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### **Two Babels—Two Aphrodites** Autobiography in *Maria* and Babel's Petersburg Myth

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#### **A Merciless Night**

“A merciless night” is how Babel opened his story “Chinaman.”<sup>1</sup> Datelined “Petrograd 1918” and barely three pages long, it packed all the necessary characters of Babel’s central casting: a prostitute combining business and affection; her consort, a debased aristocrat, an emblem of civilization in decline; and completing the trio, a “Chinaman,” the girl’s customer, whose Russian vocabulary extends no further than the simplest terms of street trade.

In a telegraphic staccato, Babel shows just how unforgiving—and spectacular—all of it was:

A merciless night. Piercing wind. A dead man’s fingers sort through Petersburg’s frozen guts. Crimson pharmacies freeze on street corners. A pharmacist’s well-combed little head droops to the side. The frost seized the pharmacy by its purple heart. And the pharmacy’s heart conked out.

On Nevsky, there is not a soul. Ink bubbles pop in the sky. It is two past midnight. A merciless night.<sup>2</sup>

No matter. Soon enough Babel’s trio are inside the rooming house where they are treated to homebrew, the Chinese man sates his appetite for sex, the prostitute earns her pound of bread, and the old aristocrat gets to enjoy added value, as he climbs into the girl’s bed, vacated by her Chinese customer with whom he had struck a fleeting friendship. Harsh as the night was, the three have survived—and profited in the process. Its pathos

deflated—popped like so many “ink bubbles” in the night sky—the story ends with a fitting telegraphic éclat: “Full stop” (*tochka*).

Do not look for a metaphysical truth here, Babel is saying. Rather, just take it for what it is: a terse report on the resilience of the human condition tapped in a modernist Morse code from a leaking but still seaworthy ship.

Babel was at the beginning of his journey.

### A Little Sunshine and a Little Levity: A Long Detour

As late as 1922, Babel planned a collection of such dispatches under the title *Petersburg 1918*,<sup>3</sup> but the project was abandoned in favor of *Red Cavalry* and *The Odessa Stories*. The two cycles made him famous as well as typecast him in the image of their narrator: a Jew, and intellectual, one “with spectacles on his nose and autumn in his heart,” for the rest of his life. In these stories, written in 1921–1925, he celebrated humanity in its Rabelaisian aspect, his characters enjoying a colorful, if dangerous, life of excess and abandon. A Southern sensibility, it seemed, had finally vanquished the gloom and doom associated with the northern capital, St. Petersburg. Those aware of his debut in 1916 could have concluded that Babel was making good on the promise he publicized in his short essay “Odessa,” part of a regular column he contributed to the Petrograd weekly, *Zhurnal zhurnalov*, in 1916–1917.<sup>4</sup>

Not unlike the young Petersburg poets, the Acmeists, who respectfully rebelled against the Symbolist mentors earlier in the decade,<sup>5</sup> and anticipating the Serapion Brothers of 1922–1923 with their slogan “Go West!,”<sup>6</sup> Babel set himself up in a polite opposition to the revered native elders. In his opinion, Russian literature had overindulged in the “stifling mists” of the Gogolian and Dostoevskian Petersburg—at the expense of the life-affirming sunshine of Gogol’s early Ukrainian tales. Babel elaborated his point with youthful gusto and a lapidary precision: “The Overcoat”’s little victim “Akaky Akakievich, in his little modest way but on a frightening scale, cast his shadow over Gritsko,” the devil-may-care heartthrob of every lass in Dikanka.

Naturally (pace Harold Bloom), this tussle with the dead founding fathers was a mere prelude. The ultimate target was the living classic himself, Maxim Gorky, at the time Russia’s premier author and Babel’s

generous patron.<sup>7</sup> The author of “Chelkash” and “Twenty Six and One,” Gorky championed brute vitality, clarity, and force—Babel allowed as much—and yet, he fell short of what the times demanded. Gorky, according to Babel, was too self-conscious, too tendentious, to be able to reform Russian letters: “Gorky knows why he loves the sun, why it ought to be loved.” “It is because of this consciousness,” Babel went on, tipping his arrow with Oedipal poison, “that Gorky is but a precursor, often magnificent and mighty, but a precursor nonetheless.”

Fashioning himself with unreflective panache as the “literary Messiah from Odessa,” the future author of “The King” wished to supersede the “precursor,” to reach the world where art—free of any tendency—could reign supreme and be unqualifiedly true. Russian literature, he insisted, needed more light, pure and unalloyed, and there was plenty of it in the “steppes by the Black Sea” (read: where I, Babel, come from) as well as further west (read: Maupassant, my true inspiration).

The sunshine he had in mind, however, had less to do with the comfort and warmth of hospitable Odessa and more to do with the city’s bourgeois character and the unblinking stare of Maupassant’s prose, much better adapted for peering into the human condition through the appearances and subterfuges of the bourgeoisie, than anything hitherto produced by Russian writers. *Le soleil de midi tombe en large pluie sur les champs*, began Maupassant’s “L’aveu,” the story that obsessed Babel for years,<sup>8</sup> and, as he spelled it out in his “Odessa,” it was this merciless noon sunshine “falling in a generous rain on the fields” that was fated to revitalize—re-fertilize—Russian letters. In case anybody was looking for such a rainmaker, they did not need to look any further: the messiah from Odessa was standing by.

Gorky would no longer suffice, as Babel showed by a mere juxtaposition of the pure artist Maupassant with the politically engagé Gorky. Unable to resist a French syntactical flourish, Babel averred on: “Maupassant, on the other hand—he is, perhaps, not *conscious* of anything, and yet—*perhaps, he knows it all*” [my italics, *GF*]. Art, Babel declared with the self-confidence of a Nietzschean modernist,<sup>9</sup> was a sufficient and autonomous form and did not require the writer to borrow ideas or values—*consciousness*—from elsewhere. It was art, indeed *ART*, not socialism or ideology, or religious metaphysics, that was the source of heavenly light raining down onto the earth and bringing about its renewal. This was the true religion for a writer; and Babel, along with other big names of his generation, was

committing himself to a lifetime of worship in its temple.<sup>10</sup> Pure belles-lettres had their own way of illuminating life whether in Paris or the South of France, as in Maupassant, or in provincial wartime Saratov or Moscow, or even the cold and dark civil-war Petrograd.<sup>11</sup> Babel's early stories, his 1916 debut in *Letopis*, are in keeping with this reading of "L'aveu." Indeed, his entire oeuvre answers to this description.<sup>12</sup>

Inimical to metaphysical bombast, Babel pitched his voice low and, rather than fashioning himself as a Zeus raining down in a golden shower of sunshine on Danae-Russia, presented himself as a Russian Jew from Odessa who visits the blond female residents of Dostoevskian Petersburg (read: Russia) and romances them by offering, not some apocalyptic revelation, but "a little sunshine and a little levity," along with "a lot of sardines in their original tin can" ("Odessa"). He was a bourgeois *homo novus*—in *Odessa Stories*, he would be transformed into the gangster Benya Krik—who was barging in on the declining Russian gentry culture, ready, as he put it in "Odessa," to "refresh her blood."<sup>13</sup>

That was in December 1916. A few months later, the revolution came and wiped the slate clean. In 1918, the road to Russia's future swung to the east and from then on ran through the new Red capital, Moscow. Babel's experience of the Polish campaign of 1920, which put an end to Bolshevism's westward march, and the early years of the New Economic Policy (NEP), a "respite," reshaped both his art and image. His youthful plan to redeem contemporary Russian letters from their quotidian ethnographic realism as well as their excessive Dostoevsky-ism (*Dostoevshchina*) became inconsequential. What took its place was an exploration of the new age in which the earthy pragmatism and skepticism of the NEP combined with the exuberance, violence, and utopian hopes of the world's first socialist revolution. In his *Odessa Stories* and *Red Cavalry*, Babel was still offering the noon sunshine promised in his 1916 manifesto, but now it was blended liberally, and ironically, with the rosy-fingered (or was it bloody-fingered?) dawn of Russia's communist age.

Not everyone was equally impressed with Babel's ideological credentials. Most critics, however, treated Babel's new writings as an acceptance, indeed a celebration, if qualified and complex, of the Bolshevik revolution.<sup>14</sup> Babel did not protest. His 1924 "Autobiography," his sole public statement on the subject, was meant ostensibly to lend support to such a reading and confirm his pro-Soviet stance.<sup>15</sup> But the 1920s was a dynamic time, and Babel was not standing still. As he continued to evolve as an

author, the old Petersburg motifs he was exorcising in his “Odessa” began to surface in his own writings. They did so even before the last traces of the NEP vanished and the Stalin Revolution seized the day.

### Akaky Akakievich Redux

An early sign of this sea change was recorded on June 25, 1925. Babel, at the time perhaps the most talked about author in Soviet Russia, wrote to Gorky that he was having doubts about the worth of his accomplishments to date, that he “had failed to live up to his [Gorky’s] expectations,” and that he now wished to strike out in a new direction.<sup>16</sup>

Albeit in a private letter, Babel was disowning *Red Cavalry* (the work whose success he had earlier attributed to Gorky’s wise guidance) almost a year before it came out as a separate edition! The Oedipal entanglements aside, the *Odessa Stories* did not fare any better. The sun was dimmed for the first time in his movie script *Benya Krik*, and it was nearly turned off in his play *Sunset* (both dating to 1926). Before long, the *Petersburg* malaise began to haunt him with its familiar settings and memories dating back to the twilight years of the old regime, the revolution, and the civil war. His literary exemplars were reshuffled accordingly: the early Gogol was now trumped by the Gogol of the *Petersburg Tales*. In his memoirs, Ilya Ehrenburg recorded Babel’s announcement of his change of landmarks.<sup>17</sup> The idea of revising some of the earlier Petersburg sketches in 1929–1932 may have stemmed from this shift, reinforced by the increasing pressure to publish new work that the cultural establishment, charged with organizing production of literary masterpieces, exerted on him in the early 1930s. When in the spring of 1933, Babel found himself at long last enjoying actual sunshine at the Sorrento villa of Maxim Gorky (the erstwhile “precursor”), it was the civil-war Petrograd, freezing and moribund, that he conjured up as a setting for his new dramatic come-back.

### Maria

Briefly, *Maria* is a play in eight scenes (or tableaux, *kartiny*) telling a story about the break-up and demise of an enlightened noble Petersburg family, the Mukovnins. The play begins, however, in a seedy hotel suite belonging to a black-market speculator Isaac Dymshits who employs as his salesmen and couriers a team of cripples masquerading as war veter-

ans. In Scene 2, we are told that one of General Mukovnin's two daughters, Maria, has gone over to the Bolsheviks and joined the Budenny Cavalry in time to participate in the Polish campaign (her prototype, to be discussed later in this piece, was Maria Denisova, the original *Giaconda* of Mayakovsky's *Cloud in Pants* and a propaganda officer in Budenny's Cavalry Army). We learn about her experiences there when her long letter from Poland, written with a Babelian flourish, is read out loud in Scene 5 of the play.

The younger daughter, Ludmila, also tries to keep up with the times. She is introduced to Isaac Dymshits by a former Cavalry Guard officer, Viskovsky, an associate of Dymshits and his procurer. Ludmila schemes to have Dymshits abandon his family and marry her; instead, she is raped by Viskovsky who infects her with VD. Soon a gunfight erupts between Viskovsky and his friend Kravchenko, belatedly outraged at Viskovsky for the rape, and the hotel is raided by the police. Ludmila is arrested, and ends up in jail. The General, a Chekhovian bumbling father type, suffers a fatal heart attack when he realizes that Maria, the family's last hope, is not coming back to rescue him and Ludmila from their Petrograd hell.

What comes to Petrograd in the final scene is not Maria but spring-time. Now empty of its owners and flooded by sunlight, the Mukovnin apartment receives new tenants: Safonov, "a bony, young, taciturn worker," and his pregnant wife, Elena, a "tall woman and with a small bright face." As part of spring cleaning, a gigantic peasant girl Nyushka is washing the windows. As the curtain falls, we hear her singing a few lines from a well-known Cossack ballad dating back to the Russo-Japanese war. The play ends, but Maria Mukovnin, anticipating *Godot* by a decade and a half, never shows up on stage.<sup>18</sup>

Babel's second and last known play, and the last major new work published in his lifetime, *Maria* has nevertheless attracted little interest from Russian or American scholars.<sup>19</sup> Following the revival of interest in Babel in the late 1950s and 1960s, *Maria* appeared to be a freak—a sop to the Soviet establishment—and it seemed to have no place in the picture of Babel's legacy as it was then imagined by his readers and scholars. My own interest in this play was kindled when I collaborated on a production with my Stanford colleague, Carl Weber, who had for decades dreamed of bringing it to the stage. In the course of this collaboration, it became clear that *Maria* was not only deeply rooted in Babel's oeuvre, but held a

key to understanding the last and virtually “silent” decade of his life and career. When approached as an autobiographical allegory, the play begins to radiate its own very special light, illuminating the author’s tormented soul, his fears for his future, as well as his misgivings about the course of the Revolution.

I therefore propose to approach *Maria* as an instance of Babel’s “autobiographical fiction,” as he once referred to his childhood stories,<sup>20</sup> a strategy justified by the deeply autobiographical character of Babel’s entire oeuvre.<sup>21</sup> Hence in my discussion here I will treat *Maria* as (1) a play based on Babel’s experiences during the civil war, (2) a product of Babel’s evolution as an author in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and (3) as an autobiographical *cri de coeur* of an author, citizen, and man facing irreconcilable artistic, political, and personal dilemmas and contradictions.

### Life’s Traces: Revolution and Civil War

Like many of Babel’s works, *Maria* has powerful autobiographical overtones, including echoes of his most famous adventure during the Polish offensive of April–October 1920. But the background to the play’s setting may be traced directly to Babel’s sojourn in Petrograd from late February or early March 1918 to the early spring of 1919, when he resided at number 86 on the Prospekt of October 25 (as Nevsky Avenue was rechristened by the Bolsheviks in November 1918 to honor the day they seized power in Petrograd).<sup>22</sup> A good half of *Maria*’s action takes place at that particular venue, one of the grand Yusupov palaces transformed into a seedy residential hotel (today, the building houses the Theater Actors Club). This address was mentioned pointedly by Victor Shklovsky in a sharp critical appreciation of Babel’s writings, his 1924 “Isaac Babel: A Critical Romance.”<sup>23</sup> Apparently, the exact location of his civil war Petrograd residence mattered a lot to Babel, as he referred to it repeatedly throughout the play. He was making sure, it seems, that whatever else his *Maria* conveyed, it sent a distinct autobiographical message—one that his friends in the early 1930s could hear and one that his readers in posterity would be able to appreciate.

During his residency at Nevsky 86, beginning in late February–early March 1918, Babel seems to have successfully, if oddly, combined two careers: as a translator for the Petrograd Cheka and as a staff writer for the newspaper *Novaya zhizn* (New Life). Just as with the grain-fed leg

of pork in the play *Maria*, which Dymshits doubts was actually grain-fed because he was not there to see it, nobody is really sure whether Babel did in fact work for the Cheka or merely claimed to have done so in order to use it as a flag of convenience. But as a reporter for Gorky's *Novaya zhizn*, he had plenty of opportunity to observe the life of civil war Petrograd in all of its aspects—his journalism of those days testifies to that. Unlike the Cheka, *Novaya zhizn* maintained a pointed anti-Bolshevik stance—despite its self-identification as “Social-Democratic” and the exhortation on its masthead for the proletarians of all countries to unite. Babel's first story in it appeared on March 9, 1918; his last, on the July 2 of the same year, right before the paper was shut down by the Bolsheviks, intolerant of a even loyal opposition.<sup>24</sup> Traces of the newspaper's attitude toward the Bolshevik regime, collected in Maxim Gorky's *Untimely Thoughts: Notes on the Revolution and Culture, 1917–1918* and evident in some of Babel's *Novaya zhizn* pieces, can be discerned just below the surface of the play.

In August or September, as we know from his 1918 sketch, “Concert at Katerinenstadt,”<sup>25</sup> Babel traveled (either voluntarily or as a draftee) to the Volga region with a food provisioning detachment, which included a team of destitute veteran-amputees. These grotesque invalids would resurface in *Maria* in the form of Dymshits's jolly cripples parleying in Babel's choicest Russian *argot*. After returning to Petrograd in October, Babel fell ill, recovered, worked for the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment,<sup>26</sup> and continued to publish his pieces in the Petrograd paper *Zhizn iskusstva* (Life of Art). He stayed in the city through spring 1919 before leaving in May for Odessa, while it was still under the control of the Reds.<sup>27</sup> He remained in Odessa, working for the local Soviet publishing outfit, Gubizdat, through the summer,<sup>28</sup> or at least until August 9, the day when, according to the family lore, he married Evgeniia Gronfain.<sup>29</sup> Ten days later, the Denikin forces began their six-month-long occupation of Odessa. It is not known whether Babel stayed in Odessa or left it along with the retreating Reds. But he resurfaced in his native city after it was recaptured for good by the Soviets in February 1920.

By then, as Babel stated in his “Autobiography,” he had also “served in the Northern Army against Yudenich” (*Sochineniia* 1, 32). The claim appears problematic since there is no other trace of this or any other soldiering experience (he claimed in “Autobiography” to have served on the Rumanian Front in 1917) anywhere in his extant work, except, of course,

for his well-known stint with Budenny's Cavalry Army in 1920. Assuming, however, that the claim was authentic, he may have participated in early actions against Yudenich in May (a state of siege was declared in Petrograd on May 1). A more likely story, whether real or made up, is that Babel volunteered for the Northern Army during Yudenich's most famous second and last assault on the city, which began on September 28 and lasted till the final victory of the Reds on November 4, 1919. To have fought against Yudenich in the fall, however, Babel would have had to leave Odessa soon after the date of his marriage to Evgeniia Gronfain, a rather improbable eventuality by the standards of ordinary life but not altogether impossible, given the vicissitudes of the civil war and Babel's association with the Reds before Denikin took over Odessa. In *Maria*, these absences, sudden departures, disappearances, and periods of waiting—"the science of parting" as Mandelstam referred to it in his civil-war poem "Tristia" (1918)—account for much of the play's dramatic tension.

The winter and early spring of 1920 found Babel in Odessa working for the Soviet State Publishing House. It was during these months that Babel and Mikhail Koltsov collaborated on saving Pyotr Pilsky from the Odessa Cheka.<sup>30</sup> A popular journalist and critic, Pilsky knew Babel from the Petrograd days and recalled his encounters with the young "pink-cheeked Russian Maupassant" in his 1929 book of reminiscences and essays.<sup>31</sup>

In April 1920, Babel made his boldest move: with the papers made out in the name of Kirill Vasilyevich Lyutov he began his assignment as a reporter (a propagandist and at times a staff headquarters clerk) for Semyon Budenny's First Cavalry Army. Exempt from the draft in World War I and apparently without any military service or, at least, none worth writing about,<sup>32</sup> Babel, it seems, could not miss his "last chance" for sharing in the defining experience of his generation.

His family had no idea about his plans; afraid that they might prevent him from going, he left home without saying goodbye and returned some six months later after his father had been officially informed of his death and while his wife was looking for him among the wounded.<sup>33</sup> In his *Maria*, Babel recapitulated this leap from the bosom of his family into the world of war and revolution, assigning it, along with his own distinct literary style, to the character of Maria Mukovnin. Her letter from the Polish frontier, read out loud by Maria's cousin, takes up the entire length of Scene 5 and sounds ostensibly just like another story from Babel's own *Red Cavalry* cycle.

## Life's Traces: The First Five-Year Plan

The most piquant aspect of *Maria* is that the eponymous character—much as she is talked about by the other characters in the play, much as they await her imminent arrival in Petrograd—never appears on stage. The weight of her non-presence is so palpable that to some *Maria* appeared as merely a “pre-quel” to what was to be the ultimate *Maria II*.<sup>34</sup> But another explanation for this enigma is also possible. The key dramatic paradox did not only resonate with the tensions of the revolutionary years, with their unpredictable comings and goings. In the late 1920s and the 1930s, Babel was equally famous for his vanishing acts, disappearing from Moscow where he had taken up residence in 1925, and of course, his alleged disappearance from print, his vaunted “silence.” Indeed, while *Maria* drew on Babel's experience in and his writings about the Civil War, it was equally, if not more so, implicated in Babel's works and days of the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Many have written about Babel's difficulties with the Soviet cultural and political establishment and its pressures both to conform to the party line in the arts and, more specifically, not to contradict the Cavalry Army myth being constructed at the time by Budenny, Voroshilov, and, indirectly, Stalin. No doubt, Babel chafed under the collar of Soviet censorship and political correctness, made worse by Budenny's attacks on him. Epistolary evidence and contemporary testimony document some of his ordeals.<sup>35</sup> However, he was also subject to stresses of a different sort.

Babel's personal life was becoming increasingly complicated and now demanded great logistical ingenuity as well as access to substantial amounts of money. From 1925 to 1932, he had to maintain his commitments to his mother and sister, who settled in Brussels; closer to home, in Moscow and Leningrad, he had to support, appease, mollify, and somehow manage the tempestuous Tamara Kashirina, who was simultaneously his friend, lover, and the mother of his first child (Emmanuel, renamed Mikhail, born in 1926), and who remained his literary and business agent long after they broke up as a couple.<sup>36</sup> He had to remain loyal, despite his gross infidelity, to his wife, Evgeniya, who left for Paris in 1925. Babel contritely rejoined her in 1927<sup>37</sup> and she bore him his daughter Nathalie in July 1929, a little short of nine months after he returned to Russia. Further, as of the summer of 1932, he had to juggle obligations to his kin in Brussels and Paris with yet another commitment: a budding romance with Antonina Pirozhkova, who later became his de facto wife and bore him his last child, daughter Lydia, early in 1937.

To keep his relationships going with the members of this “extended family” required a lot of energy, ingenuity, and imagination. Then there were the pressures generated by Babel’s unrealistic and unrealized commitments to publishers and film studios as well as the impossible financial schemes he resorted to in order to discharge his obligations—real or imagined—to his mother in Brussels, to Tamara Kashirina and their son in Moscow, and to his wife and daughter in Paris. Perhaps no other Soviet author equaled Babel in the art of generating advances on unwritten stories, novels, plays, and film scripts. But sooner or later the time came to pay up, and for Babel, with his literary perfectionism and compulsion to polish a single story for months, the weight of these obligations was hard to tolerate. More than once, he had to face creditors and writs from the court to have his personal property confiscated.<sup>38</sup> At times the pressure was crushing, and Babel would disappear into his hideout in provincial Russia or his Molodenovo collective farm outside Moscow for months at a time. His passion for horses, stud farms (Molodenovo had one), and the world of the races offered, if not escape, then relief from “economic rationality,” from his life as a literary moneymaking machine.

## Two Babels

This shuttling between the world of responsibility and the world of spontaneity makes more comprehensible the inner conflict tearing at Babel’s personal and professional life. It elucidates one of the polarities of the play: the black-market dealer Isaac Dymshits, a married *paterfamilias* with a taste for Russian noblewomen at one extreme, and at the other, the idealistic Maria Mukovnin, a fiancée of a Red cavalry commissar. There was not one, there were two Isaac Babels.

One was a writer, a bohemian author of genius who romanced Russian women (Babel’s two significant “other women” were not Jewish), who was bound to nothing but his Muse, and who needed to live the life of a vagabond à la Gorky, all in order to gather material and gain inspiration for his writings. His letters to his family and friends abound in his pleas for freedom, for his need to crisscross the country in order to be able to go on with his writing.<sup>39</sup>

But these same family letters point to the other Babel: a responsible, if grossly overtaxed, Jewish *paterfamilias*—husband to his Jewish wife, father to his daughter, devoted son and brother to his mother and sister, and

a committed lover to his Russian women, Kashirina and later Pirozhkova, with ideas about constancy and loyalty that were rather old-fashioned for his times and that he, to his great chagrin, often failed to live by. This other Babel had to calculate and plan ahead, to meet deadlines and sign binding contracts. In short, he had to be a proper bourgeois Jew, a faithful offspring of a “tradesman-Jew” (*torgovets-evrei*), as he referred to his father with ostensible infelicity in his brief “Autobiography.” For Babel, as for many of his coreligionists, there was, of course, a natural affinity between these two terms, a tradesman and a Jew, as there was for Karl Marx and Babel's older contemporaries Georg Simmel and Werner Sombart.<sup>40</sup> For this Babel, his literary gift, the only possible form of divine grace in the secular age, was nothing but a *métier*, a trade, namely a way of maintaining—in order of importance—his family, his status, and paying his bills on time.

As the 1920s drew to a close, the writer's mood darkened, and allegories of the inner conflict between the two Babels began to shape his art. The first intimations surfaced in his film script *Benya Krik*, in which he turned his own comical stand-in into a repulsive and greedy gangster receiving his just deserts when a Red Army soldier executes him with a shot to the back of his head. This shift in attitude was elaborated in Babel's first known play, *Sunset* (1926–1927), which dramatized the struggle between Babel's two alter egos: one was the old teamster Mendel Krik, scheming to run away with his young Russian consort, Marusya (*ma Russie*), and to take with him the family cashbox; the other, his gangster son, Benya Krik, now bent on bourgeois propriety and anxious to turn the old-fashioned horse-and-cart outfit into a modern, rationally run concern. Unlike his earlier incarnation in *The Odessa Stories*, the Benya Krik of *Sunset* had all of his Odessa *joie de vivre* leached out of him by a burning passion for respectability and cash. Babel was *sunsetting* his colorful, larger-than-life Odessa—the site, as he now saw it, of his illusory dreams.

Because in its style, setting, and cast of characters, *Sunset* is closely tied to *The Odessa Stories* and in a way completes them, the central theme of the play—the morphing of Babel's invented mythical Odessa into the traditionally mythical St. Petersburg—may have been blurred. Now, in his *Maria*, a play set in Petersburg proper, Babel made sure that this other, somber *Petersburg* come out monochromatic and unambiguously sharp. Several autobiographical stories of the early 1930s chart Babel's progress toward this new vision, signaling along the way the taming of *Red Cavalry* spirit and the demise of Babel's carnivalesque Odessa myth.

## The Flinty Road to *Maria*: Babel's Petersburg Mythologies

Three autobiographical stories are of particular relevance to *Maria*: “The Road,” “The Ivan-and-Maria,” and “Guy de Maupassant.” All take Petrograd as either their setting, destination, or point of departure; all were published in quick succession (March, April, and June 1932) in a popular illustrated monthly, *30 dnei*, edited by Babel’s journalist friend from the Petrograd days, Vasilii Aleksandrovich Reginin (Rapoport). All three bear the authorial date linking them to Babel’s sojourn in wartime and revolutionary Petrograd. Two of them, in fact, have clear antecedents in Babel’s publications of the early period. Whether intentionally or intuitively, Babel was laying the foundation for his own Petersburg myth. Without these pieces, his *Maria* would be as incomprehensible as *Sunset* would have been without the *Tales of Odessa*.

The first of these, “The Road,” shares elements of the setting with the sketch “Evening at the Empress’s (From the Petersburg Diary)” in which Babel recounted his visit to the Anichkov Palace in Petrograd some time in the spring 1918, but without the agonistic tension and complexity of its later counterpart.<sup>41</sup> In its magazine publication, Babel dated “The Road” “1920–1930,” referring to the time of composition since the story itself is set in 1917–1918. The second of the three stories, “The Ivan-and-Maria,” recalled “Concert at Katerinenstadt,” a report on a Petrograd food procurement expedition to the upper Volga, published in *Zhizn iskusstva* in November 1919; it, too, was signed with the dates indicating the beginning and the end of its revisions: “1920–1928.” The action of the third story unfolded in Petrograd in the winter of 1916, when Babel wrote his essay “Odessa,” an appreciation, among other things, of his French idol, Guy de Maupassant. Like the other two pieces, “Guy de Maupassant” was dated “1920–1922,” clearly pointing to the time of its composition, though it is hard to believe that Babel was all of a sudden publishing a decade-old story (no earlier versions have survived). Possibly, some earlier idea for this story was revived when Babel worked as editor and translator on the three-volume edition of Maupassant in 1926–1927. Be that as it may, Babel did not always sign his stories with dates, and the fact that he did in this case indicates a deliberate strategy. The dates emphasize a continuity between Babel’s “Petersburg” period, roughly 1916–1919, and the newly “revised” Babel of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Weary of his association with Odessa, it seems, Babel

wished to appear as the author of several new *Petersburg* stories. *Maria*, in turn, was supposed to flow naturally out of Babel's newly updated *Petersburg* oeuvre, just as *Sunset* flowed out of *The Odessa Stories*.

"The Road" is framed as a memoir about the author's arrival in Petrograd in 1918—controversial in 1931 because of Babel's work for *Novaia zhizn*—and articulates his *current* apprehensions about his future as a writer. The story is told in the first person and belongs to what Babel defined oxymoronically as "autobiographical prose fiction." Following the "disintegration of the front" (the Rumanian Front, as it would appear from his "Autobiography"<sup>42</sup>), the young author travels from his native Odessa to Petrograd through the unforgiving landscape of the Russian civil war, narrowly escapes death at the hands of a roving band of Jew-hating marauders, miraculously avoids amputation from frostbite, and finally reaches his appointed destination. Some of the details of his arrival in Petrograd, including a strip search of the vodka smugglers (*Sochineniia* 2:233), are be transposed to Scene 1 of *Maria* to be voiced by Dymshits's invalid "mules" (*meshochniki* or bagmen). Once in Petrograd, the exhausted narrator of "The Road" nearly freezes to death but is ultimately rescued by an old army friend now working for the Cheka, the organization where the narrator finds "life-long friends" and employment as a translator.

Read by someone unaware of Babel's reputation as a writer, the story may be taken for just another heroic Soviet tale about a Jewish lad from Odessa who finally fulfills his destiny by joining the Cheka. But Babel was a famous author, and what implicitly propels the narrator toward Petrograd in "The Road" is his desire to realize his vocation as a writer, "to conquer Petersburg." Lest we miss his point, Babel had the narrator, in a semi-delirium from cold and exhaustion, compare himself to a mediaeval Jewish poet who perished within the sight of Zion:

"So goes the imperative of conquering St. Petersburg," I thought and strained to recall the name of the man, who was crushed by the hooves of Arab horses at the very end of his journey. It was Yehuda Halevi. (*Sochineniia* 2:204)

The editor-in-chief of *30 dnei*, Babel's old friend, Vasili Reginin, must have winced at the implied analogy between Halevi's fate and that of the author, who was under attack by General Budenny, the Soviet cavalryman-in-chief. But a new story by the parsimonious Babel was a real coup, and Reginin, well aware of Babel's work for *Novaya zhizn*, let it pass. He had weathered worse. Once, he even allowed himself to be locked up in a cage

with tigers in order to increase his magazine circulation,<sup>43</sup> and now he was riding the wave, with a sensational publication of a story by the “silent” Babel, not to mention the serialization of *The Golden Calf* by the Odessans Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov. Thus Babel was able to cover up his work for Gorky’s newspaper and at the same time stress his loyalty to the new regime, even as he conveyed, through ingenious circumlocution and allegory, the sense of danger he now associated with his career as a Soviet writer.

Budenny’s latest attack on him, published in *Pravda* on October 26, 1928, took issue with Gorky’s praise of the author of *Red Cavalry* as a Soviet Gogol. Coming at a time when Gorky was becoming a state cult figure in the Soviet Union, it had to have the highest sanction, namely that of Stalin himself. And it would have been typical of Stalin first to unleash Budenny and then come to the defense of his friend Gorky, thereby creating a good impression among the intelligentsia and indebting Gorky to himself.<sup>44</sup> Initially merely amused by Budenny’s vituperation,<sup>45</sup> Babel soon took a more somber view of this assault. Perhaps, as he came to understand Stalin’s machinery better, he realized that he had every reason to be concerned for his future in Soviet Russia.<sup>46</sup>

That Gorky’s specter hovered over the story, not only by his glaring absence, becomes apparent if “The Road” is juxtaposed with Babel’s mini-memoir, “Commencement” (Nachalo), published in 1938, in which Babel recalled his first encounter with his future patron and protector in the fall of 1916, after Gorky had accepted his stories for publication in *Letopis*.

“Nails can be small,” he said, “and they can be big—as big as my finger.” And he raised his slender finger, sculpted so powerfully and gently, to my eyes. “A writer’s path, my dear *pistol*” (he stressed the “o”), “is strewn with nails, for the most part, large ones. You’ll have to walk on them barefoot, and there will be a lot of blood; with every year the flow of it will increase.”<sup>47</sup>

In 1932, Babel had every reason to appreciate Gorky’s foresight. Having barely survived Budenny’s threats, Babel had to withstand another attack on him in July 1930 for allegedly giving an anti-Soviet interview on the French Riviera. It was then that he asserted his loyalty by invoking his service in the Cheka beginning as early as October 1917—an intentional exaggeration or perhaps a Freudian slip uttered by a man whose whereabouts at the time of the Bolshevik coup d’état are to this day shrouded in mystery.<sup>48</sup> Although the interview turned out to be fabricated and Babel managed to clear his name formally, the air of political scandal continued

to cling to him requiring further action. The nails that Gorky had in mind were getting bigger and sharper, too.

"The Road" develops this theme—authorship as martyrdom in the cause of truth—by using analogies and substitutes, and transposing them to the allegorical plane. Addressing those who have ears, Babel touches the familiar chords of the Russian mythology of literary authorship with a subtle allusion to Mikhail Lermontov's famous reworking of Hamlet's "sleep" soliloquy: "Alone, I step out onto the road/Before me sparkles the flinty way" (Выхожу один я на дорогу, / Предо мной кремнистый путь блестит). Osip Mandelstam did the same in his 1924 "Ode on Slate" (Грифельная ода). He re-articulated Lermontov's lines—"the flinty way from the old song"—picking up the poetic relay as one who has lived through the ordeal of the civil war and borne witness to the Russian Revolution, albeit the way Doubting Thomas bore witness to the resurrection of Christ: "And I, too, wish to thrust my hand/Into the flinty way from the old song . . ." (И я хочу вложить персты / В кремнистый путь из старой песни).<sup>49</sup> Babel joined this conversation, offering his own version of Lermontov's "flinty way."

Unlike Mandelstam in his lofty exaltation atop a mountain peak, Babel characteristically took the low road—one running under the oppressively low skies and strewn with disemboweled, frozen carcasses of horses:

The Milky Way of the Nevsky Avenue flowed into the distance. The corpses of dead horses marked it like milestones. Their raised legs held up the sky that had dropped low. Picked clean, their bellies sparkled.

Lermontov's distant stars were now flickering in the gaping empty bellies of frozen nags.<sup>50</sup> Such was the road that led Babel to the Anichkov Palace on Nevsky, where Ivan Kalugin, his old army friend and now a Cheka officer, let him rest and treated him to a warm bath (a baptism of sorts<sup>51</sup>), plenty of horse meat, and fabulous Turkish cigarettes. The latter were a gift from the last absolute ruler of the Ottoman empire (deposed in 1910) to Alexander III of Russia, a physical giant, whose enormous gown was now wrapped around the diminutive narrator, a native of the area once ruled by the Ottomans. Babel was choosing his luminous details carefully.

Now, again only obliquely, Babel begins to draw an extended analogy between himself and another traveler, this time not Yehuda Halevi, but the previous owner of the palace, the Danish princess Dagmar. Like

the story's narrator, she too had come from afar—a proverbial “stranger,” in Georg Simmel's striking phrase, “who came yesterday and stayed tomorrow.”<sup>52</sup> Princess Dagmar sailed from her warm and cozy Copenhagen to the unforgiving city of Peter to become the wife of Alexander III, Empress of Russia Maria Fedorovna, the mother of Russia's next and, as it turned out, last tsar. She lived long enough to learn that her issue, her “birthing blood,” as Babel referred to the royal family, “fell on the merciless granite of St. Petersburg.”

The story was meant for publication in Stalin's Russia of 1932, and for obvious reasons Babel chose not to spell out the horrors of the murder of the royal family, but any reader his age or older would have picked up the chilling clue at once. Hounded by Budenny, pressed by his editors, threatened with evisceration by the censors, and barely able to clear his name from the accusations of betrayal, the “wise rabbi” Babel, as Ilya Eherenburg once called him, was still able to wonder in his published story whether his own “children”—the literary legacy of the stranger who came yesterday and stayed tomorrow—were destined to share the fate of Maria Fedorovna's murdered sons.

At the same time, Babel had other fish to fry. The story was meant to reaffirm—in as forward a manner as possible—Babel's credentials as a writer loyal to the regime. The ending, which has rubbed so many readers the wrong way, is where Babel trumpets his message. With Moisei Uritsky's personal approval, the narrator, Babel's alter ego, is hired as a “translator attached to the Foreign Department” (*Inostrannyi otdel*) of the Cheka with the assignment to “translate testimony given by diplomats, arsonists [*podzhigateli*, GF], and spies” (*Sochineniia* 2:206). Arsonists? The presence of these arsonists who, for some reason, chose to give their testimony in a foreign language lends the sentence the air of unreality. What makes it even more suspect is that there was no “Foreign Department” in the Cheka until December 1920.<sup>53</sup> These two gratuitous details cast the whole “recollection” under suspicion. Neither Babel nor his editor seem to have been interested in fact-checking, which was par for the course, given Babel's statement in 1930 that he started working for the Cheka on October 1917—two months *before* the Cheka was decreed into existence.<sup>54</sup>

Of course, the story ends with a happy Babel.<sup>55</sup> The narrator finds employment as a Cheka translator, gets a uniform, food ration cards, a job, and—Babel's enemies, beware!—“comrades, loyal in friendship and death, comrades like no other comrades anywhere in the world except in

our country.”<sup>56</sup> He did indeed have powerful friends, some in the Cheka. God forbid anyone should bring up the issue of Babel's writing for his friend Gorky's *Novaia zhizn!*

But it is the next (and last) sentence of the story that sounds utterly preposterous, a summing up of Babel's career since 1918: “Thus, began my life, full of thought and merriment.” “Thought,” not writing, should already put one on guard. “Merriment” is the last thing that comes through in Babel's private correspondence, filled with whining and moaning, even when he tried to put up a brave face.<sup>57</sup> Those aware of Babel's vicissitudes must have taken this coda for one of Babel's jocular, sarcastic mystifications. Clearly, the ending was tacked-on and only amplified two tragic analogies that the narrator drew to his own, by then increasingly torturous career as a Soviet writer—a stranger from the sunny bourgeois Odessa, who came yesterday to the old-regime St. Petersburg, soon turned into the revolutionary Petrograd, and stayed tomorrow in what had become Stalin's Moscow. The Anichkov Palace “baptism” created strange affinities but the writer's otherness was neither redeemed nor washed off: Hired as a “translator,” he remained a go-between, a mediator.

**IN THE SECOND STORY** of this “Petersburg” cycle, “The Ivan-and-Maria” (based on “Concert at Katerinenstadt,” 1918), Babel recalls his encounter with a larger-than-life Russian character who seems to have stepped out of Gorky's catalogue of colorful provincial types (the steamboat cook M. A. Smury from *My Apprenticeship* comes to mind).<sup>58</sup> In the story, Babel travels with a food procurement expedition to the German colony in the Volga region. The expedition includes a team of cripples, who enjoy sharing in the relative prosperity and peace of the region and whom Babel would soon transplant into *Maria* as Isaac Dymshits' cripples smuggling foodstuffs and other valuable through the civil-war checkpoints.

In the story, the narrator, Babel's alter ego, meets a remarkable steamboat captain who ferried ammunition for the Red Army detachments. An expansive Russian type, this captain is on a drinking binge and uses up the boat's precious fuel for a dangerous nighttime run for more spirits. He succeeds but ends up paying for his transcendent binge. His brains splatter the wheels of a peasant cart, as he is shot by a Red commander for wasting army fuel. Having set the sun on his own high-spirited Jewish bandit Benya Krik, Babel was now drawing the curtain on Gorky's eccentric Russian misfits.

Back in 1915, Gorky made a big splash with his essays “Two Souls,” contrasting the *yin* of Russian culture, its two souls—that of a dreamy Oriental and a volatile anarchic Slav—with the “Occidental” *yang*, with its cult of reason and purposeful action.<sup>59</sup> Babel’s “The Ivan-and-Maria,” in Russian *Ivan-da-Mari’a* (a field plant that combines violet and yellow flowers), echoes Gorky’s thought and transposes it, allegorically, onto the Stalinist drive for industrialization meant to wrench Soviet Russia out of its traditional ways and transform it into a modern productive economy on a par with the urban and industrial West. Only those who are rational and disciplined—the story’s “Germanic” Lett Larson and the Red merchant Sergei Malyshev—would be allowed to survive in Soviet Russia. The juxtaposition of the brain-splattered wheel (no doubt, the wheel of history) and a cheerful report on the success of grain procurement offered much food for thought (without too much merriment) for the Soviet reader in 1932. And the very idea of decoupling, better, purging “Ivan” from “Maria,” of eliminating one color of the flower from the plant that naturally sprouts two, would be developed further in the play *Maria*.

**THE FINAL STORY OF THE CYCLE**, “Guy de Maupassant” (1932), is set in the Petrograd winter of 1916 when the budding author is hired to help an amateur translator of Maupassant—a rich young Jewess married to a financial magnate, Bendersky<sup>60</sup>—to edit her translations for publication. Babel, of course, was involved in editing and translating Maupassant’s collected works in 1926–1927, but the job as a shadow editor that his narrator contracts for also resembles Babel’s main moonlighting trade as a script doctor and, since the emergence of sound, a writer of film dialogue for movies throughout the 1930s.<sup>61</sup> The regular editorial sessions of the two over Maupassant’s volumes culminate one night in what readings of this sort have often culminated in since Paolo and Francesca—a mutual seduction. In the dead of winter, the two admirers of Maupassant became intoxicated by the lusty sunshine of his story “L’aveu.” United in their passion for literature, and aided by a good, very good, wine (bottled sunshine, as the saying goes) from the banker’s cellars, the translator and the editor collapse into each other’s arms.

Maupassant’s “L’aveu,” it may be recalled, is about the simple, if greedy, peasant girl Céleste’s regular trips to market for which she dutifully pays her coachman until one day the coachman allows her to keep her fare in exchange for a little sex. More trips lead to more savings until

Céleste gets pregnant, and is disgraced and ruined for life. Quite the opposite, it seems, happens to Babel's autobiographical narrator: he receives good money for his editorial magic and on top of that gets to make love, magically without consequences, to an attractive married woman. But as Babel's story draws to a close, the narrator learns that the invigorating sunshine of "L'aveu" did in fact exact a toll on the commercially and in every other way successful French author. After Maupassant's many trips to the literary marketplace, and many yachts and houses later, he died, as the narrator learns from his biography, a raving syphilitic. "I felt touched by a presage of initiation into a mystery," Babel concludes the story gravely, leaving us guessing what this mystery is all about.

The answer to the puzzle is, of course, simple enough: for a writer, as for the poor and quite earthly Céleste, there is no free ride. Publishing this story ten years after the putative date of its composition was a symbolic announcement by the "Russian Maupassant" that it was time for *him* to pay up. The bills were coming due for Babel.

### Extending Credit:

#### Revising *The Odessa Stories* and *Red Cavalry*

Other stories written and published around the same time, even though unconnected to St. Petersburg, sounded a similar note. Set in Odessa, "Karl-Yankel" (1931) is the thinly veiled story of Babel's bereavement over the loss of his son, who had been adopted by Kashirina's new husband, the writer Vsevolod Ivanov. As Kashirina confirmed in her memoirs, the son Mikhail was forbidden by Ivanov to have any contact with his father.<sup>62</sup> The story came out in July 1931, the month of Babel's and Mikhail's birthdays (they were born on the same day, thirty-two years apart), and should be read as an ironic and melancholy farewell to Babel's sole male progeny. Suffice it to say that the serendipitous appearance in the story of a Kirghiz woman, who volunteers enthusiastically to nurse the baby Karl-Yankel at her own breast, referred the knowing reader to Ivanov's "Dityo" ("Babe," 1921), a story emblematic of the debut of this other protégé and friend of Maxim Gorky. An unabashed Soviet activist, the story's Kirghiz woman takes over the baby after the real mother faints from the stress of the absurd trial. What the Kirghiz woman says indicates that the child will be taken away from his mother: "With us, he will become an airman, he will fly under the skies . . ." Ivanov, who had adopted Babel's son Mikhail, could

not have missed Babel's ironic dig. The Red soldiers from Ivanov's story who adopt the child of a couple they have just slain use the same utopian language: "With us, he'll grow up, and he'll fly to the moon . . ." As in the case of "The Road," the optimistic ending Babel tacks onto "Karl-Yankel" sounds hollow—too hollow to drown out the absurdities and cruelties of Soviet life that are the subject of this story about a wrenching discontinuity between the present and the past.<sup>63</sup>

In the 1932 story "The End of the Alms House," the old men feeding off the tips and bribes at Odessa's Jewish cemetery, the same characters who once provided Babel with the colorful material for his gangster tales, are packed away and taken from their familiar haunts to a Soviet retirement home. As the title suggests, neither the old shammas Arye-Leib (both words mean "lion"), nor the writer who made a career out of rendering his oral tales into published stories, can any longer make a living off the city's past glories and its myths. The jolly old Odessa that Babel had invented was now being mothballed and sent into retirement.

A similar theme of grudging accommodation and genuine grief over loss sound in "Froim Grach" (1933), a new story, which, like "The End of the Alms House," was linked to the Odessa cycle but remained unpublished in Babel's lifetime. In "Froim Grach," Babel returned to the spring-summer of 1919, when he himself was probably back in Odessa, to tell a story about the demise of the second most exotic figure of his Jewish gangster tales. In the earlier *Odessa Stories*, in which Benya Krik functioned as Babel's alter ego, the allegorical prototype for Grach was none other than Maxim Gorky himself, which links this story to "The Ivan-and-Maria" (discussed above).<sup>64</sup> "Froim Grach" may have belonged or was related to Babel's unrealized or lost Cheka cycle.<sup>65</sup> Written in the third person, rare for Babel, and exuding the chill of distance from what was his signature in *Tales of Odessa*, "Froim Grach" demystifies none other than Babel's Benya Krik, exposing him as a sham. Apparently, his reputation as the king of Odessa gangsters was just a show for the uninitiated: "Borovoi [an Odessan working for the Cheka, *GF*] told them that it was the one-eyed Froim Grach, not Benya Krik, who was the true leader of the forty thousand Odessa thieves. He concealed his game from the outside eyes but everything played out according to the old man's schemes." While Borovoi (possibly one of Babel's Odessa Cheka friends from 1919—the story is written in the third person) revels in his own tales of Odessa gangsters, his new boss dispatched from Moscow, Vladislav Siemen (Simen),

arranges for Froim Grach, unarmed and unsuspecting, to be *liquidated* in the back yard of the Odessa Cheka. Borovoi discovers Froim's body next to a "wall covered in ivy" after he had been shot by two Red soldiers, peasant with no idea of whom they had executed, one of them still in awe of Froim's physical strength.

Like Malyshev, Larson, and Makeyev in "The Ivan-and-Maria" Siemen is the new unsentimental, rational type, sent to introduce systematic recordkeeping in the Odessa Cheka and put an end to its "romantic" attitude toward executions, for which it was notorious,<sup>66</sup> as well as any romanticizing of Odessa's notorious criminal class. Bowing to the tradition that went back to, at least, Ivan Goncharov's *Oblomov* with his *Stolz*, in which a Russian of German blood stands, to borrow a phrase, for a "Protestant ethic and spirit of capitalism," Babel's Siemen sees no place in the Soviet future for the mythic figures of Odessa's history, nor does he think that it is wise for others to be curious about such things. Babel concurred—reluctantly—in the third person, a voice untypical of his writing.

*Red Cavalry*, too, was brought into line. The 1932 novella, "Argamak," not "The Rabbi's Son," now concluded the civil war cycle and radically altered the book's trajectory. In "Argamak," the familiar bespectacled narrator, Babel's alter ego Lyutov, comes by chance into possession of a prize steed. But he is an unskilled rider, causing horrible sores on the animal's back and practically destroying it; worse, he begins to draw to himself the angry stares of Cossacks sensing in him a stranger. Feeling ashamed, tormented by guilt, and frightened, he gives up Argamak; in return he gets a docile mare that he soon learns to ride well; at long last, he blends in with the Cossacks. The author, it appears, was trading the Pegasus of his *Red Cavalry* inspiration for a tame mount—all for the sake of what sociologists call passing!

In a way, Babel was closing his books, and at the same time, paradoxically, thematizing his retreat from his ideals in his own new writings. The setting had to be old: by 1932, he surely must have despaired of ever seeing his collectivization stories in print (Stalin preferred Sholokhov to "our slippery Babel"<sup>67</sup>), but his lyric voice as well as the story's allegorical plane stayed current. Even somewhat fragmented and fragmentary, his Petersburg oeuvre became a vehicle for his ambivalent attitude toward the times, and *Maria* appears to be the summation and culmination of this cycle. This was a dangerous strategy, as it went against the "social command" or, better, orders issued from on high to depict the Five-Year Plan.

But in the frantic world of the Stalin revolution, output counted for a lot: the stories bought some time and extended credit.

### *Maria*: Topography and Character in Babel's Petersburg

From the very opening of *Maria*, Babel cranks up the tension between his two autobiographical extremes by giving each a different street address. Economic rationality, with its Jewish “accent”—Isaac Dymshits—resides at the hotel at Nevsky 86 and traffics in all manner of commodities through his team of grotesque invalids. The all-too-Russian unrealistic, romantic dreamers—the members of General Mukovnin’s family—inhabit an old-fashioned apartment on Millionnaya, across the street from the great Hermitage and the Winter Palace.

For a reader sensitive to Babel’s lifelong, quasi-autobiographical project, it is not hard to recognize in *Isaac* Dymshits a distillation of *Isaac* Babel’s own authorial persona—a writer who became a commercial success through his stories about all manner of twisted and debased humanity. Babel’s 1918 sketch, “Concert in Katerinenstadt,” and his more elaborate 1932 version of it, “The Ivan-and-Maria,” lend support to this reading. “Two weeks ago,” he wrote in November 1918,

I arrived in Katerinenstadt with unusual people, I arrived with some cripples. We organized them in Petersburg into a food procurement detachment and departed in search of bread from the Volga [German] colonies.<sup>68</sup>

The scheme, though not predatory, was akin to that devised by the character of *Isaac* Dymshits, who shared with Babel both a first name and a place of residence at Nevsky 86. The similarities do not end there. Dymshits’s family situation (his wife and children live elsewhere, out of harm’s way) and his attraction to gentile women have striking parallels with Babel’s own life.

At the other end of Petrograd’s main artery, on Millionnaya street—opposite the Hermitage (the world of high art) and the Winter Palace (the old regime), Babel placed the Mukovnins, an old-style, noble intelligentsia Russian family, and their entourage: General Mukovnin, his daughters Ludmila and the now-absent Maria, their cousin Katya Veltsen, the old nanny, and Maria’s old lover manqué, Prince Golitsyn. Crushed by the Revolution and now in rapid decline, the Mukovnins and their circle still cling to aspects of Dostoevskian spirituality (Golitsyn and Katya), Russian

Populist penitence before the people, Russian nationalism of the Change-of-Landmarks type (the General is happy to collaborate with the Bolsheviks for the sake of the country), cultural refinement (a taste for ballet at the Mariinsky), and of course book culture and learning (Mukovnin, like his prototype, General Aleksei Ignatiev, is writing a history of the abuses against the lower ranks in the imperial army).<sup>69</sup> Underneath it all, there is the Mukovnins' fervent desire not just to survive but to find a worthy place in the new world.

The two Mukovnin daughters, Ludmila and Maria, choose different strategies for moving with the times. Here Babel employs a familiar Greek dichotomy. Ludmila is a twentieth-century version of Aphrodite Pandemos (Ludmila, that is, to people's liking, popular), takes the low road, and is willing to sell herself to a rich and unsavory Jew. The other is her heavenly counterpart, Aphrodite Urania, who prefers the high road and, like Babel, joins Budenny's Red Cavalry. An approximate Christian equivalent of the Greek Aphrodite Urania is the New Testament Mary of Martha and Mary, hence the title of the play. The fact that Maria Mukovnin never shows up in the play serves only to emphasize her identification with the celestial Aphrodite Urania. The nomenclature of Babel's play seems to echo Maupassant's ironically bestowing the heavenly name *Céleste* upon the all-too materialist milkmaid of "Laveu."

The Mukovnin family name, derived from *muki*, the Russian for "torment," confirms their socio-historical type as members of the intelligentsia with its cult of martyrdom and amplifies the torments they experience in the crucible of the revolution. By settling on this name, Babel, it seems, wished his audience to associate the play with Aleksey Tolstoy's famous civil-war trilogy, *Khozhdenie po mukam* (somewhat misleadingly translated as *Road to Calvary*). It, too, revolves around the fate of two sisters; and its first installment, *Sisters* (1921), like Babel's *Maria*, was written abroad. *Sisters* served as proof of Tolstoy's loyalty to the new regime when he returned to Soviet Russia from emigration in 1923. The title of Tolstoy's trilogy as well as the Mukovnin name in Babel's play strongly echo the popular apocryphal "Descent of the Mother of God to Hell" (literally, "walking through torments"). In the "Descent," Maria Mother of God comforts the sinners and pleads successfully before her Son to grant the sinners some respite. In a subtle allusion to this tale, the entire Mukovnin household is condemned to the living hell of the 1920 Petrograd. Their only hope is to be saved by the family's favorite child, Maria, a strong,

decent, beautiful woman who incarnates the pure romance of the Revolution. But they wait for her in vain. The divine Maria never appears and only sends an emissary with a spare pair of boots—a signal to the family to get packing and go, most likely, into emigration.

This scene, along with the death of General Mukovnin, who expires realizing that he would never see his beloved Maria, has strong autobiographical overtones. Babel was in Moscow in May 1924 when he heard the news of his father's illness, and he returned to Odessa too late to say goodbye or even participate in the funeral. This experience apparently haunted him, and he had tried to assimilate it into his art, although unsuccessfully, in his unfinished novel *The Jewess* (Evreika). *Maria* offered another opportunity, and Babel made use of it, interweaving several personal motifs: his abandoning his family in 1920 to join Budenny's forces in the manner of Maria Mukovnin, an homage to his late father, who, like the General, never adjusted to the new world,<sup>70</sup> and finally his own conviction (at least in 1933) that his family was better off outside Soviet Russia, notwithstanding all of his letters to the contrary.<sup>71</sup>

The people of Babel's milieu, whether they were aware of his personal circumstances or not, had no trouble recognizing in the character of Maria a version of Babel's own authorial persona—an old-world intellectual redeemed by the Revolution—an image that Babel assiduously cultivated with the appearance of *Red Cavalry*. Dymshits and Maria, then, define the play's opposite poles, embodying two conflicting and/or complementary aspects of what it meant for Babel to be a writer—a person called upon to combine transcendence with commerce. This was not dissimilar to Babel's other favorite professional type—the prostitute—who combined romance and profit. The play was a melancholy meditation of a desperate man. In 1933, approaching forty and still unable to make a choice in his personal life, Babel was haunted by the thought of never repeating his coup of the mid-1920s, when *Red Cavalry* and *The Odessa Stories* brought him to the apex of fortune and fame.

### *Maria*: Paying Off Old Debts

Rooted as *Maria* is in Babel's anecdotes of civil-war Petrograd,<sup>72</sup> there are strong indications that Babel may have conceived the play late in 1929, prompted by Vladimir Mayakovsky, in anticipation of the tenth anniversary of Budenny's First Cavalry Army (more on this below). If so,

he was soon preempted by Vsevolod Vishnevsky, who fulfilled his “social command” by producing the play, *The First Cavalry Army*, in time for the anniversary and in accordance with the script of Budenny and his coterie. Babel, however, did not give up the idea. According to Babel's letter to Solomon Mikhoels, his good friend and the head of the State Jewish Theater, Babel had received an advance on the play, produced some unsatisfactory drafts, and was postponing further work until he could finish a cycle of stories.<sup>73</sup> Another letter (hitherto unpublished), addressed to actor and director Vasily Vasilyevich Kuza, the deputy chair of the Vakhtangov Theater Artistic Council, speaks directly of Babel's continued attempts to finish the play in January 1932:

Dear V. V., if I do not arrive at your theater at the end of February with a finished play, then it means nothing has worked out. I simply won't have enough strength to continue working on it any further. Let's give it one last try. Yours, I. B.<sup>74</sup>

Nothing came of it, it seems, until Babel's arrival at Gorky's villa in Sorrento in April 1933. There, away from his family and enjoying Gorky's hospitality, he wrote the first full draft of *Maria* in the space of two weeks (something similar happened to him with his other play, *Sunset*, in 1926).

What ten years earlier Alexey Tolstoy's novel, *Sisters*, did for Tolstoy, *Maria* was to do for Babel—serve as his “return ticket” to the USSR. In September, 1932, he finally wrested from the Politburo permission to travel to France for two months, ostensibly in order to collect his wife and daughter and bring them back to the USSR.<sup>75</sup> He had now overstayed his allotted two months by another five, lending credence to the rumors then rife in Moscow that he was planning to settle abroad for good, perhaps in the manner of a “loyal émigré” like Evgeny Zamyatin, who had been granted this dispensation by Stalin himself. Whether or not he entertained such plans seriously, by the time Babel arrived in Sorrento, he had decided to go back to the Soviet Union and felt it in his interest to have something new and substantive to show for his overextended stay abroad. His generous host Gorky must have thought so, too.

In the spring and summer 1932, Gorky repeatedly interceded on Babel's behalf before Kaganovich and Stalin<sup>76</sup> when Babel's request for permission to go to France was being blocked. We now know that the culprit was Stalin, then enjoying his long vacation in the South. It was only after Stalin's arrival in Moscow, at the end of August 1932, that Babel was miraculously waved through, receiving his permission to travel on

September 3, 1933. Stalin liked to play the role of the intelligentsia's benefactor, and the timing was meant to put Babel and Gorky on notice that the author of the miracle was none other than Stalin himself. Eight months later, long after the deadline of the allowed two months,<sup>77</sup> it was payback time. Babel, of course, had more than one outstanding item on his Soviet account books. *Maria* was supposed to cancel some of these debts and, in a manner of speaking, to extend his credit as a bona fide Soviet writer.

Babel's biggest liability was his diminished literary output at a time when the whole country, including members of the literary and artistic elite, was mobilized for the First Five-Year Plan. A play, especially a successful play, could help discharge his writerly obligation. Another weighty debt was owed to the Red Cavalry Commander, Semyon Budenny. *Maria* was supposed to convey a long overdue conciliatory gesture to a powerful critic as well as his superior, Kliment Voroshilov, Stalin's trusted civil war comrade-in-arms and since 1925 People's Commissar of Defense. Both Budenny and Voroshilov had high ambitions to lead the armed forces of the new state and ever since the end of the civil war—especially since the ouster of their former nemesis, Leon Trotsky, in 1927—both had been concocting a heroic legend and linking it to Stalin's progressively inflated civil war record. They could not forgive Babel for presenting them in his *Red Cavalry* for who they were—brave and inspiring leaders of a ragtag Cossack army, but also, like their men, uneducated and crude. It mattered little that Babel never intended to diminish their valor—nothing short of a legend would do. With its runaway success at home and abroad, Babel's *Red Cavalry* was for them a public relations disaster.

Worse still, *Red Cavalry*, which began with a victory and ended in retreat, told the story of one of the biggest fiascos of the war, the Soviet defeat in the Polish campaign, in which Stalin may have played an invidious role when he disobeyed orders to have Budenny's army link forces with Mikhail Tukhachevsky's outside Warsaw. This episode threatened to undermine Stalin's military credentials and irked him enough for him to order the evidence destroyed.<sup>78</sup> Babel had to be aware of the controversy, but in 1925–1926, when he was putting the finishing touches on *Red Cavalry*, the artistic integrity of the cycle must have overridden other considerations. He concluded the story, "The Rabbi's Son," with the ugly rout of Soviet forces as its setting. In the late 1920s and 1930s, when Stalin and his supporters were trumpeting the myth of his martial prowess, Babel's *Red Cavalry* was bound to rub the wrong way. Indeed, they would

have crushed Babel despite his international acclaim and forced him into emigration had it not been for Gorky's powerful protection. For his part, Babel, who had little interest in joining the fray, and even less in adjudicating military appointments, tried to mend fences—but never in such an elaborate fashion as he did in *Maria*.

### *Maria*—Denisova

Well-placed veterans of the Polish campaign of 1920 (and there were many) would have easily guessed that Maria Mukovnin, the eponymous protagonist of the play, was, in part, modeled on her namesake Maria Denisova—a famous Odessa beauty and the original inspiration (the “*Giocconda*”) for Mayakovsky's great love epic, *Cloud in Pants*.<sup>79</sup> A modern, independent woman with strong leftist convictions and, apparently, a young illegitimate daughter, Denisova studied sculpture and art in Switzerland during World War I until the Swiss expelled her as a political undesirable in 1919. Back in Russia, she joined what was to become Budenny's First Cavalry Army. Like Babel, she worked for the army's Political Department, designing posters and conducting political education classes among the ranks during the Polish campaign.

More important for Babel's rehabilitation scheme, during this time Denisova met and soon afterward married Efrem Afanasyevich Shchadenko (“Akim Ivanych” in the play). Shchadenko was the Red Cavalry's number-three man, after Voroshilov and Budenny, and like them, he would climb to the highest ranks of the Soviet armed forces, his career accelerating tremendously during Stalin's infamous Red Army purge.<sup>80</sup> Although Denisova's marriage was unhappy,<sup>81</sup> she shared her husband's (and Budenny's) passion for the official legend of the Polish campaign—not as a defeat but as a feat of superhuman heroism—and would have had no trouble recognizing herself in the character of Babel's Maria. In her letter to Mayakovsky, she even confessed to liking Babel as a writer. What she objected to was, as she put it, Babel's “looking under the skirts of the revolution”; judging by her sculpture, she herself preferred the Revolution in a more dignified, heroic, and essentially phallic posture.<sup>82</sup>

In *Maria*, Babel made her wish come true—in the touchingly naïve pathos of Maria's description of the Red Cossacks in her letter home (Scene 5)—a temporary relief from the somber and stifling atmosphere of the play. Maria's letter functioned also as an olive branch that Babel was

offering—without fawning—to the powerful Red Cavalry trio and their patron on high. We can only guess if Babel’s conciliatory message reached its intended addressees; perhaps, it helped to thin some of the clouds that had been gathering around him in the mid-1930s.

### *Maria: A Balancing Act*

The romantic élan of the Polish campaign, muted by its distance from the play’s setting, is counterpoint to the play’s other dominant motifs of helplessness, cynicism, and darkness. These two poles—the detached, naïve pathos and the all-too-palpable despair—account for the play’s overall message. Even in the sunny, springtime final scene, there is enough ambivalence to amplify the other side of this polarity.

A working-class couple is moving up from their basement to the Mukovnins’ luxurious digs. Elena, the worker’s wife, is pregnant, about to give birth, as it were, to the child of the Revolution. But Babel has her worried that her hips might be too narrow for a healthy birth, leaving open the question whether the new world Russian would actually issue from the loins of the Russian proletariat.

The uncertainty is further compounded by the giant peasant girl Nyushka. She resembles both the Céleste of “L’Aveu” and Vera Mukhina’s famous sculpture of the peasant baba, *Krestianka* (1927).<sup>83</sup> Like Céleste, she enters the scene bathed in sunshine. And it is her histrionics that bring the play to an end. Babel introduces her into the play as a peasant antipode of the Hermitage Caryatids, known as the Atlantes, that are supposed to be visible from the windows of the Mukovnins’ flat. She presents a great contrast to the taciturn Elena, the bony worker’s wife:

Her belly sticking out, the woman [Elena] steps cautiously keeping close to the walls, touches them, looks into adjoining rooms, turns on the chandelier, turns it off. Enter Nyushka, an immense ruddy peasant wench (*devka*), holding a bucket and a rag—to wash windows. She climbs up on the windowsill, tucks her skirt up baring her knees; rays of sunlight pour over her. Like a statue supporting a vaulted ceiling, she stands against the background of the spring sky. (*Sochineniia* 2:355)

As the curtain falls, we hear Nyushka belting out in her “basso”—male—voice a popular Cossack ballad. Far from being heroic, as might be fitting for the scene awash in spring sunlight, the ballad tells a story of a romance tragically destroyed by vile pecuniary treachery.<sup>84</sup> The curtain

cuts the ballad short at its bright introductory part, and the audience does not hear the rest of it, but the ballad was popular enough in Babel's day for, at least, some in the audience to be able to complete it in their heads. Those who knew it by heart would have wondered what the author had in mind, ending his play on a note of such foreboding: the Cossack tricked into committing suicide, his young bride still expecting him to return, the culprit evil witch who had been "bribed with money" to destroy the young lovers. True, the play leaves little doubt about the death of the old world, but there is no such certainty about what has come to replace it. Dead lovers leave no progeny.

Indeed, the last scene, if viewed as an allegory for the Revolution, presents a picture of a disoriented working class unsure of its future and overshadowed by the giant peasant *baba*, the embodiment of the "uncivilized" but fecund, not to say, virile and powerful Russian peasantry, still a vast majority in Soviet Russia even at the end of the First Five-Year Plan.

Apparently Babel shared Gorky's apprehensions about the Revolution and his fear that Russia's miniscule intelligentsia elite might disappear "like a pinch of salt thrown into the bland swamp of the Russian village." As Gorky elaborated in his obituary of Lenin in 1924, "All my life I have felt oppressed by the fact that our illiterate village, with its zoological selfishness and almost complete absence of social conscience, dominates the city." Gorky may have expressed his regret for having written these words earlier, but he left them in the second edition of his Lenin essay, published in 1931,<sup>85</sup> adding, not without a trace of irony, a Russian saying: "What has been written with a pen cannot be hacked out with an axe." Babel's giant Nyushka, who overshadows and overwhelms with her voice the other characters on stage, resonates with Gorky's apprehensions. What is more, her singing the ballad about love destroyed by treachery, as the play fades out, suggests a concatenation of ideas that go, as Babel put it in his letter to his mother, "against the General Line."<sup>86</sup>

Babel could be subtle, even cryptic, he could withhold inconvenient facts and cover his tracks, but in his writing, by and large, he bowed to the gods of art, observed their rules, and, as the ending of *Maria* shows, he managed to speak his mind. The spring sunshine at the end of *Maria* owed much, as it turns out, to the merciless sun of Maupassant's "L'Aveu." In *Maria*, even more so than he did in his private interviews with Boris Souvarine and Boris Nikolaevsky in France in 1932–1933,<sup>87</sup> Babel remained himself, knowing he was playing with fire.

## The Precursor Strikes Back

Gorky, the patron of the erstwhile “Messiah from Odessa,” had a mixed reaction to the play. He was not discouraging when Babel recited *Maria* to him in Sorrento, but he reversed himself when he read the manuscript later on, apparently, after leaving his villa for the Soviet Union. A carbon copy of his undated letter to Babel about the play records his impressions.<sup>88</sup> Gorky found the play’s message “elusive,” its action excessively grotesque, some of the dialogue easy fodder for anti-Semitism, and most important, the happy ending artificially tacked on. Clearly, Gorky had trouble getting used to this new—*Petersburg*—Babel, whom he saw as indulging in “Baudelaire-like passion for spoiled meat.” He did not notice or remained indifferent to Babel’s formal innovations, in which Chekhovian depth combined with the expressionist satire in the manner of Mayakovsky and Brecht, all of it shaped into a new cinematic structure.<sup>89</sup> Instead of trying to probe the bases for the play’s dark mood, he prodded his old protégé to revive his earlier sunny or, as Gorky had it, “romantic” disposition, having in mind, no doubt, *The Odessa Stories* and *Red Cavalry*. We can only wonder if Gorky appreciated the irony of the situation: the “precursor” asking the “Messiah from Odessa” for more sunshine. Curiously, he either failed to or chose not to notice the play’s apparent autobiographical subtext. His wondering if it was the late Zinovy Grzhebin who served Babel as the prototype for his Isaac Dymshits may be seen as Gorky’s way of signaling his unwillingness to engage with Babel at the personal or political level.

Babel could not ignore this criticism and although no drafts of *Maria* have survived, the published version suggests that he may have tried to meet Gorky halfway, at least. One may imagine that in the earlier draft, the last scene was as unabashedly cheerful as the crude happy end of “The Road”—one way for Babel to emphasize the extra-literary character of a stock Soviet closure. In the known, later, version of the play, the ending—because of its ambivalent and contradictory signals—resonates better with the previous seven scenes—dissolving, to quote Gorky, without a trace that “pinch of salt” of the Russian intelligentsia and enlightened working class in the “swamp of the Russian village.”

## Marketing and Reception

While Gorky’s cool reaction could not have improved the play’s chances, Babel did not view his objections as insurmountable. In 1933–1934, with the worst horrors of collectivization receding into the past, the

country was going through a selective liberalization which brought with it an increased tolerance in the cultural sphere. Babel had great hopes for *Maria* as a stage success and, more important, as a work inaugurating a new era in his career as a writer: he now felt drawn to the dramatic form as never before.<sup>90</sup> This new creative spurt after a dry spell of some seven years would put an end to the rumors—Stalin kept tabs—that his “silence” was an expression of opposition to the General Line, namely, Stalin’s policy, and an act of resistance against the country’s total mobilization.

In some superficial ways, *Maria* was a play after the fashions of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Several civil-war dramas had been produced that enjoyed both critical acclaim and box office success, and Babel had every reason to hope that *Maria* might follow suit.<sup>91</sup> His earlier play, *Sunset* (1928), had a mixed reception and premiered in Moscow in his absence. Babel learned his lesson. This time, he took great care in orchestrating his comeback in order to maximize both visibility and income from advances. Parts of the play were published early in 1934 in Moscow and Leningrad. The play was translated into Yiddish and was supposed to be playing simultaneously at both the Vakhtangov Theater and the State Jewish Theater of Solomon Mikhoels. Babel gave public readings at various venues, feeding the excitement and paving the way for what he hoped would be the play’s triumph on stage. For a while, everything proceeded according to plan. In his letters to Brussels, Babel mentions rehearsals at the Vakhtangov and the State Jewish Theater as well as some negotiations to have the play staged in Leningrad.

On December 1, 1934 the world changed and all of the plans collapsed. The assassination of Kirov, the Leningrad Party Secretary and a rising member of the Politburo—the crime of the century, as Robert Conquest qualified it—abolished the rules of the game and signaled the beginning of a new round of repression and purges.<sup>92</sup> Staging a new play, one that was ideologically suspect, perhaps even dangerous, by an author as controversial as Babel, became too risky an enterprise for anyone to undertake. Having at first resisted the publication of the play (he wanted the public to be surprised by it onstage), Babel now hoped that once vetted by the censor and published, *Maria* would appear less dangerous to the theater establishment. Indeed, it was published in the journal *Teatr i dramaturgiya* in April, 1935, although not under the circumstances of Babel’s own choosing.

Running parallel with the text of the play was a patronizing and discouraging review by the influential arts editor of *Pravda*, Isai Lezhnev.

The reader's eye could conveniently skip from the play's dialogue, printed on the upper part of the page, to Lezhnev's droning critique below, where the reader could learn quickly whether Babel had overdone it on sex or underdone it on the class approach (both, according to Lezhnev). More ominous, Lezhnev was wise to Babel's code and although he did not elaborate, it was clear enough that he had cracked Babel's code when he wondered how Babel could have written a play about the Revolution and neglect to show the leading role of the working class in it. *Maria* seemed doomed but for a glimmer of hope. Citing the author's private communication suggesting that *Maria* was intended as the second play in a trilogy, the authoritative reviewer advised Babel to tone down the sex scenes and to rectify his ideological stance in the other parts of the trilogy, if he ever wished to see the play staged.<sup>93</sup>

Babel attempted—or merely pretended—to heed Lezhnev's advice, though apparently without much success or enthusiasm. References to some version of *Maria II* crop up from time to time in Babel's correspondence in 1934 and 1935 but they soon trail off, suggesting that the project was abandoned. It had the same fate as Babel's earlier planned peacetime sequel to *Red Cavalry* (his unfinished novel *The Jewess*). Busy with his assignments for the Soviet film industry (for Babel, lucrative hackwork), he now focused his efforts on preserving his literary legacy—negotiating new editions of his writings, justifying republication by adding a few new or unpublished stories. The fullest edition of Babel's work during his lifetime came out in 50,000 copies in September 1936, a rare privilege he probably owed to his friendship with Maxim Gorky, who two months earlier had passed away.

## Full Stop

Babel probably never completed *Maria II*, and we shall never know the direction Maria Mukovnin's life would have taken in the planned sequel, but the actual play *Maria* seems to have scripted the remainder of Babel's life.

Halfway through the play, in Scene 4, Babel introduces two episodic characters: Yashka Kravchenko, a former lieutenant in the imperial army and “now a Red artillery man,” and “Madame Dora, a citizen of the French Republic,” who has her French passport and is madly in love with Kravchenko. This French connection, altogether gratuitous in the play, becomes meaningful if one takes into account *Maria's* autobiographical subtext, especially

Babel's loyal and forgiving Parisian wife, Evgeniia, who pleaded with him to remain in affluent France (hence Dora, *d'or*) even as he was working on the play's first draft. Like the iconic young Babel, bespectacled, plump, short, and pink-cheeked, Kravchenko, then, is supposed to represent an aspect of the play's author. Neither he nor Madame Dora ever reappear in the play but they figure in it at the crucial moment when the Mukovnins' fragile equilibrium is shattered by Viskovsky's rape of Ludmila.

In a play about the revolution, one can read the scene as an allegory of the abuse that Russia suffered in the hands of those whose duty it was to offer her protection. After all, the officer of the guard Viskovsky, a man of the Mukovnins' milieu who had once courted Maria Mukovnin, transgressed both the fundamental rules of his class and basic human decency by violating a young woman who was a guest in his apartment. Babel used a similar allegorical formula in his 1923 story, "The Sin of Jesus," though the target in the latter was, on the whole, the Russian intelligentsia. Here, Babel is not shedding any tears for the old regime or the Whites in casting Viskovsky, a stand-in for both, as the play's sole character who is unambiguously odious. But precisely because Viskovsky is the most unlikely to serve as the author's mouthpiece, Babel chooses him for a monologue that would have placed the play totally out of bounds, had it been spoken by any other character. Viskovsky addresses his tirade to Yashka Kravchenko, a fellow officer who had once pledged allegiance to the Tsar but who is now quite content, like many former officers, in his new role as a Red Army specialist (*spets*). Using terms that were anachronistic for the civil war but apt for the 1930s, Viskovsky warns Kravchenko of what might happen to him next, outlining the stages of creeping Soviet totalitarianism with chilling precision.

First comes the bribe: "You will do [as they say] as long as they let you be and strum your guitar, sleep with slender women: you are plump and you like slender women. . . ." Then, once the *spets* or, for that matter, a non-party fellow traveler like Babel, gets hooked on the good life, he will be forced to compromise his conscience: "You will do anything, and if they say to you: thrice renounce your mother—you will renounce her." After the *spets* has betrayed his own principles and is filled with self-loathing, the Bolsheviks take away from him his good life:

Yashka, the point is that they will go further: they won't let you drink vodka in the company of the people you like, they will force you to read boring books, and the songs they will force you to learn will also be boring. . . ."

These new restrictions are too confining and the person, who has once happily cooperated with the regime, begins to look for ways to escape the trap: “And then you will get angry, my Red artillery man, you will go mad, your eyes will start darting this way and that. . . .” But by then, it is all hopeless. Once the Bolsheviks learn that the *spets* is trying to slip out of their clutches, they simply dispose of him:

Two gentlemen will pay you a visit. . . . “Let’s go, Comrade Kravchenko . . .” “Should I,” you will ask, “take any things with me?” “Oh no, you need not take anything, Comrade Kravchenko, it won’t take but a minute, just an interrogation, trifles. . . .” And they will put a full stop for you, my Red artillery man, and it will cost them four kopeks. It’s been calculated a revolver bullet costs four kopeks and not a *centime* more.

With Mayakovsky’s suicide—his decision “to put the bullet’s full stop at life’s end”—still fresh in everybody’s memory, the passage had all the urgency of the present moment. It would have sent chills down more than one spine, had it sounded from the stage of one of the theaters in Stalin’s Moscow. Mayakovsky’s suicide, of course, had a lot to do with his no longer being allowed to keep the company he liked (Babel surely knew that Mayakovsky had been blocked from rejoining his fiancée in Paris) and his being forced to “learn boring new songs” (his joining the RAPP was a surrender and a sensation). Now Mayakovsky may have seemed lucky to be out of the game. In 1933–1935, many in Moscow’s theater audience—members of the intelligentsia, officials of the Party and the NKVD—could have identified with either Yashka Kravchenko or those who forced him “thrice to renounce his mother,” or indeed, with both at the same time—a phenomenon Nikita Mikhalkov explored in his *Burned by the Sun* some sixty years later.

Notwithstanding such foresight, Babel persevered. He continued to cultivate his career as a Soviet writer, albeit it a “silent” one, as he confessed mockingly at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934. He had little choice. For a while, he remained an important cultural figure, and friends abroad, associated with the anti-fascist Popular Front, made him a valuable asset for the Soviet regime. After André Gide and André Malraux threatened to walk out of the Congress of Writers in Defense of Culture and Peace in Paris, Babel and Pasternak were retroactively included in the Soviet delegation and rushed to France in June 1935.<sup>94</sup> This was Babel’s last chance for an escape. His role in the Soviet anti-fascist charm offensive in the West, with his friends Ilya Ehrenburg and Mikhail Koltsov as Sta-

lin's point men, must have influenced Babel's decision to return to Russia in 1935. Other factors were Gorky's continued patronage and friendship, not to speak of the work for the Soviet film studios, which by then must have accounted for the lion's share of Babel's income. Most important of all, Babel knew from his experiences in 1932–1933, when he tried unsuccessfully to break into the film business in France, that he would not be able to provide support for his family—his mother and sister in Brussels, his wife and daughter in Paris, not to mention himself—unless he could maintain his position as an important Soviet writer and international celebrity. Despite the considerable space for maneuver that only very few cultural figures could then enjoy, Babel was trapped. And he must have been aware that he was living out the script that *Maria's* Viskovsky outlined for Kravchenko.

The wisdom of his decision to return, as he did in the fall of 1935, was severely tested at the beginning of 1936, when a new campaign of cultural repression was inaugurated by an abusive editorial in *Pravda* against the composer Dmitry Shostakovich. In retrospect, the *Maria* debacle—it was, after all, no less raunchy than Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtzensk*—must have felt like a stroke of good fortune. Having stuck his neck out with *Maria*, Babel now had to thank Soviet censorship for dodging this bullet and restoring to him, in a manner of speaking, the reputation of the great “master of the genre of literary silence” (*Sochineniia* 2:381). “Babel is a clever tactician,” declared Leonid Leonov at the Writers Union meeting on March 10, 1936, where writers were supposed to hash out their response to *Pravda's* attack on Shostakovich. “Just keep reprinting the same work that has passed the test,” Leonov went on, “but do not publish anything new.”<sup>95</sup> Babel himself was very lucid about this tactic, as he explained it around this time to his friend Ervin Sinkó.<sup>96</sup> Thanks to Gorky's protection, Babel was able—perhaps, even had to—nurse some illusions, and for a while he did take the campaign as a mere trifle. “You're make too much ado about nothing,” a secret informer reported him saying. “Nobody has taken this seriously. The people are silent but deep inside they are laughing quietly. Budenny used to castigate me in worse terms, and nothing came of it. I am sure the same will be true of Shostakovich.”<sup>97</sup>

Whether his instincts were good or because he was well informed, Babel turned out to be right about the Formalism campaign, if not the larger picture. Following Gorky's meeting with André Malraux in March 1936, with both Babel and Koltsov in attendance, Gorky intervened and,

it seemed, convinced Stalin to reverse gears lest the anti-Formalism campaign alienate Soviet friends in the West.<sup>98</sup> “Babel has known Malraux for years,” Gorky wrote to Stalin to give him the measure of Malraux’s outrage at the campaign, “and while in Paris, he has been following the growth of Malraux’s reputation in France. Babel says that Malraux’s opinion is valued by government ministers and that among the intelligentsia of the Romance countries, this man is the most prominent, talented and influential figure, who, in addition, possesses a talent for organization.” As Gorky’s emissary and now, apparently, a foreign-policy go-between, Babel was happy to carry the message to the panicked Soviet writers and reassure them that Gorky was going to put an end to their travails.<sup>99</sup> We shall never know if he himself appreciated the melancholy irony of his mission. Gorky’s patronage was at its end.

Gorky’s death in June 1936 was a deep personal loss for Babel, and it also made him exceedingly vulnerable to attack. According to a secret police report filed on July 5, 1936, Babel told Antonina Pirozhkova that he had felt invincible as long as Gorky was alive but now he could no longer be sure.<sup>100</sup> A. N. Pirozhkova, who was a friend of this secret informer, remembers Babel saying something considerably stronger: “Now I am done in for.”

Danger was everywhere. For a while, film afforded him a safe haven because of the option not to have his name listed in credits even when he was the primary author of a script.<sup>101</sup> This, too, changed after he agreed to Sergei Eisenstein’s relentless entreaties to collaborate with him on the new version of the film *Bezbin Meadow*. Babel yielded with great reluctance—he sensed danger.<sup>102</sup> His instinct did not deceive him. The film was denounced in February 1937, with Babel and Eisenstein accused, among other things, of using their leftist friends in the West as leverage to expand the range of the permissible in the Soviet Union (they dared to show the yet uncensored reel to Leon Feuchtwanger then visiting Moscow).<sup>103</sup> Both Babel and Eisenstein were lucky to get out of it alive.<sup>104</sup> The Great Terror had commenced, and every member of the Soviet elite went to bed expecting, as Babel’s Viskovsky put it, “two gentlemen to pay them a visit.”

Babel had plenty of opportunities to recall Viskovsky’s monologue from *Maria*. He must have thought of it when he heard the news of the execution of his friend Efim Dreitser, along with Kamenev and Zinoviev, in August 1936, and then again at the end of January 1937 when he had

to write and sign a denunciation of the old Bolsheviks (he knew some of them personally), who had been convicted at the show trial of the Parallel Anti-Soviet Trotskyite Center.<sup>105</sup>

The theme of treachery and betrayal on his mind, he completed and published in July 1937 a story thematically linked to *Red Cavalry*. As A. N. Pirozhkova maintains, the story was meant to serve as the closure in the new edition of the cycle. Thematically, it was a variation on the one that happened in the Garden of Gethsemane and was accordingly entitled "The Kiss."<sup>106</sup>

As the mass repressions gathered force, Babel grew desperate and began looking for a way out. A new story, "Di Grasso," published in June 1937, shows what was on his mind: it revolves around the themes of betrayal, indebtedness, entrapment, escape into emigration, and the magical redemption through true and popular art, the endeavor in which he knew he had succeeded beyond measure.<sup>107</sup> But miracles, Babel knew, happened only in stories or with a stroke of Stalin's pen. He decided to reach out to his foreign contacts. In late summer or fall 1937, using intermediaries, he pleaded with André Malraux to write to Stalin and ask him, as he had done successfully once before, to allow Babel to travel to Paris. For whatever reason—the Frenchman may have been apprehensive that Babel would defect—Malraux never complied. He was now deeply involved in supporting the Republican cause in Spain and, which seems likely, did not wish to find himself on the wrong side of Stalin, whom he thought to be the last hope of the Republican Spain.<sup>108</sup>

The times were such that one had to choose between saving a friend and saving a country from fascism. In his letters to the family, Babel at times made a pun on Malraux's name, intentionally spelling it as malheureux. Now "this most prominent member of the intelligentsia of the Romance countries" appeared to be validating Babel's word play. Babel's loved ones abroad were aware of Babel's efforts to obtain a visa and, perhaps, to wait out the wave of terror abroad. As Babel wrote to his mother and sister in Brussels on November 1, 1937, Malraux's brother Roland, Babel's friend, had brought back with him from France instead of the gift Babel hoped for—an invitation to journey to Paris—"a *stylo*, which, alas, writes horribly, and a Canadian fur jacket which will serve me very nicely . . ." The sentence trails off in suspension points: Babel may have had in mind an unscheduled journey to Siberia. "He saw Ehrenburg," Babel concluded the letter, "but almost never saw his brother,

who is mostly in Spain, though he has found time to write a small novel, *L'Espoir*.<sup>109</sup> Malraux's *Hope* was Babel's despair. Babel's sarcasm could not be more bitter if it was to stay implicit.

As Babel's important friends and fellow writers were disappearing one after another (Elena Sokolovskaia, director of Mosfilm and Babel's old Odessa friend and patron was arrested on October 12; Boris Pilnyak, on October 28), his own chances of survival were growing bleaker by the day. At times, he tried to remain cheerful when communicating with his mother, but as we know from the recollections of his friends and his letter to his Moscow friend Anna Slonim, with whom he could be forthright, he had been, by and large, deeply depressed. A new story, "The Trial," published in June 1938, is a wistful account of a Russian émigré being given ten years—a familiar sentence in the Great Terror—for stealing from his girlfriend, a rich middle-aged French widow. The name of the Russian was *Nedachin*, no doubt a pun on the Russian *dacha* and *neudacha* (misfortune, malheureux), with a lot of resonance for Babel, who was spending as much time as he could at his dacha in Peredelkino and hoping for an intercession from Malraux. His debts to publishers were piling up, his creditors were losing patience; he was threatened with confiscation of his personal property if he did not return his advances.<sup>110</sup>

Pirozhkova recalled in her memoirs that Babel was working on the manuscript of a collection called *New Stories*, which he planned to submit to the publisher in the fall of 1939, hoping the publication would, among other things, restore his finances.<sup>111</sup> This "sacred work" (*zavetnyi trud*), as he called the book manuscript in his last letter to the family (May 10, 1939), needed one "final polishing" to which Babel would devote himself as soon as he was done with his responsibilities for the film version of Gorky's autobiographical trilogy.

Babel's letters of the 1930s, whether to his family, editors, or friends, are full of variations on this formula. We do not know what stories constituted his "sacred work"—only five new stories had been published since the 1936 edition. But even if he had as many in his desk drawer (we shall probably never know for certain), he could hardly have expected to be embraced by the Soviet publishing establishment circa 1939. Even in 1932–1936, when Babel was close to Gorky and enjoyed the munificence of his patronage, his publication record, when it came to new work, remained meager.

As 1938 was drawing to a close, Babel's association with the leaders

of anti-fascist causes in the West was losing its value to the regime. The André Gide debacle, his clear-eyed portrait of life in Stalin's USSR (*Retour de l' U.R.S.S.*), what he saw as a betrayal of the Revolution; the failure to reverse the course of the Spanish civil war; the arrest of Mikhail Koltsov, implicated in both, in December 1938—all signaled the end of the interlude when Stalin relied on his cultural entrepreneurs for swaying public opinion in the West in favor of Soviet proposals for collective security. No longer willing to “pull the chestnuts out of the fire” for England and France, as he put it memorably in his speech to the Nineteenth Party Congress on March 10, 1939, Stalin was now turning toward an alliance with Nazi Germany.<sup>112</sup> Hitler echoed the “chestnut” phrase in his April 1 speech, and the courtship dance of the two dictators commenced in earnest. On May 3, 1939, Stalin sent a new and unambiguous signal to Hitler by sacking Maxim Litvinov, the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, known for his pro-Western orientation.<sup>113</sup>

Babel was arrested twelve days later, perhaps as an afterthought following the arrest and interrogation of Nikolay Ezhov; perhaps as a follow-up to the sacking of Litvinov; or perhaps for no other reason than that his number came up at last, as it did for millions of other people. When the “two gentlemen paid him a visit,” in a memorable phrase from *Maria*, he could no longer count on his “immunity” as a protégé of Gorky, a good friend of Nikolay Ezhov's wife, or a writer and international anti-fascist celebrity and a good friend of André Malraux.

We know from the publications of Arkady Vaksberg, Vitaly Shentalisnky, and Sergey Povartsov<sup>114</sup> that the charges were standard issue for the Great Terror and altogether baseless: spying for France (Babel's association with Malraux) and Austria (Babel's once shared an apartment with an Austrian engineer) as well as conspiring to assassinate the leaders of the Soviet party and state. Beaten and tortured for days by his interrogators, Babel complied with their demands and “confessed”—only to renounce his testimony against himself and the others later. Perhaps like the accused who followed a similar trajectory, first submitting under torture to the interrogator's will and later renouncing their false confession (for example, Mikhail Koltsov), he hoped that the fantastic nature of the charges would open the court's eyes to the sheer absurdity of the indictment against him. But this strategy, if indeed it was a strategy, had no effect unless one counts the dropped charges for conspiring to assassinate member of the Soviet leadership.

Babel was number 12 in the alphabetical list of 346 men and women designated for execution, which was signed by Stalin on January 17, 1940. Nine days later and seven months after his arrest, Babel stood before the rubber-stamp court, which took twenty minutes to examine his case and to pronounce him guilty of most charges. He was shot in the Lefortovo Prison basement a few hours later and buried in the same unmarked grave at the Donskoy Monastery in Moscow as were his friends, executed around the same time. Among them were the writer and editor Mikhail Koltsov, an old Petrograd friend, who had helped him to join Budenny's Cavalry; an old friend from the Polish campaign, the Chekist Efim Evdokimov; the former party boss of Kabardino-Balkaria, Betal Kalmykov, the subject of a never completed biography; the theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold; and paradoxically, the former head of the NKVD, Nikolay Ezhov, whose wife, Evgeniya Solomonovna, had been a close, sometimes intimate, friend of Babel's (she had committed suicide in November 1938).

Different as they all were, all had identified with the promise of the Revolution and all fell victim to Stalin's treachery—like the young Cossack and his bride from the folk ballad that Nyushka belts out as the curtain falls on the final scene of *Maria*.

Aphrodite Urania never came back.

The night had no mercy for Isaac Babel.



**FIGURE 1.** The Babel family apartment in Odessa (the top floor above the billboard) at the corner of Rishelievskaya and Zhukovskogo, where Babel resided in 1906–1911 and, on and off, in 1919–1924. Photo © by Gregory Freidin.



**FIGURE 2.** The building on the left is 9 Bolshaya Monetaia Street in St. Petersburg that housed the apartment of Lev and Anna Slonim where Babel rented a room in 1916–1917. Gorky's apartment and the offices of *Letopis*, where Babel's stories were published in 1916, was at 23 Bolshaya Monetaia. Photo © by Gregory Freidin.



**FIGURE 3.** Kliment Voroshilov, Semyon Budenny, and Efim Shchadenko, the three top leaders of the First Cavalry Army, circa 1920. The photo appeared in A. Rodchenko and V. Stepnova, designers, *Pervaya konnaya* (Moscow: Ogiz-Izogiz, 1938). Irwin T. and Shirley Holtzman Collection, The Hoover Institution Archives.



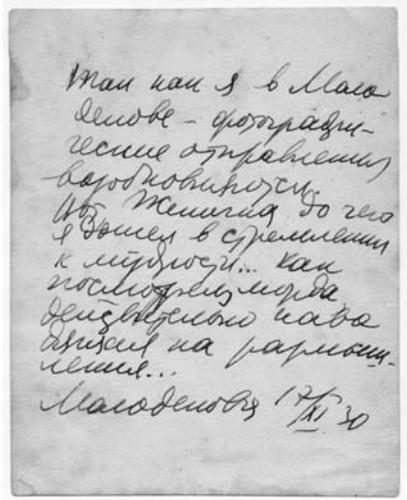
**FIGURE 4** Joseph Stalin (center) on vacation in the Caucasus in the summer 1932; Nestor Lakoba (left), the party boss of Abkhazia; Lavrenty Beria (with a hatchet stuck in his belt), then the party boss of Georgia. During this summer, Stalin was blocking Babel's request for permission to go abroad and did not relent until he returned to Moscow at the end of August 1932. The Hoover Institution Archives.



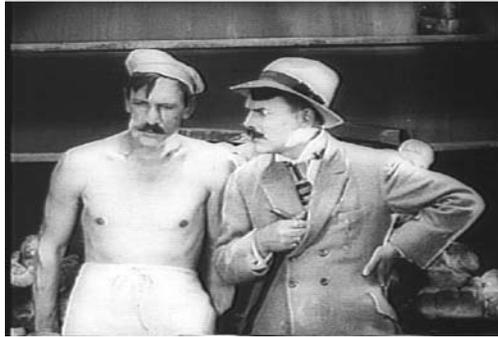
**FIGURE 5.** Isaac Babel and his wife, Evgeniia (née Gronfain), on a beach in Ostende, Belgium, during the summer 1928. Photograph from the private archive of Christine Galitzine.



**FIGURE 6.** Isaac Babel (circa 1935?). Photograph by Moisei Nappelbaum.



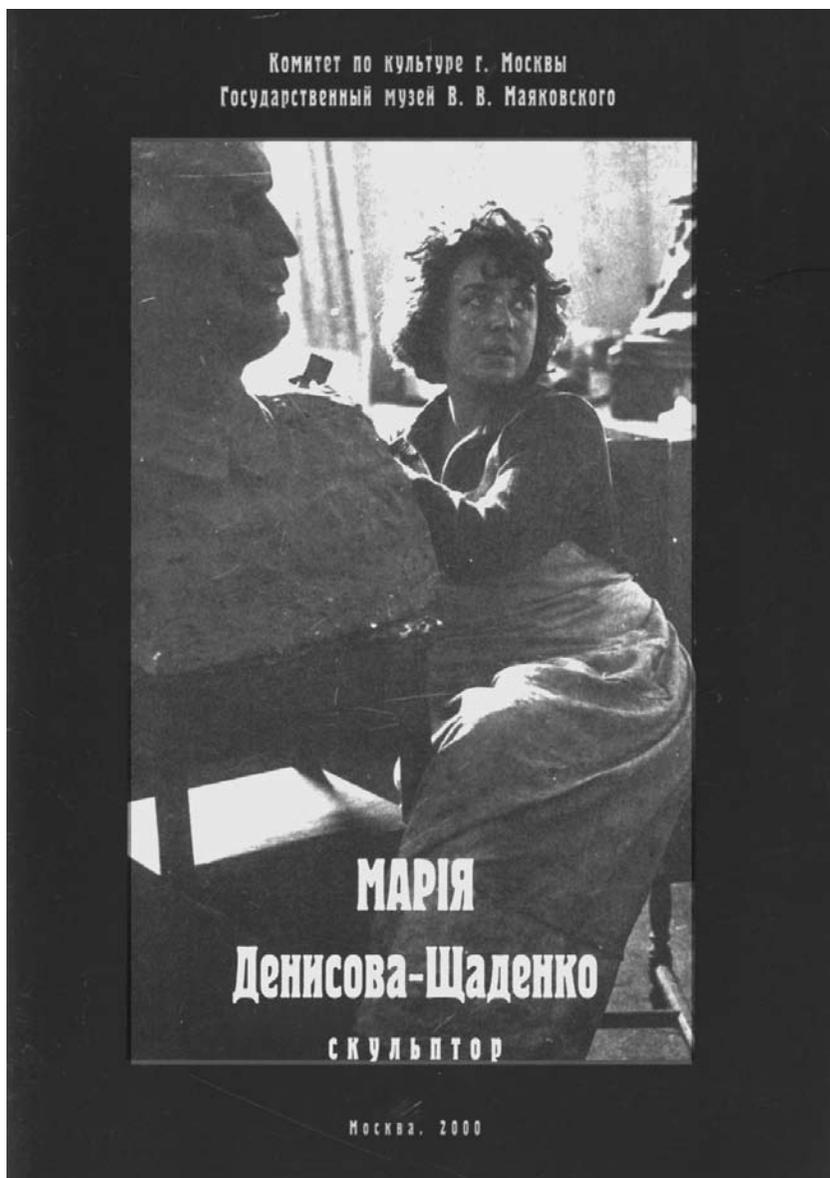
**FIGURE 7.** Isaac Babel's self-portrait. The note on the reverse, addressed to his wife Evgeniia, reads: "Since I am in Molodenovo, the photographic postings have resumed. This is what I have come to, Zhenechka, in my striving for wisdom. . . . I just took one look: there's a mug that really gives one pause . . . Molodenovo, 11.17.1930." The Hoover Institution Archives.



**FIGURE 8.** The film *Benya Krik* (1926), along with Babel's film script, grew out of his collaboration with Sergei Eisenstein in 1925, but a series of financial scandals at the Moscow film studios forced Babel, strapped for cash, to sell his script to the Ukrainian VUFKU, where it was shot and directed by Vladimir Vilner. In the script, as in the play *Sunset*, Babel chooses to renounce his former carnivalesque alter ego by presenting Krik as a sinister and trivial thief. The three frames exemplify Babel's about-face: Krik (played by Yuri Shumsky) is a wily schemer, a hedonist sexpot, and a treacherous ally of the Bolsheviks. Authenticity, the character's attribute in *The Odessa Stories*, has been transferred to the bare-chested Russian baker Sobkov (bottom), who orders Benya's execution later in the film. The mustachioed baker, the film's good guy, also suggests a biographical subtext: Babel's mentor Maxim Gorky was once a baker himself and tried raising the consciousness of the proletariat in a small basement bakery. The film was released early in 1927 (in January, Babel was still writing intertitles for it), was briefly banned by Lazar Kaganovich, then the party boss of Ukraine, and was back in theaters in February. *Ed.*



**FIGURE 9.** Boris Shchukin as the flying school director and Evgeniya Melnikova as a flight school cadet in the 1935 film *Lyotchiki* (U.S. title, *Men with Wings*), dir. Yuli Raizman and Grigory Levkoyev, script by Alexander Macharet and, apparently, Isaac Babel. In a letter to his mother (March 31, 1935), Babel claimed to be the actual author of the film script, not just the dialogues, and blamed himself for refusing to have his name listed in the credits. He worried *Lyotchiki* would fail; instead, it turned out to be a hit. The film tells a story of a romance between a middle-aged pilot and his very young female flight school cadet before each is assigned to duty at opposite ends of the USSR. The motifs of separation and a September-May romance echo Babel's own life at the time. Boris Shchukin went on to play Lenin in *Lenin in October* and *Lenin in 1918*; and Melnikova starred as Rayechka in *The Circus* (dir. G. Aleksandrov), for which Babel wrote the dialogues, and *The Fall of Berlin*, along with another dozen or so movies. *Ed.*



**FIGURE 10.** Cover of Maria Denisova (Shchadenko) exhibition held at the State Museum of Vladimir Mayakovsky in Moscow in 2000. The text on the cover: *Maria Denisova-Shchadenko, Sculptor.*

10. This reconstruction is drawn from the author's several interviews with Boris Souvarine in the 1960s and also: Boris Souvarine, "Derniers entretiens avec Babel," *Counterpoint* (Paris) 30 (1979).

11. Sergei Povartsov, *Prichina smerti-rasstrel: Khronika poslednikh dnei Isaaka Babelia* (Moscow: Terra, 1996); Vitalii Shentalinskii, *Raby svobody: v literaturnykh arkhivakh KGB: Babel, Bulgakov, Florenskii, Pilniak, Mandelstam, Kliuev, Platonov, Gorkii* (Moscow: Parus, 1995).

12. [http://www.stanford.edu/group/isaac\\_babel/bibliography/index.htm](http://www.stanford.edu/group/isaac_babel/bibliography/index.htm), accessed January 4, 2009.

## Notes to Chapter 2

1. Here and elsewhere, unless otherwise indicated, translations are by the author.

2. "Khodya" (Chink), 1923. Isaak Babel, *Sochineniia*, 2 vols., comp. and ed. Antonina Prizhkovskaya, comment. Sergey Povartsov (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1990), vol. 1, p. 98. This edition is hereafter cited as *Sochineniia*, followed by volume and page number.

3. See Isaak Babel, *Petersburg 1918*, ed. Efraim Sicher (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1987). Among the Babel scholars, Sicher has been most consistent and meticulous in recognizing Babel's book projects. Babel used cycles to fill his need for an epic sweep while preserving the form of a short story in a manner similar to that employed by his contemporary poets, among them Alexander Blok and Osip Mandelstam, who arranged their lyric poems into larger cycles or books, creating a lyric Bildungsroman of sorts. On Babel's use of the epic frame, see Gregory Freidin, "Isaac Babel (1894–1940)," in George Stade, ed., *European Writers: The Twentieth Century* (New York: Scribners, 1990), p. 1993ff.

4. I. Babel, "Moi listki. Odessa," *Zhurnal zhurnalov* 51 (December 22, 1916), *Sochineniia* 1:64.

5. The Acmeist manifestoes of Gumilev, Mandelstam, and Gorodetsky.

6. Lev Lunts, "Na zapad!" *Beseda* 2 (1923).

7. On Babel's complex relationship with Gorky, see chapter 7 ("Spravka—rodoslovnaia" [Babel' i Gor'kii]) of Alexander Zholkovsky's *Poltora rasskaza Babelia: "Gui de Mopassan" i "Spravka/Gonorar"*. *Struktura, smysl, fon* (Moscow: KomKniga, 2006). This edition is hereafter referred to as Zholkovsky 2006.

8. "L'Aveu" is one of the three stories that Babel translated for the three-volume *Collected Works of Maupassant: Sobranie sochinenii*, 3 vols., ed. I. Babel (Moscow: Zemlia i Fabrika, 1926–27), vol. 1, pp. 34–43. The other two were: "Le Mal d'André" and "Idyll." See also E. Pogorelskaia, "I. E. Babel—redaktor i perevodchik Giui de Mopassana," *Voprosy literatury* 4 (2005).

9. For more on Babel's uses of Nietzsche, see my "Justifying the Revolution as an Aesthetic Phenomenon: Nietzschean Motifs in the Reception of Isaac Babel (1923–1932)," in Bernice G. Rosenthal, ed., *Nietzsche and Soviet Culture: Ally and Adversary*, Cambridge Studies in Russian Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 149–73.

10. Cf. Zholkovsky 2006, pp. 17, 135, and elsewhere.

11. No wonder, then, that the Marxist theoretician critic and literary entrepreneur, Aleksandr Voronsky, the proponent of the view of art as a higher form of the “cognition of life,” championed Babel in the 1920s.

12. See also Gabriella Safran’s discussion of Babel’s early fiction as a response to Maxim Gorky’s search for a new type of a Russian-Jewish writer in her “Isaak Babel’s El’ia Isaakovich as a New Jewish Type,” *Slavic Review* 61(2): 253–72, esp. p. 258.

13. Viktor Shklovsky was the first to elaborate Babel’s *Odessa Stories* as an allegory of a Russian-Jewish “assault” on Russian culture. Babel, wrote Shklovsky, “is a brave man, I even think that ‘he could spend the night with a Russian woman and the Russian woman would be satisfied.’ Because the Russian woman loves eloquence.” “I. Babel (Kritichesky romans),” *LEF*, no. 6 (1924): 153. On the phrase “refreshing blood” and a range of contemporary references implied by it, including the “tainted blood” of the Romanovs, see Olga Matich, *Erotic Utopia: The Decadent Imagination in Russia’s Fin de Siècle* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), p. 274 and elsewhere.

14. For a review of responses to Babel’s debut in 1922–1926, see my “Justifying the Revolution.”

15. Babel’s “Autobiography” is datelined “Sergiev Posad, November 1924” and was intended as a response, if oblique, to Budenny’s attack on him in the September issue of *Oktiabr*, as well as a statement safeguarding the fate of the book *Red Cavalry*, which came out a year and a half later.

16. I. Babel’s letter to Gorky, June 25, 1925. *Sochineniia* 1:242ff.

17. Ilya Ehrenburg, *Liudi, gody, zhizn*, ed. B. Ia. Frezinskii, 3 vols. (Moscow: Tekst, 2005), 1:517.

18. I owe this observation to Oksana Bulgakowa.

19. Sergei Povartsov, “P’esa I. Babelia “Mariia”: Opyt kommentariia,” *Uchenye zapiski Moskovskogo oblasnogo pedinstituta (Sovetskaia literatura 10)*, 265: 77–87. Povartsov traces *Maria* back to Babel’s 1918 piece “O gruzine, kerenske i general’skoi dochke” (About a Georgian, Kerensky Rubles, and a General’s Daughter).

20. In its journal publication, “The Story of My Dovecote” was accompanied by a note indicating that it was the “beginning of an autobiographical prose fiction” (*nachalo avtobiograficheskoi povesti*). *Krasnaia nov* 4 (1925): 33.

21. See my long biographical essay, “Isaac Babel (1894–1940),” ed. G. Stade, in *European Writers: The Twentieth Century*, vol. 11 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons), pp. 1885–1914.

22. Nevsky’s original name was officially restored in January 1944.

23. Viktor Shklovsky, “I. Babel: Kritichesky romans,” p. 155.

24. The only known publications after the closing of *Novaia zhizn* were his sketch “Na stantsii” (*Era*, July 17, 1918), “Na Dvortsovoi ploshchadi,” and “Kontsert v Katerinienstade,” the latter two subtitled “diary” and published in *Zhizn’ iskusstva* on November 11 and 13, 1918, respectively. His next publication, “Na pole chesti,” a free reworking of Gaston Vidal’s *Figures et anecdotes de la Grande Guerre* (Paris, 1918), appeared in the Odessa journal *Lava* 1 (July 1920), when Babel was at the Polish front.

25. *Zhizn iskusstva* (Petrograd), November 13, 1918. *Sochineniia* 1:199–201.

26. “During my disappearance, la vie made me thrash about this way and that, I departed, came back, was ill, got drafted . . . I am leaving for Yamburg today to open a peasant university.” I. Babel’s letter to Anna Slonim (December 7, 1918). In his “Autobiography” (1925), Babel mentions his work for the Commissariat of Enlightenment (his reference to opening a peasant university in Yamburg).

27. According to the recollections of L. N. Livshits (the wife of Babel’s friend Isaac Livshits), Babel returned to his parents’ home in Odessa in May 1919. I. E. Babel, *Pis'ma drugu: iz arkhiva I. L. Livshitsa*, ed. E. I. Pogorel'skaia (Moscow: Gosudarstvennyi literaturnyi muzei, 2007), 107.

28. See Vladimir Iaskov, “Khlebnikov. Kosarev. Kharkov,” *Volga* 11 (1999); <http://magazines.russ.ru/volga/1999/11/>, accessed August 11, 2002.

29. Nathalie Babel, Introduction, in Nathalie Babel, ed., *Isaac Babel: The Lonely Years 1925–1939 (Unpublished Stories and Private Correspondence)*, trans. Andrew R. MacAndrew and Max Hayward (Boston: Verba Mundi, David R. Godine, 1995), p. xv. Hereafter, this edition is referred to as *The Lonely Years*.

30. Elena Pilsky (née E. S. Kuznetsova; died in 1972), “Venok pamiati Babelia,” *Novoe Russkoe Slovo* (NY), June 8, 1966, p. 3.

31. Piotr Pilsky, “Isaak Babel,” in his *Zatumanivshiisia mir* (Riga: Gramatu Draugs, 1929), pp. 157–64.

32. Babel’s “Na pole chesti” (1920) was prefaced by an awkward phrase that could only have been written by a person without firsthand military experience (italics are mine, *GF*): “Present stories are the beginning of *my* notes about war. Their *content is borrowed* from the books written by French soldiers and officers who participated in battles. . . . *Sochineniia* 1:80.

33. According to Babel’s sister Mary, her brother concealed from his family his plans to join Budenny. His schoolmate and lifelong friend Isaac Livshits, then also a figure in the Odessa literary and publishing scene, was supposed to come along but his parents locked him up in a room as soon as they found out about the upcoming adventure. One may assume that the elder Babels would have done the same for their offspring. Sergei Povartsov, “Podgotovitelnye materialy dlia zhizneopisaniia Babelia Isaaka; <http://magazines.russ.ru/voplit/2001/2/povar.html>, accessed November 26, 2002.

34. Isai Lezhnev, “Novaia p'esa Babelia ‘Mariia,’” *Teatr i dramaturgiia* 3 (1935): 56.

35. Babel’s letter to his sister Mary dated May 12, 1925 (*Sochineniia* 1:241). Babel’s letter to Kashirina dated October 6, 1927, in Tamara Ivanova, “Glava iz zhizni: Vospominaniia, pis'ma I. Babelia,” *Oktiabr* 5–7 (1992), 7, 17off. See also the entry in Viacheslav Polonsky’s 1931 diary about Babel’s unpublished pieces (“Voronsky tells me they are all counter-revolutionary”). Viacheslav Polonsky, “Mne eta voznia ne kazhetsia chem-to ser'ezno literaturnym . . .” (*Iz dnevnika Viach. Polonskogo. Mart-April 1931 goda*), publication by A. A. Abroskina, *Vstrechi s proshlym, Federalnaia arkhivanaia sluzhba Rossii. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva* (Moscow: Russkaia kniga, 2000), p. 309.

36. The most comprehensive story of Babel’s relationship with Tamara Ivanova (Kashirina) is narrated by her, along with Babel’s letters to her, in “Glava iz zhizni: Vospominaniia, pisma I. Babelia,” *Oktiabr* 5, 6, and 7 (May, June, and July, 1992).

37. Babel's letter to Anna Slonim dated July 22, 1927, still unpublished, contained the following: "Evg. Borisovna rented a small house on the outskirts of Paris. I have settled in a tiny room on the ground floor of this same house. Evg. Borisovna knew practically everything; I told her what others had neglected to inform her about. She and I will try to live a quiet life of work; I do not know if we are destined to be happy but we shall struggle to do work." Manuscript Collection of the Russian State Library, Fond 660, k. 1, ed. khr. 6.

38. See, e.g., Babel's letter to Tamara Ivanova (Kashirina) dated January 26, 1928 (*Oktiabr* 7, 176), and Babel's letter to Efim Zozulia dated October 14, 1938, *Sochineniia* 1:358ff.

39. For the earliest documented plea, see Babel's letter to I. Livshits, April 17, 1923 (*Sochineniia* 1:238).

40. See, e.g., Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question" (1844). In Babel's own time, Marx's position became the foundation for a very popular sociological study by Werner Sombart, *Jews and Economic Life* (*Die Juden und das Wirtschaftsleben*, 1911), which Babel no doubt studied at the Kiev Commercial Institute. A similar position is expressed in Georg Simmel's famous essay "Stranger" ("Exkurs über den Fremden," 1908). Both Sombart and Simmel were known in Russia in the 1910s.

41. "The Road" was completed in 1931 (see Babel's letter to V. A. Reginin, October 13, 1931, in *Sochineniia* 1:318 and 459). "Evening at the Empress's" (*Vecher u imperatritsy*, *Sochineniia* 1:95–97) appeared in the Odessa *Siluety* 1, 1922. There may have been another, intermediate and now lost, version of the story, alluded to by Viktor Shklovsky in 1932 (my translation, *GF*): "The third issue contains the story 'The Road.' Eleven years ago, it used to be shorter. It was published in Odessa. Without this beginning and without this ending. But as in this version, the telegraph operator did his killing by shooting a Jew in his face with a Mauser pistol. And the freezing traveler was warming himself in the Empress's library." Viktor Shklovsky, "O liudiakh, kotorye idutno odnoi i toi zhe dorogoe i ob etom ne znaiut: Konets barokko" (About the People Who Journey Along the Same Road But Are Not Aware Of It: The End of the Baroque), in *Literaturnaia gazeta*, July 17, 1932. Babel's "Evening," of course, does not even mention any telegraph operator.

42. In December–January 1917–1918, Odessa was ruled by Rumcherod, i.e., a joint Soviet of the Rumanian Front, Black Sea Fleet, and the City of Odessa. A "disintegration of the front" implied, among other things, that Babel did not desert and, more important, that the service rolls were unlikely to have survived.

43. Konstantin Paustovskii and V. K. Paustovskii, *Povest o zhizni* (*Kniga chetvertaia*), in his *Sobranie sochinenii*, 9 vols., vol. 5 (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1985), pp. 90ff.

44. The opening salvo was the ominous article signed by Semyon Budenny himself ("Babizm Babelia iz *Krasnoy novi*") published in *October* 3 (1924). Far more ominous was Budenny's renewed attack on Babel and his patron, Maxim Gorky, in *Pravda* in 1928 ("Otvét tovarishchu Gor'komu," October 26, 1928). According to a memoirist, who interviewed Budenny about the polemic, Budenny recalled that in the end it was Stalin who intervened personally and asked Budenny to cease the public controversy,

as it was interfering with Stalin's campaign of "winning Gorky over to our side." Major General Mikhail Loshchits (ret.), "Besedy s chelovekom-legendoy: K 120-letiyu so dnya rozhdeniya S. M. Budennogo," *Krasnaya Zvezda* (Moscow), April 24, 2003, p. 4.

45. See Babel's letters to Anna Slonim dated October 27, 1928 and November 27, 1928, *Sochineniia* 1:288ff. and 291.

46. Gorky was aware of the actual threat of violence against Babel, contained in Budenny's assault on the young author. An earlier draft of Gorky's rebuttal letter contains direct references to it (see Sergey Povartsov's commentary in *Sochineniia* 1:455–56. See also G. S. Merkin, "S. Budenny i I. Babel (k istorii polemiki)," *Filologicheskie nauki* 4 (1990): 97–102. On Babel's awareness of Stalin's ways, see Boris Souvarine, "Moi vstrechi s Isaakom Babelem," *Kontinent* 23 (1980): 343–78. See also Lazar Fleishman, "Ob odnom neraskrytom 'prestuplenii' Babelia," in I. Ia. Vigin et al., eds., *Poetika, istoriia literatury, lingvistika: sbornik k 70-letiiu Viacheslava Vsevolodovicha Ivanova* (Moscow: OGI, 1999), pp. 382–406.

47. *Sochineniia* 2:367. "Nachalo" was first published on June 18, 1938, the second anniversary of Gorky's death, in *Literaturnaia gazeta* and, as "Iz vospominanii," in *Pravda*.

48. Bruno Jasenski, "nashi na Riv'ere," *Literaturnaia gazeta* (July 10, 1930), p. 3. A transcript of Babel's statement is in the Manuscript Collection (Otdel rukopisei) of the Gorky Institute of World Literature in Moscow, fond 86, op. 1, ed. khr. 6, pp. 1–5. See Gregory Freidin, "Vopros vozvrashcheniia II: Velikii perelom i Zapad v biografii I. E. Babelia nachala 1930-kh godov," *Stanford Slavic Studies* 4–2 (1991): 190–240. See also Janina Salajczyk, "Polski epizod w biografii Izaaka E. Babla," in *Zeszyty naukowe wyzszej szkoly pedagogicznej im. Powstancow slaskich w Opolu. Filologia rosyjska* IX. Seria A (Opole, 1972), pp. 103–11.

49. Cf. Viktor's Shklovsky writing in 1922: "But the hole in the tram post made by an artillery shell at the corner of Grebetskaya and Pushkarskaya is still there. If you don't believe that there has been a revolution, go there and thrust your hand into the wound. It is big—the post has been shot through by a shell from a three-inch gun." *Sentimental'noe puteshestvie*, in Viktor Shklovsky, *Eshche nichego ne konchilos*, ed. A. Galushkin and V. Nekhotin (Petersburg: Propaganda, 2002), p. 149.

50. Cf. Osip Mandelstam's 1921 poem "Concert at the Railroad Station" (Kontsert an Vokzale): "It is impossible to breathe, and the firmament is teeming with maggots/ And not a single star speaks" (*Nel'zia dyshat', i reverd' kishit cherviami/I ni odna Zvezda ne govorit . . .*).

51. I am indebted to Ken Moss for this suggestion.

52. "The stranger is thus being discussed here, not in the sense often touched upon in the past, as the wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather as the person who comes today and stays tomorrow. He is, so to speak, the *potential* wanderer: although he has not moved on, he has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going. He is fixed within a particular spatial group, or within a group whose boundaries are similar to spatial boundaries. But his position in this group is determined, essentially, by the fact that he has not belonged to it from the beginning, that he imports qualities into it, which do not and cannot stem from the group itself." From Kurt Wolff, trans., *The Sociology of*

*Georg Simmel* (New York: Free Press, 1950), p. 402. Simmel's thought is echoed in Walter Benjamin's famous "The Storyteller: Reflections of the Work of Nikolay Leskov" (1936).

53. Cheka, as it was constituted in December 1917 and until August 1918, was subdivided into the Provincial Department (*Inogorodnii*), the Department for the Struggle against Counter-Revolution (*Dlia borby s kontr-revoliutsiei*), and the Department for the Struggle against Abuse of Power (*dlia borby s dolzhnostnymi prestupleniiami*). The Foreign Department proper (*Inostrannyi otdel*) was established in December 1920 "on the basis of one of the subdivisions of the Special Department" (*Osobyi otdel*), itself created in January 1919, with the purpose of fighting "counter-revolution and espionage in the Red Army." A. I. Kokurin and N. V. Petrov, comps., R. G. Pikhoia, eds., *Lubyanka: VChK-OGPU-NKVD-NKGB-MGB-MVD-KGB. 1917-1960. Spravochnik* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi Fond "Demokratia," 1997), pp. 9-10.

54. Another reason to doubt Babel's claim is the absence of any mention of his service for the Cheka from his NKVD dossier, including the transcripts of his interrogations and other statements. More recently Babel's assertion was questioned by the Cheka itself. In response to the official query by V. Kovskii, the Petersburg FSB (then MBRF) declared that neither Isaac Babel nor Ivan Kalugin could be located in their personnel rolls. V. Kovsky, "Sudba tekstov v kontekste sud'by," *Voprosy literatury* 1 (1995); [http://www.auditorium.ru/books/277/Vopli95-1\\_chapter3.html](http://www.auditorium.ru/books/277/Vopli95-1_chapter3.html), accessed April 10, 2004. This gives credence to the words of Evgeniia Gronfain who, wrote Nathalie Babel, "told me that his service with the Cheka was pure fabrication." Nathalie Babel, "Introduction," *The Lonely Years*, p. viii. None of this, of course contradicts the possibility that Babel may have done some translating for the Cheka on an ad hoc basis while in Petrograd in 1918-1919, but regular employment seems out of the question.

55. This "happy" passage has elicited considerable skepticism from the Babel scholars, among them, Milton Ehre, *Isaac Babel* (Boston: Twayne, 1986), 138-39.

56. In a letter to Tamara Kashirina (July 21, 1926), Babel refers to his Cheka friends en masse, describing how they swooped down on him and took him with them to the funeral of Felix Dzerzhinsky (*Oktiabr* 6, 196). Babel did have one very good friend in the upper echelons of the Cheka (by then the OGPU), Efim Grigorievich Evdokimov (1891-1940), whom he may have met during the Polish campaign when Evdokimov, a Cossack by birth and a onetime anarchist, served as the head of the Secret-Political Section of the Special Department of the All-Russian Cheka of the South-Western Front. A key Chekist behind the Shakhty trial, by 1932, Evdokimov was finishing his stint as the Head of the Cheka in Central Asia and was about to take charge of the Cheka for Trans-Caucasia. Evdokimov was a complex figure. Recovering from months of torture in the NKVD hospital, he is reported to have said that "he would have liked one thing—a bomb—in order to blow up the entire investigative branch of the NKVD, along with himself, that such an apparat, which cripples and destroys innocent people can only be qualified as fascist. . ." "Doklad Komissii TsK KPSS Prezidiumu TsK KPSS po ustanovleniiu prichin massovykh repressii protiv chlenov I kandidatov v chleny TsK VKP (b), izbrannykh na XVII s'ezde partii (9 February 1956)," *Almanac Rossia. XX vek. Dokumenty* 2 (2001); <http://www.idf.ru/2/7.shtml>, accessed April 10, 2004. Evdokimov and Babel were on the

same execution list, and Babel was shot on the same day as Evdokimov's wife and son. Evdokimov was posthumously cleared of all charges.

57. Writing to Viacheslav Polonsky on November 28, 1928, Babel still hoped that his position was beyond the reach of the cultural commissars from RAPP. The cultural revolution then going on could drive "nervous people to shoot themselves, but as to the merry folk, all they can do under the circumstances is to keep following their merry line." *Sochineniia* 1:291.

58. See also Elif Batuman's treatment of this story in this volume.

59. "We Russians have two souls: one, inherited from the nomadic Mongols, is the soul of a dreamer, mystic, sloth, convinced that 'Fate shall resolve all' . . . , and next to this impotent soul, there exists the soul of a Slav, it can flare up bright and beautiful, but it does not burn for long, goes out quickly, and is incapable of protecting itself from its congenital toxins that poison its strength. . . . Whence comes the cruelty, zealotry, mystical-anarchic sects—castrati, khlysty, . . . as well as drinking on a monstrous scale." Gorky, "Dve dushi," *Letopis'* 1 (December 1915): 1–12. Polemics around the controversial essay lasted for years, in part, because it encapsulated Gorky's thought about Russia and anticipated his *Untimely Thoughts* (1917) and "V. I. Lenin" (1924). The essay is enigmatically mentioned by Shklovsky in his "Babel: A Critical Romance" (1924) and served as the title for Kornei Chukovsky's brochure *Dve dushi Maksima Gor'kogo* (Petrograd, 1924).

60. The choice of the last name Madame *Bendersky* may have been a private joke, prompted by the serialization of the novels about the great deal-maker Ostap *Bender* in the same journal *30 dnei*. The wild popularity of *The Golden Calf* could not but irk Babel. Babel responded by following the Russian saying: "Some take to the priests, but others, the priest's wife." Ilya Ilf was present at a public reading of the story. See Sergei Bondarin, "Prikosnovenie k cheloveku," in A. N. Pirozhkova and N. N. Yurgeneva, eds. and comps., *Vospominaniia o Babele* (Moscow, 1989), pp. 99ff. Hereafter this edition is cited as *Vospominaniia*.

61. Jerry T. Heil, *The Russian Literary Avant-Garde and the Cinema (1920s and 1930s): The Film-Work of Isaak Babel' and Jurij Tynjanov*, 2 vols. (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1984).

62. Tamara Ivanova (Kashirina), "Glava iz zhizni. Vospominaniia. Pis'ma I. Babelia," annot. Evgenii Peremyshlev, *Oktiabr* 5–7 (1992). Hereafter, this publication is cited as *Oktiabr*, followed by number of issue number and page. "Misha was about four, Isaac Emmanuilovich sent his diplomats to me asking for a permission to see his son. I refused categorically. Misha considered Vsevolod to be his father (he was not yet two when Vsevolod entered my life), loved him very much, and Vsevolod treated him very well. Did I have the right to complicate the child's life with this sort of dualism that was incomprehensible to him? I thought that I did not, and have never regretted that I rejected Babel's request to see his son." (*Oktiabr* 7, 185)

63. Cf. Shimon Markish's reading of "Karl-Yankel" as an "inflated and false" story meant to celebrate the wonders of Soviet nationalities policy. Shimon Markish, "Saak Babel," in his *Babel' i drugie* (Moscow and Jerusalem: Personal'naya tvorcheskaya masterskaya "Mikhail Shchigol," 1997), pp. 26ff

64. “He, Benchik, went to Froim Grach, who already looked at the world with his one eye and was what he is. He said to Froim: “Take me in. I want to moor by your shore. The shore I moor by shall will gain.” This passage from “How It Was Done in Odessa” is a recapitulation of the memorable encounter between the young writer and the great man of letters that took place in the office of *Letopis* in 1916, as does this passage in “Father”: “But I am alone in my business, the late Lyovka Byk [Tolstoy, *GF*] is dead, have no help from anywhere, and here I am all alone as happens only to God in heaven. . . . ‘Benya Krik,’ said Lyubka then, ‘You have tried him out on Tartakovsky, what don’t you like about Benya Krik?’”

65. In his 1925 Diary, Dm. Furmanov recorded his conversation with Babel: “as to Dzerzhinsky, he is full of admiration for him. ‘What precision, what brevity, and how practical!’ He then told me that he wanted to write a big book about Cheka. ‘I don’t know, though, if I can manage it—my view of Cheka is just too one-sided. The reason is that the Chekists that I know, they are, well, they are simply holy people, even those who did the shooting with their own hands. . . . And I fear [the book] may come out too saccharine. On the other hand, I don’t know [enough]. I just have no idea of the mood of those who inhabited the cells. Somehow, I am not even interested. Still, I think I am going to do it.” Manuscript Collection of the Institute of World Literature, fond 30, op. 1, ed. khr. 791. See also Sergei Povartsov, *Prichina smerti-rastrel: Khronika poslednikh dnei Isaaka Babelia* (Moscow: Terra, 1996), pp. 18ff; and V. Kovsky, “Sudba tekstov v kontekste sudby,” *Voprosy literatury* 1 (1995).

66. Valentin Kataev, who had a first-hand experience with the Odessa Cheka in its heyday in 1919, presents a vivid picture of this organization and its activity in *Uzhe napisan Verter* (1979). See also a vibrant, if not altogether reliable contemporary account: N. I. Averbukh (Avenarius), *Odessakaya “Chrezvychaika”: bolshevistsky zastenok* (Kishinev, 1920).

67. Stalin’s letter to Lazar Kaganovich dated June 7, 1932, in O. V. Khlevniuk et al., eds. and comps., *Stalin i Kaganovich. Peregovora. 1931–1936 gg.* (M., 2001), p. 149.

68. I. Babel, “Kontsert v Katerinenshtadte” (Concert in Katerinenstadt), subtitled “Diary” and published in *Zhizn’ iskusstva* on November 13, 1918.

69. Based in part on Babel’s Paris friend, General Count Alexey Alexeevich Ignatyev (1877–1954), in 1933 an employee of the Soviet trade mission in Paris; see Ignatyev’s memoirs, *Pyatdesyat let v stroiu* (Moscow: 1940). The book was reprinted in 1948 and went through many editions, the last one by Voenizdat in 1988. Although Babel could not have seen the actual published book, he was no doubt familiar with Ignatyev’s stories either from the Paris days in 1932–1933, when the Babels and the Ignatyevs saw each other socially or when Ignatyev relocated permanently to Moscow in 1937.

70. See, e.g., the memoirs of Babel’s younger friend and protégé Semyon Gekht, “U steny Strastnogo monastyrria v letnii den 1924 goda,” in *Vospominaniya* 1989, p. 57.

71. See, e.g., Babel’s letter to his mother and sister dated November 14, 1934, in Nathalie Babel, ed., *The Lonely Years*, pp. 263ff.

72. Sergei Povartsov draws a connection between some elements of the plot of *Maria* and another of Babel’s 1918 Petrograd sketch, entitled “About a Georgian, Kerensky

Rubles, and a General's Daughter (A Modern Tale)," published in Gorky's *Novaia zhizn'* no. 83 (April 21, 1918). S. Povartsov, "P'esa Babelia "Mariia: opyt kommentariia," *Uchenye zapiski Moskovskogo oblastnogo pedinstituta (Sovetskaia literature 10)* 265 (1970): 77–87.

73. See Babel's letter to Solomon Mikhoels, dated November 28, 1931. *Sochinennii* 1:320.

74. Archive of the Museum of the Vakhtangov Theater. Correspondence of V. V. Kuza, no. 126. This seems to be the only letter by Babel that has survived the fire caused by a German bomb during World War II.

75. Babel's letter to Kaganovich of June 27, 1932. Andrei Artizov and Oleg Naumov, comps., *Vlast i khodozhestvennaya intelligentsiya: Dokumenty TsK RKP(b), VChK-GPU-NKVD o kulturnoy politike 1917–1953 gg* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyy fond "Demokratiya," 1999), p. 180, hereafter cited as *Vlast i khodozhestvennaya intelligentsiya*.

76. Kaganovich's letter to Stalin of June 23, 1932. *Stalin i Kaganovich. Perepiska: 1931–1936 gg* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2001), p. 189.

77. Rumors of Babel's decision to seek permanent residence abroad, to become a *nevozzrashchenets* (a crime that was equivalent to treason since the adoption of the Law on Non-returnees of November 29, 1929) began to circulate in Moscow in 1933. According to Antonina Nikolaevna Pirozhkova, Babel wrote to her with denials, expressing his surprise that she would take them seriously. For her recollection of Babel's correspondence, see A. N. Pirozhkova, *Sem' let s Isaakom Babelem: vospominaniia zheny* (New York: Slovo Word, 2001), p. 13.

78. As the Commissar for the South Western front, Stalin pushed the offensive against Lvov in August 1920, in which the Cavalry Army of Voroshilov and Budenny played a major role—in direct contravention of the order issued by the commander-in-chief in Moscow (Kamenev) to abandon Lvov and move to support Tukhachevsky's forces outside Warsaw. When the First Cavalry Army, depleted by its repeated and unsuccessful assaults on Lvov, finally redeployed as ordered, the battle of Warsaw had been lost, and the Polish forces counterattacked, leading to the rout of the Red Army. Although "no single cause explains the Soviet debacle," writes Stalin's biographer Robert Tucker, "based upon the writings of Soviet military historians published after Stalin's death, his [Stalin's] insubordination was an extremely contributing factor." Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary: 1879–1929: A Study in History and Personality* (New York: Norton Library, 1974), pp. 204–5. See also Dmitry Volkogonov, *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy*, trans. Harold Shukman (Prima Publishing: Rocklin, CA, 1996), p. 361.

79. Alexey Tolstoy knew Maria Denisova, the prototype for Babel's Maria, and apparently interviewed her and used her stories as he was preparing the last edition of his trilogy. Thus, Denisova became, in addition to the Krandievsky sisters, a prototype for the two female heroines in a Tolstoy trilogy. Babel may have further hinted at his affinity with Tolstoy by giving one of his characters the name of Alexey Tolstoy's second wife (1907–1914), an avant-garde artist, Sofia Isaakovna Dymshits (1889–1963).

80. In 1937, Shchadenko (1885–1951) was appointed by Stalin Deputy People's Commissar of Defense to head the all-important Personnel Department of the Red Army.

81. As she complained to her friend Vladimir Mayakovsky in the 1920s, Denisova

chafed under the traditional housewife role imposed on her by her husband and as a result, felt frustrated as an artist. There are indications that in his 1930 play *The Bath House*, Mayakovsky modeled the selfish Soviet bureaucrat Pobedonosikov and his unhappy, suicidal wife, Paula, on Shchadenko and Denisova. See the publication of unknown letters of Denisova addressed to Mayakovsky: V. N. Terekhina, "Razbilas o byt. Vladimir Mayakovsky: neopublikovannnye stranitsy zapisnykh knizhek i perepiski," *Chelovek* 1 (2000): 157–69.

82. *Ibid.*, p. 166.

83. Vera Mikhina, "Krestianka" (1927), State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

84. Here is the text of the ballad in my more literal translation: A Cossack rode through a valley, through Manchurian land, He rode by a green orchard, A ring shone on his hand. A Cossack lass gave him the ring when the Cossack rode away to war. She gave it to him, saying, "In a year I shall be yours. A year has come and gone." [Curtain.] And like an arrow, the Cossack galloped to his native village. He saw a hut in the foothills, and his heart began to pound. An old woman walked toward him, and tenderly spoke to him thus: "Your Cossack girl has betrayed you. She made another man happy." The Cossack lad turned his horse to the right and rode into a clear field. He took off his rifle from his shoulder and ended his life forever. And that young Cossack girl—she is still waiting and waiting for her Cossack lad. And that old woman—an evil witch—she had been bribed with money [to deceive the Cossack lad].

85. M. Gorky, "V. I. Lenin," in *Sobranie sochinenii*, 30 vols., vol. 17 (Moscow: GIKhL, 1949–1956), pp. 26ff.

86. Letter of May 2, 1933, in Nathalie Babel, ed., *The Lonely Years*, p. 232.

87. See Fleishman, "Ob odnom neraskrytom 'prestuplenii' Babelia."

88. See "Pis'mo Gor'kogo Babeliu o p'ese 'Mariia,'" in *Gor'kii i sovetskie. Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, vol. 70 (Akademiia nauk SSSR: Moscow, 1963), pp. 43–44.

89. Suggested by Carl Weber, who directed the Stanford University production of *Maria* in 2004. See his essay in this volume.

90. In a letter to his mother and sister dated February 24, 1934, Babel writes about "My itch for drama" (*The Lonely Years*, p. 250). He expressed similar sentiments a year later (February 24, 1935), in *ibid.*, pp. 275–76.

91. These acclaimed productions included: Vsevolod Ivanov's *Armored Train* 14–69 (1927); K. Trenev's *Lyubov' Yarovaya* (1926); Vs. Vishnevsky's *Pervaia konnaia* (First Cavalry Army, 1930); and, of course, Bulgakov's *Dni Turbinykh* (The Days of the Turbines, 1927), which after Stalin's personal intervention became the mainstay of the Maly Theater repertoire. According to Tatyana Stakh, Babel admired Bulgakov's play intensely: "He sat and watched the play that he had seen more than once with the kind of excitement as if he saw it for the first time." T. Stakh, "Kakim ia pomniu Babelia," in *Vospominaniia*, p. 155.

92. Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror, Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

93. Lezhnev, "Novaia p'esa Babelia 'Mariia,'" pp. 46–57.

94. According to Mikhail Koltsov's testimony given under interrogation in the Lubianka prison on April 9, 1939, "On the third day of the Congress, A. Gide conveyed via

Ehrenburg an ultimatum for A. S. Shcherbakov and me: either Babel and Pasternak are sent to Paris immediately or A. Gide and his friends leave the Congress . . . A. Gide said that only they could be trusted about the information regarding the USSR: ‘they alone tell the truth, the rest are bought and paid for.’” Viktor Fradkin, *Delo Kol'tsova* (Moscow: Vagrius, Mezhdunarodnyi fond “Demokratiya,” 2002), pp. 90–91. See also Boris Frenzinskii, “Velikaia illiuziia: Parizh 1935 (materially k istorii Mezhdunarodnogo kongressa pisatelei v zashchitu kultury),” *Minushee: Istoricheskij al'manakh* 24 (1998): 166–239.

95. G. S. Faiman, “Liudi i polozheniia. K shestidesiatiletiiu diskussii o formalizme v iskusstve. Glazami NKVD,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta* (Moscow), March 14, 1966, p. 5.

96. See Ervin Sinkó's entry in his diary for February 9, 1936. Ervin Sinkó, *Roman eines Romans; Moskauer Tagebuch*, trans. from Serbo-Croatian by Edmund Trugly (Köln: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1962).

97. G. Mochanov, “Spravka Sekretno-politicheskogo otdela GUGB NKVD SSSR ob otklikakh literatorov i rabotnikov iskusstva na sta'i v gazette ‘Pravda’ o kompozitore D. D. Shostakoviche,” in *Vlast i khodozhestvennaya intelligentsiya*, p. 290.

98. “A. M. Gorky's letter to I. V. Stalin,” *ibid.*, pp. 300–302.

99. According to a secret report of the NKVD about the Writers' Union discussion of Boris Pasternak's speech, in which he condemned the campaign, was, in part, encouraged by Babel, who, having just returned “from Foros, was saying that Gorky was very unhappy about the struggle against Formalism.” Babel told another writer, Lev Slavin, that “Gorky is very disturbed by the Formalism discussions, and for this reason, these discussions will be followed by personal blows.” Grigorii Faiman, “Liudi i polozheniia (Okonchanie). K shestidesiatiletiiu diskussii o formalizme v iskusstve. Glazami NKVD. O vtorom dne diskussii o formalizme v iskusstve,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta* (Moscow), March 27, 1996, p. 5.

100. See the secret police report on Babel in July 1936 in *Vlast i khodozhestvennaya intelligentsiya*, pp. 316–18.

101. As he claimed in a letter to his Brussels relatives, Babel wrote the script for the film *Liotchiki* (Pilots, a.k.a. in the United States as *Men with Wings*) but, following his habit, asked not to have his name listed in the credits, a decision he came to regret when he saw the film's runaway success. A story of a flight school romance between a very young female cadet and her middle-aged flight instructor, the film in many respects resembles Babel's romance with Pirozhkova, who, born in 1912, was a little more than half his age.

102. Ervin Sinkó, *Roman eines Romans. Moskauer Tagebuch*, trans. Edmund Trugly (Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik: Köln, 1962), pp. 354–57.

103. “Dokladanaia zapiska nachalnika Glavnogo upravleniia kinematografii B. Z. Shumiatskogo chelnam Politbiuro TsKn VKP (b) o situatsii vokrug postabovki S. M. Eizenshteinom filma “Bezhin lug,” *Vlast i khodozhestvennaya intelligentsiya*, p. 352. Among other things Shumiatsky wrote: “We have here an egregious attempt to appeal to foreign public opinion in order to preempt our evaluation of Soviet films.”

104. Oksana Bulgakowa, *Sergei Eisenstein: A Biography* (Berlin, San Francisco: PotemkinPress, 2001), pp. 185–89.

105. I. Babel, “Lozh, predateľstvo, i smerdiakovshchina” (Lies, Treason, Smerdyakovism), *Literaturnaia gazeta*, February 1, 1937.
106. Marietta Chudakova’s article in this volume offers a rich reading of this story.
107. Gregory Freidin, “Fat Tuesday in Odessa: Isaac Babel’s ‘Di Grasso’ as Testament and Manifesto,” *The Russian Review* 40, no. 2 (April 1981): 101–21.
108. Curtis Cate, *André Malraux: A Biography* (New York, 1995), p. 264.
109. The letter, addressed to mother and sister, datelined “Moscow, November 1, 1937.”
110. Babel’s letter to E. D. Zozulia dated October 14, 1938. *Sochineniia* 1:358ff.
111. Pirozhkova, *Sem let s Isaakom Babelem* (New York: Slovo, 2000), p. 99.
112. A. Read and D. Fisher, *The Deadly Embrace: Hitler, Stalin and the Nazi-Soviet Pact 1939–1941* (London: Joseph, 1988), p. 49ff. See also Jonathan Haslam, *The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security in Europe, 1933–39* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1984), pp. 86, 96, 127–28, and 144; and H. D. Philips, *Between the Revolution and the West: A Political Biography of Maxim M. Litvinov* (Boulder, CO, San Francisco, and Oxford: Westview Press, 1992), p. 154.
113. Zachary Shore, *What Hitler Knew: A Battle for Information in Nazi Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 109ff.
114. Arkady Vaksberg, “Protsessy,” *Literaturnaia gazeta* (May 4, 1988), p. 12. Vitalii Shentalinskii, *Raby svobody: v literaturnykh arkhivakh KGB: Babel, Bulgakov, Florenskii, Pilniak, Mandelstam, Kliuev, Platonov, Gorkii* (Moscow: Parus, 1995). Sergei Povartsov, *Prichina smerti—rassrel: khronika poslednikh dnei Isaaka Babelia* (Moscow: Terra, 1996).

### Notes to Chapter 3

1. On the Bolshevik policy toward the Jewish population, methods of the “establishment of the proletarian dictatorship on the Jewish street,” see Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics: The Jewish Section of the CPSU* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972); Mordechai Altshuler, *Ha-yevseksia bi-vrit ha-moazot* (1918–1930) (Tel Aviv: n.p., 1980); Michael Beizer, *Evrei Leningrada, 1917–1939: Natsional’naia zhizn’ i sovetizatsiia* (Moscow and Jerusalem: Mosty kul’tury-Gesharim, 1999); O. V. Budnitskii, *Rossiiskie evrei mezhdy krasnymi i belymi* (1917–1920) (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2005), and others.
2. Viktor Sevskii, “Dva kazaka. I. Podtelkov,” *Donskaia volna* 7 (1918): 3.
3. Loengreen (P. T. Gertso-Vinogradskiy), “V odnom dome (Sovetskie dni v Rostove),” *Donskaia volna* 8 (1918): 8.
4. Prince Gr. N. Trubetskoi, *Gody smut i nadezhd. 1917–1919* (Montreal: 1981), p. 49.
5. M. M. Prishvin, *Dnevnik. 1918–1919* (Moscow: Moskovskiy rabochiy, 1994), p. 282. Entry of Sept. 22, 1919.
6. Vladimir Amfiteatrov-Kadashev, “Stranitsy iz dnevnika,” ed. S. V. Shumikhin, *Minusheie: Istoricheskiy almanakh* 20 (Moscow and St. Petersburg: Atheneum-Feniks, 1996), p. 537.
7. Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GA RF), fond 440, opis’ 1, edinitsa khraneniia 110, 10 and its reverse, 18 and its reverse. Dispatches of the Kiev branch of *Azbuka* from March 28 and April 3, 1919.