklovsky’s reading, and subsequent readings, of this literature as a collective phenomenon.

A striking proportion of the Odessans’ literary output is couched in memoiristic or confessional modes of narration, including both first-person narratives in which the narrator seems to share the sensibilities of the implied author (such as Olesha’s Envy and Babel’s Odessa Tales), and the more overtly autobiographical (though still problematic) works that I discuss in this study. The fictionalized “selves” projected by Odessa writers in such generically ambiguous works as Babel’s childhood tales and Kataev’s My Diamond Crown, along with the reminiscing narrators of Olesha’s No Day Without a Line and Paustovsky’s Story of a Life, coalesced—with the assistance of Shklovsky’s article and the writers’ own collegial profile—to produce a powerful

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5 Throughout this study, I employ the abstract designation “Odessan,” rather than the more standard geographic term “Odessite,” in order to underline the distinctions between concrete and abstract phenomena (literary history and “literariness,” “memoir” and “literature,” biography and “identity,” etc.) on which my analysis will be based. A similar distinction in Russian might be conveyed by using the adjective “odessy” in place of the more usual “odesskii.”
impression of a collective personality. Finally, the insistent self-identification of these narrative personae with the city of Odessa anchored this collective personality in a specific, and highly symbolic, place, connecting the personal myth of the Odessa writers to the cultural mythology of Odessa.

As I show in Chapter One, the "Odessa myth" or "Odessa text" in Russian literature predated the "Odessa school" writers by almost a century. It is my contention that the Odessan writers, led by Babel, used this "Odessa text," a product of the exoticizing gaze of nineteenth-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 self around the myth of Odessa, in effect stepping into a niche carved out for them by metropolitan Russian writers of the previous century.

In order to demonstrate this thesis, I first outline the historical and poetical underpinnings of the Odessa myth, and postulate some ways in which the discourse employed by the Odessan writers emulates the features of that myth. I then proceed to examine, in successive chapters, three unconventional "autobiographical" works by Odessan authors: Babel’s childhood tales, Olesha’s No Day Without a Line, and Kataev’s My Diamond Crown. My analysis focuses on how these three very different texts participate in, play with, and creatively deform the genre of autobiography; the extent to which they may be viewed as drawing on or contributing to Odessan discourse; and the ways in which each conceives and projects a specifically "Odessian" authorial identity. I also explore the sites of interaction among these three texts and a fourth, highly mythologizing text, Paustovsky’s Time of Great Expectations.
The terms of my discussion demand some preliminary clarification. The notion of autobiography as a site of "identity"—itself a troublesome term to define—is a relatively new one in autobiography theory, having emerged only in the second half of the twentieth century, and then only in the West, where a shift of attention from the bios (life) component of autobiography to the autos (self) component fueled a new interest in the problematics of the self-narrating subject. Russian theories of life writing, while acknowledging the epistemological problems inherent in the narration of a self by that self, have tended to focus on the "documentary" or testimonial aspects of autobiographical texts more than on their introspective aspects—a logical emphasis, given the palpable drive to produce and to read testimonial texts in the wake of the Stalinist terror. Before proceeding, therefore, I offer the following highly selective summary of Western and Russian thinking about autobiography, which seeks to orient the reader by (1) tracing relevant developments in each; (2) noting important points of convergence and divergence between the two; (3) situating my own approach within the spectrum of critical positions on autobiography; and (4) justifying my application of Western techniques of reading to Russian primary materials. I begin with a brief side trip to consider the notion of "identity."

THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY

The concept of identity is central to the genre—or mode, or discourse—of autobiography, since it is the narrator's projected identity that (1) furnishes her with the cultural authority to make (convincingly) any given autobiographical statement, and (2) organizes the recounted experiences in a way that the reader can understand (much as
the reader’s own sense of identity organizes his personal memories of past experiences). Yet as a concept, “identity” is deeply problematic: it invites circular definitions; seeks to encompass in a single term both likeness and difference, memory and expectation; and is inseparable from the political situation that produced it, namely “the modern Western world” (tellingly, “identity,” in the modern sociological sense, has no satisfactory translation in Russian). As Richard Handler insists, “the epistemological presuppositions that the concept [of identity] carries are similar, if not identical, to those that have made other terms suspect.”

Like other abstract terms, “identity” threatens to reify what on closer inspection turns out to be a whole complex of complementary processes and ideas that are neither reducible to a single entity nor fixable in a particular condition, and which are perhaps not even simultaneously knowable. The scientific principle affirmed by Werner Heisenberg in 1927, that to observe an object is to act upon it, holds equally true in the realm of life writing, and is particularly important in autobiographical narrative, where the subject and object of the observation are one and the same. Our autobiographical observations are thus the most “suspect” of all, from Handler’s perspective; not (as I will argue below) because they are intrinsically unreliable, but because they alter the scene they purport to capture: “the uttering of every statement about ‘who we are’ changes, if only slightly, our relationship to who we are. Thus to talk about identity is to change or construct it, despite the dominant epistemology of identity, which specifies immutability.”

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Identities are constructed out of experiences, or more accurately out of the meaning accorded to experiences, but, as Smith and Watson point out, “we make that meaning, or the “experience” of those [material] events, discursively...discursive patterns guide, or compel, us to tell stories about ourselves in particular ways.” On the one hand, therefore, identity may be seen as “always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.” But to the extent that identity itself is the organizing principle behind this self-representation, it demands to be seen as something more certain and permanent, more basic to our sense of self, than the impressions and memories that it organizes. Thus, as Handler writes, “there is a tension between the notion that identity is essential, fundamental, unitary, and unchanging”—as indeed the structure of the word itself would seem to imply—“and the notion that identities are constructed and reconstructed through historical action.” This tension between being and becoming, observing and constructing, plagues all our theoretical considerations of the self, as well as of collections of selves.

The circular relationship between identity and memory further complicates the issue. As John R. Gillis observes,

the notion of identity depends on the idea of memory, and vice versa. The core meaning of any individual or group identity, namely, a sense of sameness over time and space, is sustained by remembering; and what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity....Memories and identities are not fixed things, but representations or constructions of reality, subjective rather than objective phenomena.

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7 Smith and Watson, 26.
Thus, although memory powers identity, it is also shaped by it. The problematics of this become apparent if we remove “identity” from the equation altogether, restating it in terms of memory: the way we will remember the future is determined by the way we have remembered the past. But the reverse is also true: an event of sufficient import can effect a fundamental change in our perspective, causing us not only to construct future memories in a new way, but also to go back and reconfigure old ones. In autobiographical discourse, such acts take place both on a subconscious and on a conscious level, affecting both the basic material (or “truth”) of the narrative and its aesthetic organization (or “design”).

THE PROBLEM OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

If the mid-twentieth century saw Western critical scrutiny of autobiography shift its focus from bios to autos, the publication of Roy Pascal’s seminal Design and Truth in Autobiography in 1960 heralded a further shift, toward the closer consideration of autobiography’s third component, graphe—the art of writing itself. To the problematization of subjectivity that had led the “second wave” of autobiography theorists to question the straightforwardness of self-narrative, another complication was now added: the conscious use of art in shaping autobiographical narrative. Much of this “third wave” interrogation of autobiography has centered on how to negotiate the apparent opposition between the two elements, “truth” and “design,” considered
essential to its composition. The tension between these two elements has both fueled and, on all too many occasions, stymied the critical machine.

The problem is that autobiography requires truth and design, authenticity and artifice, to exist side by side. Yet it is difficult to theorize a situation in which this could logically be the case. On the one hand, whatever is "designed" (so the reasoning goes) cannot simultaneously be "true" in the sense that a scientist's objective, empirical account of observed events is thought of as "true," because the account has been subjectively engineered by the designer. At the same time, good design is essential to the success of an autobiographical work, if only because the drive to narrate oneself seems to be felt well beyond the narrow circles of the truly extraordinary—and even an extraordinary life must be narrated with some premeditation in order to be worth the price of admission.

Some departure from the strictest kind of "truth-telling" is therefore justified, but how much? As I suggested above, and will maintain in later chapters, reading publics tend to hold autobiography to a relatively high standard of veracity. The examples I cited above, of readers' eagerness to assume that the events in Babel's highly crafted short stories actually took place, and conversely to charge Kataev with "heresy" in My Diamond Crown, are not isolated ones; autobiography criticism chronicles many such cases of deception and disillusionment. At the same time, as Timothy Dow Adams points out, autobiography is generally granted more leeway in its

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10 The division of autobiography theory into "waves" is a useful structuring device employed by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in their admirable primer, Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives (Minneapolis: U. of Minn. Press, 2001).

11 Arkadii L'vov, "Prostota neslykhannoi eresi," Vremia i my 40 (April 1979). To be fair, L'vov—though quite sincere in his criticism—is punning here on an expression Kataev borrows from Pasternak, "the heresy of unheard-of simplicity" (eresi neslykhannoi prostoty).
dealings with the truth than, say, journalism.\textsuperscript{12} For comparison, Adams cites instances in which journalists have been fired or otherwise chastised for attributing one person’s experience to another, inventing ““typical” (i.e., historically authentic, though non-existent) characters, or creating composite characters and locations—all fairly standard techniques in the autobiographer’s toolkit, and liable to go unremarked by the reader unless the autobiographer deliberately attracts attention to them. Despite the supposed sanctity of what Philippe Lejeune calls the “autobiographical pact,”\textsuperscript{13} it seems readers are prepared to take the bellettristic character of memoir into account to some degree when assessing its authenticity. Some artistic “processing” of the raw facts is expected, and accepted as authentic. But the question remains, how much?

The question is a central one because the answer, if one is ever found, will dictate the definition of autobiography as a genre. Without the notion that autobiography is based at least to some degree in real events, there is nothing to separate autobiography from fiction. Indeed, while the distinction between autobiography and fiction is maintained instinctively by readers and institutionally by libraries, it remains unclear, and critically contentious, whether such a distinction “really” exists, and if it does, what its nature might be.

The first stumbling-block to telling the difference, if any, between autobiography and fiction concerns the nature of the two categories themselves. Autobiography is conventionally regarded as a genre, as the titles of seminal works on


the topic suggest. However, the difficulties involved in trying to list the defining features of this genre has led certain critics, notably Paul de Man, to call its status into question. De Man (whose 1979 essay “Autobiography as De-facement” has become a cornerstone of modern autobiography theory, along with Pascal’s *Design and Truth*, Lejeune’s *Le Pacte autobiographique*, and Elizabeth Bruss’s *Autobiographical Acts*) complains:

Empirically as well as theoretically, autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition; each specific instance seems to be an exception to the norm; the works themselves always seem to shade off into neighboring or even incompatible genres and, perhaps most revealing of all, generic discussions, which can have such powerful heuristic value in the case of tragedy or of the novel, remain distressingly sterile when autobiography is at stake.

The selection of “tragedy” and “novel” as exemplary performers in the category of genre perhaps reveals more about the source of de Man’s frustration than does the argument he goes on to make about the undecidability of the autobiography/fiction question. “Generic discussions”—whose value is in any case at best “heuristic”—are most “powerful” when focused on tragedy or the novel because these genres have their roots in a historical taxonomy of genres underwritten by the founders of the Western Canon. In the case of tragedy, which for our purposes begins with the Attic tragedians,

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14 For example, Elizabeth Bruss’s *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre*, or William Spengemann’s *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre*. The insistence in both these titles that autobiography is both literary and a genre is not incidental, but polemical.

15 See Bibliography. James Olney’s two seminal collections, *Autobiography, Essays Theoretical And Critical* (1980) and *Studies in Autobiography* (1988), are the other two essential texts to have grappled with fundamental issues in defining autobiography; the list of works that respond to, build on, or consciously depart from the studies I have named is, of course, much longer. In the Bibliography and Notes I have attempted to mention those studies most relevant to the present undertaking, namely, the examination of nontraditional “autobiographical” works in the Russian language and canon.

genre theoreticians enjoy the advantage of access to Aristotle’s definitive treatment of the topic without the burden of access to most of his primary source material—the plays themselves, of which the great majority are no longer extant. While Aristotle’s theories have been both tested and contested in subsequent centuries of criticism, his text still serves as a generally accepted point of departure for discussions of tragedy as a genre.

Similarly, although The Novel is a much younger genre, with a correspondingly more disputed history and vaguer specifications, it shares with The Tragedy a certain “historicity” of origin which The Autobiography is hard put to match. Critics haggle over whether or not Don Quixote, say, counts as a novel; the competition to pin down the precise economic, philosophical, and social developments that provided the preconditions for the novel will probably never be definitively won; certain stylistic criteria, such as the realism that early critics like Congreve and Johnson considered an indispensable feature of the novel, have largely fallen by the wayside these days. Yet there is a broad consensus on the following “facts”: that the first works most of us think of as novels arose (for whatever reason) in the seventeenth century, that the novel became an increasingly popular and productive form of literature over the course of the eighteenth century, and that its heyday in most European literatures occurred in the nineteenth century. The “rise” of the novel in a relatively concentrated period of history lends it a political and cultural particularity that compensates for the relative vagueness of its formal specifications (basically, a unified fictional narrative of a certain length, usually but not always in prose).

17 The theory of the novel is of course not my main concern here, but for a sampling of twentieth-century views the reader may like to consult Georg Lukács, Theory of the Novel (1920); M. M. Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel” (1930s, date uncertain); Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel (1957); Diana Spearmen, The Novel and Society (1966); and Geoffrey Day, From Fiction to the Novel (1987).
Whereas the beginnings of the novel are generally traced to the late seventeenth century, and those of tragedy to fifth-century (B.C.E.) Athens, the origins of autobiography are more attenuated. Two of the books most often cited as “first” in the autobiographical genre, the respective Confessions of Augustine and Rousseau, bracket a period of almost fourteen centuries—long enough for language itself to have evolved from Augustine’s Latin into Rousseau’s French. As this chronological disparity suggests, Western theorists have variously traced the evolution of autobiography to two widely separated traditions: the confessional genre, epitomized by Augustine’s Confessions (ca. 400 C.E); and the Romantic discovery and valorization of self-consciousness, exemplified by the Bildungsroman and by Wordsworth’s monumental, fourteen-“book” poem The Prelude (1799-1850). Rousseau’s Confessions marks either the culmination of the first tradition or the inauguration of the second, depending on the critic’s point of view.18 There is, then, no firm historical ground on which autobiography scholars may comfortably stand while debating more contentious generic issues. If the “powerful heuristic value” of generic discussions is only available where the discussants enjoy the luxury of debating the meaning, rather than the basic facts, of a genre’s history, it is not surprising that these discussions should have lagged in the case of autobiography, where no such “comfort zone” exists.

Finally, autobiography, more than any other genre, is existentially threatened by the “death of the author” proclaimed by Barthes in 1977 (but foreshadowed already in

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18 Philippe Lejeune argues in Le pacte autobiographique that Rousseau’s Confessions represent the beginning of autobiography as a literary genre; George Gudșorf argues, contra Lejeune, that Rousseau represents the end of the Augustinian tradition (“De l’autobiographie initiatique à l’autobiographie littéraire,” Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France 75 [1975] 957-94).
the work of the Russian Formalists in the 1910s). Since the author of an autobiography serves as “the source of the subject matter [as well as] the source for the structure to be found in his text,” removing the author as a legitimate, even a central, object of scrutiny threatens to stymie all analysis by taking away the very premise on which autobiography rests. This exacerbates what was already the thorniest problem in defining autobiography as a genre: that it is distinguished from other kinds of narrative literature on the basis of its content, rather than of its form.

Other genres do not have to face these threats to their identity. Readers of Eugene Onegin who argue about whether “novel in verse” is an oxymoron or a legitimate subgenre can indeed have “heuristically valuable,” if ultimately irresolvable, generic discussions. By contrast, those who squabble over the status of Wordsworth’s Prelude can neither admit it to nor debar it from the category of “autobiography” on the basis of its poetic structure, but only by deciding what to make of its frequent departure from what is known about Wordsworth’s “real” life. Generically speaking, what distinguishes Wordsworth’s Prelude from Dante’s Inferno (to which The Prelude

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21 The presence of a capricious first-person narrator who appears to have a great deal in common with the author—a technique also used by Pushkin’s successors, Lermontov and Gogol—also invites the reader to bring an autobiographical lens to bear on the text, although since the main plot deals with clearly fictional third-party characters, the problem is less pronounced than with the other texts I cite in this chapter.

22 For example: M. H. Abrams calls The Prelude “a fully developed poetic equivalent of...the Bildungsroman...and the Künstlerroman,” more or less sidestepping the question of its reflexivity—that is, the identification between the speaker/narrator and the author. Conversely, W. B. Galie declares baldly, “[The Prelude] is an autobiography; it contains profound reflections on psychology, education and politics; and there are passages of an almost purely lyrical character.” (Abrams, “The Design of The Prelude,” and Galie, “Is The Prelude a Philosophical Poem?” in The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850. A Norton Critical Edition (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1979), pp.585-598 and 663-678, respectively.)
repeatedly alludes) is not its form: both are long poems, though of course their prosodic specifications differ. Nor is it the position of the narrator within the text: each poem is narrated by an “I” who claims identity with its physical author, and asserts that the experiences recounted are his own. Rather, it is the credibility of what is narrated that sets the two apart. The distinction is quite purely fabula-driven: Dante’s return trip to the Underworld marks his poem as epic, whereas Wordsworth’s more mundane adventures mark his (at least in some quarters) as autobiography.

Without historical or formal distinctions on which to base a definition of autobiography, critics have been forced to revive the “dead” author and grapple with the dismayingly pre-Formalist problem of describing autobiography in terms of its relationship to “truth” or “reality,” and differentiating it from “fiction.” Western autobiography theory and Soviet autobiography theory have approached the problem from slightly different perspectives: while Western theorists since Roy Pascal have sought to elucidate the role and purview of “design” in organizing the narrated experience, Soviet theorists have focused--naturally enough, one might suppose, given the political context--on the testimonial aspects of autobiographical writing, which has been viewed as a genre of “documentary prose” [dokumental’naia proza]. The comparison is intriguing because it implies that the two theoretical currents differ in their conception, not only of autobiography’s ethical function, but also of the relationship between autobiographer and reader.

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23 An excellent survey of the Western and Soviet literature on autobiography, 1960-1990, may be found in Jane Gary Harris, “Diversity of Discourse: Autobiographical Statements in Theory and Praxis,” intro. to Autobiographical Statements in Twentieth-Century Russian Literature (Princeton UP, 1990) 3-35. Harris goes into the details of the theory at greater length than I will do here, but manages to compress thirty years of history into as many pages, and to make some thoughtful comparisons.
The reader, in Western theory, is generally conceived of as a lone individual, his relationship with the text an intensely personal one. By contrast, Bakhtin, in an essay dated 1937-8, traces the earliest known forms of autobiography to two ancient Greek genres, the first of which he calls “Platonic” autobiography, “since it found its earliest and most precise expression in such works of Plato as the Apology of Socrates” (a curious example, since although Socrates serves both as narrator and as subject matter, he cannot strictly speaking be called the author of the Apology). According to Bakhtin, “Platonic” autobiography takes as its theme “the life course of one seeking true knowledge,” whereas “rhetorical autobiography,” is based on the funeral encomium and exemplified by the Antidosis of Isocrates. What both these forms have in common is an orientation toward “the public square”; they are designed to be received by a large number of people collectively, in public, rather than perused alone in the privacy of one’s study, or heard (like, ostensibly, Augustine’s Confessions) only by God. Their significance is more historical than personal.

Bakhtin’s choice of such publicly oriented texts as the forerunners of modern autobiography is not accidental; it is of a piece with twentieth-century Russian conceptions of autobiography, which tend to focus on the authenticity provided by first-hand, first-person accounts, rather than on their troublesome subjectivity. Mandelstam argues in “End of the Novel” that autobiography, as a genre European writers (“plucked out of their own biographies” by the modern condition) could use to locate themselves within history, must necessarily supersede the nineteenth-century novel, with its

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“interest in an individual human fate”;\textsuperscript{25} in other words, autobiography is to be seen as less subjective, and more world-historical, than the great novels of the Imperial Age. For Soviet purposes, of course, this also makes autobiography more \textit{useful} than the nineteenth-century novel (although certain approved examples of the latter would find a different use, as models for Socialist Realist fiction), a criterion that is all but ignored in Western criticism but persists in the Russian discussion of autobiography throughout the Soviet period, culminating in the post-Thaw conception of “documentary prose” as a set of genres through which writers could bring “a new measure of historical truth in the form of belles lettres” to the recent past. Mandelstam’s argument is echoed in the post-Thaw period by Kuznetsov, who formulates the aim of autobiography as “inform[ing] us of the most complex problems of the age” and “allow[ing] writers] to create their new picture of the world.”\textsuperscript{26} Thus, in the Soviet Union, autobiographical discourse was perceived, by virtue of its first-person perspective, to have an authenticity that was lacking in official historical accounts. In the West, meanwhile, exactly the opposite was true: the personal and subjective nature of autobiographical narration attracted critical suspicion and led to the foregrounding of the “literary” properties of autobiography.

While both traditions of scholarship have insisted on the “literariness” of the autobiographical text, and have recognized its dual nature as a text that is both “found” and “created” (or at least aesthetically organized),\textsuperscript{27} Western scholars have been more


\textsuperscript{26} M. Kuznetsov, “Memuarnaia proza,” in \textit{Zhanrovo-stilevye iskaniia sovremennoi sovetskoi prozy} (Moscow: Nauka, 1971) 127.

\textsuperscript{27} Jane Gary Harris offers a number of formulations of this basic duality informing autobiographical discourse: “we…must recognize the writer-narrator as a kind of mediator in the continuing dialogue
willing—-at least in recent decades—-to part altogether with the notion of historical authenticity or verifiability as the defining characteristic of autobiography. The vacuum left by dispensing with truthfulness as an absolute requirement creates freedom, but also dissent. The apparent impossibility of formulating what Timothy Dow Adams calls “an airtight definition of autobiography” has impelled critics with a stake in the problem to position themselves along the axis defined by two extreme responses to it: on the one hand, that there is, finally, no such thing as autobiography; on the other, that all texts are more or less autobiographical.28

It is difficult to discredit either of these two positions, which in the final analysis amount to almost the same thing; that is, they affirm the erosion of boundaries between “autobiographies” and openly fictional texts. Post-structuralist critiques of both the concept of the self and the referentiality of language—the two main ingredients of autobiography—have complicated the task of salvaging some firm ground on which an understanding of autobiography as a meaningful generic category may be built. As the notion that an author’s “I” refers to a real person, or his words to concrete things, becomes increasingly quaint, so does the distinction between autobiography and fiction. Moreover, the fallibility—or essential narrativity—of memory, discussed above as a central problem in the concept of “identity,” makes it still harder to claim any articulable relationship between “autobiography” and “truth,” since what the

autobiographer does consciously (i.e., organize plot around one or more aesthetic principles), the memory does without our conscious sanction. Assuming a “fallen” state of language, memory, and selfhood, it seems impossible to draw any meaningful distinctions between “autobiography” and the fictional genres on which it borders.

THE RECEPTION OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

For all the reservations outlined above, terms like “identity” and “autobiography,” which designate the articulation of the self, retain their meaning based on an intuitive consensus that there is a “there there”—a recognizable something to which they refer. As Barrett John Mandel writes, “autobiographies and novels are finally totally distinct—and this simple fact every reader knows.”29 Much as language continues to function tolerably well despite the deconstruction of stable signification, autobiography continues to command a qualitatively different kind of reading from fiction, despite repeated demonstrations (dismissed by Mandel as “academic sleight-of-hand”) that the two cannot be reliably separated. In an effort to preserve and codify its distinctive character as a “truth-based” genre, influential theoreticians such as Philippe Lejeune and Elizabeth Bruss have devised systems of rules governing the practice of autobiography.30 However, since “truth” is precisely the term on whose meaning thinkers are least likely ever to agree, and since moreover “for the autobiographer, part of the game includes trying to keep the reader off balance”31 by selectively violating the rules distilled by critics, the most successful theories are those which focus not on the


30 Lejeune, Le Pacte Autobiographique; Bruss, Autobiographical Acts.

31 Adams, Telling Lies, 8.
relationship between "truth" and "design," but on the relationship between writer and reader.

A reception-based approach to autobiography has the benefit of allowing us to consider autobiography as a communicative, rather than an ontological, issue, which in turn invites us to take into account the indispensable substrata of successful communication: consensus and intuition. Seen in this light, Lejeune's 1975 theory of the "autobiographical pact," a quasi-legal understanding between author and reader sustained by a combination of names (the nominal identity among author, narrator and protagonist) and extra-literary information such as the Library of Congress classification, takes on new authority. While it does not (indeed, cannot) preclude intentional or unintentional mendacity, the "pact" does create a writer-reader relationship based on the notion, however unattainable, of a veracious narrative.

To be sure, it is technically impossible for the author actually to abide by this contract, for the reasons explored above; however--and this is the important point--it is not the author's good faith, but rather her signature, that determines the genre of the work. The extraliterary cues mentioned by Lejeune, such as the library classification and title page, are of minor importance: what signifies is the identity of author and narrator. In this way, we can reconcile (however improbable it might seem) Lejeune's "autobiographical pact" with Paul de Man's description of the autobiographical text as one whose inevitable "deviations from reality," however numerous, "remain rooted in a single subject whose identity is defined by the uncontested readability of his proper name"; or in other words, as a document whose content is authenticated by the author's "signature," in the form of a narrator who bears the same name.
In this study, I take a basically Lejeunian approach to the texts under discussion. That is, I foreground the relationship between the author and the reader, as it is conditioned by the apparent equivalence between the narrator of each work and its flesh-and-blood author, without dwelling overmuch on technicalities such as the Library of Congress classification, which I view as extraneous to the reader’s experience of the text. This is how I am able to define Babel’s childhood tales and Kataev’s *My Diamond Crown* as autobiography, despite their fictional aspects. I also take the position that the author’s “signature” on the autobiographical text, or “pact,” in no way guarantees his adherence to the terms of the pact, which have in any case been amply shown to be incapable of fulfillment. When the author (inevitably) breaks the “autobiographical pact,” it is not, in my view, the case that he is no longer writing autobiography. Rather, the manner in which he breaks the contract will determine both what kind of autobiography we think we are reading, and the extent to which we deem it interesting or “literary.”

WHY AUTOBIOGRAPHY?

Why am I so eager to reclaim autobiography’s “turf” as a genre? To me, autobiography is only interesting, only fruitful, if it is thought of as a genre separate from fictional genres, governed by principles that, like the rules governing other genres, can be traduced or undermined in productive ways. It is precisely the impossible tension between artifice and authenticity that brings autobiography to life, and that provides authors with a myriad ways to play with the boundaries between truth and fiction. If we abolish those boundaries, and concede that autobiography is finally impossible to
distinguish rigorously from fiction, we lose the possibilities inherent in that tension. On the other hand, if, as Timothy Dow Adams asserts, bending the rules is, “for autobiographers, part of the game”--a reason to write autobiography rather than something else--then we ought to ask why autobiographers like to bend the rules, and we ought to have some idea of what those flouted rules are. The reason I have worked so hard to rehabilitate autobiography as a genre is so that, in the chapters that follow, I can pursue a series of practical investigations into the ways different authors violate the rules of autobiography, and the literary effects of these violations.

The most important principle governing autobiography is its devotion to the evolution of a central figure understood as the “self” both of the author and of the narrator; its second most important principle is the relationship of the narrative to historical “truth,” of which the identity among author, narrator, and protagonist is understood as a symbol. These two rules are of particular interest in the context of Russian and early Soviet literature. If autobiographical forms came to be viewed during the Thaw as a form of testimony, especially against the atrocities committed by the Stalinist regime, in the early Soviet period they served as a literary sanctuary for the “private” voice, at a time when language was starting to be reserved, and refurbished, for “public” uses. This private voice was not just a way of locating the individual within history, as Mandelstam implies in *The Noise of Time* (“My desire is not to speak about myself but to track down the age, the noise, and the germination of time. My memory is inimical to all that is personal”).32 It also represented a dwindling space in which history could be subordinated to the individual—a possibility the Odessan

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authors, from Babel in the 1910s to Kataev in the late 1970s, profusely exploited

Finally, it represented a space in which—despite Mandelstam’s declaration above—memory was still accessible and could be more or less freely enjoyed, in a way that was no longer feasible in the public, political sphere. Richard Borden, noting that writers of the Revolutionary generation shared “the problem of being devoted to a past which had formed their artistic sensibilities but which no longer existed in any form but memory,” suggests that, “separated from a cherished and aesthetically formative childhood by time, space, political realities, and cultural assumptions, [they] became nearly obsessed with the idea of childhood in their lives and works.”

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While childhood will not be my main focus in what follows, the concept of a politically distant past that can be looked at only through an emphatically personal filter is important to any consideration of Soviet autobiography. Whereas, according to Borden, Olesha and Kataev tend to idealize childhood in terms at once conventional and Formalist (using a “childlike” mode of perception as a form of ostranenie), Babel uses his childhood tales to present a disturbing, decidedly un-ideal portrait of his childhood more in keeping with the perspective and themes of Red Cavalry than with the “reality” of his childhood experience. Both approaches—the “idealization” and “reverse idealization” of childhood—may be seen as efforts to alter reality in the service of an idea, or to “present what should be as what is” (Sinyavsky’s succinct description of Socialist Realism), 34 on the level of personal reminiscence. The idea that literature could, and should, both act upon and improve upon reality was current in Soviet Russia


even before the formal institution of Socialist Realism in 1934; autobiographical
discourse, by offering the author control over a narrative “contractually” rooted in
reality (via Lejeune’s “pact”), afforded an opportunity to rewrite the past, much as
Socialist Realism would seek to rewrite the present and future.\footnote{I do not intend here to suggest that creative tinkering with the details of one’s personal past is politically or ethically comparable to Socialist Realism. Rather, I wish to propose that the period in which the Odessan writers rose to prominence was one in which formal experimentation coincided with conscious efforts both to remake language (whether from a Formalist, Futurist, proletarian, or some other perspective) and to remake reality through language.}

For the last few pages, I have referred to the relationship between autobiography
and “reality” as though reality could be known and verified—or at least believed in. As
the arguments outlined under “The Problem of Autobiography” make clear, however,
“reality” is always beyond the reach of the autobiographer, because both memory and
narrative are inherently mendacious; “in talking about the past, we lie with every breath
we draw.”\footnote{William Maxwell, \textit{So Long, See You Tomorrow} (New York: Knopf, 1980) 27.} And yet the definition of autobiography as a truth-based genre is indispensables, for without it none of the peculiar advantages of the genre, to which I have alluded above, exist. Something, then, stands in for literal referentiality as the standard by which we judge the “truthfulness” of an autobiographical text; something other than complete fidelity to “objective” facts allows us to decide how well the author has kept the “autobiographical pact.”

In the chapters that follow, I will examine some of the ways in which authors create the signs of authenticity, as a substitute for objective truth. These include
“narrative truth” or verisimilitude, personal myth (or what Patricia Carden calls
“spiritual autobiography”), and the success with which authors negotiate, either
affirming or challenging, readers’ pre-existing mythologies and expectations. As I shall
endeavour to show, a “good” or successful autobiography satisfies the reader’s desire for authentic insight into the author’s personality and situation, without defusing the epistemological complications and ambiguities inherent in autobiographical discourse. The Odessa writers provide particularly inviting territory for such a foray, since their autobiographical acts bordered upon and implicated one another. One of the tasks of my investigation will be to characterize each writer’s techniques for stretching the boundaries of autobiography, such as mendacity, fragmentation, and solipsism. I will also attempt to account for the relative successes and failures of these autobiographical inventions in winning over adherents to their mythologies of themselves and of Odessa.
CHAPTER ONE
THE MEANING OF ODESSA

THE ODESSA SCHOOL

Undoubtedly, some of the most important factors in the reception of the Odessa writers are biographical. The parallels among their lives, as well as the apparently genuine bonds of friendship that united them, hold enormous appeal for the reader's imagination, especially in Russia, where literary reminiscences (*Vospominaniiia o ...*) constitute a thriving genre. The biographical coincidences in particular are striking, and lend credence to the perception of Odessa as a kind of combination melting-pot and crucible, a miraculous incubator of motley talent or (in the words of one critic) a "literary cradle."¹ While the confluence of the Odessans’ careers in the 1920s may be largely attributed to the relationships they formed with one another in various collective settings during the Revolutionary and Civil War years, it is nonetheless remarkable given the wide divergences in their backgrounds. Indeed, the very choice of Russian as their language of composition was, for many of them, a significant aesthetic and political statement: Babel, it is said, might have written in Hebrew or Yiddish—*did* write, at first, in French; Olesha might have written in Polish, Shengeli in Georgian. Bagritsky and Ilf also chose to become “Russian,” not “Jewish,” writers—a decision that, almost anywhere but Odessa, would have seemed too obvious to be considered a choice at all. But Odessa’s “literary cradle” fostered modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature, and Russophone Zionist writers like Vladimir Jabotinsky, in addition to the

resolutely Russian Odessa school. For many of the Odessans, “signing on” to Russian literature was not the only option available, but it offered a chance to be admitted to an established canon, on the one hand, and to participate in something utterly new—Revolutionary literature—on the other.²

In the choice of Russian, accompanied for most of the Odessans by a physical movement from Odessa to Moscow, one can discern a drama of desire. Whatever may have fueled this desire—whether pure aesthetic preference, Revolutionary zeal, or post-colonial aspirations, like those of the Indian subcontinental writers now dominating English literature³—it drew the Odessans from the margins to the metropolis. It also united them under the standard of a common ambition, and, perhaps most importantly, it made them the bearers of a common nostalgia. The fact that their fraternity also rehearsed a favorite theme of early Soviet literature—the triumph of shared ideas over differences in social background—cannot have been lost on the Odessans. Indeed, the early careers of Babel, Olesha, and Kataev might almost have been invented to illustrate the concept.

In childhood these three writers were separated by ethnic, class, religious and ideological boundaries: Babel’s parents were bourgeois urban Jews, Olesha’s Polish Catholic monarchists, and Kataev’s (according to his Soviet biographers) “culturally

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³ The list of successful subcontinental writers in English grows with every passing year, encompassing such luminaries as Salman Rushdie, Romesh Gunesekera, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, and Vikram Seth. The field of postcolonial studies has both contributed to the lionization of these authors and cast deep suspicion on their success, which “is thought to deflect attention away from the material realities of exploitation both in the First and the Third World” (Deepika Bahri, “Introduction to Postcolonial Studies,” Postcolonial Studies at Emory Pages, Nov. 23 2001, Emory University, 3 October 2002 <http://www.emory.edu/ENGLISH/Bahri/Intro.html>).
correct” ethnic Russians who instilled a proper love of Tolstoy (and disdain for Dostoevsky) in their elder son.⁴ Yet following the Revolution, their lives proceeded in near-perfect parallel: both Babel and Olesha volunteered for the Red Army (in Olesha’s case, causing a break with his parents, who subsequently fled to Poland) and spent the Civil War years engaged in journalistic-propagandistic activities on its behalf. Kataev also saw active duty for the Red Army, although apparently not before serving a brief stint with the its opponents and spending some time in prison (a detail that “soon disappeared from his official biography”).⁵ It was during this period that their literary interests brought them into physical, as well as ideological, proximity. In the later 1910s, an assortment of Odessans, including both Olesha and Kataev, as well as Ilf and Bagritsky, gathered in the “Green Lamp” and “Poets’ Collective” literary societies; in 1921, Babel joined all four of the above-mentioned writers on the staff of the Odessa paper The Seaman [Moriak], under the editorship of Konstantin Paustovsky.⁶ Paustovsky, though a native Muscovite, is often counted (including by himself) as a member of the Odessa group, thanks to his fervent embrace in the 1920s of the Odessan

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⁴ See, e.g., L. I. Skorino, Pisatel’ i ego vremia. Zhizn i tvorchestvo V. P. Kataeva (Moscow, 1965). Skorino goes into some detail regarding the reading materials supplied to Kataev by his parents during his formative years. They included works by Ivan Bunin (a frequent visitor to Odessa and mentor to the young Kataev, although Kataev would later distance himself from certain aspects of Bunin’s work), Lermontov, and Tolstoy; more controversial pre-Revolutionary authors such as Dostoevsky and Chekhov are not mentioned.


⁶ These early episodes in the collective life of the Odessans are sketched in Feld, “The Southwestern School,” 17-27. Partial accounts are also given in monographs on individual Odessan writers, such as Elizabeth Klosty Beajour, The Invisible Land: A Study of the Artistic Imagination of Jurii Olesha, and Maxim Shryer, Russian Poet/Soviet Jew: The Legacy of Eduard Bagritskii (see Bibliography).
writers and their city; his accounts of this period are an important contribution to the Odessa literature.⁷

When the turbulent Civil War years yielded to the comparative calm and literary renaissance of the NEP period, the former crew of the Seaman gradually reconstituted itself in Moscow, where Kataev, Ilf, Petrov, Babel, Olesha, and Bagritsky worked alongside Mikhail Bulgakov on the staff of the railway workers’ journal The Whistle (Gudok). Their most fruitful writing years came in Moscow in the late 1920s and early 1930s, with only Kataev continuing in physical, political, and artistic health long enough to make any significant contribution thereafter—although his establishment, in the mid-1960s, of a “Mauvist school” (<Fr. mauvais, bad) of writing seems to encode deliberate reminders of other Odessan writers, as I shall discuss in Chapter Four. The remainder of the Odessans fared less splendidly than Kataev, mostly dying young as a result of war, illness, or political disfavor. However, they left their readers with a vibrant, though small, body of literature, and with the impression of a vivid collective personality.

“SOUTH-WEST”

The first critic to attach a name and a theory to the preponderance of Odessites among the first generation of Soviet writers was Viktor Shklovsky, in his 1933 article “South-West” [Iugo-Zapad].⁸ Shklovsky’s article, apparently intended to promote the

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⁸ V. B. Shklovskii, “Iugo-zapad,” Literaturnaia gazeta, Jan. 5, 1933, No. 1; reprinted in Gamburgskii sbornik stat’i—vospominaniia—esse (1914-1933) (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1990), 470-475. In 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” (470). (By “Southwestern” Shklovsky, taking his cue from Bagritsky, simply means an Odessan school: “The South-West’ is, geographically speaking, Odessa.”) Shklovsky concedes that “geography does not define a literary school,” but 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 Shklovsky a comparison to Alexandria, a Greek port on Egyptian soil.

What are the literary features of this neo-Alexandrian culture, according to Shklovsky? They are “Mediterranean,” which means that “moving toward a new thematics, [the Odessans] tried to appropriate it via the West,” a process Shklovsky likens to looking in the mirror of Till Eulenspiegel in order to see the local Odessa smugglers (472). Of course, they come back in clownish German reflection, and this reflection, re-internalized by the Odessans, materializes as the colorful characters of Southwestern literature, including Babel’s Benya Krik, Inber’s Vaska-Svist, IIf and Petrov’s Ostap Bender, and Selvisky’s lyric heroes (although Selvisky is subsequently chastised for abandoning his Southwestern roots in favor of “global themes” which “lowered the art of the poet”). These colorful characters become the prime movers of narrative (s粥etnye) texts, and it is here that Shklovsky sees the greatest contribution of the retooled “Mediterranean” sensibility of the Odessans: they

remainder of this section, page numbers for “South-West” will be given in parentheses in the text. All translations are mine.
possess the “Southwestern knack, the knack of the Levantine and of the European, for creating a narrative [siuzhetnaia] poem” (474).

The latter skill, Shklovsky implies, has been in danger of dying out under the “non-narrative” influence of the Acmeists and especially the Futurists (471). The necessity of reasserting the narrative strand in the literary fabric demands that the Southwesterns 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 recently-“reformed” Formalist’s insistence on a distinction between “literature” and “memoir” (harking back to Roman Jakobson’s rallying cry of “literaturnost” or “literariness”), together with his repeated use of the word “siuzhetnyi” (“narrative, plot-based”), evoking his own groundbreaking opposition of fabula (story) to siuzhet (plot, discourse), invites us to consider the collectivity of the Odessa writers on the level of form, not just of content.

Shklovsky’s reference here to “memoirs” here is, however, telling, for two reasons: first, the extent to which the Odessans’ own predilection for autobiographical discourse has affected subsequent scholarship on the Odessa school, which I shall discuss below; and second, the nature of Shklovsky’s own interest in the school. In fact, Shklovsky’s perception of the “Southwestern school” was influenced at least as much by social as by literary considerations. According to Mikhail Slonimsky, Shklovsky first met the Odessan writers in 1923 or 1924, while working on a parent publication of The Whistle, which employed Babel, Olesha, Kataev, Ilf and Petrov.⁹ He

had, then, known them for ten years before penning the article that inducted the
“school” into literary history. If this by itself were not “material for memoirs,”
Shklovsky’s wife, Serafima Gustavovna Suok, had previously been married to Vladimir
Narbut, an Odessan; and her two sisters, Lidia and Olga, were married to Eduard
Bagritsky and Yury Olesha, respectively. In fact, after Olesha’s death, his widow, Olga
Suok, would work with her brother-in-law Shklovsky to produce the edition of *No Day
Without a Line* [Ni dnia bez strochki] that appeared in 1965. It seems safe to say that
Shklovsky’s professional interest in the “Southwestern school” was rooted as much in
“memoirs” as in “literature.” In fact, as we shall see, Shklovsky’s appraisal of the
“Odessa school” was one of many stories relating to the Odessa writers that passed from
life into literature and back into life again. It is the first example I shall examine of a
phenomenon peculiarly frequent among the Odessans and their adherents: stories
(especially autobiographical stories) that come true.

This particular story, which Shklovsky had borrowed from his own life, “came
ture” in a very different way from what its narrator had expected: the “very great
influence” that he predicted for the Southwestern school materialized in the form of
political peril and vituperation. As luck would have it, the appearance of Shklovsky’s
article immediately preceded the January 1933 plenary session of the Central
Committee and Central Control Commission, the first of many political meetings that
year at which new formulae binding art and literature to the service of the Party and
Soviet unity were developed, along with provisions for “purging” unwanted elements.
In this context, Shklovsky’s efforts to institutionalize a regional school in Soviet
literature appeared “depraved” and “harmful,” and immediately attracted a torrent of
condemnation from more orthodox critics, who were mindful of the incipient formulation of Socialist Realism. In addition to singling out a Southwestern “school,” which was viewed as an attack on the unity of Soviet literature, Shklovsky’s article dared to imply that Soviet men of letters could derive inspiration from the West rather than from their common Soviet heritage. The rhetoric against him escalated, with terms like “class enemy” being used to describe Shklovsky, who by February 25 was forced to recant his position in a letter to the editors of Literaturnaia gazeta (which, however, was not published until April 29). At this point, according to A. Iu. Galushkin, “the discussion about ‘South-West’ transmuted into a broad ‘Discussion of Formalism,’ which continued to the end of the year,” reaching beyond literature into the realms of musical, theatrical, and visual art, and pitting the concept of Formalism against that of Socialist Realism. While it would be overstating the case to see Shklovsky’s article as the snowball that would eventually lead to an avalanche of cultural purges under Stalin, it is sobering to think that in seeking to elevate the status of the “Southwestern school” in Russian literature, Shklovsky may inadvertently have hastened its decline. Under the circumstances, the question of any such “school” in Soviet letters was not broached again in official criticism until the 1960s, when it was cautiously reopened in the context of new studies on Olesha, Ilf and Petrov, by critics who carefully avoided the use of such terms as “Western influence.” These works will be discussed further in the chapters on individual Odессан writers.


Shklovskii, Gamburgskii schet, 540 (Primechaniiia).

Meanwhile, in the West, Shklovsky’s article had a different legacy, and his expiatory declaration that “It is, of course, wrong to set up one group of writers against another on biographical grounds” was far from taken to heart. Rather, many critics, apparently put off guard by the Odessa writers’ partiality to the autobiographical pact, until comparatively recently were inclined to trust statements made by the Odessa writers—or, surprisingly, even by their fictional narrators—about themselves, their compatriots, their origins, their aspirations, and their craft. The following comment on Babel’s 1916 article, “Odessa,” is not unusual: “Thus, Isaak Babel’, a twenty-year-old fledgling writer, unwittingly became the spokesman for the literary trends he sensed were brewing in Odessa.” The idea that Babel, a consummate craftsman whom Paustovsky reports as completing twenty-two drafts of a single story before submitting it for publication, could perform any textual act “unwittingly” now seems naïve; as I shall discuss in the next chapter, an important achievement of Babel scholarship in the last quarter century has been the recognition of the craftiness that accompanied his craftsmanship. However, the tendency to take authors’ autobiographical statements at face value has been a hallmark of previous scholarship on the Odessa school.

Given the biographical considerations underlying Shklovsky’s choice of aesthetic object on the one hand, and the autobiographical leanings of the Odessans themselves on the other, it is perhaps hardly surprising that subsequent scholarship on

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13 See Introduction.

14 Walent Cukierman, “The Odessa School of Writers, 1918-1923” (PhD diss., U. of Michigan, 1976), 13. The essay to which he is responding appears in Babel’s Sochinenia v dvukh tomakh, ed. A.N. Pirozhkova (Moscow, 1990) 1:62-64.

15 Paustovsky, Vremia bol’shikh ozhidanii (Odessa: Maiak, 1977), 146. I am aware of the irony inherent in my using an episode from Paustovsky’s autobiographical “povest’” here to corroborate a statement about the “real-life” Babel, but in any event the corroboration is superfluous; Babel’s meticulousness, while an important part of his personal legend, is sufficiently widely attested (and evident in his works) to command belief.
the “Southwest”/Odessa school has generally failed to observe a clear distinction between biography (“material for memoirs”) and aesthetics (the stuff of “literature”). Some critics focusing on individual Odessa writers have interpreted the biographical data as a corroboration of their Odessa-based works, which are thereby taken to be strictly autobiographical. Meanwhile, most previous scholarship on the Odessans as a group has attempted to show how life in the cultural milieu of pre-Revolutionary Odessa was formative for the Odessa writers. Proof of this superficially logical hypothesis is offered in the form of certain recurring themes, motifs, and imagery that appear in the works of the Odessans: for example, depictions of sun and sea, references to summertime activities, soccer, the circus, popular song, exhibitions of physical prowess, Jewish characters and “types,” nonstandard Russian idioms, and so on.¹⁶

While these references are now seen as unmistakably “Odessan,” it is not to be supposed that the Odessan writers, by virtue of their origin, were unable to write of anything else. (In any case, such a theory could hardly explain Paustovsky’s enthusiastic embrace of the same themes.) Rather, like their migration to Moscow, the Odessans’ choice of material represented a set of conscious artistic decisions: having emerged from the literary culture of Odessa, they went on to promote a literary cult of Odessa in their works. In the following analysis, I shall attempt, first, to draw clear distinctions between the former, historical, Odessa and the latter, mythical one, and second, to explore the relationship between the historical Odessa and something I shall call the “Odessa text,” on the model of the “Petersburg text” famously articulated by the

¹⁶ See, e.g., Cukierman, “The Odessa School of Writers,” and Feld, “The Southwestern School of Writers.” A distinct Odessophilia also works to the detriment of these otherwise valuable foundational studies.
semioticians of the Moscow-Tartu school. As I shall argue, the “Odessa text” was entwined with, but distinct from, the historical reality of Odessa; it was unique in that it developed through the collaboration of assorted ethnic, political, and cultural perspectives; and it formed a reservoir of motifs upon which the writers of the Odessa School drew, and to which they also contributed.

THE HISTORICAL ODESSA

In addition to the Russian writers of the “Southwestern school,” early-twentieth-century Odessa boasted founding members of the Hebrew and Yiddish canons: the celebrated “Hebrew national poet,” Chaim Bialik (1873-1934), and the “fathers of Yiddish literature,” S. Y. [Sholem Yankev] Abramovitsh (1835-1917, also known as Mendele Moykher-Sforim after his protagonist-narrator) and Sholem Aleichem (1859-1916). The Odessa that produced these famous writers in three traditions—that is, Odessa in the period 1894-1917—seems to have been a cultural center comparable to fin-de-siècle Vienna or Prague: politically restive; artistically volatile; a nexus 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 (Russian, in the case of Odessa). It was a city where grand traditions were confronted by political and artistic radicalism, and one which—again like Vienna and Prague—boasted a large, relatively

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empowered Jewish community, many of whose members were educated alongside non-Jews and participated with them in the cultural and intellectual life of the city.\textsuperscript{18}

The international, multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan quality of Odessa culture in this epoch, as well as the powerful tensions attendant thereupon, may be traced at least in part to the geography and history of the city. Originally a Tatar outpost, located on the site of an old Greek colony, and captured by Russia from the Turks in 1789, Odessa was formally incorporated into the Russian Empire and given its Greek-inspired name by Catherine the Great in 1794.\textsuperscript{19} Politically, then, the city was firmly Russian (though its first two governors were French nationals) and it was from Russia that it received the impetus and direction for its vigorous economic and municipal development throughout the nineteenth century.

Odessa’s location—in the outskirts of the Empire, within the Jewish Pale of Settlement, connected by sea to Western Europe and (after the completion of the Suez Canal) to the Near East—contributed both to the city’s prosperity and to its evolution as a nexus of disparate cultures. By 1900, Odessa was the fourth largest city in the Russian Empire, after Moscow, Petersburg, and Warsaw.\textsuperscript{20} The cosmopolitan atmosphere that had characterized the city from the outset persisted through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, though the source, flavor, and political significance of this cosmopolitanism changed continuously. Though only a scant 10%\

\textsuperscript{18} Curiously, the cult of Odessa I have alluded to exists also in Hebrew literature, but does not appear in Yiddish literature of the same period—despite the ties of key figures like Abramovish-Mendele and Sholem Aleichem to the city. Neither author paid particular homage to Odessa in his works; Aleichem’s fictional city, Yehupets, was based on Kiev, not Odessa. I am indebted to Dr. Gennady Estraiakh (conference discussion, April 7, 2002) for this observation.


\textsuperscript{20} Weinberg, 8.
of Odessa dwellers in the 1897 census reported their nationality as Ukrainian, the influence of Ukrainian national sentiment became increasingly important as the political situation in the Empire grew more volatile; meanwhile, the city’s demographic composition shifted dramatically from one dominated by Western Europeans (who comprised nearly three-quarters of the city’s population in 1819, down to about 5% in 1897), to one dominated by Jews.\textsuperscript{21}

In 1897, when Ilf, Kataev, and Bagritsky were born, Jews already comprised nearly 35 percent of the population, up from 14 percent in 1858, and were the city’s second largest national group, after ethnic Russians (46 percent).\textsuperscript{22} The Jewish population boasted, moreover, internal diversity: in addition to the Jewish gangsters of the Moldavanka immortalized by Babel, Odessa was home to yeshiva Jews, secular bourgeois Jews, prodigious violin-playing Jews, and illustrious \textit{maskilim}—figures of the Jewish Enlightenment, or Haskalah. The city was a center both of the Haskalah and of Zionism. The end of the first decade of the twentieth century saw the emergence of several Jewish educational societies and scientific research organizations; in November 1909, soon after the founding of the Jewish Literary Society in the Russian capital, St. Petersburg, a branch was opened in Odessa, headed first by the Hebrew poet Shimon Frug (1860-1916), and later by Bialik.

Around the time of the Revolution, when the Odessan writers were coming of age, Jews made up fifty percent of the city’s population, displacing Russians as the largest national group.\textsuperscript{23} Yet considered in the abstract, what this all really means is

\textsuperscript{21} Weinberg, 7, 11, 13.
\textsuperscript{22} Weinberg, 11-13.
that in 1916 (when, according to himself, the 21-year-old Isaac Babel “began to take [his] literary works around the editorial offices” of St. Petersburg), Odessa lacked an unequivocal ethnic majority, since the numerically dominant ethnic group consisted, politically, of a disenfranchised minority. Odessa was, in demographic terms, nationless.

Meanwhile, Odessa’s relationship to the Empire of which it was an outpost (or “portal,” according to a visitor of 1912) was complicated by its climate and its geography. On the one hand, Odessa boasted relatively balmy temperatures, plentiful sunshine, and a waterfront that suited the needs of vacationers as well as merchant seamen. On the other, it was located at a convenient remove from the imperial capitals. Thus, in addition to its fundamental economic identity as an international port, Odessa served metropolitan Russia as a holiday resort and as a site of exile. It was in the latter capacity that Pushkin famously formed his acquaintance with the city, where he lived for a year in 1823-4, and in the former that subsequent writers—most notably Kuprin, Balmont, and Bunin—came to spend time in the city and contribute to its literary culture. To these writers, Odessa represented a place whose very identity was bound up in “otherness,” a place defined by its non-normative and non-metropolitan status. To the exiles and holidaymakers, as to the Jews, Odessa could be only a borrowed, not a permanent, home.


The turmoil of the Civil War increased the sense of schizophrenia that seems to have stalked Odessa from its earliest days. In the years 1917-1920, Odessa changed hands nine times, controlled in turn by Bolshevik, Austro-German, French, and West Ukrainian nationalist forces—and, of course, always by the anarchic forces that thrive on such military and political confusion.28 The city’s printing presses in those same years churned out hundreds of periodicals, of which most were in the imperial language, Russian. Ukrainian-language publications came in only third, behind Yiddish ones; ethnic French, Germans, and Poles also enjoyed substantial offerings in their native tongues.29 The reading population was, therefore, as fragmented as the city’s political status was changeable. Moreover, the very Russian spoken by the majority—the language on which the Odessan writers would draw for their works—bore traces of its multicultural environment, including Gallicisms (adults were addressed as “Madame” and “Monsieur,” a practical joke was a “roulette”), Yiddishisms (gesheft, shabes-goi, Bud’te mne zdorovy [<Yidd. Zayt mir gezunt]), and Ukrainianisms (la skuchaiu za toboi for la skuchaiu po tebe).30

THE “ODESSA TEXT”

Like Odessa proper, the Odessa text had existed for about a century by the time the Odessans became a part of it. Boris Briker, probably the first critic to examine the mythology surrounding Odessa in the terms set forth by the Tartu semioticians, notes,

28 Feld, 18.

29 Rubinshtein, S. Odes'ka periodichnapres (18917-1921) Odessa, 1929, qtd. in Feld, 22-23.

"an image of Odessa had been formed well before Babel provided the material for his picture of Odessa and its Moldovanka district." Among the elements contributing to this "Odessa text," according to Briker, are "the history of the city, newspaper reports, urban folklore, and also the structure actualized in literary works." In other words, the text is part historical, part mythical, and part literary. Real events play a role in the construction of the city-text; however, the relationship between its historical and its fictional elements is not, as might be supposed, a simple matter of "theme" and "variations," where the "original" is easily distinguished from its embellished offspring. Rather, this relationship should be envisioned as a reciprocal one: early twentieth-century Odessa was not only instrumental in creating a certain kind of literature, but was, in turn, partly created by that literature.

In particular, the ethnic and cultural fragmentation of Odessa's real-life population had important ramifications for the structure of the "Odessa text." The proliferation of ethnic, religious, linguistic, and social concerns simultaneously organizing the life of the city meant that Odessa, in its capacity as sign rather than as geographic entity, resisted classification under any fixed category of national identity, instead fluctuating according to the nature of the gaze trained upon it. If Moscow and Petersburg represented, respectively, a Russian gaze directed inward toward its own traditions and a Russian gaze directed outward toward Western Europe and modernity, Odessa represented a layering of many gazes, a kind of Cubist mélange of perspectives in which the terms "self" and "other" had no fixed referents but occupied a constantly

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32 Ibid.
shifting semiotic space. It was a place where Russian culture appeared as if seen
through a kaleidoscope, formed by the interaction of multiple coexisting yet
irreconcilable "lenses." This set of intersecting gazes included:

(1) The gaze of metropolitan Russia (personified by its exiles and
holidaymakers) toward its margins (the place of exile or holiday). This gaze is
represented in literature by Pushkin, Kuprin et al.

(2) A marginal gaze toward the metropolis, which grew more urgent as the
Revolution disrupted cultural life in Odessa and intensified the importance of Moscow,
the newly chosen capital, as "cultural and political center of the Soviet Union." 33 The
literary representatives of this gaze were the young Odessans and their contemporaries,
particularly Odessa's Jewish intelligentsia.

(3) A wary Jewish gaze on Russia, and vice versa: these relationships,
represented from both sides by the Odessan writers, have been adumbrated above (and
will be explored further below). It is worth noting that the Jewish popular stereotypes
regarding pre-Revolutionary Odessa focused rather on economics than on culture: two
colorful Yiddish expressions from the time, "Er lebt vi got in odes" ("He lives like God
in Odessa") and "Tsen mayl fun odes brent dos gehenem" ("Hell burns ten miles from
Odessa") underline the popular Jewish image of Odessa as "a Russian El Dorado," 34 in
which secularized Jews enjoyed "maximum freedom from [religious] restraint,

33 David Shneer, "The Path of a Russian Jewish Writer" [rev. of Shrayer, Russian Poet/Soviet Jew],
in H-Russia <H-Russia@h-net.msu.edu> Feb. 2002, archived at
<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=22751015344845>.
In context: "Until 1920, Odessa, along with St. Petersburg, was the center of the Russian (language)
Jewish intelligentsia. The city was also the home of Hebrew-language Jewish culture in Russia. But
after the Soviet takeover of Ukraine in 1920 and the emigration/exile of Hebrew-language cultural
activists, Odessa's Jewish intelligentsia found itself in the provinces again, as Moscow assumed the
status of political and cultural center of the Soviet Union."

34 Weinberg, 13.
maximum access to comfort and self-indulgence.” 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!

Like contemporary Western accounts of Odessa (see below), the specifics of the Yiddish perspective on Odessa seem to have been largely self-contained within their native discourse, not impinging on the Russian “Odessa text.” Their influence may have contributed, however, to the general atmosphere of lawlessness that characterizes that text; the inversion of values suggested by Menachem’s confusion of religious worship with commercial entertainment is a close cousin to the topsy-turvy logic of Babel’s *Odessa Tales* or Ilf and Petrov’s *Ostap Bender* novels.

(4) A Russian gaze toward the West. Commentators have routinely compared Odessa to Naples or Marseilles, wittingly or unwittingly inviting a contrast with the Western analogies usually found for St. Petersburg—Venice and Paris. Babel, who refers to Odessa in “The End of the Almshouse” as the “Russian Marseilles,” probably bears some responsibility for this trend. In any event, the implication is that

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Westward-looking Odessites looked toward a different, saltier West from the dainty societies on which Westward-looking Petersburgers modeled themselves; and that they framed the perennial drama of Russia’s conflicted relationship to the West accordingly.

(5) A Western gaze toward Russia. This last “gaze” deserves further investigation, as the perspective it yielded on Odessa is in some ways unexpected. The Western Europeans who came to Odessa were, for the most part, mariners of one sort or another (that is, military, commercial, or black-market), who must have judged the Russian Empire on a quite different set of criteria from those used by the capital’s better-heeled visitors. So far as I know, no contemporary account of Odessa by such a person exists. However, American writers, far from romanticizing Odessa’s uniqueness, seem to have gone out of their way to extol its familiarity. In *Innocents Abroad*, Mark Twain describes 1867 Odessa as looking “just like an American city” (certainly a claim that would be hard to make about either Moscow or Petersburg), and exclaims:

I have not felt so much at home for a long time as I did when I “raised the hill” and stood in Odessa for the first time….Look up the street or down the street, this way or that way, we saw only America!  

The journalist and illustrator Sydney Adamson, writing for *Harper’s* in 1912, goes even further in expressing the sense of familiarity that Odessa elicited: “How like the rest of the world!” The details of Adamson’s article, however, are revealing: what he finds familiar is not the architecture, but the universal experience of being swindled by porters who matter-of-factly take advantage of the language barrier. For the most part, though, Adamson’s description of Odessa, where he spent several months, is


neither of an “American” nor of a “European” city, but of one quintessentially Russian. The only traces of the Russian Odessa mythology to be found in Adamson’s article are references to the diversity of faces that pass in the street, and a comparison of Café Fanconi, also immortalized by Babel and Aleichem, to a French (albeit “Parisian”) patisserie. In all other respects the author is agreeably impressed to find everything—from the “celebrated Russian cold table” to the opera—“purely Russian.” Odessa, in Adamson’s account, might as well be Petersburg: its weather is “Arctic,” no one speaks English, everyone is so swathed in furs that only their eyes peep out; Lent and Easter are both ardently observed, and the Orthodox Cathedral is “the heart of Odessa.”

During his stay, the author is cheerfully overcharged at every turn and even arrested at one point for sketching in the marketplace. Needless to say he is released once his sketches are shown to be harmless; levities are exchanged, and no hard feelings are expected on either side. How Russian! There is an almost Gogolian aspect to the proceedings:

The prisoner bowed and a little man with sharp eyes and a grisly beard, who stood in big boots, wore a gray uniform and a big sword, ejaculated, “Ha!” The policeman explained, and once more, with too much real satisfaction for the prisoner’s liking, he repeated “Ha! ha!”

I have dwelt at such length on Adamson’s Odessan experience to illustrate the extent to which the “Odessa mystique” that is so palpable to readers of Babel and the other Odessans was not, in early twentieth-century Odessa, there for all to see. A foreign observer, even one with so much leisure and curiosity as Adamson, stood outside the

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41 Ibid.

Odessa tradition in Russian literature; the features of the “Odessa text” were, apparently, invisible to him.

The special vision of Odessa that informs Russian literature begins with the most consummately canonizing gaze of all: that of Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin. Pushkin established what would become the founding image of Odessa in the fragments of Onegin’s Journey, originally intended as the eighth chapter of Eugene Onegin:

I lived then in dusty Odessa…. There for a long time skies are clear. There, hustling, an abundant trade sets up its sails. There all exhales, diffuses Europe, All glistens with the South, and is motleyed with live variety. The tongue of golden Italy \(^{43}\) Resounds along the gay street where walks the proud Slav, the Frenchman, Spaniard, Armenian, and Greek, and the heavy Moldavian, and the son of Egyptian soil, the retired Corsair, Morali. \(^{44}\)

The details of the Odessa blazon remain substantially unchanged by the time Paustovksy, who adopted Odessa as a kind of spiritual hometown after living there in the turbulent early years of the post-Revolutionary period, offers the following lyrical description:

Odessa—it is the Black Sea, warm wind from the Bosphorus, descendants of Greek smugglers from Piraeus, Italian Garibaldians, captains and dock workers. The riches of all countries, the influence of France, the ghetto of the Moldavanka, gangsters, who valued most of all a smart joke, grey-moustached workers from Peresyp’, Italian opera, the memoirs about Pushkin, acacias,

\(^{43}\) Weinberg (Blood on the Steps, 13) notes that in the 1820s, street signs in Odessa appeared in both Italian and Russian.

yellow stone, flowers, love for an anecdote, and enormous curiosity about little things. All this is Odessa.\textsuperscript{45}

Here, Pushkin himself has been neatly written into the anthologized canon of Odessa, further expanding the “live variety” on which he himself had commented. But another key figure in the canon appears, though not by name, in Paustovsky’s main addition to Pushkin’s polyglot parade: the presence of the Jews.

 Appropriately for a group whose presence in this canonical site of the Russian literary Empire, however substantial, was irretrievably marginal, Odessa Jews are identified primarily with a wisecracking sense of humour: for Paustovsky, they are epitomized by the “ghetto of the Moldavanka,” with its “gangsters, who valued most of all a smart joke.” Readers of Babel will not miss the \textit{hommage} to the Odessa Tales embedded in Paustovsky’s inventory: the Moldavanka, an unlikely site of nostalgia for Paustovsky in real life, represents the world of Benya Krik, and the “gangsters” to whom he refers are almost certainly fictional—from Babel’s fiction. The characterization of the Moldavanka as a “ghetto,” which it technically was not, is Babel’s too (although it could equally reflect an honest mistake on Paustovsky’s part). The references to Italian opera (the subject of Babel’s “Di Grasso”) and to “the influence of France” also read as Babel signifiers, making the implicit Babel a shadowy counterpart to the explicit Pushkin in Paustovsky’s Odessa canon.

\textsuperscript{45} The translation is by Rita Feld, who documents the source of the quotation as follows: Konstantin Paustovskii, \textit{Izbrannoe} (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaja Literatura, 1965) 107. While I have no reason to doubt the accuracy of Feld’s translation, I have so far been unable to locate a copy of this volume in order either to verify her translation or to make my own. The fact that the quotation is from a volume of “selections,” rather than the 1969 PSS usually favored by Feld, suggests that the story, article, or reminiscence from which it is taken was not included in the PSS. In the absence of further evidence, I have not succeeded in identifying the source of the quotation.
Indeed, Paustovsky here echoes in part a 1916 sketch by Babel himself, entitled simply “Odessa.” In this oft-cited piece, Babel describes the features of Odessa that, according to the author, make it a likely breeding-ground for the “Literary Messiah, so long and fruitlessly awaited” by a Russian readership suffocating for the lack of “a clear description of the sun.”46 He jokingly condemns Odessites’ butchery of the Russian language, but extols their city’s “atmosphere of lightness and clarity,” which he explicitly attributes to its large Jewish population. This atmosphere is also imparted to a certain area of Petrograd by the “brunette” immigrants from Odessa who “bring with them a little bit of sun and lightness,” and have a “tendency to settle on the Kamennostrovsky Prospekt,” a collection of generalizations that, the narrator admits, “smells of a joke” [pakhnet anekdotom]. The choice of words here, “smells of a joke,” may be an encoded jab at the existing stereotypes (which I shall discuss further on) about both Jews and Odessites, which Babel likely considered equally “fragrant.” In context, it also hints at the atmosphere of the colonized Kamennostrovsky Prospekt itself; given Babel’s characterization, one might well expect to catch the scent of a joke in the Odessified air.

The association of Jews with humor, a note struck by both Babel and Paustovsky, represents a departure from the depictions of Jews that were common in Russian literature at that time, which tended to follow the depressing outlines of Chekhov’s 1894 classic, “Rothschild’s Fiddle” [Skripka Rotshil’da]. The story’s title character, a down-trodden and infectiously gloomy Jewish fiddler, was emblematic of the Jewish image in fin-de-siècle Russian literature; echoes of his mournful violin could

46 Isaak Babel’, “Odessa,” Sochinenia v dvukh tomakh, ed. A. Pirozhkova (Moscow: Khud. lit., 1990), 62-65. All translations from this text are my own.
arguably be heard even in the work of Kuprin and Babel (see Chapter 2). Even a determinedly philo-Semitic 1916 anthology, *The Shield* [Shchit], put together by Gorky to benefit Jewish causes, repeatedly portrayed Jews as “small, bent, weak, and pathetic,” according to Gabriella Safran. (The Jewish nationalist movement itself—led by “Westernized” intellectuals—may have contributed to this stereotype by striving to instill strength of body and militarism in its presumably feeble and malformed Jewish followers.)

Safran argues, in a nuanced and persuasive reading of Babel’s “Odessa” alongside one of his early stories, that the “clear description of the sun” for which Babel calls can be read on one level as a metaphor for a more uplifting depiction of the Jews—a depiction Gorky seems to have been striving for, but failed to attain. This reading is supported by the way in which Babel blurs the concept of Jewish humor into that of climatic blessings, and then into literary Messianism, a move that transforms “Odessa” from a nostalgic reminiscence into a manifesto.

Commentators have often skipped straight from Babel’s prophecy of an Odessan “literary Messiah” to the rather dull observation that Babel himself (some even add, “ironically”) turned out to be that “Messiah.” Indeed, it is hardly to be supposed that Babel had anyone else in mind for the job. What is interesting about this little manifesto is not the extent of its prescience, but the terms in which its prophecy is couched. As Barry Scherr observes, Babel does not seem intent here either upon recapturing the milieu of his childhood (which was spent not in the “ghetto” but rather

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47 This and other general information about Jewish physical fitness in the Pale of Settlement was provided to me by Prof. Keith Weiser (York University, Toronto), email, March 10, 2001.

48 Gabriella Safran, “Isaak Babel’s El’ia Isaakovitch as a New Jewish Type,” *Slavic Review* 61.2 (2002) 253-272 (this discussion, 254-258). Gorky, indeed, is cited by Babel in “Odessa” as one who has passionately striven to describe the sun, but whose efforts, by their very passion, come off as “not quite genuine” (65).
in “some of the better parts of town”), or upon introducing the setting and mood of the
Odessa Tales (which differ rather sharply from the Odessa portrayed here).\footnote{Barry Scherr, “Synagogues, Synchrony, and the Sea: Babel’s Odessa,” And Meaning for a Life Entire. Festschrift for Charles A. Moser on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday, ed. Peter Rollberg (Columbus: Slavica, 1997) 337-350; this discussion, 340-41.} Rather, he
argues emphatically for Odessa’s Russian-ness, for its importance as a “significant and
enchanting city of the Russian Empire”—the only Russian city capable of holding its
own against the “mysterious, heavy fog of Petersburg,” which is portrayed as a creeping
infection that eventually overtakes even Gogol:

Do you remember the life-giving, bright sun in Gogol, a man who came
from Ukraine? Though such descriptions are there, they are an episode.
And what’s not an episode is “The Nose,” “The Overcoat,” “The
Portrait,” and “Diary of a Madman.” Petersburg vanquished Poltava,
Akaky Akakievich shyly but with horrifying authority rubbed out
Gritsko, and Father Matvey finished the business that Taras started.

Babel here pre-empts the inevitable comparisons between himself and Gogol, an earlier
invader of the Russian literary canon from Ukraine (Shklovsky would reinvoke Gogol
in “South-West” as a validating forerunner for the Southwestern school), by dismissing
the latter as an assimilator, a man who had a vision of “lightness and clarity” but lost it;
a prophet, perhaps, but no Messiah. The latter role remains (in 1916) uncast.

To make his case for Odessa as a source of literary salvation, Babel takes the
features of the existing “Odessa text”—the sun, the sea, the dust; the “live variety” of
languages and nationalities, composed of sailors, traders, holidaymakers, Italian singers,
Jewish fiddlers, and Russian poets, with a seamy admixture of smugglers, gangsters,
and exiled Russian malcontents—and turns them into a literary program, taking care to
leave us in no doubt that it is a program for Russian literature. His birthplace—
“Russian Odessa” in “the Russian south”—is named as “perhaps (qui sait?) the only
city in Russia where our national Maupassant, of whom we stand in such need, may be born.” The unnecessary little French tag accompanying this invocation (one of several that litter this text: “pur sang,” “quand même et malgré tout,” “parole d’honneur!”), leaves us in little doubt about who this “national Maupassant” is supposed to be.\footnote{The French tags may also be a reference to the French-sprinkled Russian spoken in Odessa (see above).}

Odessa, a city by now identified above all with its Jews (as Babel readily acknowledges), is here decisively recast as a new epicentre of Russian “national” culture—which Babel paradoxically hopes to join by posing as a Frenchman. The ethnic schizophrenia of this position seems quintessentially Odessan.

Indeed, this unification of seemingly irreconcilable perspectives is a crucial element of Babel’s art. Many critics have remarked the way his narrative voice—even in seemingly disparate works—elides gender, for example in the famous Red Cavalry passage describing “the beauty of [divisional commander Savitsky’s] gigantic body” with its “long legs...resembling girls clad to the shoulders in shining jackboots.”\footnote{Babel’, “Moi pervyi gus’,” Sochinenia (1990) 2:32. See, e.g., Safran, “Isaak Babel’”s El’ia Isaakovich,” 263-4. Safran (264n) connects this androgyny in Babel to Rozanov’s theories regarding Jewish male sexuality, specifically its “fecundity and femininity.” Curiously, many of the more flamboyantly androgynous passages in Babel’s “autobiographical” stories (see Ch. 2-3) were excised from published versions during the Soviet period.}

Scherr further notes that “Babel’ seems unable to refrain from mixing the positive and the negative,” moving in the space of the same thought from “the muscled bronze figures of youths playing sports” to “pimply and emaciated dreamers,” and “from the...suffering Jewish ghetto to the sweet spring evenings with their pungent scent of acacias.”\footnote{Scherr, “Babel’’s Odessa,” 341.} Even the peculiarities of the Odessa idiom Babel makes fun of in his first paragraph seem to reflect this “double vision”: according to Babel, Odessites say “two
big differences” [две большие разности; in standard Russian, raznitsa is never pluralized] instead of “a big difference” [большой разнitsa], as if they saw difference as a two-edged sword (which, of course, it is). Scherr asserts that this two-edged-ness, this collapsing of mutually irreconcilable perspectives (positive/negative, masculine/feminine), is the only way in which “Odessa” prefigures Babel’s later Odessa-based texts. However, I would argue that this “schizophrenia” or “undecidability,” created by unifying the seemingly irreconcilable, constitutes one of at least four characteristic elements of Odessan discourse, where “Odessan discourse” is defined as a narrative mode that internalises the features of the “Odessa text,” capturing on the level of form what the “Odessa text” captures on the level of content.

THE ODESSA DISCOURSE

1. Multivocality, or reconciliation of the irreconcilable

First, the “double vision” (or multiple vision) of an idiom that sees “two big differences” where standard Russian allows only one is realized in a discourse that evokes opposite sides of, or opposite sensations elicited by, the same object (and conversely, that unites disparate objects under the same emotion: Shklovsky wrote that “Babel’s principal device is to speak in the same tone of voice of the stars above and of gonorrhea”). A similar impulse in Olesha, visible in the mixed gender signals assigned to Andrei Babichev (who has “the groin of a progenitor” and breasts that bounce when he runs) or in the juxtaposition of high discourse (Ivan Babichev’s

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53 For clarification: this is my point, not Scherr’s. I return to Scherr’s argument in the following sentence.

philosophical disquisitions) with low venues (dive bars), is associated by Victor Peppard with Bakhtinian carnival.55 Indeed, since Odessa was—to metropolitan Russia—a place outside the everyday, a place of exile or holiday where quotidian laws did not apply, it makes sense to consider the paradoxical conflations of Odessan literature as a form of carnival, the aesthetic inversion or subversion of conventional dichotomies and hierarchies. As I observed above, and will elaborate below, a favorite target of such subversion was the division between truth and fiction—a division Babel, Olesha, Kataev, Shklovsky, and Paustovsky all sought to destabilize in a variety of ways.

2. **Jewish power: breaking with stereotype**

Related to this subversion, or submersion, of conventional oppositions is the second feature that I would call a defining element of Odessan discourse: the representation of Jewish power. If Safran is right, and the “clear description of the sun” to which Babel refers is code, in part, for “a more lifelike portrayal of the Jews,” then Babel can indeed be credited with (in his own words) “bringing...a little bit of sun and lightness” to Petersburg and Moscow, in the form of a gallery of strong, unconventional Jewish characters: El’ia Isaakovich, Benya Krik, and the eccentric forebears ascribed to the narrator of the “childhood” tales, to name a few. Other Odessan writers also portrayed powerful Jewish characters in their works: for example, Bagritsky’s Kogan in “The Lay of Opanas” (*Duma pro Opanasa*, 1926), who coolly faces down and shoots the brutal rebel Opanas at the poem’s conclusion, or Kataev’s David Margulies in *Time*.

Forward! (Vremia, vpered!, 1932), who successfully oversees a record-breaking bout of concrete production (and ushers in the era of the production novel). A question that lies beyond the scope of the present study, but which would be interesting to contemplate, is whether the powerful (though not uniformly positive) Jewish types portrayed in works of the Odessans directly influenced other Jewish portrayals in Soviet literature, such as Fadeev’s Levinson in The Rout (Razgrom, 1927).

Thanks in large part to Babel’s Odessa tales, such radical images of Jewish brawn and potency (“You can spend the night with a Russian woman, and the Russian woman will be satisfied with you”), and in particular of Jewish gangsters, have become identified exclusively with Odessa. In fact, Jewish gangsters and strongmen were a relatively common phenomenon in the early twentieth century (they were found in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles in addition to Eastern Europe); the unique “Odessa-ness” of the Jewish gangster is no less a literary construct than the myth it challenges, that of Jewish physical frailty. While Jewish teachings promoted an ideal life of study—indeed, yeshiva students were supposed to rely on charity, rather than labor, to feed themselves—few Jews had the luxury of pursuing such an ideal, or of indulging in self-pity over their supposed physical disadvantages. Some even won renown for their physical superiority: as the Odessans were beginning their careers, Jews dominated the American boxing circuit, and Siegmund “Zisha” Breitbart, a Jewish


57 See Rachel Rubin, Jewish Gangsters of Modern Literature (Urbana: U. of Illinois Press, 2000). Rubin argues that the authors, including Babel, who wrote of Jewish gangsters can be seen as paralleling their protagonists as “rebels ”kneebreaking” their way into the literary canon while continuing to “do business” with the system.” She also sees in the character of the Jewish gangster a fertile terrain for exploring numerous other concerns of early twentieth-century—especially Soviet—literature: sexuality, the role of the vernacular in literature, the place of art within a political economy, and (for Babel and the American Jewish writers she analyses) the fate of Jewish community in the “new worlds” of the United States and the Soviet Union.
blacksmith’s son from Lodz, claimed (at 6’1" and 225 lbs.) to be the “world's strongest man.”58 Moreover, contemporary Yiddish literature enjoyed, according to David Roskies, a “longstanding romance with the Jewish gangster,” who, in the guise of a stock character known as the ba’al guf (after the hero of Bialik’s 1899 Hebrew novel Arye Ba’al-guf), “enjoyed something of a vogue between 1910 and the 1930s, both in fiction and on the stage.”59

It was Russian literature that lacked such characters, and in providing them, the Odessans wove together three previously separate strands of the “Odessa text”: the “Jewish question” that loomed at the turn of the twentieth century, a certain tincture of the carnivalesque, and a related preoccupation with physical prowess, as exemplified by the clientele of Kuprin’s “Gambrinus”:

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.60

This sentence, in which “strength” (of odor, of body, and of language) is repeatedly evoked alongside verbs of enjoyment (liubili, tsenili, predvalis’ s dikim naslazhdeniem), lays out the vocabulary subsequently used by Babel and Olesha to describe the world from which their narrators are debarred. It is interesting to note that while Babel stocks his stories with Jewish characters who impress by “the amazing


tension of [their] will to live,” in Gorky’s phrase, he reserves for his first-person narrators (Red Cavalry’s Lyutov; the narrator of the childhood tales) a Jewish self-consciousness based on the more conventional image of the “small, bent, weak, and pathetic” Jew. Olesha’s first-person narrators (Kavalerov; the seemingly autobiographical narrator of “The Chain” and “The Cherry Pit”) suffer from the same self-image, though they are not Jewish. Indeed, Babel’s and Olesha’s first-person narrators have in common a sense of alienation from the raw, sexy, and brutal physicality described by Kuprin and embodied by characters such as Benya Krik and Andrei Babichev. It is as if both the myth of Jewish frailty and the images of physical and sexual potency to which it was opposed have been cut loose from their ethnic moorings; the images are the same, but the division is between “self” (the narrator) and “other,” rather than between Jew and Russian.

3. Autobiographical and first-person narration

The Odessans’ latent concern with identity is closely related to the third noteworthy characteristic of Odessan discourse, one that is both foreshadowed in Babel’s “Odessa” and hinted at by Shklovsky in “South-West”: a blurring of the line (to the extent that such a line exists) between “literature” and “memoir.” As I noted in the introduction to this study, the tendency of the Odessa writers to favor narrative modes that their audience took to be autobiographical, in the strictest sense, has probably been

61 Safran, “Isaak Babel”’s El’ia Isaakovich,” 255.

62 The division, in the works of the Odessans, between “men of action” (to whom revelry and enjoyment are available) and “men of contemplation” (to whom they are not) deserves, and in later chapters will receive, further attention. Kuprin, like his contemporary Chekhov, assigns the role of irretrievably sad outsider to a Jewish protagonist, the fiddler Sashka.
the most significant factor in their reception. Their further tendency to reflect, in their works, not only upon themselves but upon Odessa (as city, as text, and as point of origin), and also upon each other, lent their several narratives a peculiar collective force, reflected in the image of Odessa that endures to this day in the mind of the Russian reading public. Despite Shklovsky’s recantation of “South-West,” the public perception of the writers he named as a fraternal group distinguished by a shared heritage and common influences endures, overriding the significant differences in their individual backgrounds.

4. Exilic anxiety and nostalgic longing

The anxiety, as well as the secret joys, of “outsiderness”—a historical reality for the Jews, but a literary pose for Babel, Olesha, and the other Odessan writers who settled in Moscow—constitute a fourth characteristic of Odessan discourse, albeit one that is shared by the literature of modernism more generally. Indeed, the coincidence of the Odessan moment in Russian literature with the epoch of modernism was probably not random: it is worthy of note that despite its frequent visits from (and romanticization at the hands of) illustrious Russian writers, and despite its status as a center of both Yiddish and Hebrew literature in the nineteenth century, Odessa did not make its major homegrown contribution to Russian literature until the Revolutionary generation. Even then, it was not until the Odessans had left Odessa for metropolitan Russia that they wrote most of the works, from Babel’s “Odessa” (1916) to Kataev’s *My Diamond Crown* (Almaznyi moi venets, 1977), for which they are justly celebrated, and with which they mutually assured their collective fame. That most of these works
were, moreover, written during the two decades following the Revolution—decades in which the Odessa they had known underwent tremendous upheaval and, arguably, ceased to exist—means that Odessa was both spatially and temporally absent for the Odessa writers at the moment when they became Odessa writers. It is not too farfetched to say that they wrote as they did, in part, to make it present.

Many of the Odessans, including the three whose works form my principal object of study in the succeeding chapters, spent their early careers in agitprop journalism. That gave them a professional interest in the progress of the Civil and Polish-Soviet Wars—wars that, as Carol Avins suggests, imbued the territorial with the ideological.63 The advancing and retreating fronts of the conflict acquired the significance of advancing and retreating time: the Polish effort to restore its 1772 borders and prestige versus the Soviet effort to catalyze a new European order, the White effort to restore a semblance of pre-Bolshevik Russia versus the Red effort to buttress its futuristic vision of Communist Utopia. These fronts passed several times through Odessa.

Inevitably, “given the powerful meanings that ideologues and simple people alike invest in real or imagined homelands,”64 this temporal and territorial conflict was deeply nostalgic in nature. For writers whose youth was divided from their adulthood by the irreversible turnstile of Revolution, the price to be paid was, in Avins’ phrase, “the loss of one’s personal past, and particularly of home, the place where one most


64 Ibid.
fully belong[ed].”\textsuperscript{65} In a rapidly changing world, as Svetlana Boym points out, “a return home does not involve only a journey in space, but also an adventure in time.”\textsuperscript{66} The return to a personal home grounded in a personal past—to one’s proper and private spatiotemporal coordinates—is an ancient literary dream, embodied in Homer’s \textit{Odyssey} and rehearsed in innumerable works over the subsequent centuries. This was the dream the Odessans relinquished as the price of their entrée into Russian literature in the Revolutionary period.

The loss of, or sense of disjuncture from, one’s personal past is a widespread theme in early Soviet literature, as Avins’ and Boym’s research suggests. After all, Petersburgers of the Revolutionary generation lost their hometown twice: first to Petrograd, then to Leningrad. However, Odessa represented a special case, since, as I have argued above, the defining feature of its semiotics was a radical ethnic and cultural undecidability: though home to about half a million people, it was homeland to none—a notion reinforced by Odessa’s enduring image as a perpetual destination of holidaymakers and exiles. If, as Rosemary George argues,\textsuperscript{67} a fundamental literary drive is the discursive re-creation of home, Odessa as \textit{patris} (the goal of \textit{nóstos} and object of \textit{algia}) renders that nostalgic project simultaneously urgent and impossible. If the temporal and spatial displacement from the \textit{patris} consequent upon joining the Revolution created the preconditions for nostalgia, the special features of the Odessan \textit{patris}—“outsiderness” and “undecidability,” or otherwise put, rootlessness and


cosmopolitanism—exploded the nostalgic project by placing a paradox at its center. The whole identity of Odessa was bound up in contradictory multiplicity: it was a shifting sign, not the kind you could navigate toward with a nostalgic compass.

The search for a fixed point of reference becomes all the more urgent amid uncertain surroundings and changeable winds. Odysseus, about to be dislodged from his rocky island and precipitated into a twenty-year absence, carves his marriage bed, the focal point of “home,” from a mighty and immovable tree trunk. This is not the first time Homer has foregrounded the conversion of a “raw” material (to use Lévi-Strauss’s terminology\(^6\)) to a “cooked” artifact: this activity stands for the creation of abstract meaning (which lasts) from concrete phenomena (which decay).\(^6\) Being, in itself senseless and ephemeral, acquires both significance and permanence through the act of making; the tree-bed becomes synonymous with Odysseus’ identity, standing for him throughout his absence and providing the key whereby he is recognized on his return. That the final proof of continuity between Odysseus the bridegroom and Odysseus the returning wanderer is furnished by an artifact, rather than a sentiment, shows us that making, not memory, is the engine by which identity is established; or as Boym puts it, “The literal is less truthful than the literary.”\(^7\) In the same spirit, the articulation of a


\(^6\) For example, in Book IV of the *Iliad*, several lines are devoted to an extended (“Homeric”) simile comparing the death of a young soldier, Simoeisios, to the fall of a tree which is subsequently used by a chariot-maker as raw material for a wheel. This image also serves as a metaphor for the “wheel” Homer makes from Simoeisios’ death, namely the minutely crafted example of ring composition represented by the Simoeisios passage itself (*Iliad IV*: 473-489). That Simoeisios is never mentioned again underscores the lesson that it is the “cooking” of the raw material—the carving of a wheel or composition of a lyric passage—that creates meaning and thereby fixes the object in human historical memory. Simoeisios owes his permanence to Homer; being owes its permanence to making.

\(^7\) Boym, *op. cit.*, 264.
coherent Odessan identity based on a common Odessan "home" must be seen as a creative, rather than a recuperative, act.

5. Stories that come true

This "circle of themes" (carnivalesque multivocality, empowered weaklings, narrations of the self, nostalgic exile) leads us back to what, for me, is the most interesting characteristic of my Odessan writers' works: their shared interest in stories that come true, and conversely in truths that become stories. As I suggested above, Shklovsky's critical narrative of the Southwestern school can be read as an impression taken from life (a "truth"), which became a story, which in turn "came true" in both expected and unexpected ways. The haste and vehemence with which more Party-minded writers rushed to refute Shklovsky's propositions parallels the similar rebuttals directed at Babel's Red Cavalry by General Budyonny,\(^71\) at Kataev's My Diamond Crown by contemporaries on both sides of the Iron Curtain,\(^72\) and at Babel's and Olesha's autobiographical narratives by Kataev himself.\(^73\) In all these cases, stories seen as having pretensions to "truth" are tested and found wanting—all the while giving rise to very non-fictional consequences. Conversely, stories that declare themselves as fictional—a short story by Kuprin, a poem by Bagritsky, the tall tales of an invented great-uncle—are suddenly revealed to be truer than the "autobiographical" narratives surrounding them, possessing a solid historicity borne out by material evidence (a grave

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\(^{71}\) Semen Budennyi, open letter to Gorkii, Krasnaia gazeta, October 26, 1928; translated in Babel, The Lonely Years, 384-387. Gorkii replied, defending the truth of Babel's vision while simultaneously pointing out that a story does not have to be literally lived in order to be "true."

\(^{72}\) See Borden, 112, for a précis.

\(^{73}\) See Chapter Four.
site, a stone wall, an eyewitness). The fluidity of the boundaries between “truth” and “fiction” will be a central theme of the present investigation into key texts by the Odessa writers.
CHAPTER TWO

ISAAC BABEL: STORIES THAT LIE LIKE TRUTH

I pull in resolution, and begin
To doubt th’equivocation of the fiend
That lies like truth.

—Macbeth

I was a deceitful [Izhiyvi] boy. This was the result of reading. My imagination was always inflamed. I read during lessons, in the recesses, on my way home, at night under the table. [...] Who would have wanted to consort with such a fellow?¹

Thus Isaac Babel begins his short story “In the Basement” [V podvale], one of a cycle of childhood stories ostensibly narrated by a younger version of Babel himself. In this particular story, the narrator almost immediately answers his own question by describing the instant popularity he enjoys among his classmates once he reveals his talent as a spinner of yarns. The same talent inspires his teachers to award him quasi-respectable grades, instead of the dvoiki (equivalent to “D’s”) he really deserves. It would seem that in fact quite a lot of people “want to consort with such a fellow.” The better question is, who on earth would be willing to believe him?

Surprisingly, the answer here too is “quite a lot of people.” So cunningly does Babel blur the line between truth and fiction in his “autobiographical” stories that his readers are apt to overlook the clues provided by the stories’ form and the narrator’s many hints, and invest heavily in his counterfeit coin, all the more so since reliable autobiographical information about Babel has been hard to come by. As I mention in

the introduction to the present study, even Lionel Trilling proved susceptible to Babel’s blarney, mistaking a scene from the Babel story “First Love” for historical fact:

But Babel had seen his father on his knees before a Cossack captain on a horse, who said, “At your service,” and touched his fur cap with his yellow-gloved hand and politely paid no heed to the mob looting the Babel store. Such an experience, or even a far milder analogue of it, is determinative in the life of a boy. ²

Trilling goes on to conjecture that Babel’s decision to ride with a Cossack regiment in the Civil War, an experience that later provided material for his best-known work, Red Cavalry [Konarmiia], was prompted by the memory of this early, harrowing—and fictional—encounter with a Cossack officer.

This transferral of story material from the realm of fiction to that of history, effected unilaterally by the reader, has interesting repercussions on the invented portions of the stories’ content. Under most circumstances, when making the choice to read a fictional text, the reader agrees to enter an “alternative universe”—one in which the fictional events can be considered “true” without infringing upon the quotidian reality that is considered “true” in the ordinary universe, that is to say, in real life. By enforcing the boundary between the fictional universe and the ordinary one, the reader can simultaneously believe in the fictional events (for the purposes of enjoying the story) and not believe in them (for the purposes of living); this is what we call “suspension of disbelief,” and is the reason most of us can tell famous actors apart from the characters they play. When, however, this operation breaks down, so that the fictional content is imported into the “real” universe, the story acquires—from the

reader’s perspective—the status of a lie: a deliberate invention masquerading as the truth.

FICTION AND LIES

Traditionally, of course, fiction (the fabrication that does not masquerade as truth) and the lie (the fabrication that does) represent mutually exclusive categories of discourse. Verisimilitude is delightful in the former, but gives offense in the latter. Within the confines of its own, fictional universe, a story may pose as mendacious—for example, if the narrator is unreliable—but outside those confines (i.e., in our world) that pose is not available: fiction has an unrestricted license, not only to be verisimilar, but to be untrue. For a short story, even a Soviet one, to be classed as a lie by anyone other than the author’s political opponents (and I am not one of those) seems an extraordinary turn of events.

The problem with distinguishing between fictions and lies is that the distinction is one of intent, a notoriously slippery quantity, especially when the works of a dead author (or even a live one) are on the examining table. In literature, the intent underlying a given fabrication cannot be fully known, and efforts to discern it can only lead the investigator into the territory of the intentional fallacy. However, all is not lost: the formal qualities of the story itself telegraph a kind of intent—not that of the author, perhaps, but that encoded in the work of art—and can be examined for concrete clues, to decipher which only an attentive reading is required. Some scholars of literature have specifically explored the relationship between fiction and lies: Michael Riffaterre draws a line in the sand between the two with the assertion, “fiction is a genre whereas lies are
not.”  While the first part of that claim is problematic (given the difficulty of establishing even autobiography as a “genre,” much less so vague a category as “fiction”), the gist of Riffaterre’s assertion, that fiction represents a legitimate artistic enterprise, whereas lies are not recognized by the critical establishment as art, provides a useful starting-point from which to consider the Babel dilemma. For Riffaterre, the distinction between “fiction” and “lie” resides in the intention, not of the author, but of the text itself: fiction “specifically, but not always explicitly, excludes the intention to deceive.” The “intentions” of the fictional text are formally encoded in the fictional narrative, which “points” to its own fictionality by means of intratextual “signs whose function is to remind readers that the tale they are being told is imaginary.”

One might surmise that Babel had omitted to include a sufficient quantity of such “signs” in his childhood tales, since Trilling (a critic so formidable, one might suppose, as not to need “reminding”) was lulled into accepting their content as authentic. However, the stories I will examine in this chapter are alive with fictionality markers, both on the formal and on the thematic level. There is something disjointed about reality as it is presented by Babel’s narrator; the vision he presents of his world is fragmented, sometimes verging on the absurd; realism is disrupted by violently inapposite, freighted metaphors and irruptions of a frenetic illogic. Even in its calmer moments, the language of the stories does not play a strictly mimetic role; a careful reading of all five stories reveals a painstakingly constructed vocabulary of symbols,

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4 See Introduction.
5 *Ibid.* Riffaterre provides a list of typical “signs” or fictionality markers on pp. 29-30.
which functions at least partly as an artistic commentary on the relationships among reality, perception, and imagination.

Particularly noteworthy among these Riffaterrian “signs” is a preoccupation, throughout the “autobiographical cycle,” with stories as such. The events recounted in “Childhood: At Grandmother’s,” for example, include the narrator’s perusal of Turgenev’s novella First Love [Pervaia liubov’], a work that, in turn, is itself explicitly concerned with stories and the art of telling them. The Turgenev work reappears later, like an authorial wink, in the title of the third Babel story, also called “First Love.” A different kind of storytelling, less literary but with formal characteristics of its own, is represented by the post-prandial reminiscences of the narrator’s grandmother. And in “The Story of My Dovcote,” a narrative studded with “creative” (read: misleading) utterances ranging from euphemisms to encomia is crowned by the “lying stories” of the narrator’s great-uncle Shoyl, who seems to serve as a model for the narrator himself.

Shoyl is only one of the characters whose statements are measured for truth-value by the narrator; all the Babel men are characterized as discursively unreliable (whether from deliberate fraudulence or from one or another dementia), as I will discuss later. The narrator himself is by no means exempt from this unreliability; a “deceitful little boy,” he is “tormented” by “unbridled fantasies.” “By day,” he reports, “I told tall stories to the neighbors’ urchins[,] by night I transferred them to paper.”

Each of these allusions seems designed to remind us that the telling of stories is

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6 “In the Basement.”
7 “First Love.”
8 “Awakening.”
an enterprise quite distinct from the living of stories; that good material does not automatically make a good story, and conversely that a good story—which, we may assume, Babel wants his own to be—may not always be a true one. Moreover, a closer examination of the way these extraneous stories are treated in Babel’s narrative reveals that, as symbols, they undermine themselves in interesting ways, adding layers of complexity to their Riffaterrian significance.

FICTION AND TRUTH

Given that it is the nature of fiction not to be true, it should hardly come as a surprise that some of Babel’s fiction is made up; if anything, we ought to be surprised that some of it is not. And yet for all the fiction-signifying apparatus described above, the relationship of Babel’s stories to extra-textual “reality” has remained a vexed issue—not only for early Western scholars of Babel (who wrote on him without the benefit even of what scant reliable information we now possess about his life), but for their better-informed and more skeptical successors.

The prospect of falling into an error like Trilling’s has driven illustrious readers of Babel, from his daughter Nathalie\(^8\) to *New Republic* columnist Cynthia Ozick,\(^9\) to call plaintively for an authoritative biography of Babel—a demand that will be difficult to meet, since Babel, in his daughter’s words, “loved to confuse and mystify people,” and the Stalinist government that purged him was hardly more candid. Lionel Trilling is

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by no means the only critic to have attempted to fill in the blanks of Babel’s life from his stories, though he is probably the most illustrious. Since Babel’s posthumous rehabilitation in 1956, as successive waves of Thaw have discredited much of what was thought to be known about him, critics writing on Babel have been quick to distance themselves from the mistakes of their misinformed predecessors, and anxious to credential their alternative propositions about the author’s life and character with an impressive array of testimony from Babel’s acquaintances, colleagues, and family. Here is Cynthia Ozick on Lionel Trilling:

For one thing, Trilling mistakenly believed that Babel…was actually a member of the regiment….Worse, in the absence of other sources, Trilling fell into a crucial—and surprisingly naïve—second error: he supposed that the “autobiographical” tales were, in fact, autobiographical.

[...]
One may suspect that Trilling’s cultural imagination (and perhaps his psyche as well) was circumscribed by a kind of either/or: either worldly sophistication or the ghetto; and that, in linking Jewish learning solely to the ghetto, he could not conceive of its association with a broad and complex civilization....Trilling’s Freudian notion of the humiliated ghetto child could not have been more off the mark.  

Her eagerness to avoid succumbing to a simplistic “either/or” worldview that could lead to misconceptions about “the real Babel” does not inhibit Ozick from offering her own hypothesis about Babel’s personality, bolstered by the “insights” of his friends and schoolmates:

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11 Others whom Nathalie Babel takes to task for comparable demonstrations of naivete include Bernard G. Guerney, Marc Slonim, and Olga Andreyev Carlisle (The Lonely Years, x-xi). Renato Poggioli, in “Isaac Babel in Retrospect” [The Phoenix and the Spider (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957)] makes a similar error.

12 Ozick, 32-35.
Amusing and mercurial, Babel “loved to play tricks on people,” according to Lev Nikulin, who was at school with Babel....For Babel, lamp oil and fearlessness were not antithetical. He was a man with the bit of recklessness between his teeth. One might almost ask how a writer so given to disguises and role-playing could not have put on a Cossack uniform.\(^1^3\)

Ozick’s determination to get at the personal qualities that motivated Babel to act and write as he did is not unique, but it does seem surprising in a writer with no personal connection to Babel the man. Nathalie Babel, understandably on a quest to exhume an authentic memory of her father (whom she had seen in person only briefly, when little more than an infant) from the layers of misinformation that had accumulated since his death, insists firmly on the mischievous bent that renders his own testimony (at least in published texts) unreliable, but, as she admits, her own portrait of Babel relies largely on the testimony of her mother, who left the Soviet Union in 1925, and of others, such as A. N. Pirozhkova (Babel’s companion in the later years of his life), who can give only a partial account of "the real Babel."

Frank O’Connor takes his mistrust of Babel so far as to err in the opposite direction, writing of *Red Cavalry*:

What I am saying is that when a Jew with an uproarious imagination describes scenes of violence one should ask oneself whether he is describing what he saw or what he thought he should have seen. Some of the things Babel describes I am quite certain he never saw.\(^1^4\)

O’Connor’s skepticism is oddly reminiscent of the indignant open letter to Gorky published, over the signature of First Cavalry Commander Semyon Budyonny, in 1928.

\(^1^3\) Ozick, 35.

(The text of the letter is almost identical to a critique penned by a Budyonny subordinate, S. Orlovsky, entitled “In the Backyards of Red Cavalry.”)¹⁵ Budyonny, fiercely defending the honor of the First Cavalry against the defamation of Red Cavalry, protested:

Babel...invents things that never happened, slings dirt at our best Communist commanders, lets his imagination run wild, simply lies...

I happen to know for certain that while Babel saw women’s breasts and bare legs around the army’s field kitchens, Pani Eliza’s servants’ quarters, in the middle of the forest, awake and asleep, in various combinations, there were a few other things the First Cavalry was doing that Babel did not see.

And that’s quite natural and understandable. How could Babel possibly have seen from the deep rear the spots where the fate of the workers and peasants was being decided? He just couldn’t have.¹⁶

One may chuckle, as Babel did in a letter dated the same day, over the professional soldier’s inability to distinguish between art and libel, and simply accept Budyonny’s and O’Connor’s explanations for the “wild” stories of Red Cavalry. Yet, unless we are to assume (and I suppose we cannot rule it out) that Babel’s playful desire “to confuse and mystify” his readers extended even to himself, Babel’s 1920 diary offers reasonably clear evidence that he did see scenes of violence like the ones he describes, as Harold Bloom points out.¹⁷ Thus, O’Connorian skepticism seems no fitter a tool for understanding Babel than Trillingesque credulity. A third way of reading must be found.

¹⁶ The translation used is that by Andrew R. MacAndrew, in The Lonely Years, pp. 384-387.
¹⁷ Bloom, “A Jew Among the Cossacks.”
FICTION AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Given the unlikelihood that research will ever yield definitive answers to all the questions surrounding Babel’s life, the question “what really happened?” seems something of a red herring. A more salient question might be: why are Babel’s readers so preoccupied—even to the point of readable anxiety—with getting at the truth? What is Babel doing, in his “autobiographical” stories, that prompts his readers to invest so much in the factuality, or otherwise, of his narrative? To solve these puzzles, we must re-open the question of the stories’ genre, looking this time at the way they define themselves generically.

The practice of embedding autobiographical material in a fictional narrative is not in itself a radical step; many of the most celebrated works in the Russian canon (for example, Tolstoy’s *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth* or Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*) take the bulk of their content from the lived experience of the author, with a thin veneer of fictionalization. Typically, such “hybrid” narratives do not present the reader with severe epistemological or generic difficulties; they simply invite him or her to participate in the ordinary readerly activity of “pretending” that the story is true, with the additional gratification of knowing that parts of it actually are. What, then, makes Babel’s “hybrid” text so much more troubling than those of his celebrated predecessors?

Simple though it may seem, the answer lies in the way Babel constructs the hybrid. Where Tolstoy and Solzhenitsyn (and the many other Russian authors of
“pseudo-autobiographies,” to use Andrew Wachtel’s term\(^\text{18}\) hang their autobiographical experiences on fictitious narrators, characters who cannot be looked up in the phone book, Babel dresses up a “real” narrator—himself (or, at least, a narrator who shares his name and date-of-birth)—in fictitious experiences. The apparent identity of Babel-the-narrator with Babel-the-author—of “Babel” with Babel—makes a dramatic difference to the way the narrative is perceived.

By fashioning a narrator from the details of his own birth certificate, Babel roots his narrative in “a single subject whose identity is defined by the uncontested readability of his proper name”,\(^\text{19}\) in other words, he invokes the defining condition of autobiography, and along with it, Lejeune’s *pacte autobiographique*. Babel enters into the *pacte* disingenuously, since the facts of his biography and those of his “autobiography” are at variance with each other; but he does enter into it. In so doing, he creates a cycle of stories that, in Alice Stone Nakhimovsky’s phrase, “pretends to be autobiographical.”\(^\text{20}\)

This brings us back to Trilling’s Dilemma: what good is the pact when Babel blithely goes on to fabricate the details of the story? And if, in light of his choices with regard to narrator and theme, Babel’s fabrications violate the terms of the autobiographical pact, should we consider them fictions—or lies? As it turns out, by citing events from a Babel story as “true,” Trilling brought into focus the very problem

\(^{18}\) See Wachtel, Andrew, *The Battle for Childhood* (California: Stanford University Press, 1990). Wachtel uses the term “pseudo-autobiography” to designate “an autobiographically based work that imitates the autobiography in all respects but one: its author and narrator are not the same person” (16).

\(^{19}\) de Man, 920.
that the stories themselves insistently raise: the nature of “story” itself, refracted through the relationship between the work of fiction and the work of deception—between the short story and the tall tale.

The tension between fiction and falsehood is staged in various forms throughout Babel’s childhood tales. In this chapter, I use the term “childhood tales” to designate the following five works, which, I will argue, form a coherent cycle: “Childhood. At Grandmother’s” [Detstvo. U babushki, unpublished at the time of Babel’s death, and originally published in English under the title “You Must Know Everything”], “The Story of My Dovcote” [Istoriiia moei golubiatni], “First Love” [Pervaiia liubov’], “In the Basement” [V podvale], and “Awakening” [Probudzdenie]. Situated on the border between fiction and autobiography, these stories resist classification according to traditional categories of reception. Their ambivalence keeps the problematics of the truth-fiction relationship in the foreground of the reader’s consciousness.

**AVTOBIOGRAFIiA AS TEMPLATE FOR A READING STRATEGY**

As a preliminary to reading Babel’s “autobiographical” stories, it is instructive to take a look at the one-page autobiography he wrote for a 1926 collection of writers’ reminiscences.21 Though it purports to be tersely factual, this four-paragraph sketch exemplifies, in miniature, some of the truth-altering techniques Babel would put to use

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in the childhood tales—including the incorporation of fictional elements. In her discussion of *Avtobiografiia*, Nathalie Babel largely discounts its value as a biographical document, observing that “autobiographical facts are largely distorted” in Babel’s summary of them, and enumerating three ways in which this is done. These may be taken as a condensed guide to Babel’s autobiographical method in general.

According to his daughter, Babel “does not differentiate between trivial and important details,” and some of the “facts” he presents in *Avtobiografiia* are “pure fabrication”; moreover, in this lightning summary of his first thirty years, the author “telescopes seven years of his life: 1917-1924.”22 We may schematize these techniques of “imaginative distortion” as follows:

(1) **Babel devotes excessive attention to details that are relatively trivial.** In *Avtobiografiia*, such details include a demographic breakdown of Babel’s classmates in elementary school, and a catalogue of their activities at recess. Beyond *Avtobiografiia*, an obvious example of Babel’s tendency to foreground activity that takes place in the margins of his “main” plot glares at us from the title of “The Story of My Dovecote”: for the first half of the story, the action is dominated by the young protagonist’s struggle to gain a place at secondary school; by the end of the story, the dovecote’s thunder has been conclusively stolen by a big, ugly pogrom.

(2) **Babel lies.**

Among the outright fabrications in *Avtobiografiia* we may include Babel’s romanticized account of the hardships he endured during his first years in St. Petersburg, and in

\[22\] *The Lonely Years*, xiii-xiv.
particular the claim that—an impecunious and illicit resident—he was driven to lodge
“in the cellar of a harrowed [rasterzannyi; Nathalie Babel has “bedraggled,” McDuff,
“tormented”], drunken waiter.” This, according to Ozick, “was pure fabrication: in
actuality Babel was taken in by a highly respectable engineer and his wife, with whom
he was in correspondence.” She surmises that the purpose of the fabrication was
“romantic imposture….A drunken waiter would have been adventure enough—but ah,
that Dostoyevskian ‘tormented!’”23 Nathalie Babel elaborates, “His father still sent him
money. Moreover, although Jewish students were allowed to remain in Petersburg only
for a limited period of time, this period could be extended.”24

Similarly, in the childhood tales, Babel freely mixes material taken from life
with the products of pure invention; Nathalie Babel is quick to point out, for example,
that Babel’s parents did not (as in “First Love”) have red hair, nor was his mother’s
name Rachel.25 As we will see, by falsifying such details in his “autobiographical”
stories, Babel creates a fictive falsehood that reflects the thematic emphasis in the
stories on lying and on the various ways in which reality may be distorted.

(3) Babel miniaturizes (or “telescopes”) the events that are most important.
The short shrift Babel gives to the years 1917-1924 in Autobiografía is the logical
corollary to the “long shrift” lavished upon minutiae from his schooldays. Together,
these two techniques [(1) and (3)] constitute a form of prevarication, not perhaps as
brazen as his outright lies, but illuminating a key aspect of Babel’s literary

23 Ozick, 34.
24 The Lonely Years, xviii.
25 Ibid., xvi.
consciousness: his concern with perception and perspective. (Olesha, as I shall have occasion to remark in the next chapter, shares these interests, although he brings different techniques to bear on them.) The discursive deformation of perspective exemplified by the twin techniques of magnification and diminution is one of the ways in which the narrator of the childhood tales will make us feel the correlation between language (as the medium via which we receive narrated “reality”) and experience (as the medium via which we receive extra-textual reality).

In addition to “miniaturizing” significant events, Babel sometimes leaves things out altogether, creating a kind of ersatz censorship. In an oddly backwards fashion, this technique of omission serves to highlight the missing information. The antecedent of state censorship—with which both Russian and Soviet literature traditionally had to contend—provided a model according to which the most salient material is that which is not stated. Babel, like his predecessors, must have been versed in the art of strategic omission. As a literary technique, however, such a stratagem demands close attention from the reader in order to work.

**AVTOBIOGRAFIIA AND “AESTHETIC COHERENCE”**

Jane Gary Harris, summarizing the approaches taken by the contributors to the volume *Autobiographical Statements in Russian Literature*, postulates that “the aesthetic coherence of a given autobiographical statement resides in the articulation of the tension created by this dialogue [between “experience” and “interpretation”]—often expressed
in the laying bare of the mediating act."\textsuperscript{26} To the extent that a given text relies for its
effect on making this tension—that is, the \textit{need} for mediation between "the
autobiographical consciousness" and "the autobiographical imagination"\textsuperscript{27}—palpable, it
follows that the mediating act must, to some extent, be laid bare. In \textit{Avtobiografiia}, the
tension arising from the "dialogue"—really, a mediated disparity—between
"experience" and (re-)"interpretation" is manifest. The "mediating act," however, is not
"laid bare" intratextually, according to the rules laid down by Jakobson and the Russian
Formalists. Rather, the reader can become aware of the mediation only upon acquiring
\textit{extra-textual} knowledge of Babel's life, from third-party sources. In other words, the
"aesthetic coherence" of \textit{Avtobiografiia} as a literary text depends on the reader's
knowledge of "what really happened"; in order to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of
the text, the reader must—paradoxically—indulge the anti-aesthetic drive to "get at the
truth."

Since the primary motivation behind \textit{Avtobiografiia} is documentary rather than
literary,\textsuperscript{28} it is of little consequence whether its "aesthetic coherence"—i.e., its
calculated mendacity— is available to the reader. However, it is not the relatively
obscure \textit{Avtobiografiia} but Babel's stories themselves that "have often misled those
critics who like to seek the man in his works."\textsuperscript{29} This constitutes a much more serious
problem, for if we cannot apprehend the "aesthetic coherence" of Babel's fiction

\textsuperscript{26} Harris, Jane Gary, "Autobiography: Theory and Praxis," in \textit{Autobiographical Statements in Russian

\textsuperscript{27} Harris, 25. Harris is working with terminology inspired by Barrett John Mandel (see Bibliography).

\textsuperscript{28} Nathalie Babel posits, convincingly, that Babel aimed "to present an appropriate past for a young writer
who was not a member of the Communist Party" (\textit{The Lonely Years}, xiv).
without recourse to a reliable biography of him, we cannot hope ever to appreciate it fully. I submit that such a situation is unacceptable; we must attempt to uncover the clues the author has left for us in the texts themselves—the ways in which the “mediating act” is laid bare intratextually. With this in mind, I devote the remainder of this chapter to close readings of the first two childhood tales, “Childhood. At Grandmother’s” [Detstvo. U babushki] and “The Story of My Dovecote” [Istoriiia moei golubiatni].

“CHILDHOOD”: SEEDS OF AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL METHOD

“Childhood. At Grandmother’s,” the first of the childhood tales, is dated “Saratov, 12.11.15”—placing it among Babel’s earliest works—and was not published until 1965, long after the author’s death. It thus falls well outside the most illustrious period of Babel’s literary output (roughly, 1920-37), and—being moreover available to us only in a slightly imperfect manuscript—has enjoyed a relatively obscure existence as a result. Editors as well as critics have tended to sever it from the “autobiographical” cycle headlined by “The Story of My Dovecote.” However, it seems clear that the cycle without “Childhood: At Grandmother’s” is incomplete, for three reasons. First, a

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29 The Lonely Years, xiii.

30 Detailed publication information for “Childhood: At Grandmother’s” may be found in Babel, Isaac, You Must Know Everything: Stories 1915-1937, Nathalie Babel, ed., Max Hayward, trans. (New York: Farrar and Straus, 1966), 3-4. In this volume, the story is given the title “You Must Know Everything,” which derives from a line spoken by the grandmother.

31 Apparently, Babel was working on a cycle of “autobiographical” stories to be collected under the title The Story of My Dovecote, which he proposed to submit to the publisher in the autumn of 1939—just one of the projects that, in Babel’s words, “ne dali mne konchit’” when he was arrested in May of that year. [See note in Babel, Sochinenia v dvukh tomakh, ed. A. Pirozhkova (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1990), vol. 2, 561.]
familiarity with “Childhood: At Grandmother’s” adds a great deal to the reader’s appreciation of “Awakening,” the final story of the cycle, which mirrors “Childhood: At Grandmother’s” both structurally and thematically. Second, “Childhood: At Grandmother’s” provides the reader with information without which certain discursive aspects of the other stories are inaccessible. Third, it is in “Childhood: At Grandmother’s” that the fundamental thematic concerns of the cycle are established, and the symbolic language that gives them expression is introduced.

The first of these recurrent motifs to make an appearance is the characterization of the narrator as a “dreamer” [mechtatel’]. The narrator describes the walk home to see his grandmother, with whom he will spend the remainder of his Saturday, as an opportunity to let his imagination roam. Variations on the word mechta, the Russian for “daydream,” occur three times in the first paragraph of the story, leaving us in no doubt about the defining feature of its protagonist’s personality. The world of daydreams (mecht) is juxtaposed early on with the world of sleep-dreams (sny), which the narrator enters when he crosses the threshold of his grandmother’s room. In later stories, we see the dichotomy between mecht and sny developed further, as our hero is subject to both; here, we see the beginnings of a connection between the narrator’s daydreams and his heightened, if imaginative, cognizance of the world around him.

Sleep-dreams, by contrast, seem here and elsewhere to be associated with a protective insensibility to the outside world. In “Childhood: At Grandmother’s,” sleep is repeatedly linked to blindness, and thus to a form of escape. The incorrigible sleeper of “Childhood: At Grandmother’s” is, however, not the narrator but his grandmother’s dog, Mimka, who is frequently to be found sleeping “peacefully” (mirno). The
correlation between sleep and the absence of worldly care (Macbeth again!) is underlined by the association of both traits with Mimka, who also symbolizes the uncritical kindness of which only animals, in Babel, are capable: “She was a terrible sleepyhead, but a great dog, kind-hearted, sensible, small and pretty.” Mimka sleeps the untroubled sleep of the virtuous.32

To assign on this basis a moral or aesthetic value to sleep-dreams, in opposition to daydreams, would, however, be a mistake. My intent is rather to highlight the role of sleep as a relief from the travails of the outside world; a relief purchased, however, at the expense of physical vision—of actually seeing that world. The associations among the highly resonant oppositions of waking/sleeping, vision/blindness, and confinement/freedom are set out in what remains of the last paragraph: “More than that I do not see, for I sleep very soundly, sleep a youthful sleep behind seven seals in Grandmother’s hot room.” Dreams (mechty when the narrator is alone, preferably outdoors, and able to exercise some subjective autonomy; sny when he is under familial lock and key) become, in the childhood cycle, the narrator’s standard form of escape, implicitly the springboard for his activities as a writer. The seeds of this idea are sown in “Childhood.”

The reader is also sensitized early on to the importance of vision to Babel’s narrative system, manifested in the proliferation of verbs of looking and seeing (videt’, osmatrivat’, zagladiyat’) and in the constant references to Grandmother’s relentlessly watching eyes. The narrator gives especial emphasis to their improbable color:

32 For a brief catalogue of animals’ anthropomorphic qualities in Babel, see Sicher, Ephraim, Style and Structure in the Prose of Isaac Babel’ (Columbus: Slavica, 1985).
yellow—introducing a color association that will come to fruition in “The Story of My Dovecote.” Grandmother’s synecdoche, her yellow, piercing eyes, is juxtaposed with that of the Russian violin teacher, Sorokin: large, red hands. Sorokin, whose brief is to subject the young “Babel” to the tiresome paternal imposition of music lessons (theoretically, his potential ticket out of the constrictions of Jewish life in Russia—among them the child-stifling atmosphere to which the narrative itself is devoted, and of which Sorokin himself forms a part), simultaneously represents both the physical, outdoor world that “Babel” so longs to master, and the oppressive cultural training that bars him from it. (This opposition—between paternally ordained violin lessons and the outdoor world of physical things—will be made explicit in “Awakening.”) Sorokin, “a splendid fellow” with “black hair in a crew-cut,” “big red [krasnye] hands and beautiful [krasivye] full lips,” is an early exemplar of that specifically Russian heartiness (connoted by krasnota—redness—and fraught, in Babel, with aesthetic appeal, or krasota), that is at once indispensable in order to belong to the physical realm, and inaccessible to the self-conscious Jews of “Babel”’s domestic sphere.

If we now attempt to schematize the symbolic associations suggested by Babel’s deployment of color and bodily imagery, we may observe the beginnings of a pattern that will be articulated further in later stories:

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33 For a further discussion of Babel’s symbolic use of color, see Danuta Mendelson, *The Function of Metaphor in Babel’s Short Stories* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1982), 76; and Sicher, *Style and Structure*, 46-61.

34 My translation.
The tension between freedom (or “fresh air”) and confinement or constraint is crucial to the childhood tales. Patricia Carden, in The Art of Isaac Babel, summarizes the dynamics of “The Story of My Dovecote”: “The pattern is one of [repeated] tension and release.”35 This tension is linked to the physical opposition between outdoor and indoor space, and thence, as many have observed,36 to the Russian/Jewish polarity, never far from the surface in Babel, although I do not propose to devote much space to it here (the work having been undertaken already by specialists on the topic). It is important to note the further connection of confinement to family, which results partly from the Jewish connotations of both.

Family, in the childhood cycle, occupies a highly ambiguous position: it is the source, on the one hand, of the narrator’s literary pedigree, and, on the other, of the “otherness” that torments him. In particular, the paternal influence in the narrator’s life causes a constant sense of oppression in the form of homework and violin practice, as I

36 See, e.g., Nakhimovsky, Russian-Jewish Literature, esp. 102-106. I like Nakhimovsky’s analysis for its balanced approach, free from the excesses of sentiment found in much of the criticism that deals specifically with Babel’s Jewish dimension.
noted above. Indeed, the narrator’s inner turmoil is cast, in large part, as his legacy from the men of the “Babel” family—who are conspicuously absent from this introductory story.

Their physical absence is underlined by the fact that the three most important male Babel figures\(^{37}\) are mentioned in the story, thus making their presence felt indirectly. The first of these present absences is that of Babel’s father: the narrator mentions him in passing, saying, “Of everything living, Grandmother loved only her son [Babel’s father], her grandson [Babel], her dog Mimka, and flowers.” Babel’s father is mentioned again, in a similar context, three pages later. His grandfather garners more attention, as the subject of one of Grandmother’s stories; he is represented as a colorful figure, but with a particular combination of weaknesses which, as we read on in the childhood cycle, will come to be understood as the perennial male-Babel \textit{hamartia:} an overindulgence in “stories” and an excessive credulity vis-à-vis his fellow man. These are pointed out by Grandmother in the preface to her narrative:

“Your grandfather,” she began, “knew many stories, but he didn’t believe in anything, he only believed in people…”

And Grandmother tells me about my grandfather, a tall, sarcastic, passionate and despotic man. He played the violin, wrote essays by night and knew all the languages. An unquenchable thirst for knowledge and life possessed him.\(^{38}\)

The fact that Babel’s grandfather is evidently dead by the time his grandmother tells

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\(^{37}\) Throughout, where I refer to members of the Babel family portrayed in the stories, I of course mean the fictional family of “Babel,” the narrator, and not the historical Babel family from whom the real Babel, the author, took his descent. I drop the quotation marks around “Babel” beginning in this paragraph because they are untidy to look at, and—assuming ordinary discernment on the part of the reader—unnecessary.

\(^{38}\) My translation.
these stories indicates that “Childhood: At Grandmother’s,” though written earlier, is actually set at a later date than the subsequent stories in the cycle (with the possible exception of “Awakening”), for in “In the Basement” we will “meet” Grandfather Levi-Itskhok in person. Grandmother’s description of him here is rather positive by comparison with the portrait in “In the Basement,” which insists more sharply on the grotesque aspects of the apparently congenital male-Babelian mania Grandmother only hints at here.

The moral Grandmother draws from the story of Grandfather Levi-Itskhok is a telling one: “Study,” she says with force, “study, you will attain everything—wealth and fame. You must know everything....Don’t have faith in human beings.” The last sentence (literally, “Don’t believe in people”) represents an injunction to her grandson not to follow in his grandfather’s footsteps: that is, explicitly, not to “believe in people,” and, implicitly, not to waste his time with stories (“Your grandfather....knew a lot of stories”), but to rely only on “knowledge”—the products of study, not of imagination. She is wasting her breath on the boy, as the reader can by this time already guess; but her advice resonates beyond the text, as an ironic admonition to us not to trust this story, not to place our faith in its narrator.

Stories, in general, figure prominently in “Childhood: At Grandmother’s” as they do throughout the childhood cycle, providing a metaliterary running commentary on the author’s project, as well as an index of the narrator’s concern with his own development as a storyteller. The most significant event in “Childhood: At Grandmother’s,” in terms of its emotional impact on the narrator, is his perusal of Turgenev’s First Love, which, in the narrator’s reading, provides an Ur-text for the
charged interrelationship of love and violence that will come to shape the world of the childhood tales:

I liked everything in it...but trembled at the scene where Vladimir's father strikes Zinaida on the cheek with his horsewhip. I heard the whistle of the whip, the supple leather dug into me keenly, painfully, instantaneously. I was seized by an inexplicable excitement. (24)

In fact (or rather, in fiction—that is, in Turgenev's original) Vladimir's father lashes Zinaida not on the cheek, but on the arm. This minor discrepancy constitutes our first evidence of the narrator's unreliability that is verifiable without recourse to actual biographical knowledge of Babel, and almost without recourse to extra-textual reality; although we are referred to a source outside the childhood cycle, the source is at least a text, and not just any text, but the eponym of one of the childhood tales themselves. By electing to "plant" evidence in an intertext, moreover, Babel calls our attention even more sharply to the theme of fiction and fictionality.

A different brand of fiction—the mythologization of the past—is represented in "Childhood: At Grandmother's" by the grandmother's stories. These have a quasi-folkloric quality, hinting at the influence of forces beyond human control, and casting their teller in the archetypal role of the scary old lady with a romantic girlhood only she can remember. Her first tale concerns a Jewish innkeeper suffering harassment at the hands of the town police commissioner. (The evidence of other childhood tales suggests that the details of Shoyl's biography coincide with those of the Jewish innkeeper, making Shoyl the third of Babel's patriarchal forebears to make a discursive
appearance in “Childhood: At Grandmother’s,” albeit not by name.) He takes his problem to the local rabbi, who tells him to go home; the police commissioner “will settle down.” When the innkeeper returns to his inn, he finds the commissioner’s corpse lying in the doorway.

No more cheery is Grandmother’s second tale, about a Polish count on whose revels she was wont to spy in her girlhood—until the Polish insurgency of 1861, when he was dragged out and publicly shot by Russian soldiers. Immediately thereafter, Grandmother reports, a messenger arrived bearing, too late, a reprieve for the count from the Tsar. This story, like her first one, purports to be not only true, but autobiographical: it is a tale of Grandmother’s first-hand brush with History. As such, it provides a kind of model for the young narrator’s retelling of his own contact—likewise as witness and chronicler, rather than active participant—with historical events, in “The Story of My Dovecote.”

THE “DOVECOTE” THAT SHOYL BUILT

“The Story of My Dovecote,” the first-published of the childhood tales, is the longest and most complex story in the cycle, and the one under whose title the whole cycle was theoretically to have been published. The notion that the whole childhood cycle is devoted, in some sense, to the story of Babel’s dovecote necessarily invests the dovecote

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39 “The Story of My Dovecote,” “In the Basement.”

40 See Babel’s letter to his mother of Oct. 14, 1931 (Sochineniia, vol. 1, 319), translated in The Lonely Years: “Before leaving I asked Katya to send you and Zhenya each a copy of the magazine Molodaya Gvardia. In it, I make my debut, after several years of silence, with a small extract from a book which will have the general title [budei ob”edinena obshchnim zaglaviem] of The Story of My Dovecote” (189).
with an intensified emblematic function, which in turn accentuates the importance of the story in which it appears. The dovecote itself does not materialize until halfway through the story (remaining an unrealized longing until then). It thus occupies, literally as well as figuratively, a central position in the narrative, despite the (typically Babelian) lack of ceremony with which it is introduced.

No less crucial than the image of the dovecote is the image of its maker, the protagonist’s great-uncle Shoyl. Shoyl is the beloved storyteller whose “inspired lies,” as Carden calls them, provide the model for Babel’s own historical-autobiographical narrative. His last reported act before dying in the pogrom of October 20, 1905, is the fashioning of his grand-nephew’s longed-for dovecote. The specificity about dates—Odessa’s most notorious pogrom did indeed rage from October 19-22, 1905—is a slyly historiographic gesture on Babel’s part, designed presumably to help his readers to their unfounded faith in his veracity. The making of the dovecote becomes a metaphor for the creation of Shoyl’s marvelous stories, which are likewise tailored to satisfy the desires of his eager young listener. Shoyl’s stories constitute, in turn, a figuration of Babel’s own; thus, the poetics of the whole childhood cycle is encoded in the image of the dovecote.

In “The Story of My Dovecote,” written some ten years after “Childhood: At Grandmother’s,” the anatomy of fiction and other counterfactual discourses (including lies) is explored still more minutely. The very title is a lie, advertising a narrative focus on the dovecote only to digress from it until the story is half over, when the dovecote

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41 Carden, 169.
makes a belated appearance only to be immediately eclipsed by an event of far greater magnitude: the pogrom in which the narrator’s doves, and more importantly his great-uncle Shoyl, are brutally killed. The narrator himself seems to feel no obligation to deliver the story promised by the title, remarking instead at this halfway point: “The story about which I am telling you, that is, my admittance to the first class of the Gymnasium, took place in autumn 1905.”

This comment, apparently designed to help us readers get our bearings, has a radically different effect: it destabilizes the reading process on which we have embarked, first by announcing that the story we are getting is not the promised “story of my dovecote,” but another one altogether (the story of “my admittance”); and second, by disrupting what earlier I called “the ordinary readerly activity” of ascribing a provisional reality to the events of the story. For the narrator’s turn of phrase—“The story about which...” (istoriia, o kotoroi ia rasskazyvaiu)—suggests that the events constitute a “story” independently of his decision to relate them; their “storyness” is posited not as an effect of the telling, but as a quality intrinsic to the events themselves. By referring to his material as if it were a plot rather than a reminiscence, the narrator seems to assert his own fictionality, wriggling out of the reader’s grasp and leaving only the deceptively historical “autumn 1905” behind.

The events of the story “about which” we are being told are straightforward enough. The protagonist, who longs for a dovecote, is promised one as a reward (by, of course, his father) if he succeeds at the entrance exams for the local Gymnasium. Overcome with anxiety, he nonetheless passes with flying colors—twice, for he is

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42 My translation.
cheated of his triumph the first time by the foul play of a fellow student's equally ambitious, but wealthier, Jewish father. (In a typical Babelian move, this minor injustice is played up at the expense of the greater one—the *numerus clausus*, or Jewish quota, which forced the Jewish students into competition with one another.) The protagonist's eventual admittance to the *Gymnasium* is an occasion for great family celebration. Soon thereafter, the boy sets out, despite ominous local stirrings, to buy the long-awaited doves; while he is at the market, the pogrom reaches full force, and when he arrives home—the unfortunate doves having been dashed against his forehead by an enraged cripple—it is to a house devoid of inhabitants, save for the defiled corpse of his great-uncle Shoyl, which the yardsman Kuzma is tending. Kuzma explains the situation to the boy and takes him to his parents, who have sought shelter at a neighbor's house.

This turn of events is horrifying, and on one level it is the sheer impact of the unexpectedly bloody conclusion to the narrator's innocent quest for, of all things, a dovecote—than which no image could be more evocative of peaceful coexistence—that drives the story. On another level, though, the story is "about" something entirely different: counterfactual discourse, in all its glorious variety. Abstracted from its violent context, the story reads as a veritable catalogue of unreliable speech-acts, beginning with the father's promise to buy the doves—a statement whose truth-value cannot be judged until later, at which point it rapidly becomes irrelevant in the light of grimmer events—and continues with his empty threats against Khariton Efrussi, the father of his son's rival. At his second entrance exam, the young protagonist responds to a question about Peter the Great by declaiming Pushkin verses—despite the fact that he has also memorized the relevant section from his history textbook. His gratuitous
substitution of *story* for *history* earns him a perfect score on the exam, an honor he immediately describes as “unattainable,” despite having just attained it. Flushed with success, he runs home to tell his father, who, he says, “believed my story without hesitation”: a highly suspect remark, for his father’s willing belief could only be worth mentioning if it were unusual, and yet we know “Babel’s” father to be notably “trusting.” If his paradigmatic credulity is routinely strained by his son’s stories, there must be some reason. Could it be that young Babel has been caught lying before?

The catalogue is interrupted by the narrator’s description of his crazy forebears, to which we shall return shortly. It resumes with a description of the ball Babel’s father gives in celebration of his success, which is attended by a number of agricultural-machinery salesmen. These are studiously avoided by the rest of the guests, for those salesmen would sell machines to anyone. The peasants and landowners were afraid of them, one couldn’t get away from them without buying something.

In this case, language not only distorts, but actually alters reality: the commercial rhetoric of the salesmen, the inverse of Babel *père*’s imprecations (which threaten an impact on reality that never materializes), creates a “truth” that apparently demands credence, and thus substantiates itself. The word becomes deed. These irresistible sales pitches, which terrorize “the peasants [*mužiki*] and landowners,” are an ironic precursor of the anti-Semitic invective used by Katyusha (wife of Makharenko, the cripple) later on in the story, whose “truth,” similarly, is perlocutionary: as she makes the statement, “Their seed must be destroyed,” those same “peasants and landowners” are out on the streets doing their best to ensure that very thing.

Celebrating alongside the salesmen at the ball is the venerable “Monsieur”
Liberman (his moniker itself paradoxical, or at least heterodox), who toasts the triumphant proto-*Gymnastas* in ancient Hebrew. The inflated rhetoric of his toast, in which its honoree’s academic accomplishments are compared to David’s victory over Goliath, represents still another way in which truth may be distorted via language. Liberman’s magniloquence, too, has its ironic counterpart later in the text: the pompously euphemistic announcement, by a felt-booted stranger at the hunter’s market, of the pogrom: “In town the Jerusalem gentlefolk are receiving a constitution.” The same stranger breaks the news of Shoyl’s murder: “On Rybnaya they have hosted [ugostili, a nice irony whose edge is lost in English] old man Babel to death.” Poor Shoyl, so recently an exuberant guest at the Babels’ ball—as the circumlocution reminds us—is now enjoying a grimmer feast.

Against this background of discursive distortions, the Babel men are singled out for their particular susceptibility to fiction, both at the reception level and at the transmission level. Seemingly addicted—as we shall see—to fabrication and falsification, they are also criticized for their naive credulity. The narrator’s description of his father in “The Story of My Dovecote” echoes the grandmother’s advice in “Childhood: At Grandmother’s”: “my father was [too] trusting of people; he offended them with the raptures of first love; people could not forgive him this and were always deceiving him.” And his father’s gullibility is nothing out of the ordinary in the Babel family: “All the men of our breed were trusting of people and quick to unconsidered action.” The responsibility of resisting this wholesale confusion of word with deed falls

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43 My translation.
to the women of the family, as the grandmother in "Childhood: At Grandmother's" and 
the mother in "The Story of My Dovecote" both struggle, against the prevailing winds, 
to talk some sense into the newest generation of Babel manhood.

Having invoked his heritage of delusion, Babel goes on to establish his pedigree 
as a falsifier. We have already been treated to his father's penchant for unreliable 
predictions, in the form of threats and promises. Now it transpires that discursive 
unreliability is a trait common to the Babel men: the narrator's Grandfather Levi-
Itskhok, formerly a rabbi in Belaia Tserkov', is said to have been accused of blasphemy 
and/or forgery—both forms of "falsification"—and banished; his great-uncle Shoyl 
tells "lying stories" about his ostensibly adventurous past.

In the Babelian universe of fictions and falsifications, Shoyl's command 
particular attention, for they are unforgettable: the narrator comments, "Nowadays I 
know that Shoyl was merely an old ignoramus and a naive liar, but I have not forgotten 
his stories, for they were very good." It does not take much effort to see in Shoyl a 
figure for Babel (the real Babel) himself: a storyteller who makes a virtue of the 
congenital Babelian affinity for fabrication; who tells autobiographical fibs in order to 
gratify his audience; and whose chief creative act, in the context of this story, is the 
making of a "Dovecote."

We know that Shoyl's stories are lies because the narrator says so:

Shoyl differed from ordinary people...by virtue of the mendacious stories 
he used to tell about the Polish uprising of 1861. In the old days Shoyl 
had been an innkeeper in Skvira; he had seen Nicholas I's soldiers shoot

\[44\] Blasphemy in "The Story of My Dovecote," forgery in "In the Basement"—although the two 
accusations are by no means incompatible.
Count Godlewska and the other Polish insurgents. On the other hand, perhaps he had not. (32)

Shoyl’s credentials as a liar are thus firmly asserted from the outset; but the attentive reader will have noticed something fishy about all of this (and it’s not just the odor of Shoyl’s fishmonger-hands). The fact is that Shoyl’s stories about the uprising are corroborated by the grandmother—who, we may deduce, is Shoyl’s sister—in “Childhood: At Grandmother’s,” a story written a decade earlier:

When I was a girl the Poles rose up in rebellion. Near us there was a Polish count’s manor. The tsar himself came to see the count [Godlewska]. Then there was the uprising. Soldiers came and dragged him out to the square. We all stood around and wept. The soldiers dug a pit. They wanted to blindfold the old man. He said, “I don’t need one;” stood facing the soldiers and ordered, “Fire!”

...As they were beginning to bury him, a messenger arrived in haste. He had brought a reprieve from the tsar. (26)

The other claim of Shoyl’s to which the narrator alludes—that he had been an innkeeper in Skvira—is also intertextually corroborated, in “In the Basement,” the fourth of the childhood tales, where we learn that before taking up his controversial career as a rabbi in Belaia Tserkov’, Babel’s Grandfather Levi-Itsikhok had also lived in Skvira. There seems no reason to doubt that his brother-in-law Shoyl did too, or that Shoyl was, as he says, an innkeeper; and if we accept the latter claim, we must instantly become aware of the resonance with the “Childhood: At Grandmother’s” grandmother’s other story about the “olden days”:

Long ago, many years past, a certain Jew had run an inn....The police commissioner came and harassed him. He began to find life difficult. He went to see the tsadik and said, “Rebbe, the police commissioner is vexing me to death. Intercede for me with God.” “Go in peace,” the tsadik said to him. “The police commissioner will settle down.” The Jew went away. In the doorway of his inn he found the police commissioner. The latter lay dead with a purple, swollen face. (25)
If the long-ago innkeeper was actually Shoyl (an assumption less far-fetched than it might seem, given the “The Story of My Dovecote” narrator’s hints that Shoyl too told this story), we can begin to discern patterns in Shoyl’s personal narrative that will come to grisly fruition in “The Story of My Dovecote,” when he enters the text as a physical character (rather than just an allusion). The familiar structure of the innkeeper story, reminiscent of the fairytale (naturalized into the Russian canon by Pushkin) about the golden fish who grants the fisherman a series of wishes, leaves us with the impression that the Jew in this story used his wish—granted here not by a supernatural fish but by the holy tsadik—to kill the unfortunate police commissioner. If the Jew in question was actually Shoyl, then Shoyl’s murder (on “Fish Street,” no less) may be read as poetic justice, providing a kind of ultimate narrative closure.

There are echoes of Shoyl’s death, too, in the story of Count Godlewski’s execution. Like the Count, Shoyl, a non-Russian, meets his death at the hands of a hostile Russian assembly, and with fortitude (albeit not with the count’s quiet dignity). The soldiers’ offer of a blindfold is reflected in the Russian yardsman Kuz’ma’s proposal to cover Shoyl’s eyes, after his death, with coins. And, like the count, Shoyl dies untimely: the one person who could reprieve him—Babel, who is writing the story—arrives, in the person of his narrator-protagonist, too late. The fact that Shoyl proceeds, ultimately, to “live out” his stories, lends them additional validity; though the narrator initially presents them as implausible, they acquire the stamp of authenticity by virtue of their subsequent enactment—or to put it more succinctly, they “come true.”

So far, my analysis has presumed Grandmother’s stories themselves to be “true”
(if only within the cosmos of the stories themselves). In fact, however, their credibility remains likewise in question. First, they are literally "grandmother tales," a term which in Yiddish (bobe-mayse) refers, like the English "old wives' tales," to preposterous claims, stories one ought not to believe.\textsuperscript{45} It is easy to imagine that Babel, writing from an Eastern European Jewish background, intended Grandmother's stories to be read in the context of this idiom, and thus, in their very essence, to undermine their own credibility. Moreover, the stylized, folktale-like quality of the two stories that are quoted at length casts further doubt on their authenticity as personal reminiscences.

Conversely, however, the details of these particular "grandmother tales" are borne out by references in "In the Basement" and "Awakening," as well as by points of concurrence with Shoyl's stories in "The Story of my Dovecote." Moreover, unlike Shoyl, Grandmother is not intrinsically suspect, for the Babel women, in contradistinction to their men, are not explicitly depicted either as liars or as gulls. In fact, as I noted above, their peculiar clarity of vision is stressed throughout the childhood tales. If Grandmother's corroboration does not make Shoyl's stories incontestably true, it does at least mean that they are not incontestably false. Thus, the reader initially inclined to doubt the veracity of the stories must, on further reflection, doubt their mendacity—an attitude requiring a certain amount of mental contortionism.

This is where it gets tricky. If Shoyl's credibility is bolstered by his sister's testimony, the narrator's is commensurately undermined (since it is through his

\textsuperscript{45} Curiously, while the term \textit{bobe-mayse} (meaning a fanciful story) has become associated with grandmothers (Yidd. \textit{bobe}), this conventional translation is etymologically incorrect. Originally spelt \textit{bove-mayse}, the word properly referred to the sixteenth-century Yiddish romance the \textit{Bove-Bukh}, a
testimony that Shoyl’s credibility is compromised to begin with). We can classify the narrator’s untruthful designation of Shoyl’s stories as “false,” along with the surprise he expresses earlier in the story at being so readily believed by his father, as evidence of his unreliability. On the other hand, to accuse Shoyl of telling the truth is to undermine the narrator’s carefully established “pedigree” as a liar, and thus to discredite the notion that he is unreliable. Moreover, inasmuch as Shoyl may be read as a representative of the author in the text, Babel’s obfuscation of the status of Shoyl’s stories signals the ambiguous status of his own authorial project.

And so we find ourselves at an impasse: the more we scrutinize Babel the narrator, the more he changes shape before our eyes, so that finally we are at a loss to say whether or not we should believe him. Babel’s ingenious layering of clues that successively authenticate and discredit his narrative creates something akin to the “Cretan paradox”: if the narrator is telling the truth, then he must be lying, and vice versa. Although the narrative seems to incorporate Riffaterrian gestures toward its fictional “intentions,” centering upon the figure of Shoyl, as these signals are transformed from figures of fictionality or falsehood to figures of potential authenticity, they lose their function of “remind[ing] the reader that the tale he is being told is imaginary,” weakening the stories’ self-identification as fiction and making them—paradoxically—not more true, but more mendacious. In short, Babel uses these very gestures to do precisely what Riffaterre proscribes: he makes a genre of a lie.

As I indicated earlier, however, the point of Shoyl’s stories (as the narrator

process of folk etymology converted the term to bobe-mayse, or grandmother’s tale. See the “Philologos” column of the Yiddish Forward (English edition), New York, October 18, 2002.
insists) is not that they are true, or for that matter false, but that they are good. Time and again in the childhood cycle we see the narrator address the distinction between good stories and bad: in “Childhood: At Grandmother’s,” he promises to tell us (“another time”) the story of the friendship between his grandmother and her dog, because “it is a very good, touching and tender story.” Shortly thereafter, he presumes to “improve upon” a venerable intertext, Turgenev’s First Love (a narrative, moreover, that places particular emphasis on the work done by its own narrator to make it “good”) by transferring the site of a whip-lashing from the heroine’s arm to her cheek. This rather saucy revision presages a similar move that Babel will make in “The Story of My Dovecote,” improving upon another intertext: Alexander Kuprin’s “Gambrinus.”

“DOVECOTE” AND ODESSAN INTERTEXTUALITY

“Gambrinus,” Kuprin’s part-homage to, part-indictment of the atmosphere of pre-Revolutionary Odessa, is an important part of the “Odessa text” already extant when the Odessans made their first forays into literature, and the role this story plays in works by the Odessans makes an interesting case study in their manipulation of that city-text. Kuprin’s story centers on a Jewish fiddler named Sashka, entertainer-in-residence at the Gambrinus tavern. Sashka, an extraordinarily resilient character, survives the rowdy crowd at the tavern, the occasional anti-Semitic barb from a new customer, the Russo-Japanese War (into which he is conscripted, despite being clearly over age), a POW camp, a pogrom, a brawl, and an unwarranted arrest that leads to the mangling of his left arm. Like Shoyl, he is ebullient under fire; unlike Shoyl, he seems indestructible in body in well as in spirit. His little dog, Snowdrop, is not so fortunate; she sticks
faithfully to his side until—like Babel’s doves—she falls victim, as his surrogate, to the anti-Semitic violence that rages in the city. This incident, set during the same pogrom as “The Story of My Dovecote,” October 1905, is particularly interesting as an apparent precursor to the one Babel depicts:

He [a stonemason, thwarted from killing Sashka outright] simpered like an idiot, spat, and wiped his nose on his sleeve. But suddenly he noticed a nervous little white dog that snuggled up to Sashka, trembling. He stooped down quickly, grabbed it by the hind legs, lifted it high, dashed its head against the paving stones, and started to run. Sashka stared after him in silence. The man was running along capless, his body bent forward and arms stretched out, his mouth gaping and eyes round and white with madness.

Snowdrop’s brains were scattered over Sashka’s boots. He wiped them off with his handkerchief.\(^{46}\)

Compare the similar scene in “The Story of My Dovecote”:

With a fat hand the cripple turned the [bag of] doves upside down and pulled out a cherry-coloured female. Its feet thrown back, the bird lay in the palm of his hand.

“Doves,” said Makharenko and, his wheels squeaking, approached me. “Doves,” he repeated, like an inevitable echo, and struck me on the cheek.

He struck me a swinging blow, his hand now clenched; the dove cracked on my temple, Katyusha’s wadded posterior 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. Soft dove guts crept over my forehead, and I closed a last unstuck eye so as not to see the world that was spreading out before me. (36)

Babel’s version of this structurally similar scenario uses the symbolic potentials of its constituent elements more efficiently: the substitution of doves (the traditional symbol of peace and, in the Noah story, of an end rather than an introduction to hardship) for

\(^{46}\) Kuprin, A. I., Granatovyj braslet. Povesti i rasskazy (na angliiskom yazyke), trans. Stepan Apresyan (Moscow: Progress, 1982), 275.
Sashka’s pet dog ratchets up the tension between the action (violence) and its object (a peace harbinger). Moreover, the elements are more parsimoniously deployed. The narrator and protagonist (and, ostensibly, the author) are the same; the symbolic victim of the murder (Sashka, in the Kuprin story) is also a physical victim; the surrogate victim, or sacrificial animal, is also a weapon; the superfluous paving stones are eliminated; altogether, the number of nouns involved in the attack is reduced from five (assailant, weapon, surrogate victim, symbolic victim, narrator) to three (assailant, weapon/surrogate victim, symbolic victim/narrator).

The identities of the assailant and the symbolic victim also contribute to the immediacy of Babel’s drama: the victim, explicitly identified with Babel himself, becomes our direct link to the experience of anti-Jewish violence, and the fact that he is a (future) writer, rather than a fiddler, makes the attack on him implicitly an attack on the very fabric of the text we are reading. Meanwhile, the man shattering Peace upon the face of Literature is no unmotivated thug, but a figure of helplessness in his own right; a cripple, he is too weak to participate in the truly murderous violence taking place downtown, which both supplies his motivation (a frustrated lust for blood and pillage) and underscores the pathos of the scene. Finally, the oozing cerebral matter is moved from the protagonist’s boots—the place normally occupied by dust—to his face, where it becomes a virtual surrogate both for the protagonist’s blood (trickling from his temple) and for his tears (obscuring his vision, flowing down his cheeks).

It should be noted that one of the few things to remain unchanged about this passage between Kuprin’s story and Babel’s is the status of the Jew as victim. To be sure, historical accuracy would seem to demand it, but we have seen that Babel is no
slave to historical accuracy—and Jewish history could in any event have provided other plots for Babel to pursue. In this story, far from presenting Russian literature with a new, powerful Jewish type, Babel hews close to the traditional imagery of the Jew as a “man of contemplation” who responds helplessly to an unprovoked onslaught from a “man of action.” However, unlike Kuprin’s Sashka or Chekhov’s Rothschild—both downtrodden fiddlers, not fledgling authors—the Jewish protagonist of “The Story of My Dovcote” is able to verbalize his pain. Words, not music, are his art and his preferred medium of expression; words are his power. Where Sashka and Rothschild are largely limited to a wordless form of expression that must be mediated for us by a remote narrator, the “Story of My Dovcote” protagonist controls his own narrative; if he cannot make his encounter with the 1905 pogrom a better experience, he can at least make it a better story. Under attack by *fabula*, Babel fights back with *sizhet*.

By writing “himself” (i.e., his autobiographical protagonist) into the Sashka role, Babel rewrites not only a classic text of the “small, bent, weak, and pathetic” Jew genre, but a classic text of the Odessa canon to boot. Konstantin Paustovsky—who, along with Babel, was one of the Odessa school’s most devoted mythologizers—offers his own revision of the same Kuprin story in his 1958 memoir, *A Time of Great Expectations* [Vremia bol’shikh ozhidanii]. Like Babel, Paustovsky (who uses his memoir to insert himself firmly into the canon of the Odessa School and its lore) sets out to dissolve the boundary between “real” and “fictional” events:

And so one day a death announcement was printed in the “Odessa News” for one Aaron Moiseevich Goldstein. It seems to me that that

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47 Gabriella Safran, “Isaak Babel’s El’ia Isaakovich as a New Jewish Type,” 254.
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 reread “Gambrinus.” Everything in that story was as precise as an official report, and at the same time the story was humane to the point of tears and as picturesque as a summer evening on Deribasovskaya.... Evidently, the noble sensitivity and humanity of Kuprin himself had imparted to this story the characteristics of great art.

I could hardly believe that Sashka the Musician, who had been for me since childhood a literary hero, had really lived just next door, in the garret of an old Odessa house.

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.48

This passage constitutes nothing less than a conversion narrative: from his initial assumptions that “all literary heroes were made up” and “[l]ife and literature never flowed into each other,” the narrator travels to a new understanding of the fluid relationship between life and art; an 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, Alexander Kuprin. This journey, from the complete separation of “life” and “literature” to their complete integration, represents in microcosm the conversion undergone by Paustovsky in A Time of Great Expectations—a conversion catalysed by the interpenetration of “life” and “literature” practised by Babel.

48 K. Paustovskii, Vremia bol’shikh ozhidanii (Odessa: Izd. “Maiak,” 1977), 149. All translations from this text are my own.
A Time of Great Expectations, like Babel’s childhood tales, narrates Paustovsky’s first-hand experience of events in Odessa during a historic epoch (in this case, 1920-21), a setting that allows him to introduce Babel as a main character and to cement in the reader’s mind the three-way connection among Babel, Odessa, and Paustovsky himself. As a result, it is largely on the strength of this work that Paustovsky is frequently included among the Odessa School. But, again like Babel’s stories, A Time of Great Expectations is more than just a document of Paustovsky’s life in Odessa: it simultaneously describes and enacts the author’s conversion to “Odessanism,” which in turn serves to justify his induction into the Odessa school of writers, presided over both implicitly (in the choice of genre and form) and explicitly (in long, “verbatim” speeches) by Babel, who appears as a leading character in Paustovsky’s narrative. Paustovsky has, in a sense, picked up the narrative mediation of Babel where Babel himself left off; he is again transformed into “Babel,” a fictional persona, but seen this time from the point of view of a narrator who reveres and longs to emulate him. It seems fitting that Paustovsky uses this fictional persona—as Babel himself did—as a means to insinuate Odessan discourse, and himself along with it, into the Russian canon.

Interestingly, Paustovsky’s text also contains an oblique allusion to Babel’s revision of Kuprin. In one of the many conversations that Paustovsky quotes verbatim (despite a chronological gap of some 37 years between the conversation and its subsequent narration), Babel remarks: “There are writers, even good ones, who scatter

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49 See, e.g., Feld, “The Odessa School of Writers,” 30.
paragraphs and punctuation marks all over the place...Kuprin himself wrote such prose." With this quotation, Paustovsky contrives to hint both at Babel’s role in the Odessa discourse, and at his own. Babel, in “improving upon” Kuprin’s chapter in the Odessa text, reappropriates that text—originally based on the exoticist objectification of Odessa by mainstream Russians—as a springboard from which Odessan writers can stage a reverse invasion of the Russian canon. Whereas Babel’s revision of Kuprin unites the roles of protagonist and author (casting Babel himself as both), Paustovsky inserts himself into Kuprin’s narrative as eyewitness and epilogist—a dual title that also describes Paustovsky’s *modus operandi* with respect to Babel in *A Time of Great Expectations*.

In Chapter Three, I shall return to the question of Paustovsky’s unilateral “collaboration” with Babel on the Odessa discourse, noting the extent to which Paustovsky’s life text depends on Babel’s, and in particular how it mirrors Babel’s concern with the boundaries between “good” and “bad” storytelling—on the ethical as well as on the aesthetic plane. First, however, I shall examine the ways in which the latter concern makes itself felt in the rest of Babel’s childhood tales.

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CHAPTER THREE

BABEL’S BILDUNGSROMAN AND THE ODESSA SCHOOL

GOOD STORY, BAD STORY

The questions Babel raises in “Childhood” and “Dovecote” about the aesthetic qualities, epistemological status, and ethical boundaries of fiction remain on center stage in the three stories that complete the childhood cycle: “First Love” [Pervaia liubov'], “In the Basement” [V podval'e], and “Awakening” [Probuzhdenie]. In these stories, fiction and falsehood, fantasy and outright delusion, are explored in an array of guises and on various narrative levels, both formal and thematic. As in “Childhood” and “Dovecote,” the genre and mode of the stories, their rhetoric, characters, and action, all serve to focus the reader’s attention upon the nature and teleology of fiction itself. If, as Alice Stone Nakhimovsky has asserted, the stories recount “a past that has an overriding psychological validity, even if the details are made up,”¹ that psychological validity is grounded at least partly in the childhood narrator’s ongoing exploration of what details to make up, why, and how. The fruits of that exploration are woven into the narratives of the remaining stories in a variety of ways.

“First Love,” the third story in the childhood cycle, takes its title from a narrative (Turgenev’s eponymous novella) certified as “good” both by Babel’s narrator in “Childhood,” and by Turgenev’s narrator in the original, which itself features—surely not coincidentally—a frame narrative explaining how the story, potentially

¹ Alice Stone Nakhimovsky, Russian-Jewish Literature and Identity (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992), 102.
“bad,” came to be a “good” one:

“My first love really does belong among the not exactly usual ones,” answered Vladimir Petrovich with a slight hesitancy. [...] “Ah!” said the host and Sergey Nikolaevich simultaneously. “So much the better... Go on then, tell us.” “If you like... or no, I won’t start telling you, because I’m no good at telling things. [...] If you’ll allow me, I’ll write down everything I remember in an exercise book and then read it out to you.” The friends wouldn’t agree at first, but Vladimir Petrovich insisted. Two weeks later they gathered again and Vladimir Petrovich kept his promise.²

From here on, in Turgenev’s novella, the properly prepared Vladimir Petrovich becomes the narrator of his own autobiographical oddity. His prefatory fastidiousness is particularly interesting because perfectly gratuitous to the storyline; one might as well simply begin with the first-person narrative. But the frame narrative establishes that there is a difference between “good” and “bad” stories, and that the difference is located in their form, rather than their content: literary value is not immanent in the material, but is produced by the skill of the storyteller (exercised, not incidentally, in the act of writing the story down). We may assume that Vladimir Petrovich has successfully crafted a “good” story by adhering to these values; but what qualities mark a story as “good”? A possible criterion by which to judge literary value is offered later in the novella by Vladimir Petrovich’s First Love-object, Zinaida: “That’s why poetry’s so wonderful; it speaks to us of what doesn’t exist and of what’s not only better than what does exist, but even more like the truth.”³ This emancipation of “truth” from “reality” may be said to have struck a chord with Babel, who adopted it (as we have seen in the last chapter) as a cornerstone of his poetics.


³ Ibid., 170.
In “In the Basement,” the story that follows “First Love,” the recurring good story/bad story duality is played out by the juxtaposition of Babel (a gripping but mendacious storyteller) with classmate Mark Borgman (a conscientious but dull one). These two make quite the odd couple with their rival stories about Spinoza, through which, paradoxically, they become friends. Mark’s primary concern is for the veracity of his narrative; this stands him in poor stead once the audience-hungry Babel arrives on the scene. Whereas Mark’s Spinoza stories deal with the religious context of the philosopher’s biography, Babel regales his audience with embellished descriptions of what Spinoza got up to in his spare time. The two friends, pitting Spinoza’s (life)style against his substance, are in a sense waging a literary battle between content and form over the philosopher’s body;^4 unsurprisingly, Babel wins, although his triumph is confined to the literary (and emphatically not the academic or socioeconomic) arena.

In the fifth and final childhood tale, “Awakening,” the young storyteller receives a brisk schooling in naturalism; though he is at liberty to tell stories about “what doesn’t exist,” he evidently remains under some sort of obligation to make them, in the words of Turgenev’s Zinaida, “not only better than what does exist, but even more like the truth.” In order to accomplish this, the narrator discovers, he must improve his vocabulary; his stories lack verisimilitude because he does not know the words for “what does exist.” This lesson is imparted by a new father figure known as Nikitich, another “good” storyteller whose tales “of fish and animals” have his audience of Jewish children “dying of laughter,” and who takes the young Babel under his wing to

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^4 There are, of course, other dimensions to this rivalry, not directly related to my thesis; for example, the dueling biographies could be seen in the light of conflicting views among early twentieth-century European Jewry about how to utilize the history of Jewish thought for contemporary ideological ends.
teach him this final (for the childhood cycle) lesson.\textsuperscript{5}

THE TIES THAT BLIND

Among the themes unifying the stories of the childhood cycle are the issues of freedom and confinement, of perception, and of family that made their first appearance in “Childhood.” In my analysis of that story, I observed that the three dominant male Babel figures are introduced \textit{in absentia}: the narrator’s great-uncle Shoyl, father Manus, and grandfather Levi-Itskhok proceed to dominate, respectively, each of the three stories that follow. In “Awakening,” the fifth story of the cycle, the narrator finally turns to a father-figure outside—and forbidden by—his family, the proofreader Nikitich, whose guidance of and ambitions for the narrator stand in direct opposition to those set out by the latter’s father.

The narrator’s relationship to his father is problematic in the extreme, at least partly because his father represents his closest link to the troubled male bloodline of the Babel family. In an excised portion of “Dovecote,” the narrator says of his teacher, Karavaev, “This Karavaev was better than a father to me.”\textsuperscript{6} Karavaev’s defining trait, in the sketch of him that follows, becomes his ruddiness; he is thus imbued with the connotations of the red family of colors, associated by Babel with positive action, with the hearty physicality of the (literary-stereotypical) Russian peasantry, and by extension

\textsuperscript{5} Babel’, \textit{Sochinenia}, 174-5.

\textsuperscript{6} Like other excised portions of Babel’s stories, this sentence is present in the original published version of the story and in the 1979 Aliya collection (see Bibliography), but is omitted from most Soviet editions of Babel’s works, including the 2-volume 1990 \textit{Sochinenia}. It is possible that Babel himself made the excisions, but in most cases it seems more likely that Soviet censors did so.
with the liberating “crimson blindness” that comes over the protagonist when, during
his oral examinations, he takes flight from his paternally-induced anxiety into the verses
of Pushkin. The association of Karavaev with the “red” continuum of freedom,
blindness, and a kind of delirious autonomy leaves Babel’s father, by implication, to
represent its counterpart: the “yellow” continuum of unsparing visual clarity,
constriction and oppression, which for the narrator is inextricably linked to the domestic
realm, family and the indoors.

The foregoing brief summary sketches out the web of associations, generated by
“Childhood” and “Dovecote,” from which the reader approaches “First Love.” The
appearance, early in the latter story, of a paragraph recapitulating the events of
“Dovecote” provides us with an opportunity to look for evidence of Babel’s signature
technique of prevarication, the exaggeration of trivial details at the expense of
significant ones. A close reading of the passage reveals the by-now expected omission;
the narrator skips straight from

For five years out of the ten I had lived, I had dreamed about doves with all the power of my soul, and then, when I had bought them, Makarenko the cripple had smashed the doves on my temple
to:

Then Kuzma took me to the Rubtsovs’ (154/42).
The missing event is the child’s return home to the horrifying discovery of Shoyl’s
corpse. Turning to this scene in “Dovecote,” we find that it is the site of another, more
subtle omission:

“They gave our grandfather the chop, no-one else,” said Kuzma.
[...] “You should put some five-kopeck coins on his eyes...”
But back then, just ten years old, I did not know what dead people needed five-kopeck coins for (150-52, my translation).
The omission of “on their eyes” in the last sentence might appear less significant had not optical imagery proliferated to so noteworthy an extent throughout both “Dovecote” and “Childhood.” To make such frequent and prominent references to “eyes” and then suddenly to leave them out in a sentence where mention of them seems to be called for must occasion some readerly curiosity.

But to what end? In the universe of the childhood tales, images of eyes and visual perception become an extended metaphor—or, at least, analogy—for the act of narration. The metaphor works in counterpoint to the logical connection between seeing and telling forged by the narrator, who functions as the reader’s eyes and ears in the text (relaying information that, being fictional, cannot be experienced firsthand), and transforms the evidence of his own eyes into language for consumption by the reader. Babel, apparently at pains to level the playing field between visual mediation (“seeing is believing”) and narrative mediation (“don’t believe everything you read”), repeatedly makes reference to eyes and eyesight in his depictions of the various “tellers” who appear in the childhood tales, including himself. In “The Story of My Dovecote,” the narrator twice describes his mother as follows: “Mother was pale [...], she was experiencing fate [through my eyes]” (144, my translation; the phrase “through my eyes” is omitted the second time, thus receiving a peculiarly Babelian emphasis). The mother’s experience of her family’s destiny through “Babel’s” eyes parallels the reader’s experience of their destiny through Babel’s prose.

The mother’s use of her son as a quasi-narrator is mirrored by the narrator’s own attempt to use Kuzma in a similar capacity at the end of the same story:

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7 The McDuff translation here reads “...I did not know why dead people needed coins on their eyes” (40).
"Kuzma," I said in a whisper, "save us..."
And I went over to the yardkeeper, embraced his old crooked back with its one raised shoulder and saw grand-uncle from behind that dear back. Shoyl lay in the sawdust, his chest crushed, his beard turned up, its rough clogs worn on bare feet... (152/40, my emphasis)

The description of Shoyl's corpse (which, the reader belatedly realizes, has until now been withheld) follows; the implication is that the child cannot bring himself to experience Shoyl's corpse except "through the eyes" of another. Unable to confront the death of his former favorite narrator directly, he turns to Kuzma to fill the void left by the dead storyteller, and, by literally hiding behind Kuzma, places the latter in a quasi-narrative mediating role. Conversely, Kuzma's suggestion that coins be laid on the dead man's eyes (a Russian practice whose purpose is to hold the eyes closed), suggests an end to Shoyl's role both as a see-er and as a teller.

In "First Love," the opposition of outdoor to indoor space and the theme of visual perception are further integrated to produce a spatial figuration of objectivity and illusion. Whereas "Dovecote" catalogued various kinds of fabrications, crowned by Shoyl's "inspired lies," "First Love" explores another, equally important aspect of fiction: fantasy. Nakhimovsky characterizes the prevailing aesthetic of the story as "ironic and misplaced"; that sense of ironic mis- or displacement stems in part from the febrile, overimaginative quality of the narration. From the dragons on Galina's robe at the beginning of the story, to the narrator's extraordinary illness at the end, everything depicted in the story seems surreal, illusive.

The story opens with the narrator's description of his fantasies about Galina Rubtsova, the wife of the neighboring tax-collector in whose home the (fictional)
Babel’s father would not have had to kneel at a Cossack’s feet and beg that his store be spared, for the simple reason that Babel’s father did not own a store. He owned a warehouse, which was neither broken into nor plundered during the pogrom. I must add (and this may be a disillusionment to readers of “First Love”) that no member of the Babel family was red-headed, that my grandmother’s name was Fanny, not Rachel, nor would she ever have thought of addressing her husband in the terms used by the woman in the story; she was a modest, sensitive woman. It is, of course, not impossible that there was a charming girl...
named Galina who wore a Chinese peignoir, and who inflamed my father’s passions at the age of ten. But if she did exist, then my father was the only member of the family who had the privilege of knowing her.

From the narrator’s voyeuristic surveillance of this imaginary siren and her (possibly just as imaginary) husband, we are led into a one-paragraph summary of the events of “Dovecote” (to be examined in more detail presently), and thence into a description of the protagonist’s arrival at the Rubtsovs’ on the day of the pogrom. The bulk of the Rubtsovs’ domestic activity appears to take place in the “glass veranda” that “usurp[s] part of [the Babels’] land,” which has a destabilizing effect on the action of the story as a whole, for events that take place behind glass cannot help but take on, especially in this context, a certain aura of unreality. As a result, there is no truly stable narrative ground in “First Love”—hence its general atmosphere of delirium—but events glimpsed by the protagonist through a window remain the least anchored in “reality.”

Upon his arrival at the Rubtsovs’, the narrator finds the women—his mother and Galina, neatly embodying the archetypal feminine division of labor between Mary and Eve—within the glass veranda, in a “green rotunda” (the color green, especially prominent in “First Love,” is associated in Babel’s universe not with growing things but with death and decay).11 Women, in the fictional Babel family, are the pragmatic ones (see Chapter Two), and accordingly they occupy here the relatively stable territory of indoor space, while all around them are windows. Galina explains that the narrator’s father is wandering the streets outside, “upset,” and urges the boy to “call him home.” The boy looks out through the window at a scene that possesses an unmistakably imaginary quality:

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11 See Efraim Sicher, Style and Structure in the Prose of Isaac Babel’ (Columbua: Slavica, 1985), 47.
And through the window I saw the deserted street with an enormous sky above it and my red-haired father [ryzhego moego otets] walking along the roadway. He had no hat covering his lightly ruffled red [ryzhik] hair; his cotton shirt-front was turned askew and fastened by some button or other, but not the one it ought to have been fastened by.  

The adjective “ryzhii,” discredited by Nathalie Babel and emphasized by repetition, may be a reference to the “ryzhii toshchii zhid” of Chekhov’s “Rothschild’s Fiddle” (or, one imagines, to any number of Rothschild’s literary brethren), the quintessence of Russian literature’s assumptions about Jewish weakness, to which canon Babel is about to contribute.

Still watching through the window, the boy witnesses the famous scene of his father’s kneeling before the mounted Cossack, pleading for the salvation of his family store. The scene over, the father’s supplication refused, the boy sticks his head out of the window—into the imaginary realm—and calls to him:

Father turned around when he heard my voice.
“My little son,” he mouthed with inexpressible tenderness, and began to tremble with love for me. (156/45)

This moment is particularly poignant given that such tenderness from the normally authoritarian father—whose chief role in “Dovecote” and “Awakening” is to enforce his own ambitions for the narrator’s education—is apparently forthcoming only in the boy’s own imagination.

The father’s transition from the otherworld behind the window into the more certain territory of domestic space is accompanied by the onset of his son’s mysterious

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12 Babel, Sochinenia, 154-5; trans. McDuff, 43. Henceforth, when using the McDuff translation for quoted passages, I shall identify them in the text by two page numbers in parentheses; the first number will refer to the page number in the 1990 Sochinenia, the second to the MacDuff translation.

13 If, as I hypothesize, the field beyond the window is a spatial metaphor for the hinterland of fantasy whence Babel draws his fictional material, the error of those critics who interpret this incident literally is twofold: they not only falsely assume that events in the “autobiographical” stories are true, but also fail to distinguish between the realistic and imaginative fields operating within the story.
hiccupper disease, which afflicts him until the end of the story. His symptoms escalate into a (latterly heavily censored) bout of convulsions, a highly Freudian “swelling, pleasant to the touch” that rises from the boy’s throat, and copious quantities of green vomit.\textsuperscript{14} Experienced by the narrator as a rite of passage (“towards night I was no longer the lop-eared boy I had been all my life”), and as a demonstration of his mastery over Galina (“Fear was shaking the woman and making her writhe”), the illness has distinctly sexual overtones:\textsuperscript{15}

I snarled in triumph, in exhaustion, with the ultimate exertions of love. Thus did my illness begin. I was ten at the time. 

 [...] 

Now, when I remember those sad years, I find in them the beginning of the ailments that torment me, and the causes of my premature and dreadful decline. (159/48-9)

The “ailments” in question undoubtedly include the “unbridled fantasies” that “torment” the young voyeur earlier in the story, as well as the pangs of “first love” (which we must interpret, following the narrator’s use of the phrase in “Dovecote,” as a reference not only to the boy’s crush on Galina, but more globally to the self-destructive credulity of the Babel men) and the mysterious hiccupper illness, possibly a metaphor for puberty. It is tempting to see here also some prescience of the genuinely “premature and dreadful decline” suffered by Babel in the 1930s, as his output tapered off and the political landscape grew more treacherous. It is not impossible that even as early as

\textsuperscript{14} It is interesting, though perhaps not directly relevant, to note the similarity between the symptoms portrayed here by Babel and those of demonic possession, as depicted in William Friedkin’s 1973 B-grade horror film, The Exorcist. The sense that Babel’s narrator-protagonist has been somehow taken over by a force beyond his control—be it History, Ukrainian anti-Semitism, or sexual maturity—does hover over the narrative of “First Love.”

\textsuperscript{15} The “triumph” associated with these “ultimate exertions of love” that make Galina writhe with fear recalls, in an oddly twisted way, Reb Arye-Leib’s description of Benya Krik in “How It Was Done In Odessa” (“You can spend the night with a Russian woman, and the Russian woman will be satisfied...”). In Babel’s fiction, for a Jewish man to exert power over a Russian woman is both the ultimate triumph and, it seems, profoundly unnatural and disturbing.
1925, with *Red Cavalry* and the *Odessa Tales* behind him, Babel had some inkling of the difficulties he faced; Paustovsky’s anecdote about the 22 preliminary drafts of *Liubka the Cossack*, and Babel’s half-joking despair at his own perfectionism, is set in 1921. That anecdote, as so often in Paustovsky’s reminiscences of Babel, contains disconcerting echoes of Babel’s own stories, including a reference by Babel to the “mysterious disease” [*neponiatnyi nedug*] that afflicts him:

> “I age several years after every story.... I wrote somewhere that I am aging fast from asthma, from a mysterious disease that was installed in my weak body when I was just a child. All that is a lie! Writing even the smallest short story, I work on it like a navvy, as if I had to raze Everest to its foundations all on my own. Beginning work, I always think that I won’t have the strength for it. Sometimes I even weep from exhaustion. My blood vessels ache from this work. If some phrase or other won’t come out, a spasm grips my heart. And they so often won’t come out, these accursed phrases!”

By Paustovsky’s account, then, fiction itself (viewed by Paustovsky’s Babel not as an effortless “Mozartizing,” but as a punishing craft) constitutes Babel’s “illness,” a reading that is not inconsistent with the overtones of sexual transition associated with the disease of “First Love.” After all, for a Babel male, puberty means induction into the Babel family’s tortuous version of manhood, the province of fiction and delusion.

Curiously, the doctor who diagnoses Babel’s “nervous illness” in “First Love” emphasizes, in a passage censored by most Soviet editions, that the illness occurs “only in Jews and among Jews only in women.” This additional complication seems so gratuitous as to be completely inescrutable; it may perhaps be read, however, as a commentary on the narrator’s capacity to make the passage into manhood. That young

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17 McDuff, 49; this passage does not appear in the 1990 *Sochineniia*, but may be found in early editions of the story, including I. Babel’, *Istoriiia moei golubiatni* (Paris: Imprimerie scientifique et commerciale, 1927), 40.
Babel exhibits female symptoms suggests he is struggling, either to remain in the comparatively sane female hemisphere, or to escape it; the latter seems more likely, given the association of outdoor space with both fantasy and freedom. Increasingly, throughout the childhood tales, the narrator’s impulse is to escape from the tyranny of domestic expectations into fiction and fresh air—the world beyond the window.

COMPLETING THE CIRCLE—AND ESCAPING IT

In the fourth childhood tale, “In the Basement,” Babel returns both to the theme of confinement (with a title that cannot help but evoke the self-imposed cage of Dostoevsky’s narrator-chudak in “Notes from Underground”) and to a consideration of lying, which he links immediately to the practice of literature: the story opens, “I was an untruthful little boy. This came from reading” (179; my translation). Here Babel turns the concept of “book-learning” on its head, arguing that his character has learned from books not useful knowledge, but the art of yarn-spinning, which proves both a liability and an asset, especially at school. Through the rather naïve voice of his narrator, Babel appears to satirize the Platonic contention that “poetry....has a terrible power to corrupt even the best characters, with very few exceptions.”18 (We will see a further sly reference to this argument later in the story, when the narrator launches into a recital of precisely the kind of poetry most censured by Plato—dramatic verse, here represented by Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar.)19 In The Republic, Plato goes on to argue that “the only poetry that should be allowed in a state is hymns to the gods and paeans in praise

19 Plato, op. cit., 435; Babel, 183ff./55ff.
of good men,"\textsuperscript{20} a formula that, \textit{mutatis mutandis}, would be institutionalized by the
Soviet regime a few years later, in the form of Socialist Realism. This political subtext
cannot, of course, be discounted in reading Babel, who was (as his speech at the 1932
All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers indicates) acutely conscious of the burden placed
on writers by the institution of a state-mandated program for literature; here, though, it
is hard to say whether his conceit of the fiction-infected reader/narrator supports or
undermines the founding theses of Socialist Realism. On the one hand, the narrator’s
addiction to fiction appears to impair his ability to negotiate reality (whatever “reality,”
in these stories, may be said to mean); on the other, it is in this story that we really
observe the childhood narrator exploiting his imagination for the first time; he uses it,
literally, to win friends and influence people.

I have already discussed (in Chapter Two) the competing versions of Spinoza
rendered by the rival narrative philosophies of this narrator and his classmate Mark
Borgman, and the triumph (with a playground audience) of Babel’s inventions over
Borgman’s more sober testimony. It is worth noting that in the classroom, Babel both
suffers and profits from the exercise of his imagination:

That year we moved up to the third class. My transcript was covered
with three-minuses. I was so strange with my carryings-on that the
teachers, on reflection, could not bring themselves to give me twos (180;
my translation).

It is interesting to reflect on how the “five-plus” pupil of “The Story of My Dovecote”
has sunk to such new academic lows: is it the move from suburban Nikolayev to urban
Odessa (prompted, if the stories may be read as a coherent arc, by the 1905 pogroms); is
it the narrator’s inability, as he says, “at twelve years of age...to get along with truth in

\textsuperscript{20} Plato, \textit{op. cit.}, 437.
this world” (181/53); or is it that Pushkin verses, however inappositely declaimed, garner maximum acclaim, whereas the narrator’s own literary efforts are still only worth half as much? The narrator seems to invite a combination of the second and third explanations: on the one hand, his book-fueled fictionalizing is not an acceptable substitute for conventional academic performance, as represented by young Borgman; on the other, it might be an acceptable substitute if it were good enough—if, for example, the fictional Babel’s storytelling were equal in quality (or, perhaps, merely in canonicity) to Pushkin’s.

One thing is for certain: the narrator has traded in the extraordinary, desperate rote-learning—the “crimson blindness”—that served him so well in “The Story of My Dovecote” for a new academic, and narrative, strategy. Having gained a degree of mastery over the “unbridled” fantasy that plagued and delighted him in “First Love,” he now wields this fantasy in the service of “good” stories like those formerly told by Shoyl; in short, he has learned to lie for aesthetic effect. While the results may yet be mixed, we can perceive that slowly but surely, this narrator is gaining in skill.

This skill is not enough to overcome the real disparity in material circumstances between Babel and his new friend, the investment banker’s son Mark Borgman, although the narrator deploys all the invention at his disposal to bridge the gap, even furnishing his unrelievedly eccentric male relatives with new pasts that, he hopes, will the better equip them to bear comparison with the exotic, sumptuous lifestyle of the Anglicized investment banker’s family:

I told Mark that even though everything in our house was different, Grandfather Levi-Itzkhof and my uncle had travelled the world and had thousands of adventures. I described these adventures in order. My sense of the impossible instantly left me (181/52).
These stories represent another of the narrator’s attempts to use fiction to improve upon reality—to create what Turgenev’s Zinaida in *First Love* called “what’s not only better than what does exist but even more like the truth.” Even as the narrator admits that “the story about my uncle’s kindness and strength was a false one [lzhivye rasskazy—precisely the term used to describe Shoyl’s stories in ‘The Story of My Dovecote’]” (182/53), he goes on to note:

Conscientiously speaking, if one considered with one’s heart, this was the truth [pravda] and not a lie [lozh’], but on a first glance at the dirty and raucous Simon-Volf, this incomprehensible truth [istina] was impossible to perceive (182, my translation).

Whether Babel intends a subtle distinction between pravda and the more Church-Slavonic istina (perhaps something along the lines of “a truth” versus “The Truth”) is unclear, but like Shoyl’s “lzhivye rasskazy,” this one represents a case in which the narrator’s stated project seems to parallel (if not precisely coincide with) Babel’s own: an effort to tell stories that surpass reality as much in credibility as in invention.

Stories or no stories, the narrator eventually has to confront the incompatible facts of his situation: “the following day, little Borgman was coming [to visit]. Nothing what of what I had told him existed” (181/52). He engineers a fragile semblance of domestic tranquility by banishing his problematic male ancestors from the house for the day, but, inevitably, it erupts into a state of exuberant, absurd, and (for the narrator) exasperating Bedlam upon these inconsiderate relatives’ untimely return. A drunken Uncle Simon-Volf appears with kitschy animal-themed furniture—perhaps a travesty of the mania for bringing home live animals shown by other literary characters, such as Gogol’s Nozdrev in *Dead Souls*. In response, Grandfather Levi-Itzhkhok, eluding his
minders, “cre[eps] up to the window and beg[ins] to saw away on his violin, probably so that Simon-Volf’s soul language should not be audible to passers-by” (185/58)—certainly a travesty of the literary and historical stereotype of the Jewish fiddler (Chekhov’s Rothschild; Kuprin’s Sashka; real-life Odessans Jascha Heifetz and David Oistrakh, to name a few) which is also satirized in “Childhood: at Grandmother’s” and “In the Basement.” That Grandfather is located just outside the window again hints at his status as an imaginary figment; Uncle Simon-Volf, too, though he eventually enters the house, is first spotted, in all his vulgar glory, “through the window” (v okne, 184).

The disintegration of the ersatz Babel ménage is heralded by an episode of declamatory berserkism on the part of the narrator that recalls the “crimson blindness” of the oral exam scene in “The Story of My Dovecote.” Initially just reciting his favorite Shakespeare speech for his friend, he once again finds himself fleeing from unbearable anxiety into the realm of poetry. As he does so, the dramatic tension escalates: “I attained a happy state of mind, assumed a pose and began to declaim the lines of poetry I loved more than anything else in life”; “Before my eyes, in the mist of the universe, hung Brutus’s face”; “[I]n order to suppress my anxiety, I began to shout in Anthony’s words”; “I tried to shout down all the evil of the world....I was dead, and I was shouting. A wheezing rose up from the bottom of my existence” (183-85/55-56).

The beloved lines in which the narrator loses himself are those of Mark Anthony’s “Friends, Romans, countrymen” speech from Julius Caesar, which has probably earned the young Babel’s favor by virtue of its status as the most literary of lies—“literary” because it bears the imprimatur of Shakespeare, and a “lie” for reasons that Babel will soon bring to our attention. Babel highlights the mendacity of the
speech by interrupting it, for narratorial commentary, after the first two (in Russian, four) lines:

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;
I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.

Thus does Anthony begin his performance. I choked and pressed my hands to my chest.

He was my friend, faithful and just to me.... (183/55)

By breaking the speech where he does, Babel draws our attention to the fact that Anthony, having disclaimed any intent to praise Caesar, immediately sets about praising him. Like Shoyl in “The Story of My Dovecote” (and later, like Guy de Maupassant in the eponymous story), Anthony provides a possible model for the young narrator, and for Babel himself: he is a teller of lies that end up being worth more than the truth.

*   *   *   *   *

The last of the childhood tales, “Awakening,” contains echoes of all four of its predecessors; it also completes the young storyteller’s progress towards a working control of his imaginative powers, the exercise of which is posited as a solution to the insupportable constriction that dominated the atmosphere of “Childhood. At Grandmother’s.” In “Awakening,” we see the act of writing reach its full potential as an act of freedom: the circle is completed (the narrator acquires the last skill he needs to become a writer) and broken (the narrator escapes the confinement of his crazy family and learns about the outside world).

The opening of “Awakening” carries strong reminders of “Childhood. At Grandmother’s”: a similar atmosphere of imprisonment is felt as the ambitious and authoritarian father is depicted as a hapless tyrant who forces his unmusical son to learn to play the violin. The young narrator pretends to practise, but instead reads the works
of Dumas and (again) Turgenev while going through the motions of practising. When not chained to his music-stand, he is telling or writing stories, consciously following in the footsteps of his brilliant, insane, and graphomaniac grandfather—who is also, as we have witnessed in “In the Basement,” a violinist of dubious gifts.

The use of literature as a means of escape leads (or appears to lead; again, we must be wary of the narrative’s apparent adherence to neo-Platonic propositions about the effects of literature on behavior, especially given the Soviet legislation of similar propositions, and the difficulties these restrictions apparently caused for Babel) to the protagonist’s surreptitious abandonment of his musical education and his adoption of new mentor figures to supplant the violin teacher: first the English pipe-maker and seaman, Mister Trottyburn [Trottibern], and then the athletic and pragmatic storyteller, Yefim Nikitich Smolich. It is this “Nikitich” who will undertake the final step in the child’s education as a writer: the introduction of verisimilitude. The fictional Babel family has taught its latest offshoot to generate fantasies about “what doesn’t exist,” and to articulate these as fictions; through an apprenticeship with Nikitch, the boy will learn how to make his new fictions as viable, or “real,” as real life.

To accomplish this, the narrator-protagonist must learn how the natural world works, information he portrays as being inaccessible from within the indoor world of desks, bookshelves and music stands that has been prescribed for him, and in which the outdoors functions only as a corridor between worthy indoor destinations. His “escape” from this oppressive domestic sphere is thus directly linked to his achievement of “realistic,” or verisimilar, prose, metaphorically represented by the task of learning to swim (a lesson also to be taught by the redoubtable Nikitich). In pursuit of these
parallel goals, young Babel strays from the straight and narrow path leading to his violin teacher's studio, and "finds himself" instead at the waterfront; "Thus," he reports, "did my liberation begin" (173/61).

To the truanting boy, things—the "forbidden" things associated with his escape to the outdoors—appear as words: "The pipes of the Lincoln master [Trottyburn] breathed poetry. Into each one of them had been inserted an idea, a drop of eternity" (174/62). Trottyburn, evoking the age-old parallel between creation and procreation (also a favorite of Plato's, but hardly exclusive to him), refers to the pipes as "children"; he insists to the real children following him around, "children must be made by one's own hand" (174/62). Each of these "children," "breathing poetry," containing "an idea, a drop of eternity," represents to the young Babel a sememe—the "inchoate or future text" contained within any single word, which, according to Michael Riffaterre's study of the mechanics of verisimilitude, holds the key to creating verisimilar (or "lifelike") narrative:

"[T]he nuclear word can at any time generate a story simply by transforming its implicit semes into words and letting them be organized by narrative structures....Any [such] agreement between the narrative model and the sememic model will produce...an ironclad verisimilitude."

In other words, realism is produced by the cooperation of words with their environment; a narrative that fulfils the expectations generated by its component words will meet Zinaida's criterion of being "even more like the truth." "Awakening" represents, above all, a war between the young (fictional) Babel and his (fictional) parents to realize opposing stories from competing vocabularies: from the sememes "small," "frail,"

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21 Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth*, 5. The phrase "inchoate or future text" appears in the same paragraph.
“Jewish,” and “violin,” the parents hope to generate their own sequel to the “Jascha Heifetz” text, which to them represents wealth and fame. Their son, rejecting that text (and perhaps sensing in it a subtext of victimhood imprinted by Kuprin and Chekhov), seeks to create for himself an alternative text, to be generated from the sememes “port,” “smuggler,” “sea,” and “sun,” and consummated—he vainly hopes—by his finally learning to swim.

Nikitich, grasping that, as the narrator puts it, “the ability to swim proved to be beyond my reach” (174/63), correctly diagnoses the problem: “What is it you lack?....Your youth is no problem, it will pass with the years...What you lack is a feeling for nature” (175/64, ellipses in original). Nikitich undertakes to teach the boy the vocabulary—the sememes—he lacks, the names and particulars of the flora, fauna, and other natural phenomena that make up the world of “fresh air” he longs to command. Before the narrator has time to make much progress, however, the game is up: Zagursky, the violin teacher, comes to inform on his neglectful pupil, who, anticipating his father’s reaction, is forced to flee ignominiously to the lavatory and lock himself in. The scene is reminiscent of the narrator’s attempted suicide at the end of “In the Basement,” with some important differences: while both scenes depict the narrator seeking refuge from a crazed patriarch in a confined space, in the latter case the refuge is only temporary (not to mention farcical), and it succeeds; the father is successfully staved off until he can be calmed by the women of the household. The less dark resolution of the scene in “Awakening” perhaps reflects the child’s growing confidence in his ability to control his own text.

The final paragraph in “Awakening” reads like a color-reversed negative of the
opening paragraph in "Childhood: At Grandmother’s":

On Saturdays, I returned home late, after six lessons. Walking along the street did not seem to me an idle occupation. As I walked, I had remarkably good dreams and everything, everything was native and familiar. I knew the signboards, the stones of the houses, and the windows of the shops. I knew them individually, only for myself [and] was firmly convinced that in them I could see the principal thing, the secret thing, what we grown-ups call the essence of things....And from the shops, the people, the air, the theatre playbills, I created a city of my own
("Childhood: At Grandmother’s," opening paragraph). 22

When everyone had gone to bed, Aunt Bobka took me to Grandmother took me to Grandmother’s. We had a long way to go. The moonlight froze on unknown bushes, on trees that had no name. An invisible bird gave a peep and was silent—perhaps it had fallen asleep. What kind of bird was it? What was its name? Is there dew in the evening? Where is the constellation of the Great Bear situated? In what direction does the sun rise?

We walked along Pochtovaya Street. Bobka held me tightly by the hand, so that I should not run away. She was right. I was thinking of escape.
("Awakening," closing paragraphs; 178/67)

Where the overture to "Childhood" displays a narrator conversant with the elements of his world, the coda to "Awakening" shows us the same narrator, on the same stretch of road, in a state of radical disorientation. The sememes from which he generates his city-text in "Childhood"—and it is significant that Babel, the father of literary Odessa, describes himself as "creat[ing] a city"—are man-made things, like Trottyburn’s pipes; he is utterly blind to the "natural" text that lurks behind this synthetic world, which is made up of words absent from his vocabulary. His familiarity with the man-made world—the "Jewish" world of culture, books, violins, and domestic interiors—is borne out by his ability to tell it, which is what the childhood tales have done. To escape from

22 Babel, Sob. soch., I:37; McDuff, 21. My ellipsis and emphasis.
this fictional plane to the broader “Russian” canvas of the natural world—the canvas that will launch Babel, like Gogol before him, into the Russian canon—he must master the new vocabulary to which Nikitch has alerted him. Only by so doing can he make his stories about this newly-discovered world “good” enough to supplant the story he already knows by heart: the oppressive text of his childhood.

BABEL’S _BILDUNGSROMAN_

Viewed as a complete cycle, the childhood tales have a pleasing symmetry, visible in the respective opening and closing sections of “Childhood: At Grandmother’s” and “Awakening,” above. They also appear, as I have taken pains to demonstrate, to follow a single unifying story arc: the formation of Babel as a writer, and specifically as the kind of writer whom critics would later perceive as palpably Odessan. Taking the stories in the order I have suggested, we see the narrator, first, absorbing intertexts and arguments about what makes a story “good”; second, absorbing different kinds of counterfactual discourse and learning that a lie can supersede the truth; third, indulging his fantasy; fourth, marrying his fantasy to canonical texts; and finally, joining the world of fantasy and books to the natural realm. In the process, we also see the nascence of certain attributes I have assigned to Odessan discourse: the refutation of the Chekhov-Kuprin “frail Jew” text, the reconciliation of the seemingly irreconcilable (for example, the narrator’s contraction, in “First Love,” of a disease supposedly found “only in women”), the use of autobiographical discourse, and the interpenetration of “life” and “literature.”

The reception of the stories as a cycle is, then, satisfying on a number of levels,
including both content and form. It is, however, not without problems. Most
obviously, “Childhood: At Grandmother’s” was never published; we cannot say for
certain what Babel’s intentions were for the story. The symmetries between that story
and “Awakening” may reflect not an architectural design but a comprehensive rewriting
in which material was pillaged from the earlier story and retooled for the later, better
one. Moreover, while the protagonist’s age is not indicated in “Childhood,” the setting
of that story is more akin to the Odessa of “In the Basement” and “Awakening” than to
the Nikolayev of the earlier childhood tales. Finally, it is difficult to justify the
exclusion of later stories in the “Bildungsroman” series, particularly “Di Grasso,” in
which the narrator’s age is the same as in “Awakening,” fourteen.

And yet the stories are what they are, and our lack of information about Babel’s
final intentions for them must allow us some leeway in reading them as the stories
themselves seem to dictate. As I have conceived of them, the childhood tales have an
integrity of theme and language that makes good readerly sense; “Di Grasso,” while
similar in setting and spirit, is, as Gregory Freidin (1981) has observed,

rather different from Babel’s other childhood reminiscences...First of
all, it is much shorter both in the amount of time that it covers and in its
actual length. Secondly, its thematic content, packed into a compact
frame, possesses an unusual depth, since the main narrative incorporates
within itself another narrative, a play performed by a travelling troupe of
di Grasso [the lead actor’s name].

Perhaps most important, “Di Grasso” presents the narrator not as a writer in the
making—the unifying trope of what I have termed the “childhood tales”—but as a
spectator, indeed, as a critic; the insights into art that he offers here from a spectator’s

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23 Gregory Freidin, “Fat Tuesday in Odessa: Isaac Babel’s ‘Di Grasso’ as Testament and Manifesto,”
perspective seem of a different order from the narrator’s more diffuse epiphanies (and sly arguments) about the nature of literary language in the childhood cycle.

The title of “Di Grasso,” with its evocation of carnival (the eponymous character’s name is derived from the Italian for Shrove Tuesday, martedì grasso) does, however, capture the most celebrated—and most Odessan—feature of Babel’s style, the “reconciliation of irreconcilables” noted by Shklovsky, Markish, Ehrlich, et al. This invites us to consider other ways in which the poetics of the childhood cycle extend to Babel’s œuvre more generally. It is impossible not to notice the predominance of autobiographical discourse in Babel’s stories—it is used even in the Odessa Tales, though more subtly there than in the “lying” autobiographical stories of the childhood cycle, or the thinly veiled “pseudoautobiography” of Red Cavalry—and the accompanying interpenetration of literature and life. And, noting this, we cannot help but remark further that the first-person narrators in each of the sequences listed above (the Odessa Tales, the childhood tales, and Red Cavalry) are remarkably similar; while they do not all share a name, they are all observers, intellectuals, and “outsiders,” uncomfortably aware of their own incongruity both among the groups they seek to join (always, physically powerful and decisive groups: the gangsters, the Russian urchins, the Cossacks) and among a posited “own kind” (the family of the childhood tales, the Jews of Red Cavalry).

As Barry Scherr points out, the Odessa of the childhood tales and the Odessa of the Odessa Tales are geographically distinct entities; the childhood tales, described

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24 See Chapter One.

above, are set in the more bourgeois areas of the city, whereas the *Odessa Tales* immortalize the “less savory side streets” of the Moldavanka district, the lair of the Jewish gangsters who became, through these same stories, irrevocably linked with Odessa. Yet the two sets of stories have more in common than Scherr goes on to propose. The cumulative effect of the two cycles is to delineate two contiguous, yet mutually exclusive, fields of Jewish experience, both distinctively Odessan, both radically different from the Yiddish world of the *shtetl* and (despite the inclusion of the 1905 pogrom) from the dreary alternatives of half-digested assimilation and political victimization portrayed by Chekhov, Kuprin, et al. Located at opposite ends of the same tramline, these two worlds are united by the Black Sea; by certain emblematic characters (the mysterious Mister Trottyburn, who appears in “Liubka the Cossack” as well as in “Awakening”); by the carnivalesque reconciliation of opposites; by a preponderance of “abundant” female characters; by a certain flair, on the part of the characters who populate them, for aphoristic pronouncements; and—crucially—by the narrator’s uneasy distance from the milieu he is describing (a quality Scherr ascribes to *Red Cavalry* and the *Odessa Tales* but not to the childhood tales). Moreover, the “two Odessas” actually meet in “Awakening,” when the narrator attempts to flee the bourgeois milieu of the earlier childhood tales for precisely the muscular and lawless environment presided over by Benya Krik in the *Odessa Tales*.

The *Odessa Tales*, like the childhood tales, constitute a somewhat disputed, and disputable, entity: from the strict-constructionist’s point of view, they consist of the four stories republished by Babel in 1927 as a single volume, under the title *Odessa Tales*:

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26 See discussion of Jewish gangsters in Chapter One.
"The King" (*Korol', 1921), "How it was Done in Odessa" (*Kak eto delalos' v Odesse, 1923), "The Father" (*Otets, 1924) and "Liubka the Cossack" (*Liubka Kazak, 1924). Other stories, drawing on the same cast of characters and set in the same milieu, are often considered alongside the core four: most notably, "Justice in Brackets" (*Spravedlivost' v skobkakh, 1921) and "The End of the Almshouse" (*Konets bogadel 'ni, 1932), which also bear the subtitle "From the Odessa Tales," but were not published in that original volume. For the purposes of the current discussion, namely the underlying consistency of Babel’s narrative voice and his vision of Odessa between the childhood and Odessa tales, my analysis will focus on just one of these stories: "How It Was Done in Odessa." However, my conclusions are intended to bear on Babel’s other stories of the Moldavanka as well.

In "How It Was Done in Odessa," the gap between the narrator and the milieu he is describing is underlined by the narrator’s decision, early in the story, to hand over the narration to a third party, the old man Arye-Leib (the name, with typically Babelian irony, means "lion-lion"; the old man uses "lion" as an epithet for the young, generally and sexually potent Benya in his story). Arye-Leib’s portrayal of Benya Krik coincides with what we learn from the other Benya stories, but we get the bonus of Arye’s outside perspective on the main narrator (Babel’s narratorial persona). It is from this story that Babel criticism inherits the famous description so often applied to Babel himself: "you have glasses on your nose, and autumn in your soul." Time and again, Arye stresses the discrepancy between the narrator, who "brawl[s] at his desk and stutter[s] in the

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28 See Trilling (following the 1955 Walter Morison translation): "We can only wonder at the vagary of the military mind by which Isaac Babel came to be assigned as a supply officer to a Cossack regiment...He was an intellectual, a writer—a man, as he puts it in striking phrase, with spectacles on his nose and autumn in his heart." Lionel Trilling, Introduction to Babel, *Collected Stories* (1955); reprinted in McDuff, 348.
presence of others,” and Benya Krik, who does his “brawling on the squares and [his] stuttering on paper.”

These asides frame an internal narrative in which Benya, finding that his strength and drive exceed the possibilities of his lowly position as a drayman’s son, establishes himself in the Moldavanka underworld by performing, with flair, a task (mounting an extortion raid against an oft-robbed Jewish businessman, Tartakovsky) set him by its ruling cartel. There are many parallels between Benya Krik’s coming-of-age story and Babel’s “autobiographical” one: both struggles pit the son against the father (“Babel’s” father actually threatens to kills him “Awakening,” while Benya’s father “compels [him] to die twenty times a day”). Both are propelled by the son’s urge to become an integral part of the seedy, but fabulously profitable, life of the port (Benya asks to be apprenticed to Froim Grach; the young Babel marvels at the hundred-percent profit turned by his 11-year-old friend on each one of Mister Trottyburn’s pipes). Prowess, physical and sexual, is an important component of each son’s self-realization: young Babel fantasizes about the Russian Galina and ditches violin lessons for swimming ones; Benya, “the lion,” “can spend the night with a Russian woman and satisfy her.” It will be noted that while these rites of passage are expressed in similar terms, Babel (both in the childhood tales and in the Odessa Tales) remains a spectator, while Benya is the man of action; the same dichotomy obtains, famously, in Red Cavalry.

The consistency of Babel’s first-person narrative voice across his œuvre has led

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29 Babel, Sob. soch., I:127; trans. McDuff, 244. Subsequent page references for quotations from this story will be given in parentheses in the text, with the first number representing the relevant page in Vol. I of Babel’s 1990 Sochineniya, and the second number representing the corresponding page in the 1995 Penguin translation, e.g.: (127/244).
Freidin (1990) to hypothesize, intriguingly, that Babel

had in mind a larger autobiographical frame designed to incorporate his
known and future work and enclosing the entire life span of the boy who
grew up to be the author-narrator of Red Cavalry and, finally, a major
Soviet writer. The great success enjoyed by the autobiographical fiction
of Maksim Gorky—Babel’s acknowledged protector and mentor—its
elevation to the status of a national epic in the 1930s, lends support to
this conjecture.\footnote{30}

This overarching autobiographical frame is Freidin’s best guess as to the meaning of
Babel’s famous last words upon being arrested: “They didn’t let me finish” [Ne dali
mne konchit’]. No evidence having emerged either to support or to confirm the
widespread speculation about Babel’s being engaged in work on a novel at the time of
his arrest, and the novelistic form being otherwise unrepresented among Babel’s works,
Freidin’s conjecture seems a highly plausible one. Whether Freidin imagines the
Odessa Tales’ forming a part of this autobiographical scheme is unclear, but their
consistency with the narrative voice of Babel’s more obviously “autobiographical”
works,\footnote{31} as well as their value as a counterpoint to Babel’s other “Odessa tales”—that
is, the childhood tales—suggests that they could have contributed a great deal to this
hypothetical project.

BABEL AS TEXT

One further point of convergence between the Odessa and childhood tales on which I
have not yet commented is the double-edged Anglophilia that marks the yearnings of


\footnote{31} I do not speak here of Babel’s style; much has already been written about Babel’s use of Odessan skaz
in the Odessa Tales (see, e.g., James Falen, Isaac Babel: Russian Master of the Short Story [Knoxville: U. of Tenn. P., 1974], Ch. 5; Wałenty Cukierman, “The Odessa Myth and Idiom in Some Early Works of Odessa Writers,” Canadian-American Slavic Studies 14:1 [Spring 1980], 36-51), and this adoption of
his heroes’ native idiom does not, to me, constitute an erasure of Babel’s narrative voice.
Babel’s narrative persona(e) toward the two poles of Odessan-Jewish success: that is, the black-market magic represented by Mister Trottyburn (“Liubka the Cossack”; “Awakening”) and the bourgeois bliss represented by Mark Borgman’s father (“In the Basement”), the prosperous bank director who “expresse[s] himself in the coarsish, abrupt language of Liverpool captains” (180/51), plans to educate his son in England, and celebrates his arrival home from work by settling down with the Manchester Guardian. These characters make up part of the glamorous, outlandish fabric of the stories—what Scherr calls their “exotic foreign quality, usually accompanied by the motif of the sea”—in which the Italian thespians of “Di Grasso” and “In the Basement” also participate. They also represent an important component of the Odessa text more broadly speaking: that is, the influence of the West, which Shklovsky characterized, approvingly, as a source of “new themes” in the work of Odessa writers. (This was the portion of his critique that Shklovsky was forced to recant, calling it “politically and methodologically wrong, and therefore harmful,” three months later, since it contravened the official stipulation that Soviet literature be based on the homegrown literary heritage.) For Babel, the chief Western influence—the one to which he, his friends and contemporaries, and the critics continually return—was not English but French: the nineteenth-century French master of the short story, Guy de Maupassant, who appears in Babel’s works first in the 1916 sketch, “Odessa,” and later as the title and subject of Babel’s 1932 story “Guy de Maupassant.”

“Guy de Maupassant,” the last Babel story I shall analyze in specific, is of

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32 Scherr, op. cit., 348.
33 V.B. Shklovskii, “lugo-zapad,”
34 Shklovskii, “Pis’mo redaktoru,” Literaturnaya gazeta, April 29, 1933; trans. Feld, “The Southwestern School of Writers,” 2.
interest for the same reasons as the other stories I have treated in this and the previous chapter; it has transgressed the boundary between "fiction" and "fact" to become firmly esconced in the generally accepted Babel lore, and now enjoys more widespread dissemination and educated belief than most of what is "factually" known about Babel. Two aspects of the story in particular are of interest: one is the story’s participation in the “decapitation” (castration, patricide) subtext that runs through all three of the major story cycles (childhood, Odessa, Red Cavalry): Maupassant cuts his throat at the end (that is, at the end of Babel’s story, and of Maupassant’s life). The second, to which I shall devote my attention here, is constituted by the narrator’s programmatic statements about style, which have been read and reproduced ad infinitum as a bona fide articulation of Babel’s poetics—much as Arye-Leib’s phrase “spectacles on your nose and autumn in your soul” has become the defining interpretation of Babel’s personality. The passage in question, in which the narrator “repairs” a Russian translation of Maupassant done by a lady of leisure, is worth producing in full, because of its influence on the “official” image of Babel:

I took the manuscript home with me, and there, in Kazantsev’s attic—among the sleepers—cut clearings in someone else’s translation. This is not such unpleasant work as it might seem. A phrase is born into the world good and bad at the same time. The secret lies in a barely perceptible turn. The lever must lie in one’s hand and get warm. It must be turned once, and no more.

In the morning I took back the corrected manuscript. Raisa had not been lying when she had spoken of her passion for Maupassant. She sat immobile during the reading, her hands clasped: those satin hands flowed to the floor, her forehead was pale, the lace between her downwards-crushed breasts moved aside and trembled.

“How did you do it?”

Then I began to speak of style, of the army of words, an army in

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35 For an able treatment of this topic, and a comprehensive list of examples, see Freidin, “Fat Tuesday in Odessa.”
which all kinds of weapons are on the move. No iron can enter the
human heart as chillingly as a full stop placed at the right time. 36

The interpenetration of “fiction” and “reality” that I have characterized as central to the
Odessan literary identity, and which emanates above all from Babel, can again be seen
at work in Paustovsky’s treatment of a breathtakingly similar episode (minus the sexual
tension) in his Odessan adventure, described in A Time of Great Expectations. In this
case, the story in need of repair is not a translation, but an original work submitted to
The Seaman (of which Paustovsky was managing editor). Written by Andrey Sobol, the
story was, Paustovsky reports, “disorderly and all mixed up, but undoubtedly a work of
talent and dealing with an interesting subject.” An editor, Blagov, offers to make the
story fit for publication without changing a word, and does so—by correcting all the
punctuation and paragraphing. Sobol’s gratitude is comparable to that of a freshly
redeemed Dostoevskian hero:

Sobol dashed up to Blagov, seized both his hands and shook them
heartily. A minute later he was hugging Blagov and kissing his three
times in the Moscow fashion.

“Thanks,” he said, very much agitated. “Thanks for the lesson
you have taught me—a little too late in the day, I’m afraid. I feel like a
criminal when I think how I used to mutilate my writings.” 37

The reminiscence ends with Paustovsky, Blagov, a local militaman, and Eduard
Bagritsky drinking together
to the glory of literature in general and punctuation marks in particular.
We all agreed that a full stop in the right place may work wonders. 38

This near-verbatim echo of Babel’s oft-quoted maxim is just one of the many ways in

36 Babel, Sob. soch., II:217; McDuff, 74.
literatury na inostrannykh iazykakh, 19647), 119.
38 Ibid., my emphasis.
which Paustovsky conjures Babel, as the presiding spirit over his (Paustovsky’s) conversion to Odessanism, and Maupassant, as the presiding spirit over Babel’s art.

Babel first materializes on Paustovsky’s horizon in 1921, in the form of a story, “The King”; shortly thereafter, already a celebrity (at least according to Paustovsky), he appears at The Seaman’s offices in the flesh. Paustovsky tends to the mythology of Babel—Odessa’s “literary messiah”—as zealously as St. Paul to that of Jesus, fluently couching his first impressions of Babel (as a reader of “The King”) in the terms deployed by Babel himself in the 1916 “Odessa” manifesto:

Everything in ‘The King’ was completely unaccustomed for us.... Suddenly, like an unexpected burst of sunshine through the window, some exquisite fragment or melody of a sentence, like a translation from the French, would invade the text.\(^{39}\)

The echoes of Babel’s own writing grow still stronger when the man himself enters the text. Paustovsky, writing in the late 1950s about conversations that took place in the early ’20s, wields dialogue like Thucydides—which, incidentally, is one of the techniques (under the heading of “mimetic excesses”) listed by Riffaterre as a “sign pointing to the fictionality of fiction”\(^{40}\)—so that the reader involuntarily wonders whether Babel knew he was being recorded. Babel’s first line of direct speech is drawn, again, straight from the pages of “Odessa”—and returns us, again, to the contemplation of Maupassant:

“Here in Odessa,” [Babel] said with a mocking twinkle, “we will not have our Kiplings. We are peaceful lovers of life. But we shall have our Maupassants. Because we have plenty of sea, sun, beautiful women, and plenty of food for thought. I guarantee you some Maupassants.”\(^{41}\)

\(^{39}\) *Ibid.*, 123-24; my emphasis.

\(^{40}\) Riffaterre, *op. cit.*, 29.

Looking again at the parallel scenes from "Guy de Maupassant" and Paustovsky’s memoir, one might be struck by the addition of Eduard Bagritsky to the drinking paty following Blagov’s successful conversion of Sobol’s story to Babelian standards of punctuation. In addition to providing local Odessan literary color, Bagritsky’s presence in this scene could be interpreted as a wink to the reader, since such wholesale appropriation of Babel’s ideas and phraseology is mockingly ascribed to Bagritsky in *A Time of Great Expectations*. In one episode, Babel (according to Paustovsky) compares the poetry of Aleksandr Blok to “the ringing of a thousand harps”; Bagritsky, in a subsequent conversation, muses, “You understand, just the melody on unison harps with the muted voice of the poet. That was the voice Blok had,” and is abruptly cut off by Isaac Livshits:

> “Edya!” said Izya Livshits, “don’t parrot and distort Babel. What I’m hearing is an outlandish jumble of things he has said.”
> “This is what I think myself,” said Bagritsky modestly.
> “Oh yes?” Izya feigned surprise. “Since when have you been so eloquent?”

Bagritskii becomes something of a symbol for the confusion of factual and fictional discourses in Paustovsky’s narrative; in *The Golden Rose*, Paustovsky writes of him:

> We might as well warn Eduard Bagritsky’s biographers that they will have a hard time establishing the facts of his life. The reason for this is that the poet was in the habit of spreading the most fantastic stories about himself. These became so inseparably linked up with his life that it is now impossible to distinguish fact from fiction....The stories he told about himself became woven into the texture of his life.\(^{43}\)

Paustovsky here might as well be talking about Babel—or even about himself; for that matter, Paustovsky himself is at least partly responsible for “spreading fantastic stories

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\(^{42}\) *Vremia bol’shikh ozhidanii*, 155.

about” Bagritsky, as well as about other Odessa writers. His stories about Babel, though, bear the particular distinction of being themselves Babelian, both in subject matter (Paustovsky recounts amusing tales of Moldavanka organized—or rather, disorganized—crime, and of Babel’s family) and in the ambiguous territory between “fact” and “fiction” that they occupy. In one, Babel puts an end to a protracted visit from his in-laws by insisting that they return in haste to Kiev to see a “world-famous” otolaryngologist by the name of Greenblatt—the only one who can be entrusted with the mysterious ear ailment of Babel’s nephew. The humor of the story resides in the fact that, as Paustovsky subsequently realizes, “that whole business with the eminent Kiev specialist had been pure improvisation. Babel had played it like a first-class actor.” But the ending of the story, much like the Grandmother’s stories in “Childhood: At Grandmother’s,” introduces a competing reality:

After a week a letter came from Babel’s mother-in-law.
“What do you think?” she wrote indignantly. “What did Professor Greenblatt establish? Professor Greenblatt established that that rascal stuck a piece of indelible pencil into his ear, nothing more. Nothing more, not a single speck. How do you like that?”

So, while Babel on the one hand “improvised” the entire story of the eminent specialist, it turns out on the other hand to be true (there is an eminent Professor Greenblatt practising otolaryngology in Kiev)—just like Shoyl’s stories. Elsewhere, Paustovsky quotes Babel as lamenting,

I have no imagination....I don’t know how to make things up. I have to know everything down to the last wrinkle, or else I can’t write anything. On my shield is inscribed the motto “Authenticity!”

Yet every story simultaneously suggests that Babel might just be “improvising.”

44 Fremia bol’shikh ozhidani, 141.
45 Ibid., 145.
In summary, Paustovsky supports his claim to be an “Odessa writer” by saturating his prose with implicit and explicit references to Babel; promoting Babel’s own mythology both of himself and of Odessa; presenting Babel paradoxically as a storyteller who drew all his tales from life, yet might also have “made the whole thing up”; drawing parallels among the autobiographical practices of Babel, Bagritsky, and himself; and using Babel’s own language to associate all the above features with Odessa itself. I contend that these practices exactly coincide with what Babel himself intended. Indeed, what has been demonstrated repeatedly over the course of the last two chapters is that Babel, in his works, continually seeks to invade and if possible even to supersede “real life” (“what does exist,” in the words of Turgenev’s Zinaida) with stories. The success of this gambit seems in keeping with the privileged position Babel consistently awards to prose fiction over all other forms of artistic creation (one need only think, for example, of the treatment meted out to music in “Childhood” and “Awakening”). Only in prose—the stuff of our everyday communication, a humble yet infinitely malleable clay, as Babel has shown—can an artist construct and mediate a reality capable of competing with “real-life,” extra-textual reality (which is itself, after all, subject to representation by precisely the same sorts of text) in viability and depth. Babel’s works, with their emphasis on the pursuit of “liberation” and autonomy, seem to equate “real life” with a sort of determinism; the seductive aspect of fiction is precisely its total submission to the will of the author.

It is possible to see in this project a kind of parody of the neo-Platonic assumptions about the relationship between art and life underlying Socialist Realism, to

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46 Ibid., 128.
which Babel seems to allude repeatedly in his stories; it is also possible to see, as some critics have done, an attempt “to present an appropriate past for a young Soviet writer who was not a member of the Communist Party.” It is unlikely that such conjectures can ever be resolved fully one way or the other, and nor does the “real” answer much matter; “reality” consists, now, in the narrative Babel has bequeathed to us. As it happens, Babel’s “lying stories” about himself, his fictive autobiography, have proven far more authoritative than any authentic biography is ever likely to be—and have insinuated themselves into our contemporary perception, not only of Babel himself, but of his fellow Odessan writers, and even of his native city. Thus, in a way, Babel has contrived to make reality conform to his stories, rather than the other way around; and his version has been, for three-quarters of a century, the definitive one.

47 Nathalie Babel, The Lonely Years, xiv.
CHAPTER FOUR

RECOVERING THE SELF:
VALENTIN KATAEV AND YURY OLESHA

As we have seen, Odessa’s most famous literary son, Isaac Babel, seemed to gravitate almost exclusively toward a first-person narrative voice that was widely perceived to be autobiographical, even when the content or form of his works did not fully authorize their reception as autobiography. General Budyonny was the first of many to call attention to this aspect of Babel’s prose, when he expressed anger at Babel’s “lies” about what he had seen at the front and declined to be mollified by the frankly belles-lettres character of the Red Cavalry stories. ¹ A similar attraction to the autobiographical mode, with similar implications for the reception of the texts in question, can be seen in the works of other Odessan prosaists, including Konstantin Paustovsky (discussed in the previous chapter), Yury Olesha, and Valentin Kataev. Olesha, in his speech to the first All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers—itsself a highly autobiographical exercise—endorsed the conclusions reached by unnamed “people” that the protagonist of Envy (Zavist’, 1927), Nikolai Kavalero, was in many ways “an autobiographical portrait.”² In Olesha criticism, Elizabeth Beaujour has shown how close Kavalero’s narrative voice is in some respects to that of Olesha’s autobiographical narrator in No Day Without A Line (Ni dnia bez strochki, 1965).³ Meanwhile, Kataev’s doctrine of Mauvism (movizm), developed in the 1960s, centered

¹ See Chapter One.
on the subjectivity of the narrating author, and his Mauvist works were repeatedly interpreted as memoirs despite explicit disclaimers such as the following:

In general I do not vouch for the details in this work. I implore readers not to perceive my work as memoirs. I can’t stand memoirs. I repeat. This is a free flight of my fantasy, based on real events, which might not even be quite accurately preserved in my memory.\(^4\)

The work from which this disclaimer is drawn, *My Diamond Crown* (Almazni moi venets, 1977), explicitly disavows membership in any of the usual Russian genres: “Not a novel, not a story, not a novella, not a *poema*, not reminiscences, not memoirs, not a lyrical diary... But what then? I don’t know!” (*AMV 67*). The only genre to which Kataev, following Tiutchev,\(^5\) can reliably assign his narrative is that of the lie. However, in true Odessan fashion, he immediately pushes the definition of this genre into the realm of paradox, using words that remind us of Zinaida’s pronouncement about poetry in Turgenev’s *First Love*:

Yes, this is a lie. But the lie is *even more like the truth* than truth itself. A truth born in the mysterious coils of the mechanism of my imagination. [...] In any case, I swear that everything written here is the purest truth and at the same time the purest fantasy. (*AMV 67*, my emphasis).

In an additional effort to unsign the autobiographical pact, Kataev declines to refer to any of the contemporaries (including all the major Odessan writers) who people his narrative by their real names, instead substituting lower-case epithets, a move that could be variously interpreted as whimsical, protective, or dismissive. Among the Odessans, Olesha is referred to as *kliuchik* (“little key”), Bagritsky as *ptitselov* (“birdhunter”), \(^1\)Ilf

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\(^4\) Valentin Kataev, *Almazni moi venets* (Moscow: DEM, 1990), 66. Henceforth, the page numbers for quotations from this volume will be given in parentheses following the quotation, as follows: (*AMV 66*). Since this work has never appeared in English translation, all translations from it are my own.

\(^5\) “The thought that is expressed is a lie” (*Mysl’ izrechennia est’ lozh’*) —Tiutchev, “Silentium.” Kataev refers to this famous line immediately following the passage just quoted.
and Petrov as drug ("friend") and brat ("brother"), and Babel as konarmee ("[Red] cavalryman"). Paustovsky does not appear.

*My Diamond Crown* was written and published long after the deaths of all the other Odessa writers whose careers, in the 1920s, had seemed so promising. Yet, like all Kataev's major works of Mauvist quasi-autobiography, it reaches back to a time when they were not only still alive, but thriving: a time before that troublesome watershed year, 1934, when Babel and Olesha gave the speeches at the first Congress of Soviet Writers that, in retrospect, seemed to mark the end, not the pinnacle, of their renown. Thus, in the years following the Thaw, the writer of *Time, Forward!* makes it his project to turn time backward again.

THE PROBLEM OF VALENTIN KATAEV

By 1934, all the Odessan writers except Kataev had published the works for which they are remembered; alone among them, Kataev adopted the artistic principles of Socialist Realism as his own, and continued his literary career with a minimum of inconvenience. Paradoxically, Kataev's success as a writer has almost automatically disqualified him, until relatively recently, from serious critical study. It also makes him a total anomaly among the Odessans, with only Paustovsky (d. 1968)—whose Odessan

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6 Kataev did run slightly afoul of the authorities with the second volume of his Socialist Realist *Black Sea Waves* tetralogy for young people, *For the Power of the Soviets* (Za Vlast' Sovetov, 1948; reissued with alterations as *The Catacombs* [Katakomby] in 1951). His sin was one of omission: he had forgotten to adhere to the second principle of Socialist Realism, *partiinnost* or Party-mindedness. However, as Richard Borden points out in *Writing Badly* (353n.), Kataev's punishment—being "well-scolded in public" and "forced to rewrite his book on someone else's terms"—was "nothing of consequence" in comparison to the career- and sometimes life-ending repercussions suffered by other artists in the same period.
credentials Kataev, in a conversation reported by Arkady L’vov, roundly dismisses—surviving long enough to compete with Kataev in memorializing the Odessan moment in Russian literature.

Kataev’s long life in Russian letters raises the specter of an ancient dilemma, immortalized by Homer: the “choice of Achilles” between a long life and great renown. The dilemma is sharpened by Kataev’s position as a Russian, and a Soviet, writer. Thanks only in part to the early canonization of Pushkin as Russia’s greatest poetic genius, longevity and greatness were, if not mutually exclusive (Leo Tolstoy alone would be sufficient to refute that possibility), at least not often correlated in the Russian canon. In Tsarist Russia, a striking proportion of notable writers died young of dueling, drink, or disease; in Soviet times, political incorrectness was added to the list of mortal perils besetting writers whose talents set them apart from the common. For the writers who perished in Stalin’s purges, posterity provided one tiny, ironic consolation: their literary reputations would neither be tarnished by political conformity, nor dissipated by a gradual decline from excellence. To survive, one had to compromise, and literary activity that satisfied Party watchdogs attracted suspicion from a different quarter, that of the intelligentsia.

For Kataev, longevity encumbered him with two problems: first, how to sustain a literary reputation commensurate with the length of his career, as Tolstoy had; and second, how to cope with the burden of survival itself, and in particular with being the

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7 Arkadii L’vov, “Prostota neslykhannoii eresi,” Vremia i my 40 (April 1979), 161-76. This conversation will be discussed in more detail below.

8 Obviously, I am writing from the point of view of hindsight. While the Party, of course, did what it could to destroy the reputation of any writer who was purged, in most cases literary merit has proved more durable than the Soviet regime itself. “Posterity” in this case should be taken to refer to post-Soviet opinion.
sole survivor of the group of writers—chiefly Odessans—with whom he had begun his career. To solve these problems, he had to prove (a) that his survival was justified on literary grounds, or in other words that he “deserved” to stand as a successor to Pushkin and the other writers of the “great” nineteenth-century tradition; (b) that he was more than just a political shill writing to the Party formula; and (c) that he was a true representative of his own, largely ill-fated, generation in Russian letters. In My Diamond Crown, Kataev tackles these problems in a variety of ways.

KATAEV AND PUSHKIN

“My love, forgive me this apostasy,” writes Nabokov in a poem addressing the poet’s grief at being exiled from his native literature, and it is the charge of apostasy that Kataev, like his contemporary Nabokov, must answer in order to take a place in the Russian canon. Where Nabokov must compensate for his spatial disjunction from the wellsprings of “great” Russian literature, the disjunction for which Kataev must compensate is ideological and, metaphorically speaking, temporal: by urging time forward he has opened a potentially prejudicial gap between himself and the nineteenth-century writers who represent the immortality of “tradition.” Like Nabokov’s—and like the Odessa myth itself, which Kataev outwardly rejects—Kataev’s claim to

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10 It should be noted that while these days the nineteenth century seems relatively distant, for both Kataev (b. 1897) and Nabokov (b. 1899) it was the era into whose twilight they were born. Both are of the generation whose task it would be to determine what the twentieth century was, in literary terms. Thus, they look back to the nineteenth century not only as the “great” century of Russian literature but also as the epoch immediately preceding their own — making the question of continuity a genuinely urgent one.

11 See Chapter One, pp. 35ff.
canonicity is established on the fringes of Pushkin’s most canonical works, or what might be termed “Pushkin’s cutting-room floor.”\textsuperscript{12}

The novel in which Nabokov “appropriates” nineteenth-century Russian literature (and quite possibly some early Soviet literature as well\textsuperscript{13}) ends with a paragraph of hopeful speculation about fictional characters’ continued lives “beyond the skyline of the page”—that is, after the author of the text in which they appear parts company with them—that evokes Pushkin’s \textit{Eugene Onegin} both in form and in content:

Goodbye, my book! Like mortal eyes, imagined ones must close some day. Onegin from his knees will rise -- but his creator strolls away. And yet the ear cannot right now part with the music and allow the tale to fade; the chords of fate itself continue to vibrate; and no obstruction for the sage exists where I have put The End: the shadows of my world extend beyond the skyline of the page, blue as tomorrow’s morning haze -- nor does this terminate the phrase.\textsuperscript{14}

Here Nabokov, underscoring his implicit argument throughout the novel that the line of succession to Pushkin’s throne ran now through the fragile émigré literary community, not the Soviet establishment, “inherits” from Pushkin an artifact crafted by the great poet but subsequently fallen into disuse: the Onegin stanza, here “cunningly” disguised as a paragraph of lyrical prose. That is the formal allusion. The content of the passage

\textsuperscript{12} Though my focus here is on the use of Pushkin as a literary “ancestor,” and not on a full-blown comparison of Kataev’s autobiographical (or quasi-autobiographical) method to Nabokov’s, the two writers certainly invite such a comparison. A concise list of similarities between Nabokov’s approach and Kataev’s is provided by Borden in \textit{Writing Badly} (115-16). The most important of these is the two writers’ rejection of chronolinearity, which gave increased importance to the subjectivity of the narrator as the source of the principles (subjective patterns or associations) by which the plot is organized.

\textsuperscript{13} Richard Borden (lecture at Columbia University, Sept. 2000) has pointed out that a passage early in \textit{The Gift} (1935), where a mirror is unloaded from a moving van and becomes a metaphor for the author’s philosophy of art, greatly resembles the celebrated “street mirror” scene late in Part One of Olesha’s \textit{Envy} (1927). The similarity is also noted, obliquely, by Ken Kalfus in a review of \textit{Envy} (\textit{The New York Review of Books}, June 10, 2004).

similarly invokes a kinship between Nabokov’s novel and Pushkin’s, but one based not on the works themselves so much as the world that exists just beyond the boundaries of both texts, the world from which the author-narrator “strolls away” when it is time to say “The End.” This idea, of a validating encounter with Pushkin that takes place just outside the gates of Pushkin’s published texts, is also used by Kataev in My Diamond Crown, as is the ploy of “inheriting” a disused Pushkin artifact.

The artifact in question, which forms the title of Kataev’s book, itself exists only outside Pushkin’s finished text, on the great poet’s cutting-room floor. It is a diamond crown fashioned for Marina Mnishekt to wear in Boris Godunov, but left out of the final published version of Pushkin’s verse drama, as Kataev explains:

I shall probably name my book [...] My Diamond Crown, from the scene of Boris Godunov that Pushkin crossed out, in my view wrongly.

It’s a charming scene: in preparation for her decisive meeting with the Pretender, Marina consults her maid Ruzia about what adornments to wear.

“Now then, is it ready? Can’t you make haste?”—“By your leave, first make the difficult choice; what will you put on, the strand of pearls or the emerald crescent?”—“My diamond crown.”—“Splendid! Do you remember? You wore it when you deigned to go to the palace. At the ball, so they say, you shone like the sun. Men sighed, beauties whispered... At that time, it seems, young Khotkevich saw you for the first time, he who afterward shot himself. And indeed, so they say, whoever looked on you fell in love on the spot.”—“Can't you be quicker?”

No, Marina can’t be bothered with reminiscences, she is in a hurry. Away with the strand of pearls, away with the emerald crescent. You can’t put on everything. A genius must know how to limit himself, and most of all, how to choose. Choice is the soul of poetry. (AMV 12-13)\footnote{The omitted scene, which appears in Pushkin’s manuscript but not in the published version of Boris Godunov, preceded the ball scene headed "The Castle of the Governor Mnishekt in Sambor" (Zamok voevody Mnishka v Sambore). It can be read in the online edition of Pushkin’s 1859 Collected Works (Sobranie sochinenii v desiat’ tomakh, Russkaia Virtual’naia Biblioteka [RBV], 2000-2003), at <http://www.rvb.ru/pushkin/01text/05theatre/03edit/0854.htm#excels2>. Like Nabokov’s Onegin stanza, the verses Kataev quotes here are “disguised” in his text as prose, and I have translated them as such.}
Of course, not only the ornaments rejected by Marina are cast aside by the poet’s “choice”: the diamond crown she does select falls by the wayside too. Kataev, apparently less choosy (and thus, by his own admission, less of a genius?) than Pushkin, picks it up and puts it on, crowning himself, as Borden says, “the Pretender, the Tsar of Russian culture of the 1920s”\(^\text{16}\) just as Pushkin’s Pretender (Samozvanets) crowns himself Tsar of Russia:

> Marina already made her choice. Me too: everything superfluous is rejected. What’s left is “My Diamond Crown.” Hastening to the fountain, I am ready to put it on my own balding head. Marina is my soul before a decisive meeting. But where is that fountain? Isn’t it in the Parc Monceau, whither I was once summoned by a mad sculptor? (AMV 13)

As the reader learns in *My Diamond Crown*’s final tableau, to which I will return presently, it is indeed in the Parc Monceau in Paris that the fictional Kataev finally dons his diamond crown. By then, however, the “crown” has acquired additional symbolic resonances from the various uses to which Pushkin is put in the course of Kataev’s narrative.

After *Boris Godunov* (which also provides the basis of an anecdote connecting Olesha with Pushkin, via a moment of self-congratulation),\(^\text{17}\) the most important Pushkin intertext for *My Diamond Crown* is his 1836 poem “Exegi Monumentum” (“*la pamiatnik sebe vozdvig nerukotvorny*...”). Kataev takes Pushkin’s metaphorical “monument not made by hands” and “realizes” it in his own text as a monument that only Kataev, as the sole surviving writer of his original circle, can see—the ghostly afterimage of the Pushkin monument that, sometime in the five decades between the

\(^{16}\) Borden, *Writing Badly*, 121.

\(^{17}\) See AMV, 9-10, and Borden, *Writing Badly*, 119.
time being written about and the time of writing, had been moved from its “lawful place, at the head of Tverskoy Boulevard”:

For people of my generation there are two monuments to Pushkin. The two identical Pushkins stand opposite each other, separated by a noisy square, streams of automobiles, traffic lights, the batons of traffic wardens. One Pushkin is ghostly. He stands in his old, lawful place, but only old Muscovites see him. To others he is invisible. In the unfilled emptiness at the beginning of Tverskoy Boulevard, they see the real Pushkin, surrounded by streetlamps and a bronze chain, on which, sitting in a row and rocking slightly, in the early 1920s conversed two poets [Bagritsky and Esenin] and a third party—I, their contemporary.

And the Pushkin of today is for me just a ghost. (AMV 30-31)

The theme of the monument “not built by hands” (nerukotvornyi) unites with the theme of the crown not worn in the final stanza of Pushkin’s poem, and in the final paragraphs of Kataev’s “unmemoir.” Pushkin orders his muse, like Marina on the cutting-room floor, to forego her crown:

Be obedient, O Muse, to the divine commandment,
Fearing no offence, demanding no crown;
Receive flattery and slander with indifference,
And do not argue with a fool.18

These two crowns-not-worn, from Kataev’s two main Pushkinian intertexts, will merge and re-emerge at the end of My Diamond Crown.

Before proceeding to a discussion of the ending, it is worth mentioning another piece of Pushkiniana that Kataev contrives to import into his own self-narrative. This time the item in question is a story about Pushkin, namely Gogol’s claim that

[Pushkin] gave me his own subject, from which he has intended to make something in the nature of a narrative poem (poëma) and which, as he

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said, he would have given to no one else. This was the subject of *Dead Souls*.19

Kataev (who as a “Southerner” thinks of Gogol as a literary “relative” or “godfather” [AMV 65]), offers an updated version of this anecdote in which he, predictably, plays the Pushkin role:

Back then, attracted by Gogol’s Chichikov, I decided that the strength of *Dead Souls* consisted in the fact that Gogol had managed to find a mobile hero. [...]

A search for jewels, hidden in one of twelve chairs scattered around the country by the Revolution, seemed to me to offer the possibility of sketching a satirical gallery of contemporary types of the NEP period.

I laid all this before my friend and my brother [Ilf and Petrov], whom I had resolved to turn into my literary Negroes, according to the example of Dumas père: I would propose the theme, the source, and they would work out this theme, clothe it in the flesh and blood of a satirical novel. (AMV 154)

Here we see Kataev emulating Pushkin by supplying the picaresque-satirical plot for a novel to be written by his literary protégés, a plot which (by emulating Gogol’s *Dead Souls*) also allows Kataev to take credit for an authentically “Southern” work of literature, reconnecting him to the Southwestern discourse of his origins. The *modus operandi* across all these uses of Pushkin in *My Diamond Crown* is consistent: Kataev takes a Pushkin-related “story” and makes it “true,” by importing it into an autobiographical discourse authenticated by the narrator’s lived experience.

Kataev’s text is framed by two encounters, fifty years apart, with the “mad sculptor” mentioned in the passage about Marina (see above, p. 149), who, upon meeting Kataev in Paris, conceives a desire to sculpt him and his Russian literary contemporaries:

“I have found my theme! I will give you all eternity. I swear, I will do it. I just need to find a suitable material. If I find it... Oh, if only I can find it... then you will see what real sculpture is. Believe it, on one of the days of eternal spring in the Parc Monceau, among the pink and white flowering chestnuts, among the tulips and roses, you will finally see your likenesses, sculpted from an unheard-of material... if, of course, I can find it... (AMV 8)

It is this same sculptor, Brunsvik, who excitedly summons Kataev to the park fifty years later:

“I finally found a suitable material. No! Not a material, but a substance! A suitable substance for your friends, of whom you told me so much!” he shouted from the threshold. “This substance was delivered to me from the area around Cassiopeia. The Universe is built from this substance. It’s the best you can get on the global market. A substance from the depths of the galaxy. Hurry!” (AMV 207)

Arrived in the park, Kataev (the mad sculptor having meanwhile “disappeared, this time forever”) finds “white, shining statues without pedestals” of all his erstwhile colleagues dotted around the landscape. Like the ghostly Pushkin monument in Moscow, these statues are visible only to Kataev, whose special Mauvist vision allows him to transcend the limitations of time and space. Scarcely has he managed to take them all in when

...it suddenly seemed to me as if the starry frost of eternity, subtly at first, quite imperceptibly and unfrighteningly, touched the thinning grey hair around the tonsure of my uncovered head, making it sparkle, like a diamond crown. (AMV 214)

As he stands there, the narrator gradually loses the power of movement and is himself transformed into a sculpture “made of a cosmic substance by the mad fantasy of the Sculptor.”

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20 Like the “door in the wall” image and the solar imagery in A Shattered Life (v. infra), Kataev’s use of statuary here can also be seen in terms of a dialogue with Olesha’s autobiographical writings. In No Day Without a Line, Olesha writes: “[A] broken statue moves inside me in its accidental casing, expressing together with it the effects of some strange and terrible enchantment, some detail of a myth from which I will be able to apprehend only one thing: my own death” (ND 170). Characteristically, Kataev converts this imagery of enchanted statuary and death into something positive and affirming—another “crown.”
In these closing paragraphs of Kataev’s book, the narrator engages in a kind of literary arms race with Pushkin. At out last sight of him, he has not only become his own “monument not made by hands,” but has donned the crown that Pushkin was prepared to forego. Where Pushkin erects his own monument, Kataev invents a fictional Sculptor to do it for him; the resulting monument is not only nerukotvorny, not built by hands, but also nezemnoi, not of this earth. Where Pushkin presumes to assure only his own immortality, Kataev takes charge of the immortality of his entire literary generation. Finally, in his rewriting of Boris Godunov, Kataev plays all the parts—or at least all the crowned heads: he is Marina, putting on a diamond crown in the margins of Pushkin’s text; he is the self-crowned Pretender (samozvanets), posing as King of the Russian writers of the 1920s; and, the “tonsure” reference suggests, he is also Boris himself, trading his earthly kingdom for a heavenly one at the end of his reign. In short, every crown that Pushkin leaves lying around, Kataev picks up and puts on.

By importing Pushkin’s fictional objects into a text about himself—one which, despite its author’s strenuous efforts to defy generic categories, is probably best described by Borden’s term, “solipsistic memoir”—Kataev, like Nabokov, legitimates himself as an heir to Russia’s most canonical writer. And, like a true Odessan, he does so by manipulating the boundaries between “fiction” and “truth”: Pushkin’s Boris Godunov, a story taken (like Shklovsky’s “South-West” or Shoyl’s tall tales) from life, “comes true” as a part of Kataev’s personal narrative.
Fig. 1.
*Raoul Verlet’s monument to Maupassant (1897) in the Parc Monceau, Paris.*
KATAEV AND BABEL

The adaptation of Pushkinian themes is not the only significant aspect of Kataev’s sculpture garden, however. The location of the garden is also freighted with symbolism, leading back to another important “ghost” whose legacy Kataev could not avoid confronting: Isaac Babel. The Parc Monceau in Paris, fictional site of Kataev’s “cosmic” monuments, is in real life famous for its statue of Guy de Maupassant (see Fig. 1, previous page), the writer named by Babel as a model for Odessan literature (and an avatar to himself).21 In a moment of uncharacteristic generosity, Kataev even places his fictional statue of Babel next to the real statue of Maupassant, thus creating an “associative connection” between the two. This is no small concession, since the definition of Mauvism set forth by Kataev two pages earlier—in a direct polemic with Babel—proclaims “the replacement of the chronological connection with the associative connection (assotsiativnoi sviaz’iu)” as the new structuring principle for artistic prose.

Like Paustovsky (see Chapter Three), Kataev in My Diamond Crown uses Babel’s own language when treating the topic of Babel, but where Paustovsky seems to do so in a spirit of discipleship, Kataev (who reportedly referred to Paustovsky in one conversation as “that old liar Paustovsky with his idiotic stories”22) employs a frankly iconoclastic tone. Babel, as the prophet of literary Odessa and as its all-but-self-proclaimed literary Messiah, was an unavoidable topic both for a writer seeking to join the Odessa “school,” like Paustovsky, and for a writer seeking to escape it, like Kataev.

21 Though the Parc Monceau also boasts other famous statues, Maupassant’s—which happens to share Kataev’s birth year—is the only one of these “real” monuments mentioned in Kataev’s narrative.

22 Arkadii L’vov, “Prostota neslykhnoiu eresi,” 165.
It is instructive to compare the two writers’ methods of engagement with Babel’s legacy.

As I noted in earlier chapters, the commonplaces of Babel’s personal mythology are almost all drawn from his published stories, rather than from direct knowledge of his life. Kataev remarks disparagingly, “konarmeets led an enigmatic life; no one knew where he roamed, where he lived, whom he saw or what he was writing” (AMV 202). As the nickname suggests, what everyone did know was that Babel had traveled with Budyonny’s Red Cavalry, and what he had seen—or purportedly seen—there. They also knew that at the first Congress of Soviet Writers, he had half-jokingly bid farewell to “the right to write badly.” They knew that he wore “spectacles on his nose,” and from that they could inferred, following the logic of Arye-Leyb in the story “How It Was Done in Odessa,” that he also wore “autumn in his heart.” (Kataev’s quest in My Diamond Crown is for a land of “eternal spring” [vechnaia vesna] —a contrast that may well be deliberate.) And, regarding Babel’s poetics, they knew the famous aphorisms from his story “Guy de Maupassant,” which I discussed in the last chapter: “No iron can enter the human heart as chillingly as a full stop placed at the right time,” and “A phrase is born into the world good and bad at the same time. The secret lies in a barely perceptible turn. The lever must lie in one’s hand and get warm. It must be turned once, and no more.”

Paustovsky and Kataev both allude to these details of Babel’s personal mythology in their memoiristic portraits of him, but in very different ways. Paustovsky,

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25 Babel, Sob. soch. II, 217; McDuff, 74.
as we saw in Chapter Three, becomes a convert to Babel's philosophy of punctuation,\textsuperscript{26} marvels at the meticulousness that prompted Babel to draft a story twenty-two times before making it public,\textsuperscript{27} and perpetuates Babel's chosen metonyms: novelty, sunshine, jocularity, and the French influence, specifically that of Maupassant. Kataev, on the other hand, ironizes the well-known features of Babel's reputation, for example by nicknaming him "konarmeets" when the major theme of Red Cavalry is, arguably, the narrator's ongoing exclusion from the ranks of the "real" cavalrymen—his failure to become a true member of the konarmiia. Similarly, Kataev turns Babel's famous reticence about himself upside-down by interpreting it as "a special ploy to call additional attention to himself" (AMV 202). The spectacles on Babel's nose, the outward symptom of the perennial "autumn in his heart," are here caricatured as "the round spectacles of a small-town intelligent, wearing a Budyonny helmet with a red star but with a big automatic pen instead of a rifle" (AMV 201).

On the literary side of things, Babel's celebrated perfectionism in matters of word choice and punctuation is invoked and ridiculed. Kataev reports:

Our meetings were always accidental and brief. But [Babel] never let slip an opportunity to teach me a literary lesson:

"Literature is an eternal battle. I spent the whole of last night battling with a word. If you don't defeat the word, the word will defeat you. Sometimes, for the sake of a single solitary adjective one is obliged to spend not just several nights, but even months of bloody labor. Remember that. In dialogue, there must not be a single inessential expression. One should resort to dialogue only in case of the most extreme need: the dialogue should be brief, in character, and should give off an astringent odor, so to speak..." (AMV 203)

\textsuperscript{26} See above, p. 136f., and Paustovskii, The Golden Rose, 119.

\textsuperscript{27} See above, p. 34, and Paustovskii, Vremja bol'shikh ozhidanii, 146.
The irony inherent in this interminable monologue about the need for concision in dialogue is obvious. Kataev also takes this opportunity to parody Babel’s famous equation of stylistic minutiae with lethal force (the “steel” that “enters the human heart”), as well as the gap between the “masculine [i.e., violent] language” on which Babel’s autobiographical narrators dote, and the effete, intellectual sphere of action to which they tend to be confined.\textsuperscript{28} In Kataev’s exaggerated account, the ironically nicknamed “cavalryman” is hard pressed to win a battle with a single word, let alone another soldier.

Kataev’s most audacious rewriting of Babel’s legacy comes when he sets up his own artistic doctrine of “Mauvism,” in opposition to the “childish disease of Flaubertism” that paralyses Babel with “horror before an insufficiently artistically placed adjective or even punctuation mark” (AMV 203). Congratulating himself on having “freed myself from these prejudices thought up for us by literary theorists and critics with no sense of beauty,” Kataev goes on to offer his latest definition of Mauvism:\textsuperscript{29}

... It is simply a new form, come to replace the old. The replacement of the chronological connection with the associative connection. The replacement of the search for beauty with the search for authenticity, no matter how “bad” this authenticity might seem. In French, “mauvais”—that is, “bad.” In a word, again—Mauvism. (AMV 204, my emphasis)

\textsuperscript{28} For a discussion of the autobiographicity of Babel’s narrators, see Chapter Three, above. For an insightful discussion of Liutov’s attempts to master the “masculine language” of Red Cavalry, see Eliot Borenstein, Men Without Women: Masculinity and Revolution in Russian Fiction, 1917-1929 (Durham: Duke UP, 2000), 73-124.

\textsuperscript{29} Kataev offered numerous definitions, descriptions, and diagnoses of “Mauvism” in his works between 1965 and 1986. A cogent history of these is supplied by Borden in Chapter One of Writing Badly. Since I am only concerned with Mauvism insofar as it relates to the Odessa theme, I will limit myself to commenting on this particular, intriguingly worded, description.
For all Kataev’s bravado about “freedom” from the tyranny of careful word choice, the choice of words here (as elsewhere in *My Diamond Crown*) is highly significant. In the service of his supposed polemic with Babel, Kataev has calmly appropriated Babel’s own signature vocabulary: “Authenticity,” the motto supposedly “inscribed on Babel’s shield”;30 “bad” writing, which Babel had famously eulogized in 1934; even the little flourish of French. In fact, the choice of a French-derived name for Kataev’s “school” of “bad writing” can only be intended as an affirmation of Mauvism’s Babelian pedigree.31

This usurping of Babel’s metonyms can be read as Kataev’s de-Messianization of Babel, in preparation for his own self-coronation as Pushkin’s heir at the end of *My Diamond Crown*. By 1977, Soviet literature had had plenty of occasion to reflect upon the probable destiny of a literary “Messiah”: namely, destruction at the hands of the temporal rulers. In appropriating Babel’s quest for personal authenticity, his appeal on behalf of “bad” writing, and his Francophilism, Kataev arguably appropriates the very qualities that led to Babel’s downfall—the equivalent of picking up the cross after the danger of crucifixion is over. At the same time, Kataev’s overthrow of Babel and coronation of himself, like his topsy-turvy logic in interpreting Babel’s reticence as ostentation and proclaiming “bad” writing to be good, is reminiscent of the “upside-down” world of carnival. Perhaps Kataev is crowning himself, after all, not as Pushkin’s successor, but as Lord of Misrule. Most likely of all, in typically Odessan fashion, he is doing both at once.

30 See above, p. 139.

31 Borden (*Writing Badly*, 25) traces the roots of Mauvism to Babel’s “writing badly” speech. I will not repeat his conclusions here but expand upon them.
MAUVISM AS ODESSANISM

Mauvism itself was conceived by Kataev precisely as a form of carnival—that is to say, as an inversion of “normal,” everyday values, in this case those of official art. The establishment of Socialist Realism as the official method of Soviet art in 1934 was thematized, at the first Congress of Soviet Writers, as the death knell of “bad” writing. The theme, introduced by Leonid Sobolev, was amplified by Gorky in his speech, and finally formed the peroration of Babel’s address:

Following Gorky, I would like to say that on our standard should be written Sobolev’s words, that everything is given to us by the Party and the government, and only one right has been taken away—to write badly.

Comrades, let us not conceal it. The right to write badly is a very important right indeed, and not a little is being taken away from us. It was a privilege which we used extensively.

So then, comrades, let’s give up this privilege, and may God help us. Or rather, since there is no God, we’ll help ourselves.33

Kataev, in turn, resurrects explicitly “bad” writing as an antidote to the “good” writing of Socialist Realism. That it is a resurrection rather than a true innovation is revealed not only by the Babel-derived name Kataev chose for his method, but by the characteristics he associates with it in the definition quoted above: a new organizing principle (the supersession of chronolinearity by “associative” connections), and a new aesthetic criterion (“authenticity” rather than “beauty,” where “beauty” arguably stands for conformity to the official aesthetics of Socialist Realism). Both these characteristics call for a subjective turn in literature: the “objective” structuring matrix of time is to be


replaced with the subjective patterns supplied by the personal memories and perceptions of the narrator, and the collective standard of beauty is to be abandoned in favor of the individual author’s fidelity to the “authentic.”

Implicit in the rejection of conventional chronological structure is a further kind of “badness”: a repudiation of the teleological perspective of Socialist Realism, in which chronological progression necessarily entails historical progress. In his proto-Socialist-Realist production novel, *Time, Forward!* (Vremia, vpered!, 1932), Kataev had adhered to an exceptionally rigid chronological structure, confining the action to a single twenty-four-hour period, the better to emphasize the novel’s titular theme—the race to cram ever more production into the same unit of time. Moreover, the brisk forward motion and strict “tempo” exemplified by the novel’s form and celebrated in its content were explicitly associated with Stalin, by means of his famous speech to the eighteenth Party Congress (1931), from which characters quote verbatim near the beginning and end of the novel:

> The tempo must not be reduced! On the contrary, we must increase it as much as is within our powers and possibilities. This is dictated to us by our obligations to the workers and peasants of the USSR. This is dictated to us by our obligations to the working class of the whole world.

> To slacken the tempo would mean falling behind. And those who fall behind get beaten. But we do not want to be beaten. No, we refuse to be beaten! One feature of the history of old Russia was the continual beatings she suffered because of her backwardness. [...] All beat her because of her backwardness, military backwardness, cultural backwardness, political backwardness, industrial backwardness, agricultural backwardness.

> That is why we must no longer lag behind.\(^{34}\)

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\(^{34}\) J. V. Stalin, “Speech to the 18th Party Congress” [February, 1931], in *Problems of Leninism* (Moscow, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1953) 454-455.
As a Mauvist writer, Kataev not only dismantles strict chronological structure but embraces “backwardness”: he frankly indulges in nostalgia, writing almost exclusively about events and personages from his youth, and confesses to his own inability to adjust, for example, to the new position of Pushkin’s statue in Moscow. Kataev, in 1932 the champion of “temps,” makes it his business in My Diamond Crown to profess the opposite philosophy—to “lag behind.”

Of the numerous ways in which writing, viewed from a Socialist Realist perspective, could be “bad,” Kataev thus seems to emphasize two in particular: the privileging of the personal over the universal, and the privileging of the past over the future. The “right to write badly” that he exercises here is strongly reminiscent of the “right” claimed by Olesha in his speech to the first Congress of Soviet Writers, delivered the day before Babel’s:

...I have come to the conclusion that my greatest wish is the right to preserve the colors of my youth, the freshness of my vision, to defend that vision from assertions that it is not needed, from accusations that it is vulgar and worthless.35

Where Babel, albeit with reservations, acquiesces to the loss of the right to write badly, Olesha here seems to reassert his right to a kind of writing that others have called “vulgar and worthless,” that is, “bad.” Among these others was Kataev, who in a 1933 interview had applied a series of lethal adjectives—“decadent,” “uncultured,” “useless”—to Olesha’s writing.36 Olesha seems to enter into a polemic with Kataev when he goes on to say, with a faintly contemptuous inflection,

35 Iurii Olesha, “Speech to the First Congress of Soviet Writers” [August 22, 1934], in Envy and Other Works, tr. Andrew R. MacAndrew (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1967), 216. Subsequent citations from this speech will be given in parentheses in the text.

I could have gone out on a construction site, lived in a factory among the workers and described them in an article or even in a novel. But that was not my theme, the theme in my blood, in my breath. I couldn’t handle that subject matter as a true artist. I would have been forced to contrive, to lie. (216)

While Kataev, alone among the Odessans, had done precisely that—“gone among the workers” to create a novel pre-empted the official adoption of Socialist Realism by the Writers’ Union at that same 1934 meeting—Olesha was struggling to redeem his attraction to the past (“the colors of my youth”) and the subjectivity of his vision. Even his speech to the Congress is an autobiographical narrative; after a single sentence of abstract generalization (“There is good and bad in every man”) the personal pronoun “I” makes its appearance, and never disappears for very long thereafter. He reveals that Envy, too, was in some measure autobiographical:

Six years ago, I wrote the novel Envy.
The main character of my story was Nikolai Kavalerov. People told me that Kavalerov had many of my traits, that it was an autobiographical portrait; that, indeed, Kavalerov was me.
Yes, Kavalerov did look at the world through my eyes.
[...
But then, people declared that Kavalerov was a vulgar, worthless man. Knowing that Kavalerov embodied so much of myself, I took these accusations personally and was shocked. (215)

Earlier, Olesha has asserted that “a fictional character can kill an artist,” suggesting a world in which fictional characters come to life and surpass their creators; now, distraught by the world’s rejection of him in the guise of Kavalerov, he undergoes the reverse process, turning himself, in stages, into a fictional beggar:

I imagined myself as a beggar. [...] But then creative imagination came into play. [...] I decided to write a story about a beggar. [...] I became a beggar, actually a real beggar. (215)
Olesha’s beggar-self wanders the countryside until one day he finds a ruined wall punctuated by a mysterious portal, passes through it, and finds his youth magically restored. This fictional return to the past translates in real life to a twofold epiphany: that his own past is not “vulgar and worthless” but valuable and usable; and that, as an artist, he “can only write about things that are in him.” He recommits himself to the past and the personal.

The Kataev who is adumbrated in Olesha’s speech is, for obvious reasons, the teleological Kataev of *Time, Forward!*. However, the metaphor of the door in the wall—an image borrowed from an H. G. Wells story and associated with nostalgia for an innocent and inaccessible past—provided the later Kataev with a chance to write himself retroactively into Olesha’s speech, by naming his first Mauvist work, *The Little Iron Door in the Wall* (Malen’kaia zheleznaia dver’ v stene, 1964), for the same Wellsian image. By exploiting this opportunity for retroactive intertextuality, Kataev nails his colors to the mast of “bad” writing, Olesha-style, and reasserts his claim to the mantle of “Odessan” writing—to the colors of the youth that he shared with Olesha.

*MY DIAMOND CROWN AND THE “SOUTHWEST SCHOOL”*

Asked point-blank about the “Southwest school,” Kataev is reported by one reviewer to have exclaimed:

“What school! What Southwest! That muddle-head [*putanik*] Shklovsky, for whom the most important thing on earth was to have a label, took the name from Bagritsky and stuck it on whomever he felt like, and now everyone repeats it after him like parrots: ‘Southwest!’ But in actual fact, what Southwest? two stories by Babel, three poems by

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37 For a detailed discussion of the uses to which this motif was put in Russian literature, see Richard Borden, “H.G. Wells’ ‘The Door in the Wall’ in Russian Literature,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 36, no. 3 (Fall 1992).
Bagritsky! I created a school: Mauvism. Yes, that is a school; it has its principles, I have followers; whereas the Southwest is just an invention of Shklovsky’s, because he is a theorist, and a theorist isn’t a theorist unless he thinks up some kind of school.”³⁸

Despite his disregard for Shklovsky’s “theorizing,” Kataev nonetheless grounds his narrative of the 1920s in Shklovsky’s vocabulary, referring (AMV 29) to himself and Bagritsky as “Levantines”—the term Shklovsky used to explain the Odessans’ orientation toward the West—and insisting upon his own affinity for the Mediterranean, particularly Italy, in addition to claiming Gogol as a relative. Kataev’s nickname for Bagritsky, ptitselov (birdhunter, from Bagritsky’s eponymous 1918 poem), also calls to mind Shklovsky’s epithet for him, ptitsevod (bird raiser).

My Diamond Crown’s closest rival, the memoirs of “that old liar, Paustovsky,” is also invoked, though Paustovsky himself is not admitted to Kataev’s pseudonymous circle. In addition to satirizing Paustovsky’s portrait of Babel (see above), Kataev competes with Paustovsky over the figure of Bagritsky, who, however, represents in Kataev’s text much the same principle that he stands for in Paustovsky’s: the interweaving of “stories” with “real life.” In My Diamond Crown, Kataev credits himself with “dragging the birdhunter to Moscow,” away from the circle of young poets, his passionate and faithful disciples, for whom he was a deity. [...] Arriving from Moscow and seeing this picture, I realized that leaving the birdhunter in Odessa was impossible. He would perish. He needed to move immediately to Moscow, where the whole flower of the young Russian Soviet literature had already gathered (AMV 49-50).

Bagritsky, so naive and provincial that he doesn’t believe Kataev’s assurances that there will be a restaurant car on the train, brings provisions in his suitcase, including a block of brynza (sheep’s-milk cheese) wrapped in a copy of The Seaman, the paper over

³⁸ L’vov, “Prostota neslykhannoi eresi,” 166.
which Paustovsky had presided during his tenure in Odessa and acquaintance with
Bagritsky. The reduction of Paustovsky’s periodical to food wrap is an appropriately
scornful image to mark the transition of Bagritsky from Paustovsky’s provinces to
Kataev’s Moscow.

Kataev also seems to be in dialogue with Paustovsky when he presents his
version of the “where were you when you heard Blok was dead” story, which occupies
a major role in Paustovsky’s memoir as well. In A Time of Great Expectations, I.
Livshits brings the news from town and entreats Paustovsky, “Go to Isaac
Emmanuilovich [Babel] and tell him about it....I can’t.” Paustovsky goes, but cannot
bring himself to break the news. There follows a chapter dedicated to recording the
ways in which Odessan writers commemorated Blok’s death:

In those days we spoke endlessly of Blok. Somehow toward
evening, Bagritsky came from town. He stayed the night with us and
practically all night recited Blok. Izya [Livshits] and I lay silently on the
dark terrace. The night wind rustled in the dry leaves of the grapevine.

[...]

“Well, orphans,” said Babel with warmth, “what on earth are we
going to do now? We’ll never live to see a second Blok, even if we wait
two hundred years.”

“Did you ever see him?” I asked Babel.
I expected Babel to answer “no,” which would be a relief. I was
generally free from the sentiment of envy. But all those who had seen
and heard Blok in person, I envied long and hard.39

But Babel had met Blok, and proceeds to describe him, purposefully dismantling
Paustovsky’s expectations (“He was not at all a fallen angel, or an incarnation of
rarefied thoughts and feelings”), then, like Bagritsky, to quote Blok’s verses from
memory. Almost imperceptibly, the mood of Paustovsky’s narrative shifts from

39 Paustovskii, Vremia bol’shikh ochidaniii, 150-52.
eulogizing Blok to admiration of Babel. The sequel to this episode is the conversation with Bagritsky that I cited in Chapter Three, in which Bagritsky (embodying his function as a symbol for “fabulism” in everyday life) parrots “an outlandish jumble” from Babel’s speech about Blok, to Paustovsky’s and Lifshits’ s amusement.

For Kataev, too, the moment when he learns of Blok’s death is an experience shared with an Odessan colleague, in this case, Olesha:

We went hungry for the second day running. There was absolutely nothing to be done. We went out onto the dry, littered square, heated to burning point by the midday Ukrainian sun, and suddenly saw, displayed behind the glass of a long-unwashed telegraph agency display window, a portrait of Aleksandr Blok. It was in a red and black calico frame.

We froze, as if struck by lightning:

our treasured dream had been someday to see Blok in the flesh, to hear his voice. We read the telegram displayed alongside the portrait, where the death of Blok was succinctly announced.

[...]

In one moment, all the musical and visual elements of his poetry, which had long since become a part of our souls, coursed through our imagination.

“In an unmown ditch... beautiful and young... There is no name for you, my distant one... All valor I forgot and noble deeds... [etc.]

(AMV 83)

In common with Paustovsky, Kataev remembers (or purports to remember) Blok’s death as a shared experience, one that connects Kataev to his Odessan roots as well as to his sense of Blok as a “father” to all the writers of the Odessan (i.e., Revolutionary) generation, now become “orphans.” The similarities between the two accounts—the dry heat, the supine mourning attitude, the spontaneous quotation of memorized verses—do not need to be deliberate to be striking. Whether Kataev intended his reminiscence to complement or compete with Paustovsky’s, the intertextuality works.
Bagritsky, the only writer of whom Kataev and Paustovsky both speak in warm personal terms, serves a similar purpose in *My Diamond Crown* to Babel and Kuprin in *A Time of Great Expectations*: that is, as the teller of stories that come true. Bearing out Paustovsky’s claim in *The Golden Rose* that Bagritsky’s stories “became woven into the texture of his life,” making it “impossible to distinguish between fact and fiction,” Bagritsky provides Kataev in *My Diamond Crown* with “memories” of things not yet seen:

...Having made our way through the subtropical garden with its pomegranate trees, fig trees, and strange never-before-seen flowers, we felt the damp warmth of the stagnant air and found ourselves before a natural stone wall of unusual height. One could imagine that this was forever petrified smooth grey waterfall, motionlessly cascading from somewhere in the heights of the cloudless Sicilian sky. In that moment it seemed to me that I had seen that grey wall somewhere before, or at least heard about it.

But where? When? *(AMV 28)*

It is only when the tour guide announces, “Signori, your attention. Before you is the grotto Dioniso, the grotto of Dionysus,” that Kataev recalls an early Bagritsky poem (“Dionis,” 1915), describing the scene exactly:

I heard the gasping athsmatic voice of the young birchunter—a schoolboy, apostrophizing from the farcical afternoon half-dark of the summer theater to the antique god:

“Dionysus! Dionysus! Dionysus!”

“There, where the cold gray projection throws itself down in the form of a waterfall, I shout in the silent cave: Dionysus! Dionysus! Dionysus!” *(AMV 28-29)*

The guide goes on to explain that in this cave, “the god Dionysus first pressed grapes and taught mankind to make wine.” “Well, of course!” responds Kataev, slightly misquoting (as is his wont throughout *My Diamond Crown*, another of the ways in

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40 Paustovskii, *op. cit.*, 209.
which “reality” is made to conform to his subjectivity rather than the other way around):

"You went off into the turquoise grottos to press the golden grape." That is, he is again presented with a fact that he “already knows” from a long-ago poem by Bagritsky. “But,” he marvels,

how could that boy from Remeslennaya Street, who had never left his native city, who had spent the greater part of his life on a mezzanine to which one had to climb from the kitchen by means of a painted wooden ladder [...] —how could he with such precision imagine the grotto of Dionysus? (AMV 29)

Kataev suggests both supernatural (“telepathy? clairvoyance?”) and prosaic (“some merchant sailor from the Odessa-Syracuse route”) sources for Bagritsky’s mysterious knowledge of the grotto, but the mystery is insusceptible of solution, for Bagritsky is long dead—“the first of us Levantines to depart for that country whence there is no return” (AMV 29). Yet the word “Levantine” at this crucial juncture provides a clue; in Shklovsky’s “South-West,” this term had been used to indicate an affinity among the peoples of the Mediterranean—East and West. Bagritsky may never have seen Dionysus’s grotto in the flesh, but he enjoyed a spiritual affinity with the people who saw it every day. His “Dionysus” poem is another example of a theme “appropriated...via the West.”

41 The full text of Bagritsky’s poem is available in the excellent online Russian poetry archives at http://www.litera.ru/stixiya/authors/bagrickij.html (last checked June 15, 2004). The first two stanzas, which Kataev is quoting (slightly inaccurately, and ostensibly from memory) here, run as follows:

Там, где выступ холодный и серый
Водопад свергается вниз,
Я кричу у безмолвной пещеры:
"Дионис! Дионис! Дионис!"

Утомясь после долгой охоты,
Запьвив свой пурпурный наряд,
Он ушел в бирюзовые гrotты
Выжимать золотой виноград...

42 Shklovskii, “Iugo-zapad,” 472; see Chapter One, above.
In short, though Kataev overtly rejects Shlovsky’s theory of a “South-West school,” using Mauvism as a counter-example of a real “school,” he makes use of several elements of the “South-West” theory, without apology or fanfare, in My Diamond Crown. The reference to “Levantines,” the choice to title Bagritsky’s character after one of his own poems (as Shklovsky had titled his article), the revelation of Bagritsky’s absorption of a “Western” theme and image into his early poetry, and Kataev-narrator’s own search for the “land of eternal spring” in Western Europe, are all ways in which My Diamond Crown pays homage to Shklovsky. Similarly, the chain-links between “South-Westernism” and “Mauvism” turn out, as I have argued above, to be not dividing but connecting them.

Beyond the conversation with Shklovsky, we can see an Odessan pattern in My Diamond Crown as follows:

(1) The text constitutes a complex response to Babel and Olesha’s famous 1934 speeches at the All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, into which speeches Kataev retrospectively writes himself as the reviver of “writing badly” in the 1960s.

(2) Kataev employs a quasi-autobiographical voice that, like Babel’s, fosters an expectation (amply attested in the criticism) of “truth” in his readers, even as his text is explicitly and flamboyantly fictionalized.

(3) Like Babel and Olesha, Kataev engages in a carnivalesque reconciliation of seemingly disparate elements, concurrently playing two opposite roles: Pushkin’s heir and Lord of Misrule.

(4) He further elaborates upon the quintessentially “Odessan” theme of stories that come true, showcasing the transitions between fiction and fact (or, to underline the
kinship with Babel and Paustovsky, between “improvisation” and “authenticity”) that we have previously identified with Babel, Paustovsky, and (in both Paustovsky’s and Kataev’s works) Bagritsky. In *My Diamond Crown*, these transitions operate in both directions, and in a number of different ways: events from history, fictionalized by Pushkin in *Boris Godunov*, are de-fictionalized by Kataev’s “autobiographical” narrator who adopts them into his “real life.” Similarly, a legend about the god Dionysus, invented to explain certain “real-life” phenomena (the natural grotto, the discovery of wine), is further literarized by Bagritsky in his “Dionysus” poem, only to be reincorporated into “real life” by Kataev more than half a century later.

KATAEV AND OLESHA

A much-discussed function of *My Diamond Crown*, one I have not discussed much here, is the posthumous rehabilitation, not of Yury Olesha himself, but of Kataev’s relationship to Olesha. For critics who counted Olesha among Stalin’s victims, this was one of the most difficult aspects of the book to swallow. The Kataev who in 1933 had denounced Olesha’s use of metaphor as “decadent” now devotes several paragraphs to rhapsodizing about those same metaphors; having shown himself rather a fair-weather friend to Olesha, he now refers to the latter as “my best friend”; where Olesha had ruminated in *No Day Without a Line* that he did not remember quite how he ended up writing satirical verse for *The Whistle*, Kataev now steps in to take the credit; he even has the effrontery to criticize the title given to *No Day Without a Line* by its editors (who included Olesha’s widow and his brother-in-law Viktor Shklovsky), claiming that

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43 Yuri Olesha, *Ni dnia bez strochki* [No Day Without a Line] (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1965), 140. Henceforth, page references to this work will be given in parentheses in the text, as follows: (*ND 140*).
Olesha had expressed his true wishes (that the book be entitled Proshchanie s zhizn'iu, “A Farewell to Life”) to him, Kataev, in a private conversation. All this stands in vivid contrast to the self-effacing tones in which Olesha speaks of Kataev in No Day: “Kataev writes better than I. He has written a lot; I, only fragments, a collection of metaphors” (ND 161).

Despite the somewhat marginal literary status accorded to No Day Without a Line on account of its posthumous redaction, critics have identified numerous ways in which this text seems to have been crucial to the development of Kataev’s Mauvism. At the very least, the parallels between No Day and subsequent Mauvist works such as My Diamond Crown are highly suggestive. First of all, as I shall discuss, No Day is a highly subjective autobiographical text (one almost cannot call it a “narrative”), in which the actual events and objects described are of secondary importance to the consciousness of the person describing them. Secondly, Olesha’s text is, so to speak, “shattered”—written entirely in “fragments” (otryvki, a word Olesha uses repeatedly to describe his project)—presaging the discontinuous narratives (held together by subjective “association,” rather than chronolinearity) of Kataev’s Mauvist works, and in particular the form of his A Shattered Life (Razbitaia zhizn’, ili vol’shebnyi rog oberona, 1972), which presents a narrative of the author’s Odessa childhood in the “fragmented” form of a hundred and twenty short stories, related to but not dependent on each other. (Victor Peppard suggests, fruitfully, that this “fragmented” structure is continuous with Olesha’s Modernist commitment to the “principle of montage”—a technique also favored by the early Kataev.44) Third, Olesha deliberately blurs the line

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between autobiography and fiction (and, not incidentally, confounds genre) by referring to this fragmentary work as an “autobiographical novel” (ND 10). Fourth, Olesha foregrounds the fallibility, spontaneity, and capriciousness of memory, letting misremembered facts and quotations stand in the text even when he acknowledges them, so that the structure of memory becomes the basis for the structure of the book. Finally, in common with Babel and Paustovsky as well as Kataev, Olesha shows an explicit interest in “stories that come true” as well as in “truths” (lived experiences) that become stories.

The major difference between the style of No Day and that of Kataev’s My Diamond Crown is one of tone. Where Kataev expresses pride in (and takes full credit for) the literary idiosyncrasies described in the foregoing paragraph, Olesha seems to apologize for them:

So what if I write fragments, not finishing them; I am still writing! It is still a kind of literature—perhaps even the only kind in a certain sense: maybe such a psychological type as I, in such a historical time as now, actually can’t write in any other way—and if he does write, and to some degree knows how to write, then let him write, even in this way. (ND 11)

This contrast in tone between the two authors—ebullient Kataev and apologetic Olesha—is nothing new; indeed, as Elizabeth Beaujour suggests in “The Imagination of Failure,” Olesha’s first-person narratives (including Envy, No Day, and several of his short stories) “form a coherent image that we are asked to contemplate: the self-portrait of the artist as failure,” whereas Kataev seems never to have doubted that he could succeed at the genre of the moment: NEP satire (The Embezzlers), the production novel (Time, Forward!), Socialist Realism (the Black Sea Waves tetralogy), and finally the

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“confessional prose” of the Thaw and post-Thaw periods. As Beaujour points out, Olesha’s defeatism is as much of a literary pose as Kataev’s triumphalism is: “Not only does Olesha omit the successes that were in fact his, but even among the failures he writes only about those, personal and artistic, of which he could say, paraphrasing Kavalerov, “It’s not my fault; it’s their fault.”\textsuperscript{46} Even when Olesha and Kataev are doing virtually the same thing—writing associative, fragmented and subjective reminiscences about the 1910s and ‘20s—Olesha presents himself as a victim of the times, Kataev as a proud innovator. This contrast, between the “forward” Kataev and the “backward” Olesha, not only informs the two writers’ personal (and mutual) mythologies, but to a large extent conditions their reception: where Kataev is criticized for “opportunism,” Olesha is held to exemplify “the indisputable absence of artistic compromise.”\textsuperscript{47}

THE OLESHA OF \textit{NO DAY WITHOUT A LINE}

Despite its importance as a milestone in the post-Stalinist autobiographical canon,\textsuperscript{48} \textit{No Day Without a Line} has suffered even more than Babel’s “autobiographical” stories

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{47} E. Kazakevich, reminiscence in O. Suok-Olesha and E. Pel’son, eds., \textit{Vospominaniiia o Iurii Oleshe}, (Moscow: Sov. pisatel’, 1975), 294. Arkadii Belinkov, in his \textit{Sdacha i gibel’ sovetskogo intelligenta. Iurii Olesha} (Madrid, 1976; reprint Moscow: RIK “Kul’tura,” 1997) is at pains to correct this view of Olesha, pointing out that he was not above toeing the Party line on occasion and attributing his loss of stature after 1934 to his own weakness, rather than a heroic refusal to write insincerely. However, the fact that Belinkov felt so strongly that it should be dispelled (and devoted 500 pages to doing so) indicates the power of the myth.

\textsuperscript{48} Violetta Gudkova writes, “Today it seems that the ‘confessional prose’ of the new generation of writers, which made a lot of noise at the end of the ’fifties, counts Olesha’s books among its direct literary predecessors. They [Olesha’s books] even became the catalyst for the later works of V. Kataev—\textit{The Grass of Oblivion} and \textit{Holy Well} with their ‘Mauvism’ that did not catch on....” (V. Gudkova, “O Iurii Karloviche Oleshe e ego knige, vyshe deshe bez vedoma avtora,” introductory article to Iu. Olesha, \textit{Kniga proshchaniia} [Moscow: Vagrius, 1999], 19. Translations from this article are mine.) See also Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour, \textit{The Invisible Land: A Study of the Artistic Imagination of Iurii Olesha} (New York: Columbia UP, 1970), 174.
from being freely plundered as a source of "authentic" records concerning Olesha's thoughts on various subjects, while simultaneously underexamined as a work of art because of its problematic origins: Borden articulates the conventional wisdom when he says, "Since the author himself was not involved in the final structuring, _No Day Without a Line_ cannot be analyzed for structural intent." While, certainly, Olesha's intentions regarding the structure of the book cannot be discerned, the structure imparted by Shklovsky et al. to the 1965 version of the book undoubtedly organizes the reader's reception of its contents, and should not be excluded from critical analysis. Before proceeding with such an analysis, it will be useful to give a brief account of the genesis and evolution of the book.

According to Judson Rosengrant, it was not until 1954, twenty years after his passionate speech to the First Congress of Soviet Writers, that Olesha began to work on _No Day_ in a concentrated way. In the intervening two decades, he had written and published a great deal of material in a wide variety of genres—articles, sketches, stories, screenplays, and radio commentaries—but the relative lack of critical attention to these works both at home and abroad, which continues to this day, give the effect of a long silence between Olesha's stories of the 1930s and the first, partial publication of _No

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49 Borden, _The Art of Writing Badly_, 143.

50 The edition produced by Shklovskii, Suok-Olesha, et al., in 1965 is no longer definitive, having been superseded by the more comprehensive edition produced by Violetta Gudkova in 1999 (v. _infra_). However, as the only stand-alone edition of the text in book form before 1999, and the one chosen for translation into English (Ardis, 1979), it is arguably the most widely-read version of Olesha's reminiscences, as well as the one referred to by Kataev and in most of the existing criticism.

51 Judson Rosengrant, Introduction to Yury Olesha, _No Day Without a Line_, tr. and ed. Judson Rosengrant (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979), 18. It should be noted that in the 1999 edition of Olesha's "diary," which includes the material published in _No Day Without a Line_, and retains dates where the author saw fit to note them, the earliest fragment is dated January 20, 1930.
Day in 1956. Olesha himself, in No Day, seems to cultivate the suspense surrounding the prospect of his working on a substantial piece of fiction again, reporting a conversation at the Writer’s Club with the poet E. Tarakhovskaia in which the latter asks him, “Is it true that you’ve written an autobiographical novel?” and expresses disappointment when Olesha denies the rumor. “From all sides I heard about my novel,” continues Olesha:

Well, obviously, they really want me to write it, if they believe in this rumor and even spread it around themselves. Maybe I have to write it, if that’s what my contemporaries want? Moreover, they suggest the form—an autobiographical novel... That, incidentally, shows an understanding of the nature of my writings.
Should I try it?
Well, here’s the beginning. (ND 10)

In this fragment, Olesha establishes not only an appetite for his work, but also the genre to which the work is to belong, subverting that same genre all the while: if No Day is to be considered a novel, it is far from a conventional one. Consisting entirely of such “fragments” (otryvki), each more or less self-contained and tending to center on a single theme or incident, the book pursues no single narrative thread, although it is loosely held together by certain themes and motifs, and, of course, by Olesha’s whimsical, wistful, perceptive narrating voice. Some of these fragments were published before Olesha’s death, in Literaturnaia Moskva (1956; 2:721-51) and in his Selected Works (Izbrannye sochineniiia, 1956), but Olesha continued producing them until his

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52 The question of Olesha’s ersatz “silence” is addressed forcefully by Arkadii Belinkov in Sdacha i gibel’..., where it forms part of the author’s argument against the received mythology of Olesha as (in Belinkov’s words) “a great martyr.” See Sdacha i gibel’..., 482-491; also Peppard, The Poetics of Yury Olesha, 12-14, and Rosengrant, Introduction to No Day Without a Line, 17-18.
death in 1960, leaving behind “piles of papers, filled with variants of the book No Day Without a Line.”

Selections from the papers were again published, in Oktiabr' under the title “Nidnia bez stroki” [sic], in 1961; but it was not until 1965 that No Day appeared in book form, having been collected, selected, sorted and organized into a semblance of wholeness by Olesha’s widow, Olga Olesha-Suok, and her brother-in-law, Viktor Shklovsky (with assistance, briefly, from Arkady Belinkov). Mikhail Gromov of the Moscow University Department of Journalism prepared the final copy, which included fragments that had not been previously published but also excluded some that had. Violette Gudkova has criticized the process of selection that determined the final contents of the book, a process she indicates was less deferential to the author’s presumed intent than Shklovsky’s tactful accounts imply:

Apart from the state censorship, there operated the censorship of the editor, which was not so much high-minded as sanctimonious.... Everything that shocked the editor, “didn’t appeal” to him, or where the editor “did not agree” with the author, was taken out.... On the archived pages one encounters annotations such as: “A complicated and strange entry that offers nothing to the reader.” Both epithets are characteristic: they looked for the simple and the habitual.

From Gudkova’s account it is clear that, while the creators of the 1965 edition followed Olesha’s stated intention in gathering his autobiographical fragments into a book, much of the material that Olesha would have preferred to include was omitted.

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54 The foregoing account of the evolution of the book is based on information given in Shklovskii’s preface to the 1965 edition of Ni dnia bez strochki; in Rosengrant’s Introduction to the 1979 translation of No Day; in Belinkov, Sdacha i gibel’...; and in Beaujour, “The Imagination of Failure” and The Invisible Land.

Completeness aside, how much of the book's structure can be said to be Olesha's? Shklovsky mentions "plans" left by Olesha, but appears to be referring to passing comments in Olesha's personal correspondence (at least, this is all he quotes) rather than a comprehensive schema. In 1954, Olesha wrote to his mother:

By the way, I am now writing a book of reminiscences -- really deeper than reminiscences, but the form of this book is closer to reminiscences than to anything else. Odessa appears in it, with the years of childhood and Gymnasium there. So that I find myself now in the sphere of childhood, and in proximity to you...⁵⁶

The editors have converted this rather vague description into a structural blueprint, emphasizing the themes of "Childhood" and "Odessa" by naming the first two sections of the book after them and organizing the relevant fragments accordingly. (The reader will not fail to notice that these two subjects are also extensively used by both Kataev and Babel.) Thus, fragments dealing with childhood themes and reminiscences appear in the first section, while the "Odessa" section centers on the Gymnasium, paralleling the progression of Babel's childhood stories, and emphasizing the importance of "time" and "place," respectively, to Olesha's sense of self. The third section, "Moscow," coincides in time and space with the action of Kataev's My Diamond Crown. The final two sections, organized along thematic rather than spatiotemporal lines, take place primarily in the present tense; these contain reflections that coincide with the time of writing, rather than harking back to the past. Part Four, "The Golden Shelf" (Zolotaia polka), contains Olesha's comments on works of literature and occasionally on the other arts, taking its title from the fragment placed first in the section, which explains, "The golden shelf is the one on which favorite

⁵⁶ As quoted by Shklovskii in his preface to Ni dnia bez strochki, 5.
books are placed" (ND 187). Part Five, “The Wonderful Intersection” (Ud<em>vitel’nyi perekrestok</em>)—also named for a vivid image in its first-placed fragment—contains fragments that are valedictory in tone, focusing on old age, death, and the narrator’s reflections on his physical surroundings.

The merits of the structure imposed by Shklovsky <em>et al.</em> are several: it follows the few guiding remarks left by the author, it creates a more or less chronological narrative despite the impossibility of determining either the exact chronology of the fragments or the exact order in which they were composed;<sup>57</sup> and it <em>does</em> appear to arise organically from the thematics of the fragments themselves, which can by and large be said to fall into the five types represented by the five parts of the finished book, with a sixth type—Olesha’s metaliterary reflections on what he is writing, and <em>how</em>—being scattered throughout the book, but heavily concentrated in the early pages of Part One. As Jusdon Rosengrant suggests, “the result is not necessarily what Olesha had in mind, and certainly not without its questionable and even careless decisions, [but] it remains a basically cogent alternative.”<sup>58</sup> The question is whether the book as we know it is not in fact rather <em>too</em> cogent. By compensating for the “disintegrated” nature of the text as well as it does, creating the illusion of something not entirely unlike a conventional autobiography, the “organic” structure preferred by Olesha’s editors distracts the reader from the ways in which Olesha has manifestly suited form to content in <em>No Day</em>.

Although Olesha maintains his traditional pose of artistic failure by implying, in one above-quoted fragment, that he writes in <em>otryvki</em> because he has lost the ability to

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<sup>57</sup> According to Violetta Gudkova, the papers in the “pile” left by Olesha were more often than not dated, but frequently only by day and month, without the year (Gudkova, “O Iurii Karloviche Oleshe e ego knigye...” 21).

<sup>58</sup> Rosengrant, Introduction to <em>No Day</em>..., 19.
produce anything more sustained, another fragment placed on the same page claims a completely different motive.

Contemporary prose items can have a value commensurate with the contemporary psyche only when they are written in one sitting. Reflections or reminiscences in twenty or thirty lines, maximum—that’s the contemporary novel.

The epic seems to me neither necessary nor even possible.

Books are now read in short intervals—in the metro, even on its escalators—so why on earth should a book be long? I can’t imagine a long-haul reader, one for the whole evening. In the first place there are millions of televisions; in the second, there are newspapers to be read. And so on. (ND 11)

This opinion, perfectly orthodox for a modernist of the 1910s or ’20s but quite remarkably unorthodox by the time it was penned, amid the studied grandiosity of Socialist Realism, exemplifies another of Olesha’s favorite poses, namely a quasi-childish political naïveté. No wonder Soviet critics thought Olesha had become somehow stuck in childhood, a victim to a kind of literary retardation brought on, perhaps, by the excessive consumption of fairytales in extreme youth; Olesha, with his

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59 Critics have generally followed one or other of Olesha’s leads in accounting for the fragmentary form of No Day: Chudakova (Masterstvo Iurii Oleshi, 94) and Belinkov (Sdacha i gibel’..., 478) are of the opinion that it constituted a deliberate artistic choice on Olesha’s part; Beaujour (Invisible Land, 175-76) and Peppard (Poetics of Yury Olesha, 49-50), that it signaled Olesha’s failure to manage anything more sustained. Rosengrant (Introduction to No Day..., 21-22), embraces both theories simultaneously.


61 This argument is made in an article summarized by Richard Borden in “The Magic and the Politics of Childhood: The Childhood Theme in the Works of Iurii Olesha, Valentin Kataev and Vladimir Nabokov” (PhD. diss., Columbia University, 1987). The article in question, I. S. Cherniauskaya, “Vospominania o detstve V. Kataeva i Iu. Oleshi,” in L. P. Sokolova, ed., Problemy detskoi literary (Petrozavodsk, 1976), is typical of Soviet literary biography in pointing to the dangers of an “incorrect” literary upbringing and the concomitant benefits of a “correct” one. Kataev, in contrast to Olesha, is credited with a healthy aesthetic outlook on childhood, the result of being raised on a wholesome diet of Russian “critical realists,” notably Nekrasov and Tolstoy. L. I. Skorino, in her Pisatel’ i ego vremia: Zhizn’ i tvorchestvo V. P. Kataeva (Moscow: Sovetskii Pisatel’, 1965), makes a similar point about Kataev (pp. 9-10). Borden himself implies that Olesha fled back into his childhood as an escape from a post-Revolutionary era whose values he could not assimilate, and calls No Day a “somewhat futile literary exercise,” evidence that Olesha “had, in a sense, been transformed into a literary ‘child’” (28).
twin poses of naïveté and helplessness, apparently adopted as a defense against the
demands of Socialist Realism, invites such a diagnosis. But it is not the whole story.
Rather, Olesha is trying to tell us, the child coexists with the man: all stages through
which the self has passed are present in the memory simultaneously, and this jumble of
impressions and attitudes, sometimes—perhaps inevitably—mutually contradictory, are
the substance of the self. Olesha’s “autobiographical novel,” seemingly devoid of plot
and structure, aims to reproduce the author’s concept of the self in textual form.

The Russian novel enjoys a noble tradition of defying generic expectations,
beginning famously with Pushkin’s “novel in verse,” Eugene Onegin, and Olesha’s
“novel in fragments” can be fruitfully seen as a participant in this tradition. We can
best understand No Day Without a Line not as Olesha’s literal attempt “to proceed
backwards through my life, as Marcel Proust managed to do in his time” (if judged
solely on the success of such a Proustian project, the book manifestly fails, as Beaujour
has pointed out), 62 but rather as a book about a character who wishes to do so. Indeed,
much as Kavalov “had many of [Olesha’s] traits” and “looked through [Olesha’s]
eyes,” the autobiographical narrator of Olesha’s fragmentary novel shares many traits
with Kavalov. He is completely sincere, but also unremittingly subjective, so that his
sincerity does not automatically translate into reliability—especially since he literally
sees things differently from the people around him. He is especially conscious of the
component bits of views: the play of light on a particular surface, the color of a person’s
hair, the pattern on a cup. He is a deeply nostalgic character (while not, of course, as

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While this seems to be, in part, what Olesha wants his readers (or at least some of them) to think, I do
not believe it is the whole story.

Century Literature 1, no. 2 (Spring 1977): 123-34.
unguardedly counterrevolutionary as Kavalerov was seen by critics to be); his chief concern is to bridge the fathomless gulf between the vividly remembered world of his childhood and the keenly observed world of his adult life as a writer. All these qualities make him both a particularly Oleshan and a particularly Odessan character.

The narrator's main project in *No Day Without a Line* is to solve the mystery of continuous identity, which means tackling the puzzle of memory: how does it work, what does it do, who (that is to say, which of his personae) is present when the writer of today recalls things that happened to the child of yesterday, and can his present-day self remember things of which his bygone self was not aware? In a passage highly reminiscent of the walks that open and close Babel's childhood stories, Olesha recalls being escorted by his grandmother to the *Gymnasium*:

My grandmother brought not a writer, but also a little boy [*ne literatora, a tozhe malen'kogo mal'chika*: a nice example of “Odessan” grammar]. He did not see everything that the writer recalls now. Maybe all of that never happened! No, it all did happen! Unquestionably, it was autumn and the leaves were falling... Unquestionably, sailing past me, they creaked at the sides, like ships. And like ships, they described, as they sailed around me, a circle—two or three twists of a spiral—and quietly settled on the asphalt, on the edge where there was already a large quantity of them, a whole perished fleet. Occasionally the breeze would turn some of them to face a different direction... No, the boy did see all of this—the writer only recalls it now and draws it out from among other recollections, but it was seen by that very boy whose grandmother had brought him there. (*ND* 61)

Olesha thus tackles head-on the central problem of modern autobiography theory, the strained relations between “truth” and “design,” *bios* and *graphein*, the accidental nature of experience and the deliberate nature of literary craft. Where, as we have seen, Babel offers his readers several models of autobiographical storytelling and challenges us to unpick the paradoxes they adumbrate, Olesha rather neatly solves the problem by
offering this central paradox—the seeming contradiction between “truth” (experience) and “design” (story)—as a dialogue between two stages of the self, which are not arranged in a hierarchy but rather are both necessary dimensions of the literary self-portrait.

The mechanism by which these serial selves are linked into a single sense of self is memory, but, as we already know, memory is elusive, a point Olesha brings to our attention in another fragment:

The work of memory is astonishing. We remember something for a reason completely unknown to us. Say to yourself, “Now I will remember something from my childhood.” Close your eyes and say it. What gets remembered will be something completely unforeseen. The participation of the will is excluded here. A picture lights up, switched on by some kind of engineers behind your consciousness. The devil take it, my will is almost not in me! Rather, it is beside me! How little it influences the whole me! How little place I, the conscious one, I, possessed of desires and a name, occupy in the whole me, which does not possess desires and a name! (ND 14)

Memory, Olesha suggests, rarely does one’s bidding; it does not appear to organize its stored information into a logical sequence, and it preserves vivid impressions of things that no longer exist—even, sometimes, of things that never existed. Moreover, since the remembering self is inevitably different (removed in time and space) from the observing self that recorded the original impressions, at least two separate consciousnesses are at work whenever the self looks back on its own history. Olesha takes precisely these characteristics as the structuring principles of his narrative. The reader of No Day Without a Line is forced to experience Olesha’s self as she (according to Olesha’s theory of memory) experiences her own: that is, in a series of vivid, isolated miniatures that the memory produces by an unpredictable method and in an ungovernable order.
Seen from this perspective, the editorial structure imposed on the fragments, with its contemplative frame that announces the project at the beginning and reflects upon it at the end, and with its overall sense of chronological movement from evocations of childhood to end-of-life meditations, appears as something of a disadvantage. The spontaneity and ungovernability of memory would be better represented by a random assortment of fragments. However, if the given structure impedes our understanding of “the work of memory,” it draws attention to “the work of reading”: that is, it replicates the work performed in the mind of the reader, for whom such chronological sorting is an important strategy for penetrating the autobiographical text. Olesha’s “autobiographical novel” is a hybrid of several recognizable novelistic categories, including the *Bildungroman*, *Künstlerroman* and literary memoir. The editorial structure (and this applies as well to structures other than the one chosen by Shklovsky *et al.*) performs some preliminary organizational work on this hybrid text, sorting the fragments roughly into generic categories.

One pleasing result of this organization is the way it invites the reader to trace the narrator’s shifting relationship to language and particularly to metaphor, a central feature of Olesha’s literary technique and one that has been extensively commented upon by critics both favorable and unfavorable to Olesha. 63 This relationship follows a trajectory similar to the “three ages of man” identified by Andrew Barratt in Olesha’s short story “Liompa,” which correspond to three ways of experiencing the relationship

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between name and thing. In “Liompa,” the “rubber boy,” youngest of the three symbolic characters in the story, has things but not words: “Things rushed to meet him. He smiled at them, not knowing any of them by name” (144). The middle character, “young Alexander” (a “boy” who nevertheless acts “in a perfectly adult way”), has both names and things, held in firm relationship to each other by means of “blueprints” and “laws” (143). The third figure, an old man on the verge of death, has only words, the things to which they correspond having fled in the order in which they recede from the zone of possible experience:

Every day fewer of these things were left. A familiar object like a railroad ticket was already irretrievably remote. First, the number of things on the periphery, far away from him, decreased; then this depletion grew closer to the center, reaching deeper and deeper, toward the courtyard, the house, the corridor, the room, his heart.

[...]

Then the disappearances began to occur at a mad rate, right there, alongside him: already the corridor had slipped out of reach and, in his very room, his shoes had lost all meaning (142).

The process by which things “disappear” is one of dematerialization, atrophy of res that leaves verba intact but bereft of referent: “the flesh of a thing disappeared while the abstraction remained” (144).

As Borden has pointed out, the stage of childhood represented by the “rubber boy”—not pre-verbal, but knowing only a limited number of words—is the “age of man” in which he is most productive of metaphors: “Basically, children use metaphors to assimilate and describe unfamiliar experience because comparison with what they

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65 Page references in parentheses are to the translation by Andrew R. MacAndrew, in Envy and Other Works, 141-45. I have made a few very minor adjustments to MacAndrew’s translation; the Russian text may be found in Olesha, Izbrannoe (Moscow: Khud. lit., 1974), 191-194.
already know and for which they already have a name is their lone option.”^66 Although this seemingly poetic activity reflects “not the inventiveness of the child’s imagination, but the poverty of his vocabulary,”^67 it is, as Borden convincingly argues, a significant source of inspiration for Olesha, and the basis of the frequently made observations that (a) Olesha’s style is particularly saturated with metaphors, and (b) these metaphors are of a kind that enables the reader to “see the world anew, like a child.”^68 The “three ages of man” exemplified in “Liompa,” then, represent not only the three stages of the human relationship with language, but also the progress of the inverse relationship between verbal mastery and “poetic” perception: the child perceives metaphorical relationships all over the place, but lacks the verbal mastery to exploit them; as he gains in mastery, the words become more and more firmly attached to their accepted, conventional referents, until at last he is left with words that are useless, since they cannot be divorced from their corresponding objects, and the actual objects that fall within his purview grow fewer and fewer.^69

*No Day Without a Line* works with the same progression, from effortless metaphor in the early, “Childhood” fragments—“the barber waited all in white, like a wafer”(19)—to painstaking, literal description in the later, present-tense ones:

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^69^ Interestingly, Gudkova reports a remark, supposedly made by Olesha to an acquaintance while riding up in the elevator, that again posits this inverse relationship between linguistic mastery and poetic production: “I didn’t know how to write, and it got written; today I know how, and it doesn’t get written!” (Gudkova, “O Iurii Karloviche Oleshe e ego knige...,” 17).
A duck tips its head forward into the water—do we notice how humorous and charming that motion is, do we laugh aloud, do we glance around to see what’s going on with the duck?

She’s not there! Where is she? She’s swimming underwater....wait, she’ll surface presently! She has surfaced, flinging away with a motion of her head such a spray of sparkling drops that it’s even hard to find a metaphor for them. (ND 301-302)

Both methods are evocative, but they reveal more than just the writer’s shifting relationship to language; they also say something about the nature of memory. Olesha’s narrator, though “old,” accesses the childish ease of metaphor through memory; his project, indeed, is largely concerned with using memory to unite the linguistic mastery (and independence from “things”) of old age with the metaphoric perception of extreme youth.

ODESSANISMS IN NO DAY WITHOUT A LINE

Leonid Rzhevsky, writing of the “mutual influence, or rather, mutual belonging” among what he calls the Odessan “pleiad,” singles out two salient characteristics of their writing:

1. the generosity and emotionalism of the colors;
2. the attitude of the author toward the object of his narration—irony, a half-smile, more rarely pathos—which so often determines the stylistic key.”

Although Rzhevsky abstracts these characteristics from a consideration of Babel’s prose, they are equally—if not more—applicable to Olesha, whose most famous “autobiographical” narrator-character, Kavalero, maintains what orthodox critics would consider a reprehensibly ironic attitude toward the New Soviet Men around him,

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and whose own depiction of that same Kavalerov could fairly be described as combining “a half-smile” with genuine pathos. Olesha’s sensitivity to color is also striking, and made explicit in his eulogy to “the colors of my youth,” at the First Congress of Soviet Writers.\(^71\) Colors form the basis of his affinity with Kavalerov: “Kavalerov’s colors...were mine. And they were the freshest, the brightest colors I have ever seen.” They also form the basis of his hoped-for relationship with the new Soviet reader, whom he imagines asking: “Who are you? What colors do you see?”

In naming “generosity and emotionalism of colors” as a feature of Odessian prose, Rzhevsky had in mind not only the brilliance of the literal colors described, but the vividness of the (generally metaphorical) language used to evoke them: among the examples he cites are Bagritsky’s watermelons, Vera Inber’s “sea the color of raging amethyst,” Paustovsky’s “knees like medium-sized yellow pumpkins” and Babel’s “severed fingers, from [which] there dangled ribbons of black cheesecloth.”\(^72\) Rzhevsky does not mention Olesha, but as Victor Peppard observes, a particular color scheme can be discerned in Olesha’s texts, explicitly associated with Odessa but present also in his other works: “[E]ven in the works such as Envy, whose setting is clearly not Odessa, there is an unmistakable Odessan subtext that manifests itself in their sunny landscapes of green and blue.”\(^73\) Likewise in No Day, particularly in fragments containing reminiscences about Odessa, the dominant colors are vegetal green, marine and empyrean blues, and solar yellow.

\(^71\) See above, p. 162.
\(^72\) Rzhevsky, “Babel”—stilist,” 77-80.
The one color conspicuously missing from Olesha’s Odessa palette is the red that Babel associates with robust Russianness—the red also of triumphant Bolshevism and of the Soviet flag. If “the colors of [Olesha’s] youth” were to be considered “vulgar and worthless,” even suspect, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that this was because there was no good Socialist red among them. In the section of No Day Without a Line entitled “Odessa,” only one fragment introduces the color red with anything resembling the emphasis placed on the yellow-blue portion of the spectrum:

> Of all colors, the most beautiful is carmine. Both its name and its color are lovely. Why is it called “carmine”? Aren’t they some sort of mollusc? What could be more pleasant than holding in your hand a brush that had just been dipped in carmine! And now it begins to lie down on the Alexandrine paper, giving birth to the petal of a poppy—a little tongue, almost swaying on the paper, as if in the breeze...
> Right now only one thing interests me—learning to write much and freely. Let it be about carmine or about poppies, let it be about...
> Let it be a story about the drawing class at the Gymnasium, when, sitting in the assembly hall, we drew a stuffed hawk from life.

(ND 85)

The fragment goes on for four more paragraphs, but, despite Olesha’s exhortations in the second paragraph, neither carmine nor poppies, nor anything remotely red, ever actually materializes. The event Olesha gets around to describing, concerning the art teacher’s approbation of one Kolya Danchov, bears no apparent relation to the rhapsody about carmine that precedes it, leaving the latter to appear sterile, its potential never realized. A later fragment about scarlet fever hints at downright sinister associations: Olesha writes, “The very sound ‘scarla’ made me tremble” (ND 93).

Like Babel’s childhood, Olesha’s is frequently tinted with yellow, but where Babel associates yellow with the “cooked,” cultured, restricted indoor sphere of his grandmother and her ambitions for him, Olesha associates it exuberantly with nature
and spontaneity. The golden yellow of the sun suffuses Olesha’s happier childhood memories; yellow light gilds solid objects, creating a tangible link between the everyday world and the sun itself:

By the entrance to the cellar, whither the sun still reached, worked a carpenter. It’s very important that it was precisely the sun: the shavings turned gold in it. And how strong always is the bond between then and the sun! How lovingly it treats the shavings! Sometimes, when you’re not looking at them, but distracted by the conversation, it will suddenly seem that a nymph has appeared, right there next to the workbench!

I don’t remember what the carpenter was working on. [...] His rule flew up from time to time, also yellow, yellow like matches, like a soldier, like the sun...

While working in the basement, the carpenter made for me something like a model of an army rifle—or rather, its outline cut from white, slightly yellowish, pine wood. It’s difficult for me to describe the delight that seized me when I took that object in my hands for the first time. (ND 37-38)

Another fragment establishes a similar fusion of light with its environment, this time taking the form of a synesthetic relationship between sight and smell:

The yard smelled of rosin. [...] That smell was yellow, as the sun lying on the stones of the yard and the bricks of the wall was yellow—yes, yes, a yellow sunny smell. Around the yard walked languid Vitya Koyfman with plump lips, with untanned, pleasantly-pale face.

Later we scrambled up a ladder at the risk of falling and saw, through doors temporarily cut in the wall of the outbuilding that was going up, the interior of an already finished room, also bathed in the yellow of the sun (ND 40).

The sun is a particularly important image in No Day Without a Line, uniting the optimism-suffused mood lighting of the narrator’s remembered childhood, the warmth of the spring-summer landscapes in which most of his fictions are set, and the metaphorical radiance of poetic inspiration (one is reminded of Balмонт’s “Let us be
like the sun"). \textsuperscript{74} This all-integrating radiance may be seen as the source of the
metaphorical light “switched on by some kind of engineers behind your consciousness,”
in the earlier fragment on “the work of memory.” Shklovsky’s edition of the text ends
with a triumphant vision of it:

Obviously, at my every step since entering the world, I have been
governed by an external medium; obviously, the sun, which holds me on
a wire, on a string, and moves me, and serves as my eternal charging
station.

It emerges [prostupae] in the form of a dimly shining circle
visible through a diffuse but nearly impenetrable barrier of cloud—just
barely emerges, and look, shadows are visible on the stone. Scarcely
distinguishable, but all the same I see on the pavement my shadow, the
shadow of the gate, and most important, even the shadow of some spring
catkins hanging from a tree.

What is it then, the sun? Nothing in my human life would have
taken place without the participation of the sun, be it concrete or hidden,
real or metaphoric. Whatever I have done, wherever I have gone,
whether dreaming, waking, in darkness, young, or old, I have always
been at the tip of a sunbeam. (ND 303)

This passage, which seems to transform Olesha himself into one of the iridescent light-
reflecting objects that have drawn critical attention in his fiction, presents, as Beaujour
remarks, “a typically romantic image...of poetic election,” and also “an admission of
dependence on some external force,”\textsuperscript{75} clearly bearing a family resemblance to the
earlier passages in which Olesha declines agency and control over his own fate, but
differing from them in its upbeat tone. But the sun Olesha invokes is not only abstract
and metaphoric, it is also a “concrete” and “real” sun—the warm, yellow sun of Odessa.

\textsuperscript{74} For more in-depth discussions of sun imagery in Olesha’s works, see Beaujour, \textit{The Invisible Land}, 61-64 and 191-93. For a discussion of the way this image resurfaces in Kataev, see Borden, \textit{Writing Badly}, 153-54.

\textsuperscript{75} Beaujour, \textit{The Invisible Land}, 193.
STORIES THAT COME TRUE

Olesha is in some ways the one of the Odessa writers who is most visibly fascinated with the borderland between truth, particularly autobiographical truth, and fiction. Part Two of Envy opens with a selection of Ivan Babichev’s autobiographical reminiscences, centering on his wonderful inventions— inventions whose reality or otherwise is left deliberately ambiguous. The first of these is a machine designed to induce dreams to order:

“Fine,” said [Ivan’s] father, who was a school principal and a classicist. “I believe you. I want a dream about the history of Rome.” “What specifically?” the boy asked, businesslike. “Anything—the Battle of Pharsalus. But if it doesn’t work, you will be spanked.”  

In the event, “it doesn’t work,” and the boy is indeed spanked. But later that same day, Frosia, the housemaid, confides to Ivan’s mother: “All night I kept seeing horses. Galloping. Horrible horses, wearing masks. Horses in a dream mean lies...” (E 59). It seems that Frosia has caught the dream meant for Ivan’s father. Even more intriguingly, she ascribes a truth-value to it—it reveals to her the “truth” that someone has been telling lies. But whose are the lies? Frosia’s fiancé’s, as she surmises? Ivan’s, for pretending to be able to control dreams? Or perhaps, as Ivan later suggests, history itself turns out to be a lie, exposed by his dream machine:

“I believe,” [Ivan] went on, “that the night after that humiliating day, my papa did dream of the Battle of Pharsalus. In the morning he didn’t leave for school. Mother took a glass of mineral water to his study. Possibly he was shocked by some of the details of the battle. Perhaps the dream made a farce of his idea of history and he couldn’t get over it. Possible the battle was decided, in his dream, by Balearic slingshot men who landed from balloons...” (E 61)

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76 Yuri Olesha, Envy and Other Works, tr. Andrew R. MacAndrew (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 58. Page references to further quotations from Envy will be given in parentheses in the text, as follows: (E 58).
The young Ivan’s second invention is “a special soapy solution and a special little tube with which to blow an amazing soap bubble,” which the young inventor brags will attain the proportions of a hot-air balloon before exploding and “fall[ing] in a golden rain on the city” (E 60). Again, the boy’s father is convinced that this is a tall tale, his astonishment knows no bounds when, shortly before dusk, he observes a “large orange sphere” floating slowly across the sky, apparently at Ivan’s behest. Taking pity on his father, who is now completely spooked, Ivan reveals his prior knowledge of the fact that “Ernesto Vitollo was scheduled to fly over the city in a balloon that day.” In other words, his bubble invention was a hoax. But here the third-person narrator chimes in, in confidential parentheses:

(It is a fact that, at the time Ivan was a twelve-year-old schoolboy, manned flight was not very common and it was rather unlikely that a flight be staged over a provincial city. Whether this story was true or not does not matter. Fantasy is the beloved of reason.) (E 61).

And superfluity, it seems, is the mother of invention, at least in Ivan’s case. We are left with the following chain of reasoning: (1) Ivan told a story about a magnificent-bubble-blowing invention; (2) he falsely substantiated his story by appropriating a manned balloon flight as his “bubble”; (3) but the story of the manned balloon flight may be equally false, leaving us to wonder what in fact Ivan’s father saw; (4) of course, the whole thing may be an invention, just a yarn Ivan is spinning to his friends in a bar; (5) but it makes no difference whether or not the story is true. Ivan’s inventions work like Shoyl’s lies, Babel’s “improvisations,” and Bagritsky’s Dionysus poem: positing themselves at first as fanciful fictions, they substantiate themselves in later events.
Ivan, of course, is a fictional character, and his games with truth and lying can extend only as far as the boundaries of the text that contains him. In *No Day Without a Line*, Olesha becomes fascinated with a “real-life” Ivan Babichev: Dante Alighieri, whose “autobiography” included fantastic adventures in Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, as well as meetings with a variety of celebrated persons living, dead, and fictional. “Let us remember,” writes Olesha, almost seeming to believe in the journey,

Dante descends to Hell while living, not in the capacity of a ghost but specifically living, as the same person he was at the threshold of Hell, on Earth. All the rest are shades; Dante is a human being. Olesha is particularly taken by a passage in Canto XXI in which Dante and Vergil are stymied by the absence of a bridge Vergil had expected to use:

It ought to be right here, this bridge. The bridge, however, is not there. Maybe the wrong direction had been taken from the very beginning? The picket of demons—simply a dastardly, drunken band—turns up again and again.

“Is there a bridge somewhere around here?” asks Vergil.

“There is!” answers one of the demons.

[...]

“There is a bridge! There is! It’s over there! Go that way!”

The bridge is not over there either (it has been destroyed altogether), but the demons want to instill a panic in both travelers, turning them aside from their path for once and all. (*ND* 190-91)

The episode that so beguiles Olesha is one in which three different kinds of story are united: Dante’s autobiographical narrative, which on the face of it purports to be a record of real, if rather extraordinary, experiences that Dante has had (the reader might bear in mind Dante’s appeal to the Muses to aid his verses “that my tale not be divergent from the fact” [*si che dal fatto il dir non sia diverso*]),† Dante’s imaginary world, of which Olesha stands in awe; and Christian doctrine (another kind of “fact”)

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† Dante, *Inferno*, XXXII:12, my translation.
concerning Christ’s Harrowing of Hell, which turns out to be responsible for the missing bridge. In Olesha’s summation:

I don’t have the book handy, and I can’t recall how the adventure ends.... I’ll only mention the extraordinary reason invented by the author to explain why there turned out to be no bridge. It fell down during the earthquake that took place in hell when Christ descended there!

What power of authenticity!

It’s not surprising that, meeting Dante on the streets of Florence, passers-by would recoil in holy terror:

“Oh, my God, he was in hell!” (ND 191)

What impresses Olesha is not (as Rosengrant’s translation would have it) Dante’s “power of invention,” but precisely his power of authenticity, the same word that Babel takes as his motto in A Time of Great Expectations. Dante may, like Babel, be “improvising,” but he creates something so “authentic” that, like Babel’s childhood stories and Kataev’s Mauvist works, it breaks the bounds of its fiction and obtrudes upon reality: Dante’s readers, represented here by the nervous Florentines, emerge with the conviction that he has really been to Hell—that his tale is “not divergent from the fact.” Thus, in the pages of Olesha’s “autobiographical novel,” Dante becomes the very model of a Odessan modernist; his marriage of the autobiographical pact with virtuosic flights of imagination may be seen as a blueprint for the literary discourse practised by Olesha and his fellow Odessans.

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78 Olesha, No Day Without a Line, tr. Rosengrant, 203.

79 See Chapter Three, above, and Paustovskii, Vremia bol’shikh ozhidanii, 145.

80 Of course, the encounter between Dante and his Florentine readers is itself a fiction, since as far as is known, Dante never returned to Florence after his exile in 1302! Like the “rational explanation” (a manned balloon flight) for the wondrous bubble seen by Ivan’s father in Envy, this authenticating image of the credulous contemporary readers is transparently inauthentic, reversing the signs on the terms of the “truth”/“fiction” equation once again.
CONCLUSION

THE ODESSAN SELF

In the preceding pages, I have posited that the literary projection of a specifically Odessan self-consciousness is characterized by several interrelated discursive features: multivocality and carnivalesque inversion; a sense of exile in both time and space, often manifested in the narrator’s positioning of himself as an outsider in the world he depicts; a blurring of the distinctions between autobiographical and fictional narrative; and a preoccupation with stories (often, “lies”) that come true, and their inverse, “truths that become stories.”

I refer above to a “blurring of distinctions” between autobiography and fiction—or as Shklovsky would have it, “literature” and “memoirs”—but it is perhaps more accurate to say that the already vague boundaries separating those two narrative modes are cannily exploited by the Odessa writers, often on several levels at once. When Babel’s “autobiographical” narrator pits his own credibility against that of an autobiographical narrator he has invented—Great-Uncle Shoyl—the immediate effect is to place the main narrator above Shoyl in the epistemological hierarchy, as someone whose story is “more true” than the ones Shoyl tells. When, however, Shoyl’s allegedly mendacious stories are independently verified by another character, they become more “true” within the world of the narrative, while the narrator’s claims become more suspect. Meanwhile, outside the world of the narrative, Babel’s adoption of the autobiographical mode to tell stories in which he blandly breaches the autobiographical
pact creates an additional contradiction; his quasi-autobiographical stories become “true” in the sense that they invite credence from the reader, taking a place (albeit under false pretences) in the popular perception of Babel’s “real life.”

Similar translations between the world of fiction and the world of memoir take place when Paustovsky’s “real life” is invaded by a story, in the guise of Sashka the fiddler from Kuprin’s “Gambrinus”; when Kataev, standing before the grotto of Dionysus, sees a Bagritsky poem come to life before his eyes, creating the effect of an experience that postdates his “memory” of it; or when Olesha cites an apocryphal Florentine reader’s response to Dante’s “autobiographical” account of Hell. In each of these examples, and the many others cited in the foregoing chapters, what is at stake is the difference between “authenticity” and “invention”; the two categories almost never emerge intact, instead metamorphosing into each other when the reader least expects it. The borderlands between autobiography and fiction prove, for the Odessan writers, a particularly fruitful playground in which to explore, and subvert, this dichotomy.

If the most striking feature of Odessan self-narrative is its love of paradox, its second most striking feature is its collaborative effect. As Arkady Lvov puts it, Paustovsky served as Babel’s “apostle and author of an apocrypha” about him, a role which not incidentally increased Paustovsky’s own standing, since “that apocrypha, A Time of Great Expectations, the fourth book, proved the most widely-read portion of his Story of a Life.”¹ This apostolizing on Paustovsky’s part helped cement a canonical conception of “Odessa” or “South-West” literature that had been put in place by Babel and Shklovsky, forcing a resentful Kataev (at least in Lvov’s account) to choose between conforming to the canonical lore about the Odessa school, or deviating from it

¹ Lvov, “Prostota neslykhannoi eses,” 165.
and being accused of “lying,” “heresy,” and even “vampirism.” Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose: freed from the more extreme constraints of Socialist Realism, Kataev found himself battling a separate orthodoxy. At the same time, it is his deviation from that orthodoxy that accounts for much of the pungency of My Diamond Crown; paradoxically, it is in violating the boundaries of received truths about the “Odessa school” that Kataev shows himself most Odessan. The paradox of the narrative that is at once fictional and mendacious is a central interest of all four authors I have examined in this study.

These two essential qualities in the narratives I have examined—their play with fiction and truth, and their interactive character—can be seen as related: what is at stake is a narrative breaking of bounds. Whether or not they would have conceded it, these authors share an interest in stories that break free of their generic and epistemological territory and invade other spaces: other narratives, the “real world.” For each of the authors in this study—Babel, Paustovsky, Olesha, and Kataev—my main goal has been to analyze the strategies they use to negotiate (and breach) the nebulous boundaries dividing fiction and autobiography, “literature” and “memoirs,” “invention” and “authenticity,” and in so doing, to arrive at a conception of what it means, in literary terms, to be an “Odessan self.” Finally, I have sought to show how the “self” served as the canvas on which Odessan writers created the colorful, inventive, sunny, and ironic literature that, by virtue of its entwinement with their collective identity, came to be identified with Odessa in the minds of the reading public.
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