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*TWO TALES OF ONE CITY: ISAAC BABEL,
FELLOW TRAVELING, AND THE END OF NEP**

Abstract

“An Evening at the Empress’s” (1922) and “The Road” (1932), two narratives by Isaac Babel that have garnered relatively little critical attention, chart the harrowing descent of a once free-wheeling, confident NEP-era writer into the treacherous creative abyss that followed thereafter. While they have been described in passing as related variants, this study proposes that the stories in question share a dark and much more deliberate compositional relationship. Over a span of ten years, Babel first depicts the open, independently-traveled creative road of the early twenties, and then reconfigures it to reflect its methodical narrowing, and eventual reduction, to a vertiginous tight rope. This essay, in which the 1932 story is re-read through the revealing lens of its antecedent, examines Babel’s retrospective take on NEP as he witnessed, and experienced, the crippling effects of its dissolution.

“The Marxian method affords an opportunity to estimate the conditions for the development of the new art, to trace all its sources, to help the most progressive tendencies by a critical illumination of the road, but it does not do more than that. Along its paths, art must make its own way on its own two feet.”

Leon Trotsky

“Journeys, like artists, are born and not made.”

Lawrence Durrell

In *Literature and Revolution* (1923), Trotsky explains that the creative disposition of Boris Pil’niak, Vsevolod Ivanov, and Sergei Esenin “has

* This essay is dedicated to Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, whose keen critical eye and intellectual generosity have been invaluable “fellow travelers” of my work on Babel. I would also like to thank Alexis Pogorelskin and my anonymous readers for their insight and thoughtful comments.

been made by the Revolution, by the angle at which it caught them, and they have all accepted the Revolution, each in his own way.”¹ The Marxist theorist granted these men considerable room for individual development as contemporary writers, acknowledging the multifarious avenues leading the way to emergent revolutionary art. A year later he would lament: “The political writing of class hastens ahead on stilts, while its artistic creativity hobbles along behind, on crutches.”² It was Trotsky who, continuing the metaphor of Revolution as a journey, coined the term “literary fellow travelers” to describe authors who could claim neither proletarian background nor party membership, yet sympathized, “each in his own way,” with the Revolution and its ideals. Besides those mentioned above, this designation would eventually include some of the most talented writers of the NEP period: Mikhail Zoshchenko, Yurii Olesha, Valentin Kataev, and, of course, Isaac Babel. Unlike many Bolsheviks, Trotsky did not harbor an entrenched hostility toward the intelligentsia. A prolific journalist and thinker himself, he emphasized the vital importance of fellow traveler literature at a time of demanding cultural transition and regarded its authors “not as competitors of the writers of the working class, but as the real or potential helpers of the working class in the great work of reconstruction.”³ In light of its “frightful cultural backwardness,” the Russian proletariat was, according to Trotsky, only just learning to express itself, and by using fellow travelers as facilitators, not spokesmen, the proletariat would eventually discard its crutches and begin to advance along the revolutionary road at a confident, steady march.⁴

By the time *Literature and Revolution* was published, Babel’s meteoric rise to fame was well on its way: All his programmatic writing, most of the *Odessa Tales*, and about half of his highly-acclaimed *Red Cavalry* stories had appeared in print. Yet Trotsky never mentions him; it was likely too early. Not until General Semen Budenny’s first attack on *Red Cavalry*, in March of 1924, would serious doubt be cast on the author’s ideological compass. One of the most celebrated fellow travelers, both in Russia and abroad, Babel would soon come to see Trotsky’s flexible literary designation become an emblem of disgrace. Although fellow travelers were officially recognized in the resolution of 1925 and allowed to exist as a politically and creatively eclectic grouping – “the Party must assume an attitude of tolerance toward the intermediate ideological forms”

1. Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, trans. Rose Strumsky (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), p. 62.

2. Leon Trotsky, *Art and Revolution: Writings on Literature*, ed. Paul N. Siegel (New York: Pathfinder, 1998), p. 66.

3. Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, pp. 179-80.

4. Trotsky, *Art and Revolution*, p. 79.

– by 1927 Trotsky was expelled from the Central Committee and his ideas condemned as counterrevolutionary.⁵ In February of 1929 he was deported to Turkey, and the spring of that same year witnessed the vicious campaign against Pil'niak and Zamiatin. As NEP's relative leniency came to an end and Stalin's first five-year plan was implemented, fellow travelers could no longer count on equitable treatment. Trotsky's generous plurals were gradually replaced by the tyranny of the singular form, and the many paths of the Revolution were reduced to a sole, bleak road. Fellow travelers were essentially given an ultimatum: *za ili protiv*, for or against. "In the twelve years since the Revolution," the poet Eduard Bagritsky stated in *Literaturnaia gazeta*, "a writer has had ample time to develop a definite point of view, for or against. If you're against it, don't eat our bread – we don't have much as it is; if you are for it, do what you can do to help, without playing the fool."⁶

In 1930, a year after his pronouncements in *Literaturnaia gazeta*, Bagritskii, once a fellow traveler, would end up joining RAPP. According to Maxim Shrayer, this was an act of self-preservation, and while Babel was never one to affiliate himself with any group, he, too, would be forced into normative, politically advantageous behavior, at least on paper.⁷ "An Evening at the Empress's" (*Vecher u imperatritsy*, 1922) and "The Road" (*Doroga*, 1932), two narratives that have garnered relatively little critical attention, chart the harrowing descent of a once free-wheeling, confident NEP-era poet into the treacherous creative abyss that followed thereafter. While they have been described in passing as related variants,⁸ I propose that these stories share a dark and much more deliberate compositional relationship. Over a span of ten years, 1922-1932, Babel first depicts the open, independently-travelled road of the early twenties, along which an artist could by and large negotiate and plot his own itinerary, and then reconfigures that road to reflect its methodical narrowing, and eventual reduction, to a vertiginous tight rope. To my knowledge, Carol Avins is the only one to have considered "The Road," and especially its ending, in any depth.⁹ While her primary concern revolves around the

5. "O politike partii v oblasti khudozhestvennoi literatury," *Pravda*, 25 July 1925.

6. Eduard Bagritskii, "Protiv pereklichkoi s emigrantskhinoi: Za podlinno sovetskuiu literaturu, za ozdarovlenie vsereossiskogo soiuza pisatelei," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 9, no. 2 (1929): 21.

7. Maxim Shrayer, *Russian Poet / Soviet Jew: The Legacy of Eduard Bagritsky* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), pp. 100-01.

8. Carol Avins, "Isaac Babel and the Jewish Experience of Revolution," in *The Enigma of Isaac Babel: Biography, History, Context*, ed. Gregory Friedin (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2009), pp. 82-99.

9. Though she acknowledges their failure to convince, Avins discerns a more genuine hopefulness in "The Road's" closing lines. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

Jewish experience of revolution, my study, in which the 1932 story is re-read through the revealing lens of its antecedent, examines Babel's retrospective take on NEP as he witnessed, and experienced, the crippling effects of its dissolution.

In "The Road," Babel turns our attention to the end of World War I and the early days of revolution in a first-person narrative that describes a traumatic journey from Kiev to Petrograd.¹⁰ Escaping from the "crumbling front" in November of 1917 in order to reach the Cheka headquarters and his former sergeant, Ivan Kalugin, the Babelian narrator of this story witnesses and endures anti-Semitic persecution, theft, hunger, and extreme cold.¹¹ Once in the capital he makes his way to Anichkov Palace, where he finally finds Kalugin, and together they spend the night delving into the private life of the tsars. On the following day, the narrator is given employment, food, and shelter, and the story closes on a statement of gratefulness: "That is how, thirteen years ago, a superb life filled with thought and merriment began for me" (Babel 2006, I: 244)

As many have noted, it is difficult to swallow this ending.¹² Its formulation rings false and the depiction of the events leading up to it do not support its optimism. As a whole, "The Road" is a re-framed and revealingly modified version of a piece that Babel published in the early twenties, "An Evening at the Empress's" (henceforth "Empress") in which the narrative persona describes himself as a "homeless poet" (Babel 2006, I: 269). It is primarily on this antecedent's experience that my comparative analysis hinges, but the differences in genre, construction, tone, and setting of the two versions invite close attention as well. Among other things, they register Babel's painful awareness of the need to refashion himself persuasively as a dutiful Soviet writer, a fact he expressed publicly when he was summoned by the FOSP secretariat in 1930: "I already understood long ago that the death of fellow-traveler literature was drawing near. It gives a most pitiful impression and constitutes a monstrous dissonance with the rhythms of our Bolshevikik époque" (Babel 2006, III: 363).

10. In both stories, Babel refers to the city as Petersburg. I will address this anachronism later in my discussion. Unless otherwise stated all translations are either my own or, in the case of Babel's work, adapted from Peter Constantine's translations (2001 and 2010).

11. Isaak Babel, *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh*, ed. I. N. Sukhin (Moscow: Vremia, 2006), 1: 235. Hereafter references to this citation will be in the text by name, date, volume number and page number.

12. Zsuzsa Hetényi, *In a Maelstrom: The History of Russian Jewish Prose* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2008), p. 184; Efraim Sicher, *Jews in Russian Literature after the October Revolution: Writers between Hope and Apostasy* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), pp. 73, 80; Milton Ehre, *Isaac Babel* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986), pp. 138-39.

Unlike the narrator of “The Road,” who has yet to make his way to revolutionary-era Petrograd at the start of the story, the one in “Empress” is already there: “Siberian salmon caviar and a pound of bread in my pocket. No shelter. I’m standing on Anichkov Bridge, huddled against Klodt’s horses [. . .] I need a little corner. My mind skims over all the apartments abandoned by the bourgeoisie. Anichkov Palace shimmers in view in all its squat splendor. There’s my little corner” (Babel 2006, I: 266).¹³

It is subtle, but the narrator’s phrasing betrays an attempt to take some distance from the middle class to which he likely belongs and that has fled the city. Yet, he is not apprehensive about his socio-political status. While he also ends up at Anichkov Palace, it is not the result of a planned itinerary but because the location happens to present itself as a viable option at that particular point in time. There is, in fact, a distinct spontaneity about this protagonist, who narrates in the present tense and allows us to live in the moment with him. Even Babel’s choice of genre underscores the intentional looseness of tone: “Empress” is a sketch, an often plotless, impressionistic essay that seeks to evoke rather than assert. As a compositional form it is one of the most flexible, affording writers great latitude in both content and expression. Though the narrator huddles against Klodt’s horses to protect himself from the impending chill, a confident and optimistic resourcefulness color his current drifting. Even hunger, a merciless foe that was bringing countless others to their knees at the time (as Babel confirms in “Chink” [“Khodya,” 1923] a piece from *Petersburg, 1918*) is compared to a “clumsy child” who only manages to “nag” the narrator. The truth is that he already has caviar and a pound of bread in his pocket and just needs a warm nook to consume them. This “homeless poet” is not looking for a place to settle; he merely requires a rest stop.

After slipping inside the palace unnoticed, the narrator meets with a stroke of luck: A German for whom he once typed up, free of charge, a statement regarding the loss of his passport is on duty in the library of the Dowager Empress Mariia Fedorovna (*née* Princess Dagmar of Denmark). This detail is an effective allusion to issues of nationality and ethnicity. In all likelihood, the German feared persecution by the Russian government during World War I and had not so much lost his passport as he had, wisely, destroyed it so as to avoid deportation, incarceration, or worse. “This German belongs to me entirely,” the narrator exults, knowing that he can count on a person who once benefitted from his generosity and who is now beholden to him. That this should take place at a time when

13. Even though there are no specific dates in “Empress” (as there are in “The Road”) confirming the period in which the sketch takes place, it is clear that the author is describing the same historical period in both pieces.

anyone remotely associated with Germany (including Empress Alexandra herself) was still suspect, is especially meaningful: The currencies at work in this Petrogradian episode are inter-cultural cooperation and good will, even between supposed sworn enemies. Such would have been the attitude of left-wing intellectuals and internationalist Bolsheviks who scorned the chauvinism of the Russian government, so much so that they continued to refer to the capital city as “Petersburg” even after 1914.¹⁴ Babel does the same in “Empress,” allowing him certain political marks as well as the opportunity to conjure up Petersburg’s illustrious literary and cultural history of which he is part. Together, the two men concoct a reason for the narrator’s presence at the palace: “We decide that I will wait for Lunacharsky in the library because, well, I need to see him.” Once again, the plan is devised neatly and on the fly. The narrator is not a victim of his circumstances; he uses them to move forward.

The reference to Anatoly Lunacharsky, appointed head of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment in 1917, serves various purposes. A self-proclaimed “poet of the Revolution” and “intellectual among Bolsheviks,” Lunacharsky was a staunch supporter of the arts and sought to protect their integrity.¹⁵ The fact that the narrator, who also describes himself as a poet, is confident about his fabricated reasons for being in the imperial library points to the relative looseness in the arts scene at the time. More than any other in Russia, the Petrogradian artistic community zealously guarded its autonomy, which had been retained since the February Revolution, and the Commissar of Enlightenment found himself constantly liaising between them and the Bolsheviks.¹⁶ At the time, independent artists had a voice and an ear.

Once his German acquaintance leaves, the narrator spends a fortifying evening in the opulence of what is the most cultured of rooms, a royal library, where he is engulfed in a blanket of heat: “A warmth beyond description rises from the steam pipes of the central heating.” Besides the provisions he brought with him, he chances on a potato pie, tea, and sugar. “That evening I ate like a human being,” he tells us, grateful to recover a modicum of refinement. It is not simply the warmth and food that restore the narrator, but also the very space in which he finds himself and the urbane behavior it elicits: “I spread the most delicate of napkins on an ornate little Chinese table glittering with ancient lacquer.” Bulgakov’s

14. Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: Language and Symbols of 1917* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1999), p. 159.

15. Anatolii Vasilievich Lunacharskii, *Velikii povorot* (Petrograd, 1919), p. 31.

16. Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970), p. 113.

Preobrazhensky would certainly have understood the significance of such details. “I am alone,” the narrator tells us, yet the essay’s title suggests society, a “vecher” spent under the auspices of Mariia Fedorovna. In truth, the narrator doesn’t seem to be alone at all, for the empress’s library positively comes alive to address his needs: “The deep divans wrap my frozen body in calm [. . .] the bulging velvet palms of the cushion beneath me caressed my bony hips.”

Having consumed his re-humanizing dinner the narrator proceeds to nourish his mind: “The books, their rotting and fragrant pages, carried me off to faraway Denmark.” Reading, whether the Empress’s personal correspondence or classical literature (Chénier and Lamartine), provides the wings for his sensitive, intellectual journey, reminding us that his brief visit to Anichkov Palace functions as a pleasurable *soirée* among the educated, even if they are not physically present. Babel is careful to inject some detachment, however. That the books are “molding and fragrant” and laced with “dried flowers crumbling to dust,” and that the personal letters, written in “fading ink,” are only barely legible, not only attest to their agedness but also suggest their decrepit irrelevance to Revolutionary Russia (Babel 2006, I: 267-268). Yet even as he mocks the “clumsy little prayers written to Lord Jesus,” the narrator is patently moved by the loving family and culture that nurtured the young Danish bride and that she once left behind: “It was very late that night when I tore myself away from this sorrowful and touching chronicle.” That he should find it difficult to set this reading aside begs our attention, after all he has no apparent plans for the evening and, in fact, soon falls asleep. Why then must he “tear” himself away?

Babel was no stranger to internal conflict and began to examine his own as early as 1915, in “Childhood. At Grandmother’s,” whose general situation bears a strong resemblance to this particular moment in “Empress.” If the young boy of “Childhood” longs to escape his grandmother’s old-world, deeply Jewish, and oppressively hot lodgings and, at the same time, to remain there forever, it is because his identity consists as much of his grandmother’s ambit as it does of the world outside her fortress. Similarly, upon entering and basking in the warm sophistication of the Anichkov library, the narrator recovers fundamental parts of himself – *kul’turnost’*, graciousness, intellectual stimulation – and becomes whole again. As an educated man he not only recognizes but both appreciates and identifies with the cultural legacy that saturates the palace walls; as a member of the new, progressive generation he is expected to spurn that patrimony, or at least to regard it with suspicion. The resulting action of “tearing himself away” from his reading and the past it represents keenly reflects the ambivalence of a fellow traveler, an ambivalence that gener-

ates ponderous reflection: “exhausted by my thoughts and the silent heat, I fell asleep” (Babel 2006, I: 269).

We should recall that while “Childhood” ends with the adolescent protagonist also succumbing to sleep “behind seven locks in grandmother’s hot room,” the adult narrator of “Empress” is not paralyzed by the inside-or-outside conundrum confronting him. He wakes up: “In the depths of the night I made my way toward the exit along the dully glinting parquet floors.” As his “tattered shoes” confirm, he is a man on the move and the impulse to stay inside Anichkov palace, whether to read more royal correspondence or merely sleep, is trumped by the instinct to regain the city streets and the independence they tender. At this point in his life, the narrator is unwilling to settle anywhere for long. Even his departure from the palace interior is depicted in terms of escape: “Pressed against a column, I waited for a long time for the last court lackey to fall asleep.” Significantly, the narrator conceals himself not, as one might expect, so as to penetrate *within* the official building (he tells us from the outset that “it isn’t hard to slip into the entrance hall”), but to make sure he is not held back. The sleeping watchdog, the “court lackey,” is a rich anachronistic figure: if he awakens, he might detain the narrator inside the walls of a familiar but disappearing world.

At one in the morning he is back outside: “Nevsky took me into its sleepless belly. I went to Nikolaevsky Station to sleep. Let those who have fled from here know that in Petersburg there is still a place where a homeless poet can spend the evening.” Making sure to underscore his vocation, the narrator claims the city as a poetic space that still holds options: When the sketch comes to an end, he is out on the street scoping out temporary shelter once again. And it is surely no happenstance that he chooses a railway station, symbol *par excellence* of movement and transience. This poet’s homelessness is not a predicament but a conscious status. Life around him is clearly in flux, and he himself is being pulled in different directions, but he is an organic and consenting participant in this instability, either unable or unwilling to give up the independence that comes with the open road.

Ten years later, the protagonist’s experience is vastly different and the elements that persist from “Empress” highlight the acuteness of the changes in the author’s perspective. From the outset, “The Road’s” Petersburg looms ominously as an inhospitable place, a grotesque underbelly whose train station – formerly a promising shelter – “hurls” the traveling narrator “from its howling stockade” onto one of its boulevards” (Babel 2006, I: 239). As he makes his way to Anichkov Palace, he sees that the sub-zero temperatures have frozen the streets, which are lined with dead horses, while men seek sexual services in exchange for bread. With

regard to structure, the earlier sketch is now framed by an outer tale that describes how the narrator comes to be in the city at all. The capital is the culmination of a hellish voyage that begins in the narrator's hometown, whence his mother dispatches him to Kiev armed with bread crusts and underwear lined with money. The details of this departure scene evoke many a traditional folk or fairy tale in which a humble youth leaves home to seek his fortune with only a bread husk and the few coins that his family can spare. "*Doroga*," the story's title in Russian, has also been rendered as "The Journey," suggesting a more profound, metaphysical passage from one existential state to another, precisely the outcome that the narrator's closing words would have us believe. But despite what he intimates, or even states outright, the transformation he describes in the course of his journey is highly equivocal and its "happy ending" exposes it as no more than a Soviet fairy tale.

In terms of genre, and by comparison with "Empress," "The Road" is much more a story than it is sketch: It has a clear plot, conflict, narrative resolution and, even if not convincingly, the main character undergoes *Bildung*. In some respects, the piece fits the mold of the *sui generis* sketch of the early thirties, which was an exceedingly popular hybrid form combining documentary and fiction writing. At the same time, it satisfies the objectives of production novels, which often sought to portray the main protagonist's and/or writer's own ideological conversion.¹⁷ Either way, these were forms of writing with a clearer mandate and not the kind of loose sketch that Babel had published in 1922 under the umbrella of NEP's creative tolerance.

The freedom of genre and physical movement that were defining attributes of "Empress" are annulled as of "The Road's" opening paragraph: "I was trying to get to Petersburg. For twelve days and nights I hid with Chaim Tsiriul'nik in the basement of his Hotel Bessarabka. The commander of Soviet Kiev issued me a pass to leave the city" (Babel 2006, I: 235). Not only is the former drifter immobilized, underground, but any further movement is also subject to authorization by a third party. Even then he is forced to wait for three days until a train finally arrives. Besides the stark reduction in ease of motion, the confidence and pluck of "Empress's" narrative tone are immediately snuffed out by a heavy blanket of dejection: "In all the world there is no more doleful sight than the Kiev train station [. . .] The low sky was furrowed with clouds, full of rain and gloom." The bracing, raw revolutionary instability that characterized the atmosphere of "Empress" and provided its homeless poet with options

17. Gregory Carleton, *The Politics of Reception: Cultural Constructions of Mikhail Zoshchenko* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1998), pp. 82-84.

is now a more directive force that alternately obstructs his path or imposes fixity.

“The Road’s” narrator is fixed in another important way: He is consistently, and almost exclusively, perceived as a Jew. In “Empress,” he is simply Russian and the food ration he carries – bread and caviar – confirms it. What is of greatest consequence here is not how the narrator, who has not changed in this regard from one text to the next, identifies, but how he is viewed by others. The fact of his Jewishness is a non-issue with the German on whom he chances in the library, even though the German’s non-Russianness is a significant detail.¹⁸ In “The Road,” however, it is the *muzhik* on the train who first tags him as a Jew and from that moment forth the narrator’s ethnicity becomes a perpetual marker of, and stain on, his identity. Unlike the poet of “Empress” for whom Petersburg appears to be negotiable, familiar turf, this young man will emerge as not only a residential but also ethnic outsider in a menacing capital city.

When the train departs from the Kiev station it does so haltingly – “At first it stopped every verst” – but then “it gathered speed, its wheels rattling faster, singing a powerful song” (Babel 2006, I: 235-236). This, of course, is the song of the Revolution, which, the narrator adds “made everyone in our transport car happy. Fast travel made people happy in 1918.” The tone of these two protruding sentences recalls (or, more accurately, prefigures) the woodenness of the narrator’s closing statement about his “life of merriment” and has a similarly grating effect. The repetitiousness of “made everyone/people happy” (*sdelalo vsekh schastlivymi/sdelala liudei schastlivymi*), with its well-worn slogan words emphasizing the ubiquitous “happiness” and “joy” (*radost’*) that was generated by the revolutionary struggle, sounds rehearsed, even bored. By 1932, readers would have doubtless heard many such propagandistic statements and their intrusion into the narrative flow is immediately doubled by the sudden interruption of the physical journey itself: “At night, the train gave a jolt and stopped.” At lightning speed, the narrator has been catapulted into abject darkness, for it is at this juncture that he is confronted by the story’s first, and seminal, instance of anti-Semitism. In this disturbing episode, an element from “Empress” is gruesomely turned on its head: Yehuda Veinberg, a recently married schoolmaster traveling to Petrograd with his wife, is summarily shot in the face by the station telegrapher who thinks nothing of his travel permit signed by Lunacharsky himself. In the 1922 sketch, the name of the Commissar of Enlightenment had provided the narrator safe haven; now his signature brings about certain death.

18. For many right-wing Russians, the German replaced the Jew as the main national enemy during World War I. Figs and Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution*.

Circumstances are, indeed, appreciably different ten years later, so it now becomes crucial to consider two perspectives simultaneously: The Revolutionary period in which the events take place, and the increasingly repressive era during which the story was written. By the late twenties, Lunacharsky, who had never been given access to the inner counsels of the Party and enjoyed, therefore, an ambiguous leadership status, had progressively lost most of his prestigious positions as a result of Stalin's ravenous consolidation of power.¹⁹ A frequently criticized protector of artists as well as intellectuals and, like Trotsky, convinced of the contributions they could make to the rising socialist society, Lunacharsky refused to accommodate Stalin, who despised the old intelligentsia and viewed it as a dangerous holdover from tsarist times. Although he resigned as Commissar in 1929, he continued to support the intelligentsia notwithstanding the danger this posed for him or, as it turns out, for anyone associated with him.²⁰ Lunacharsky's lethal political irrelevance in "The Road" serves to alert us generally to the acute power shifts that had taken place over the last decade and, more specifically, to signal the grave blow being directed at the arts since the dissolution of NEP in 1928. Despite the dates of composition on Babel's manuscript, 1920-1930, the date of publication, 1932, looms ominously over "The Road." It was on April 24 of that year that *Pravda* announced the Central Committee's intent to dissolve any existing literary association, including RAPP, and to anchor all authors under one roof: The Union of Soviet Writers. A month later, Socialist Realism would officially become the sole acceptable mode of expression. From then on, creative peripatetics would no longer be tolerated and any fellow traveler would have been wise to take note.

"The Road's" atrocities do not end with Veinberg's execution. While he is not a writer, as an educated schoolteacher and implementer of Lunacharsky's agenda, Veinberg is still a bourgeois intellectual subject to attack. This important association is overshadowed, however, by the fact that he and his wife are principally targeted for being Jewish: "A big, stooping *muzhik* in a fur cap with dangling earflaps was shifting back and forth behind the telegrapher. The boss winked at him, and the *muzhik* put his lamp on the floor, unbuttoned the dead man's trousers, sliced off his sexual organs with a pocketknife, and began to shove them into his wife's mouth.

'You were squeamish about *tref*,' the *muzhik* said, 'so now eat something kosher.'" (Babel 2006, I: 236)

It is not enough to liquidate Veinberg, he must serve as an example. Accordingly, he is quite literally defaced – shot in the face at close range

19. Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, pp. 9-10.

20. O'Connor, *The Politics of Soviet Culture*, pp. 17, 89.

– and his body mutilated. Anyone associated with him (his wife) or with a similar background (Jews, bourgeois intellectuals) must be intimidated, and the *muzhik's* eagerness to bring all this about is evident in his impatient shifting back and forth. Since Ukrainian nationalist forces were running things in the countryside during the first weeks of 1918, it is possible that the telegrapher and the *muzhik* are acting without the Bolsheviks' blessing. Babel is deliberately vague here, setting the stage for the sanctioned, if less blatant, anti-Semitism still to come.

It is worth insisting on the fact that Veinberg is not simply being dismembered, he is being neutralized as a male Jew. The physical record of his religious affiliation is excised from his body and his seed is squandered. These are clear terror tactics and, especially in the context of Babel's *oeuvre*, the manner of Veinberg's posthumous humiliation recalls a pogrom. In "The Story of My Dovecote" (1925), the Jewish narrator returns home during an anti-Semitic riot to discover his murdered grandfather: "Two perches had been shoved into Grandpa – one into his fly, the other into his mouth" (Babel 2006, I: 164). To be sure, the *muzhik's* strategy of intimidation is effective: "The [wife's] soft throat swelled. She remained silent," much as Babel would become in the mid-thirties (*ibid*, p. 236). However circumscribed the Veinbergs' ordeal might appear at first, we soon find out that Jews are being thrown from the train cars, and the "song of the Revolution" proceeds in a distinct staccato: "Shots rang out unevenly, like shouts."

The attention subsequently turns to the narrator, who for some reason is spared a "Yid's" fate even though he is mordantly identified as a Russian who "would make a first-rate rabbi." Nevertheless, the *muzhik's* rough treatment of him, as well as the part of the body on which it is focused, hearkens back eerily to Veinberg's genital mutilation: "[The *muzhik*] brought his crumpled worried face close to mine [and] ripped out the four golden ten-ruble coins which my mother had sewn into my underwear." While the narrator is not actually being torn apart, the ripping of his underclothes comes to the same thing symbolically, and the mark of Abraham's covenant with God – the circumcised penis – is replaced in this instance by a stereotypical ingredient of Jewish identity, money, which is also being forcibly removed.

After being stripped of his boots and coat in the dead of winter, the narrator is commanded in Yiddish to run away, and though he feels the *muzhik's* gun aimed on his back he is allowed to live. The contradictory thrusts shaping this moment sum up the gist of the narrator's predicament: On the one hand, he is denied the very things that make it possible for him to advance, and on the other he is told to run. Under these circumstances he will either die (of cold or a bullet) or be forced to find an-

other way to do as he is told and keep moving. Assisted by a forester, who refuses to let the narrator stay in his warm hut but gives him rags to wrap his feet, he makes his way to a *shtetl* where his mobility continues to be at risk: “There was no doctor at the hospital to cut off [*otrezat*] my frostbitten feet.” The same verb also described the *muzhik*’s work on Veinberg’s genitalia, but the possibility of dismemberment is in this case not a threat to the narrator’s manhood or Jewishness, but to the ability to walk, as Trotsky puts it in this essay’s epigraph, “on his own two feet.”

In light of our acquaintance with his earlier incarnation as the confident and mobile poet of “Empress,” the narrator’s transformation ten years later into the frequently constrained and targeted traveler of “The Road” deserves careful consideration. As a “homeless poet,” the protagonist was both literally and figuratively free of a permanent address: He came and went as a civilian and, more importantly, as a writer. Much as Babel himself, who began 1918 working with the Cheka but left to write for Gorky’s Menshevik *Novaia zhizn*’, the narrator of the 1922 sketch neither wished nor felt pressured to affiliate himself with a single home, a stance which, in the early twenties, would have earned him the label of “fellow traveler.”²¹ On its own, “Empress” may not strike one as a piece seeking to record the fellow-traveler experience, but read retrospectively in the context of its starkly altered narrative sibling, these characteristics begin to stand out. We might also ask why Babel would choose to recast a previously circulated, and relatively unremarkable, work. At one time, the author did admit privately that he constantly sought reasons not to publish in order to avoid compromising himself.²² But the fact is that he did rewrite and re-submit “Empress” as “The Road.” Moreover, and with the brand of self-referential irony that we have come to expect from Babel, the frame of the expanded narrative actually exposes the very process of becoming personally and professionally compromised. To pick up where we left off in the story, and beyond the physical trauma, it would be no small matter for the (fellow) traveling narrator to have his feet, the symbol of his creative mobility, amputated. As I will show, the literal restrictions placed on the narrator’s ability to move about the country have severe figurative implications on his creative autonomy.

21. On Babel’s work with the Cheka, and *Novaia zhizn*’, see Frieden’s chronology in *The Complete Works of Isaac Babel*, trans. Peter Constantine (New York: Norton, 2001), p. 1053 and Vitaly Shentalinsky, *Arrested Voices: Resurrecting the Disappeared Writers of the Soviet Regime*, trans. John Crowfoot (New York: Free Press, 1993), p. 25.

22. In 1936, Babel told his roommate: “As long as I don’t publish, laziness is thrown in my face. If, on the other hand, I publish, then a veritable avalanche of accusations will fall on my bald head.” Ervin Sinkó, *Roman Eines Romanes* (Köln: Wissenschaft und Politik, 1962), p. 314.

Even though dismemberment is ultimately averted and his feet heal, the episode describing the removal of the narrator's bandages rings an alarmingly familiar bell: "Ripping the bandages off my feet, [the medic] straightened his back, and, grinding his teeth asked me in a low voice, 'Where? Where is it taking you? Why is it always moving, this nation [*natsiia*] of yours? Why is it stirring up trouble, getting all worked up?'" (Babel 2006, I: 238).

This is an unmistakable variation on the *muzhik's* aggressive manhandling of the narrator. Not only are things being ripped off his body again, but his interlocutor's intimidating bedside manner is also patently inspired by the narrator's ethnicity. The medic, who has read Engels but confuses the concept of nation (*natsiia*) with nationality or ethnicity (*natsional'nost'*), is the first to conflate Jewishness with mobility and to cast them both in a negative light. The narrative result of this conflation is immediate: "The soviet moved us out at night on a cart: patients who had not seen eye to eye with the medic and old Jewesses in wigs, mothers of the local commissars." The continuation of the narrator's journey is passively constructed – "nas vyveli" – and the impetus for it stems, once again, from a third party. More importantly, the event is clearly retributive. Though his feet are spared, and even if he is advancing toward his destination, this traveler is not moving independently.

The narrator does regain some of his agency once his wounds disappear: "My feet healed. I continued along the destitute road to Zhlobin, Orsha, and Vitebsk." Thus begins the final episode of the outer frame before we re-enter the geographic and narrative space of "Empress." It is worth citing extensively: "The muzzle of a howitzer acted as my shelter from Novosokolniki to Loknya. We were riding on an uncovered cannon platform. Fedyukha, my chance traveling companion, a storyteller and witty jokester, was undertaking the great journey of the deserters. We slept beneath the powerful, short, upward-pointing muzzle, and warmed each other in the canvas pit, covered with hay like the den of an animal. After Loknya, Fedyukha stole my suitcase and vanished. The shtetl soviet had issued me the suitcase along with two pairs of soldier's underwear, dried bread, and some money. Two days went by without food as we approached Petersburg." (Babel 2006, I: 238-239)

Babel makes a point of mapping the narrator's departure out of what had until recently been the Pale of Settlement (Zhlobin, Orsha, Vitebsk) and into Russia proper (Sokolniki and Loknya), and makes a series of notable substitutions. As the narrator leaves the provinces behind, gun muzzles are no longer threats in the hands of *muzhiks* and become, instead, a source of protection. The violent stripping previously reserved for Jews is now administered on persons more obviously deserving of this treatment:

“The smugglers were led out onto the platform and their clothes were ripped off” (Babel 2006, I: 239). No blood – only contraband vodka – is spilled. On the previous train ride, Veinberg, who was the only traveler identified by name, mirrored the narrator as a fellow Jew. This time he befriends a “chance traveling companion” (*sputnik*), Fedjukha, who parallels the narrator as a storyteller. Finally, in providing the protagonist with an identical collection of goods – underwear, dry bread, and money – the *shtetl* soviet now stands in for his mother. It might appear that as he advances toward Petersburg the narrator’s Jewishness becomes muted, and less of a liability, while his ties to the revolution and its agents are strengthened. The situation is not that simple, however, for although he is not subjected to the summary execution and dismemberment of a Jewish brother, he is instead targeted by a trusted companion who strips him of his essential belongings in much the same way as the *muzhik*. It is not that threats to his person diminish as he comes closer to the capital but, as we shall continue to see, that the wolves are wearing sheep’s clothing.

The cold but still rousing conditions of “Empress’s” Petersburg have in “The Road” degenerated into a veritable existential nightmare. This iteration of the capital is a frigid death trap: “The wind roared through the tunnel of Gorokhovaia Street [. . .] which lay like a field of ice cluttered with rocks [. . .] Dead horses lay along [Nevsky Prospekt] like milestones.” At number 2 Gorokhovaia, which did indeed house the recently established Cheka, the narrator is met by “two iron dogs, with raised iron snouts,” another pair of machine-gun muzzles. From there he is sent to Anichkov Palace, where Kalugin, his former sergeant turned Cheka investigator, can be found. Once a nearby shelter of his own choosing, Anichkov has now become an assigned destination and, furthermore, one that poses immediate danger to his life: “I’ll never make it,” he tells himself as he prepares to leave. Cobbled as it is with equine corpses, Nevsky is far from “welcoming,” as it had been in the 1922 sketch, and “flows into the distance like the Milky Way,” offering no visible end to the narrator’s travails. Feeling neither optimistic nor resourceful, the narrator reconfirms his expectation of defeat to a passerby who offers no assistance. And the narrator’s resolve dwindles further: “‘Thus falls away the necessity to conquer Petersburg,’ I thought, and tried to remember the name of the man who had been crushed by the hooves of Arab thoroughbreds at the very end of his journey. It was Yehuda Halevi” (Babel 2006, I: 240).

Even though overt anti-Semitic persecution ceases upon the narrator’s arrival in Petersburg, our hyper-awareness of his Jewishness does not. Aside from underscoring his ethnic background, the narrator’s auto-comparison with Halevi, an illustrious medieval poet and thinker, also alludes to his own vocation as a writer, a fact that up to this point had been

merely inferred based on “Empress.” Within the story’s framework of journeying, it is Halevi’s well-known pilgrimage from Spain to Jerusalem that is being evoked, and, in particular, the legend of his demise at the gates of his destination.²³ Babel is careful to liken only his protagonist’s imagined death, and its irony, to Halevi’s, but an attentive reader will soon discern many more and deeper traits binding all three men. A highly educated member of Spanish court Jewry, Halevi was a polyglot who wrote poetry in Hebrew, philosophical essays in Arabic, and even mastered Castilian and Andalucian dialects to assist him in his capacity as physician.²⁴ More importantly, he was a man painfully torn by his allegiances, by the pull of his background and cultural provenance on the one hand, and the call of his religious convictions on the other. As he aged, Halevi felt insistently called to the Holy Land and soon found it impossible to continue residing in Spain. That “The Road’s” narrator alludes to the poet-philosopher’s legendary voyage in the context of his own star-crossed journey to Petersburg suggests that he wishes to present his passage to the Russian capital as a pilgrimage of sorts. To be sure, the narrator is being called by a supreme power of his own. For him, a soldier seeking to resume his duties, the objective is understood to be patriotic and political, not religious, a recasting that surely contributed to the censor allowing Halevi’s name to remain in the story.

The impetus for the narrator’s pilgrimage is one of several elements that point to his ambivalence toward the fairy tale he is telling and makes its concluding lines so unpersuasive. The mere fact that his itinerary takes him along Nevsky, where nothing is ever as it seems, offers a clue to its misguidedness. To begin with, the narrator is not so much drawn to Petersburg by an internal impulse, as Halevi had yearned for Jerusalem, but is summoned there by his superior officer, Kalugin: “He called me in his letters” (Babel 2006, I: 239). Furthermore, as he advances toward his promised land so as to contribute to the revolutionary effort, this soldier, poet, and Jew is mercilessly targeted by the very forces of change he longs to assist. In a telling detail, “Empress’s” court lackey (*privdornii lakei*), who earlier delayed the narrator’s departure from the palace, is now simply a “sleeping lackey” (*zasnuyshii lakei*) and does not impede the narrator’s access to the building. The man’s clothes, however, belie a compromised transition: “his beltless military tunic, flooded with light, covered (*nakryvala*) his livery trousers trimmed with gold braid” (*ibid.*, p.

23. Albeit a moving one, the legend of Halevi’s death is just that. He did reach the Holy Land in 1140 but died only a few weeks later. Collette Sirat, *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), p. 113.

24. Barbara Galli, *Franz Rosenzweig and Jehuda Halevi: Translating, Translations, and Translators* (Montreal: McGill-Queens Univ. Press, 1995), pp. 293-94.

240). A surface reading – the type Babel hoped, on one level, to project – suggests that the narrator is attempting to reflect current evolution and the fact that Old Russia is changing before his eyes. But Babel’s inference is hard to miss: the boldly illuminated military tunic may momentarily outshine and partly screen the livery underneath – “*nakryvala*” means to cover as well conceal – but the tell-tale gold trim comes through nonetheless. Even the fact that Kalugin is currently stationed at Anichkov Palace, a tsarist space, alerts us to the possibility that where power and its wielding are concerned things have changed in appearance, but not substance.

Before entering the palace, the narrator pauses on Anichkov Bridge, which is precisely where “Empress” began. This is a key intertextual crossroads and the changes in circumstance, tone, and orientation are extraordinary. No longer upright, as he was in the 1922 sketch, the narrator now “[lies] down on the polished flagstone, elbow under [his] head.” Hungry, exhausted, and emotionally battered, this figure exudes defeat, not optimism, and even assumes Halevi’s position in his legendary moment of death, his head dangerously close to the horses’ hooves. In this post-NEP version of events, the narrator is patently not the agent of his passage inside the building: “The granite scorched me, and drove, pushed, flung me forward to the palace.” Functioning consistently as the grammatical object of the granite, he is forced inside by a series of aggressive verbs; either the narrator goes where he is supposed to, or he dies. Anichkov palace, one among several alternatives in “Empress,” is now presented as the only option. Similarly, in the drastically more austere context of the 1932 narrative, the architectural symbolism of the bridge itself – a path leading from one sphere into another – resounds with far greater urgency.

The protagonist’s journey continues to be externally determined even inside the building: “A splotchy arrow, drawn in ink, pointed the way to the commandant.” Specifically not with paint, which might have been the more expected medium, the prescribed route is identified with ink, the fluid of laws, edicts, and party resolutions. When he enters Kalugin’s office, the narrator finds him “as if on stage,” and instead of being engrossed in serious political tasks, he has been amusing himself with a pile of Tsar Nicholas’s old toys. These are hardly signs of a man committed to a cause; he is merely playing at it. Nor does Kalugin’s description inspire confidence: His “mop of straw-colored *muzhik* hair” recalls Veinberg’s ruthless peasant butcher who, along with the telegrapher, also abused his position. This unsettling proximity persists in the fact that, though he does not physically terminate or maim the Jewish protagonist, Kalugin does subject him to a mock-baptism, making him one more accomplice in the progressive dismantling of the narrator’s identity. Announcing that he

needs a bath, the Cheka investigator carries his underling – note that the narrator’s mobility has now been reduced to complete inertia – to “an antique tub with low sides,” and, since “the water didn’t flow from taps” (presumably because of the cold) “pour[s] water over [him] with a bucket” (Babel 2006, I: 241). In the space of Babel’s prose, this has been done before, in “First Love” (1925), where the situation is chillingly similar: Following a pogrom, the young narrator takes refuge in Galina Rubtsova’s house, where she forces a thinly-veiled christening on him by placing his head under the tap of her kitchen sink, in the “cook’s corner,” before an icon of Nicholas (*ibid.*, p. 170). In the earlier instance both the source of the pogrom and the agent of baptism were associated with tsarist autocracy, making its restaging in Anichkov Palace further proof that *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*. In the end, Kalugin’s brand of ethnic cleansing differs from that of his fellow *muzhik* only in the manner of execution: Whereas one of them plays out his anti-Semitic agenda violently, either by excising the mark of Abraham from the offending body or by threatening it figuratively, the other attempts to wash away Jewishness by submerging it in a tub of ersatz baptismal water.²⁵

Following this first phase of initiation into Kalugin’s sphere, the narrator is presented with clean clothes – christening attire, if you will – that once belonged to Tsar Alexander III: “The long underpants went all the way up to my head, the robe had been tailored for a giant, the sleeves were so long I was stepping on them” (Babel 2006, I: 241). In these over-size clothes, provided not by the *shtetl* soviet this time, but by the Cheka, the narrator’s personal reduction comes through most caustically. He is even shown to be an accessory in the curbing of his agency since his hands are constrained by his own feet. On some level, the narrator and Babel acknowledge their acquiescence to what is being perpetrated. Beyond ridiculous, then, this is a pitiable sight, and Kalugin’s seemingly harmless teasing, “so you’re making fun of old Alexander Alexandrovich?” works to highlight the bitter truth: The joke is on the narrator himself.

As he did in “Empress,” Babel’s protagonist finds himself in Mariia Fedorovna’s library sipping tea, but this time he is neither alone nor at liberty either to define or experience the evening on his own terms. Thus, what had once been a scene describing his physical, cultural, and intellectual fortification, in other words, an anchoring of his sense of self as an educated and unaffiliated Russian poet is, ten years later, the record of the methodical disassembly of his identity. To begin with, the genial ambience that once cloaked the narrator in the space governed by Mariia Fedo-

25. Just a year earlier, Babel had already probed the intersection of religious ritual, specifically circumcision, and Soviet ideology in “Karl-Yankel” (1931).

rovna, who is remembered as a figure of tolerance with regard to Russia's minorities and also of defiance *vis-à-vis* Pobedonstsev's aggressive Russification policies, is now countered by the smothering effect of Alexander's robe which envelops the narrator in its former owner's avowed anti-Semitism. Moreover, and in direct opposition to this moment in "Empress," the consumption of food does little to heighten the sense of the narrator's humanity: "We chased our tea down with horsemeat sausages, which were black and somewhat raw" (Babel 2006, I: 242). Since equine corpses lined the streets to the palace, the narrator and his dinner mate have effectively become scavengers feasting on carrion. The fact that the meat is not fully cooked readily suggests its disturbing provenance: it is fresh off the street. Initiation ceremonies frequently entail a commemorative meal, but this one is as much about celebrating baptism as it is a further undoing of the narrator's ethnicity. Much like the ceremonial pork Liutov consumes in "My First Goose" (1924), following his initiation into the Cossack brotherhood, horsemeat is not kosher, and its ingestion continues to eat at the narrator's Jewishness. This pilgrim, as was the case for Halevi, is not to be trampled by live horses but poisoned by dead ones. Nor is the shape of the tainted food a coincidence, for it recalls the grotesque forced consumption of "kosher" meat in the form of the deceased Veinberg's sexual organs. Appealing to a fraught conflation of characters, the narrator, who can be seen as both dead and alive at this juncture, alternately reflects and refracts Halevi, Veinberg, and his wife.

On some level, readers might heave a sigh of relief now that the protagonist is warm, fed, and safely inside the palace walls, but Babel continues to seed his counter-narrative with unsettling details: "The thick, airy silk of curtains separated us from the world. The sun, fixed on the ceiling, reflected and shone, and the steam pipes from the central heating gave off a stifling heat." This entire setting feels staged and artificial; even the heat, which was comforting in "Empress," is oppressive in its excess. Anichkov's presumed security is further undercut by Kalugin himself: "'You only live once,' he said, after we had finished our horsemeat." The Russian idiom "*byla ne byla*" can also be understood as "here goes!", an acknowledgement of the risk about to be taken and not simply an invitation to *carpere diem*. And it is not just the questionable meat that resonates with Kalugin's comment, for the surrounding instability and lack of order make it difficult to judge where one stands, a fact borne out all too well by Veinberg's sudden execution and the narrator's constant mistreatment. Kalugin confirms his awareness of how quickly the tide can change, and punishment be meted out, when he repeats himself after presenting the narrator with two boxes, one holding cigarettes and the other cigars that had been gifted to Tsar Alexander by the recently deposed Sul-

tan, Abdul Hamid II: “You only live once [. . .] Let’s hope they’ve not been counted’.” The use of smoke to mark the ongoing religious ritual is an effective detail, but the socio-cultural significance of cigars is of greater consequence still. Relaxing in the comfort of the imperial library, Kalugin tempts the narrator with the trappings of the same elite circle that the Revolution sought to overthrow. Rather than a cigarette, the default smoke of the harried urban masses, the narrator selects a cigar, the emblematic choice of the leisure class and, more specifically, of men.²⁶ The new Cheka recruit and ex-Jew, then, is being accepted into an exclusive, anti-Semitic, and manly brotherhood that, in the context of Russian social history, appears distressingly familiar.²⁷ Here, we must also stop to appreciate Babel’s insistence on phallic imagery as the narrator’s imposed conversion comes to a close. That the cigarette he is offered is “twenty centimeters long [. . .] as thick as a finger and wrapped in pink paper” speaks for itself, and the narrator refuses to take one. But the unnerving fact is that the cigar he does accept will be ritually clipped at one end and subsequently inserted into his mouth. The narrator cannot win for losing. Evidently, there is no end to the number of times he will be forced to rehearse the same assault.

As the initiation approaches completion, the narrator and Kalugin act almost exclusively as a plural subject: “We spent the night,” “crumbling in our fingers,” “we could not tear ourselves away” (Babel 2006, I: 242-243). Not only do they appear to be as one, but also, and most eerily, the singular narrative voice of “Empress” has been co-opted into a plural entity. The remainder of the evening is spent, as in the earlier sketch, perusing royal paraphernalia (toys, clothes, books, and diaries) but the narrator’s perspective has changed appreciably. Besides having to share the reading experience with a prejudiced set of eyes, his own outlook is no longer that of an independent individual. In the context of “The Road’s” narrative frame and of the protagonist’s journey from his maternal home to Petersburg, Princess Dagmar’s departure from her own Lutheran family to the Russian capital acquires pointed significance. These two young travelers are, in fact, reflections of one another across time. Kalugin’s letters bidding the narrator join him in Petersburg, the young man’s solitary departure to and arrival at “Kalugin’s palace,” and their reunion, complete with the sergeant’s act of undressing his guest and carrying him to

26. Ironically, in 1815-1848, cigars had become a revolutionary emblem because Marx smoked them. The context is clearly different here. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Tastes of Paradise: A Social History of Spices, Stimulants, and Intoxicants* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), pp. 111-15.

27. Seasoned readers of Babel will also recognize the resemblance of this initiation to Liutov’s in “My First Goose.”

the bath, cast the two men as pseudo-royal spouses. The narrator is no longer “single” in more ways than one. By stating that “Princess Dagmar became Mariia in Russia,” a transformation that had been implicit in “Empress,” he highlights a name change that presupposes religious conversion. In accordance with Romanov court tradition, Dagmar adopted Orthodoxy prior to her wedding, just as the narrator is made to renounce his Jewish heritage before marrying into the Cheka. But besides being entirely coerced, his conversion describes not a gain, but loss. Just as Fedyukha, his traveling companion, absconded with his suitcase while he slept, Kalugin, another presumed ally, steals the narrator’s identity when he collapses from exhaustion. More than into Christianity, I would argue that the narrator is being baptized out of Judaism: He is being taken apart, “un-membered” or “dis-membered,” as Veinberg was. Both the Danish princess and the Jewish narrator are forever altered by their transit to Peterburg, which results either in actual or figurative marriage. Indeed, the would-be wedding night and attendant deflowering are deliberately punctuated by the narrator who tells us “I had finished smoking Abdul Hamid’s cigar” as the event comes to an end (Babel 2006, I: 243). In Russian, the sentence is constructed in the passive voice, “*sigara Abdul-Gamida byla dokurena*,” thereby dismissing the narrator as active subject. In light of the pseudo-sexual context, the narrator’s exhaustion and vulnerability, and of the previously established cigar-penis association, this young man’s initiation into the Cheka smacks of rape and crude, political fellatio. Though it is his decision to join Kalugin’s ranks, the obvious duplicitousness and coercion undergirding this episode make the abuse amply clear.

On the following morning, and reconfirming the pattern of guided movement, Kalugin escorts his inductee to Mikhail Uritsky, the chairman and Grand Inquisitor of the Petersburg Cheka, for final approval: “He had a word with Uritsky. I stood behind a heavy curtain that hung to the ground in cloth waves [*sukonymi volnami*]. Fragments of words made their way through to me.” A second act of staging marks the final phase of the narrator’s induction. Avins also pauses on the scene’s theatricality and suggests that Uritsky’s appearance – “his swollen eyelids, burned by sleeplessness” – is an indication of the kind of effort that the narrator’s service to the Cheka will eventually require.²⁸ My reading is somewhat different. While I agree that the narrator’s future in the secret police is likely to be consuming, it will not be so for the same reasons it is for Uritsky. Standing on opposite sides of the undulating drapes whose resemblance to water evokes the earlier baptismal ceremony, the narrator

28. Avins, “Isaac Babel and the Jewish Experience of Revolution,” pp. 88-89.

and the commissar seem more dissimilar than alike. Moisei Uritsky, also a bespectacled, educated Jew, became Mikhail Uritsky and emerged on the other side of the curtain of his own volition; he was neither underhandedly modified nor bullied. Babel's recurring theater imagery underscores the artifice that informs "The Road" as a whole, especially in comparison with "Empress." Viewed from a post-NEP perspective, revolutionary and party activity are not what they purport to be, which is why the story's closing paean to socialism rings so hollow. How telling that the narrator does not even speak for himself in Uritsky's presence; Kalugin, at center stage, declaims his merits for him: "'He's one of us [. . .] His father is a storekeeper, a merchant, but he's washed his hands of them. . . . He knows languages.'" The wording "*paren' svoi*" effectively summarizes the de-Semitization to which Kalugin subjected his recruit – as a Jew he had been "chuzhoi" or "other" – and while the Russian "*on otbilsia ot nikh*" is more accurately translated as "he has broken with them," Constantine's rendering is most appropriate here since it literally was in the tub that the narrator was, unbeknownst to him, ritually cleansed of his Jewish and mercantile past.

The fact of imposed transformation and coerced biography is fully captured in the paragraphs that lead to the story's jarring conclusion: "They made me a translator in the Foreign Division. I got a military uniform and food coupons. In the corner of the former Petersburg City Hall that was allocated to me I set about translating depositions [*pokazaniia*] given by diplomats, agents provocateur, and spies.

Not even a day had passed, and I had everything: clothes, food, work, and comrades true in friendship and death, comrades the likes of which you will not find anywhere in the world, except in our country." (Babel 2006, I: 244)

The independent poet of "Empress," who had earlier chosen his own "corner" in Petersburg is now assigned one. He is also "made into" (*menia sdelali*) a dedicated translator. Similarly, the knowledge of foreign languages once employed to read Chénier and Lamartine, or even to help out a German in need, will now assist the Revolution in identifying, convicting, and executing her alleged enemies. The narrator is even issued his final set of clothes, official apparel that will identify him with a specific group; the homeless freethinker has become an indentured military clerk. In all, it has taken a mere day to erase his previous identity and supply him with an alternate one, and the city that once sheltered this fellow traveler has become his prison. Whereas the narrator of "Empress" is free to leave Anichkov Palace and spend the night at Nikolaevsky Station, his later incarnation is directly ushered to Gorokhovaia number two

where he will remain indefinitely: Though Babel only worked in the Cheka briefly, “The Road’s” closing line suggests extended service.

The complex interplay between the apparent safety and hidden dangers of fixity allows us to revisit the ex-poet’s walk from Anichkov to Gorokhovaya, as well as his final narrative statements, from yet another perspective. In light of his carefully crafted double narrative, and given the relentless persecution and duress that inform the narrator’s path to the Cheka, Kalugin can be seen as escorting a convert to Uritsky as much as he can be seen to bring in a prisoner. Some years after his stint with the secret police, Babel told the anti-Stalin émigré journalist Boris Souvarine that there were “valuable literary works” sitting in the Cheka archives, explaining that these were the autobiographies and confessions that educated detainees were required to write upon arrest. In her fascinating study, *Police Aesthetics: Literature, Film, and the Secret Police in Soviet Times*, Cristina Vatulescu examines the myriad ways in which the secret police shaped, redirected, and co-opted artists’ biographies, forcing them to write about themselves defensively or incriminatingly and casting them actively as authors of their own demise: “Rather than writing truth about themselves, the victims attempted to guess and approximate an autobiography that would be satisfactory to the secret police.”²⁹ If, as Avins observes, the narrator’s fraught closing remarks evoke “a Stalinist-era ending in the testimonial style,” it is because “The Road” effectively belongs to the genre that Babel once translated when he worked at Gorokhovaia number two.³⁰ A split narrative, the protagonist’s tale of how his “superb life” came to be is really no more than a coerced testimonial. As we watch “Empress,” a loose, unprompted piece, become surrounded by an encroaching narrative frame, we can easily discern the creative struggle taking place on the pages before us. The re-writing of the 1922 sketch into its post-NEP version is effectively a re-writing of the narrator himself. No longer a homeless poet but a conscripted clerk, and now definitively purged of his fellow-traveling mobility as well as his bourgeois, Jewish tendencies, the narrator is as much a victim of abstract political oppression as he is of Babel, who knowingly penned this at once rank and masterful story. The ideological testimonial may be forced, but the author’s creative confession to us, his readers, is heartbreakingly genuine.

In the early thirties, art was clearly not advancing “on its own two feet,” as Trotsky had maintained it should. Nor were fellow travelers.

29. Cristina Vatulescu, *Police Aesthetics: Literature, Film, and the Secret Police in Soviet Times* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 41.

30. Avins, “Isaac Babel and the Jewish Experience of Revolution,” p. 88.

31. Konstantin Paustovskii, “Rasskazy o Babele,” in *Vospominaniia o Babele* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Knizhnaia Palata, 1989), pp. 30-31.

They were being led, shoved, and corralled into the creative abattoir that was the Writers' Union. Besides being reconfigured as a one-way road, the accepted path of literary activity was becoming impossibly narrow – it was not so much a path as a line drawn in the sand – and refused to accommodate writers of alternative persuasions. Babel had once told Konstantin Paustovsky that for him writing was like “walking on a tightrope” (*khodit' po kanatu*), wishing to emphasize the rigor, both physical and aesthetic, required by the compositional process but also the need for measure and creative agility.³¹ Little did he suspect that his beautiful metaphor of the creative experience would eventually become realized as an existential threat. By the First Congress of Soviet Writers (1934), Babel officially adopted the genre of “literary silence”: Between 1934 and his arrest in 1940 he published only a handful of stories and a single play. The fact that “Kolyvushka,” which was written at around the same time as its companion collectivization story, “Gapa Guzhva” (1931), was not published until 1963 is significant, and it allows me to draw some final conclusions about “Empress's” transitional journey to “The Road.”

Even though he has met all the government requirements for grain contribution and taxes, the peasant (*kulak*) Ivan Kolyvushka is informed one day that his land will be confiscated and his family resettled. With one exception, his fellow villagers do not come to his defense. But whereas his wife and daughters flee without waiting to receive their marching orders, Kolyvushka remains to make a statement at the village council: “My people [*mir*],” Kolyvushka said, stretched out his hand, and put a bunch of keys on the table, “I am breaking with you, my people . . .” (Babel 2006, I: 163). Rather than submit to the community's exclusion of him, Kolyvushka renounces the keys to his domain and actively exiles his fellow citizens from his heart. He may no longer have a physical place to call his own, but his identity and work ethic remain intact; they still describe him, but not the rest of his village. On the following morning when Kolyvushka walks away on his own two feet: “He stumbled as he walked, but then his strides grew firmer. He turned on the road to Ksenevka. No one ever saw him again in Velikaia Staritsa” (*ibid.*, p. 166). We are not told what becomes of Kolyvushka; it is beside the point. What is important is the retention of his agency. In striking contrast to “The Road's” ending, where public triumph is severely undercut by personal defeat, Kolyvushka, though materially dispossessed, walks away unbroken as a person and becomes stronger with each step that distances him from the nascent *kolkhoz*. The way to stand one's ground, then, is to travel the road. Not only does Kolyvushka refuse to join this threatening group, but he is never seen in their vicinity again, another profound disjunction with regard to “The Road's” closing scene, where the narrator, whose own

road is forced to an abrupt end, is still serving out his sentence as a rehabilitated ex-fellow traveler. Like the two Yehudas, who never reach their destination but whose integrity in life remains uncompromised, Kolyvushka exhibits surface change – his black curls turn white overnight – rather than capitulation. The narrator's proverbial new clothes, however, along with the new identity and workspace obtained from the Cheka at an exorbitant price, expose him, and his fairy tale, for all to see.

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