THE ART OF STORYTELLING IN BABEL'S ODESSA TALES

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“If you want to take a peek at life, come in here to us, there is something to laugh at...”

“Если хотите что-нибудь наблюдать из жизни, то зайдите к нам на двор, есть с чем посмеяться...”

(“The Father” p. 142)

With these words, Yevzel invites Grach to witness and laugh at the death of an old Turk. The scene takes place in Odessa, a city “that has a certain something” (“в нем что-то есть” “Odessa” p. 64). As Yevzel invites Grach into his backyard, so Babel invites the reader into the Moldavanka, a Jewish ghetto of Odessa. The Odessa Tales describe a world crushed by poverty and ruled by gangsters. What is this “certain something” to which Babel alludes? In “The Life of Matvey Rodionovich Pavlichenko,” one of the Red Cavalry stories, the dreadful narrator states: “I want to understand life, as it is for us” (“мне желательно жизнь узнать, какая она у нас есть....” II p. 59). In “The Father,” Golubchik seems—the narrator’s assertion is loaded with Babel’s irony—to have succeeded in this enterprise: “he knew about life everything that there is to know” (“знал о жизни все, что можно о ней знать” p. 139).

While most scholarly work has focused on Babel’s masterpiece Red Cavalry, which chronicles the Budyonny campaign of 1920 that Babel took part in as a war correspondent, little has been written on its counterpoint, The Odessa Tales, where the themes of violence, family, inequalities, and love are treated in an exotic and apparently cheerful way. In The

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1All quotations from Babel’s work are from Babel, Isaac Sochinenija v Dvuh Tomah. Belaja, Galina, editor. Moskva: Khudozhestvennaja literatura, 1990. The second volume is indicated by “II.” Page numbers without volume indication refer to the first volume. I translate.
Odessa Tales, Babel presents these themes through the everyday life of the Jews of the Moldavanka, and his narrator borrows their own words, which do not belong to literary language. The stories can, therefore, only be fully appreciated in the original. Through his playful use of words, Babel invents a new relationship between the narrator and the reader, where the narrator is not merely one character among many but becomes an engaging, multifaceted voice.

This thesis investigates the art of storytelling in The Odessa Tales. I will first consider The Odessa Tales as a cycle, justifying its given extent. I will then move on to what constitutes the specificity of the city of Odessa and its appeal on Babel, who gave it pride of place in his work. Having established the context, I will unveil the fabric of the tales and explore the different voices of a disconcerting narrator. As Babel’s art cannot be estimated at its true value through general comments, I will provide a close-reading analysis of two excerpts of one of the tales, “The Father,” focusing on Babel's literary techniques.
The Odessa Tales as a cycle

In 1927, Babel published Stories. On the cover: The King (Рассказы. На обл.: Король), in which can be found—among other stories—"The King," "How Things Were Done in Odessa," "The Father," and "Lyubka the Cossack." All four stories had been published independently in journals between 1921 and 1924. "The King," "The Father," and "Lyubka the Cossack" were first published with the subtitle "From the Odessa stories," as did another story, "Justice in Parentheses," which Babel later discarded. The subtitle and his choice to publish the stories together as a book indicate that Babel saw them as a coherent entity. In 1932, "The End of the Almshouse" was published with the same subtitle "From the Odessa stories." Two other stories, "Froim Grach" and "Sunset," unpublished in Babel's lifetime, are included in the Odessa stories in Nathalie Babel's edition of her father's work. The play Sunset and the movie Benya Krik (1926) constitute distinct variations on the Odessa theme.

According to Lionel Meney, the Odessa stories can be seen as a cycle to the extent that they share themes (they are centered on a legendary hero, Benya Krik, and his associates) and literary devices. The choice of stories, instead of a novel, frees Babel from the requirement of consistency:

In the story "The King," Benia Krik is wed to the daughter of the rich dairyman Eikhbaum, but in another story of the cycle, "The Father," he becomes betrothed to Froim Grach's daughter Basia.

Each story forms an independent whole and is articulated around a few events that Babel has the freedom not to connect in a single storyline: dramatic progress is not expected. As

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2 Русские Советские Писатели Писатели Прозаики, Биобиблиографический указатель Том 1 Аведеев—Жестев. Ленинград, 1939, pp. 103-118.
a consequence, The Odessa Tales are open-ended; some stories have been added years later, and Babel might have had others in mind, which “they didn’t let [him] finish.”

Arguably the main character of The Odessa Tales—as he shares the front stage with Froim Grach—Benya Krik was inspired by Mishka Iaponchik, Odessa’s Al Capone. In the tales, Benya Krik is a picaresque hero; he is “the King” of the southern Jews that Babel recalls in “The Tachanka Theory”: “And to my memory comes the image of the southern Jews—jovial, ventripotent, sparkling, like cheap wine” (“И в памяти зажигается образ южных евреев, жовиальных, нузатых, пузырящихся, как дешевое вино” II p. 43). Despite being a gangster (or paradoxically, precisely because of that), Benya is admired by all—reader included. He is a bandit-hero, as his father used to be, who has been admired just as much: “He used to cut off the belts of policemen, he used to beat the doorkeeper at the main post office. He drank by the gallon, on an empty stomach... That’s what the old man used to be!” (“Городовикам ремни обрывал, на главной почте швейцара бил. По четверти выпивал, не закусывая, всю Одессу в руках держал... Вот какой старик был!” “Sunset” II p. 311). For the Jewish gangsters of the Moldavanka, murder is a way of life and gangsterism a profession: “Work peacefully (...). Get rid of this habit of getting nervous at work” (“Работай спокойнее (...). Не имей эту привычку быть нервным на работе” “How Things Were Done in Odessa” p. 131), “I quit my profession, Eikhbaum, and I enter your business as a partner” (“Я брочну специальность, Эйхбаум, и поступлю в ваше дело компанионом” “The King” p. 122). It is significant that vigor and physical strength, Cossacks’ exclusive characteristics in Red Cavalry, are the attributes of Jews in The Odessa Tales.

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Tales. For example, Lyubka Schneiweiss, whose last name ironically means Snow White in Yiddish, is suggestively dubbed Lyubka the Cossack. Froim Grach is described similarly: “The strength of an ox (...) such a strength is outrageous... Unless you murder an old man like that, his strength will not get weaker. He was shot ten times and was still doing fine” (“Чисто медведь (...) это сила непомерная... Такого старика не убить, ему 6 изношу не было... В нем десять зарядов сидит, а он всё лезет...” “Froim Grach” II p. 258).

In *The Odessa Tales*, Babel gives a voice to Jews up until then unheard of. He stages “vagrants, thieves, murderers, the unlettered and unprotected,” without indulging in pity. Jewish gangsters become the object of artistic depiction. Abram Lezhnev noted: “It is only in Babel’s hands that the life of the Jews of Odessa has acquired esthetic value.”

**Babel and the city of Odessa**

Odessa was founded by a decree of Catherine the Great in 1794 and almost immediately became a diverse and multicultural city. As early as 1843, the German political economist August von Haxthausen reported: “In Odessa is found the most motley mixture of nationalities I have ever seen.” This mixture can be explained by the privileged location of Odessa on the Black Sea, at the very fringes of Russia. An international seaport, Odessa was a crossroads of goods and men, coming and going, bringing with them new flavors and various cultures. It has often been compared to Marseilles, even by Babel himself, who visited the French city at the end of 1927 and saw it as “an Odessa that has flourished.”

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Located at the intersection of commercial routes, islet of relative freedom, Odessa attracted many Jews at the turn of the century. They formed one third of the population of Odessa in 1894, and half of it in 1917.

At the beginning of the 20th century, a “Southern School” of Russian prose started to develop in Odessa. The uniqueness of Odessa’s spirit made Babel predict, as early as 1916:

Beyond gentlemen, bringing with them not much sun and a lot of sardines in their original packaging, I think that must bloom, and soon, the fructuous, life-giving influence of the Russian south, Russian Odessa, maybe (qui sait?) the only Russian city where the one we need so much, our national Maupassant, might be born (Кроме джентльменов, приносящих немного солнца и много сардин в оригинальной упаковке, думается мне, что должно прийти, и скоро, плодотворное, животворящее влияние русского юга, русской Одессы, может быть (qui sait?) единственного в России города, где может родиться так нужный нам, наш национальный Мопассан “Одесса” pp. 62-63).11

According to the first sentence of “Autobiography,” Babel “was born in 1894 in Odessa, in the Moldavanka, the son of a Jewish shop-keeper” (“Родился в 1894 году в Одессе, на Молдаванке, сын торговца-еврея” p. 31). However, his family soon moved to the nearby city of Nikolayev, and Babel lived continuously in Odessa only between 1906 and 1911, when he attended the Commercial School.12 Despite this relatively short time as one of its inhabitants, Babel considered Odessa his hometown, as testifies his note on Eduard Bagritskii:

11Incidentally, we can find these same “sardines in their original packaging” (“сардины в оригинальной упаковке”) in Kaplun’s store, “the best store on Privoznaya Square” (“первья лавка на Привозной площади”):

Inside it smelled of numerous seas and splendid lives, unknown to us (...) on the counter were olives, brought from Greece, Marseilles butter, coffee beans, Lisbon Malaga, sardines from the company ‘Philippe and Canot,’ and Cayenne pepper (В ней пахло многими морями и прекрасными жизнами, неизвестными нам (...) на стойке этой были поставлены маслины, принесенные из Греции, марсельское масло, кофе в зернах, лиссабонская магала, сардины фирмы ‘Филипп и Канот’ и кайенский перец “The Father” p. 140).

I remember our last conversation. We agreed it was time to get out of strange towns, time to go home, to Odessa, to take a little house on Blizhnie Melnitsy, to write chronicles, to grow old... We saw ourselves as old men, sly, portly old men, warming ourselves in the Odessa sun, on the boulevard by the sea, and following the women with a long gaze...\textsuperscript{13}

Babel grew up in a relatively prosperous family.\textsuperscript{14} Where did his attraction for the brutal exploits of Benya Krik come from? Simon Markish underscored Babel’s “general interest in criminal life (as well as in subjects related to the borderlands and ‘aliens,’ Jews included).”\textsuperscript{15} Babel himself lived hidden, not leaving a trace, as if he were a criminal. Is it to say that Babel “hankered after the life of action,” as Henry Gifford claimed?\textsuperscript{16} I would add that Babel didn’t strive for a life of action for himself to live but hankered after it, because it was the life he was interested in narrating; he needed it as raw material for his art.

It is important to note that when Babel wrote *The Odessa Tales* (1921-1924), the Odessa he described (1905-1907) had already disappeared.\textsuperscript{17} Patricia Carden commented:

His Odessa stories are an almost voluptuous celebration of the city written at a time when the country was gripped by hardship and famine. Odessa has become in the modern Soviet Union an old courtesan who has seen better days, shabby, striving for gentility.\textsuperscript{18}

In the face of the disappearance of his beloved Odessa, writing was for Babel an outlet. He confided: “I would like to tell the world everything I know about old Odessa; after that I will be able to go on to the new Odessa.”\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{13}Markish, Simon "The Example of Isaac Babel." *Commentary*, 64 (1977), Nr. 5, p. 39.
\textsuperscript{14}Freidin, Gregory "Isaac Babel (1894-1940)." *European Writers of the Twentieth Century*. Stade, George, editor. New York: Scribners, 1990, p. 1885.
\textsuperscript{15}Markish, Simon "The Example of Isaac Babel." *Commentary*, 64 (1977), Nr. 5, p. 36.
\textsuperscript{17}Freidin, Gregory "Isaac Babel (1894-1940)." *European Writers of the Twentieth Century*. Stade, George, editor. New York: Scribners, 1990, p. 1885.
\textsuperscript{19}in Markish, Simon "The Example of Isaac Babel." *Commentary*, 64 (1977), Nr. 5, p. 44.
Babel complained—but can we believe this to be more than a mask?—about his lack of imagination and hold it as a warranty of his authenticity. To Paustovsky he claimed: “‘Authenticity,’ that’s the motto, and I’m stuck with it!” At the same time, however, when his wife asked him “how far the Odessan stories were autobiographical (...) [Babel] replied that very little in his fiction arose from his own experience.” He maintained that he invented most of the stories. This paradox is readily solved by considering Babel’s perspective on the craft of fiction: “A well-thought story does not have to resemble real life; life itself tries hard enough to resemble a well-thought story” (“Хорошо придуманной истории незачем походить на действительную жизнь; жизнь изо всех сил старается походить на хорошо придуманную историю” “My First Fee” II p. 250). In the stories, the historical framework is blurred. Falen wrote: “the element of fable that Babel exploits in these tales lends them a curious quality of timelessness, so that in spite of the fact that the stories take place in a modern city the sense of historical reality is suspended and nebulous.”

Babel’s style

Babel considered style “the basic ingredient of structure.” Doing so, he followed the footsteps of Flaubert, whose creed is well-known: “style by itself [is] an absolute way of seeing things” (“le style [est] à lui seul une manière absolue de voir les choses”). Babel not only wanted to find “le mot juste,” he also strove to instill the proper rhythm in the stories: “No iron sting can pierce a human heart as coldly as a period in the proper place” (“Ни какое...
Such precision implied great attention to details, and Babel’s stories are often likened to poetry. Boileau exhorted the poet: “Bring back your work to the workshop twenty times” (“Vingt fois sur le métier remettez votre ouvrage”), a command that Babel literally followed. He showed Paustovsky his thick draft manuscript for “Lyubka the Cossack” and explained: “it’s fifteen pages long. But these are the twenty-two versions — two hundred pages of it.”

The “substantifique moelle” is extracted through tremendous effort. Babel admitted:

It’s my happiness, or my cross. More a cross, I suppose. But take it away, and every drop of my blood will go with it and I won’t be worth a chewed up fag-end. That’s the work that makes a human being out of me and not just an Odessa street-corner philosopher. (...) I work till I drop, I do all I can because I want to be at the feast of the gods and I’m afraid they’ll throw me out.

The technique of montage

Babel considered that a story was well-written when nothing was left that could be removed. The plot is, therefore, “very simple, a setting out of the facts [his italics], without superfluous description.” Babel followed Chekhov’s advice to “enable the reader to understand what is happening from the course of the story, from the characters’ conversations, from their actions, without explanations by the author.” He admonished:

“Don’t explain! Please, you don’t need any explanations—just show, and the reader will

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figure it out for himself.”

In Babel’s stories, the reader is exposed to fragments, pieces. He has to fill the gaps and “find out the subtle links” (“découvrir les liaisons subtiles”). According to Marc Schreurs, “reading a Babel story for the first time, one will often be puzzled by the kaleidoscopic arrangement of themes on the surface level.” Therefore, Babel’s narrative has been seen as an example of literary montage, first by Eisenstein, who considered Babel “an irreplaceable and helpful anthology of the new cinematic art.” Meaning in the stories comes from the juxtaposition of contrasting shots. Carden saw in it “the method of Babel’s art to intrude the unexpected, the deviant upon the reader to such a degree that he cannot comfortably rest in his expectations.” The absence of explanations along with the juxtaposition of themes creates an explosive contrast. This is precisely where Babel’s allegiance to cinema makes sense: “The essence of cinema resides not within the shots as such, but within the interaction between shots. Expressive effects in film are the results of juxtapositions.”

When staging violent events, Babel does not emphasize their violent nature. He refrains from any explanation and affects a detachment akin his characters’ carelessness: “I won’t draw any conclusion. I don’t want to” (“Я не стану делать выводов. Мне не до них” “Evening” p. 178). Babel does not want to give any answer, he does not want to argue; i.e., he never preaches. This apparent detachment only makes violence—which surreptitiously

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30Eng, Jan Van der "La Description Poétique chez Babel." Dutch contributions to the Fifth International Congress of Slavicists, (1963), p. 84.
penetrates everything—more visible. By refusing to interpret the events he presents, Babel
gives the reader the most tangible rendition of them. Connecting the dots, the reader
becomes involved in the story.

Babel’s irony

If Babel refrains from any judgment, irony is his best weapon and makes his presence
palatable throughout the story. In his study of Babel’s poetic, Van der Eng noted:
“irony obscures all elements that could be considered tragic” (“[L’] ironie amène avant
tout l’obscurcissement de tous ces éléments auxquels on pourrait attacher un certain poids
pathétique”36). It, in this case, stems from the contradiction between intonation and
signification, and it is not so much directed toward a specific object as it is toward the
reader. Babel’s ironic intrusions prevent the reader from passing any hasty judgments. Babel
makes each sentence ambiguous and dubious. For example, the carefully-worded letters of
Benya Krik and the fact that “right after him the other gangsters started shooting in the air,
because if you don’t shoot in the air, you might kill someone” (“И вслед за ним и другие
налетчики стали стрелять в воздух, потому что если не стрелять в воздух, то можно
убить человека” “The King” p. 122) are funny, but they also show that Benya’s conduct
has little to do with bestial violence. Throughout the stories, nothing can be taken at face
value, but nothing can be rejected at once either. Cues are contradictory. The reader is
catched off-guard; he is never sure how he ought to understand what happens.

36Eng, Jan Van der "La Description Poetique chez Babel." Dutch contributions to the Fifth International
Congress of Slavists, (1963), p. 87.
Close Reading

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Фроим Грач был женат когда-то. Это было давно, с того времени прошло двадцать лет. Жена родила тогда Фроиму дочку и умерла от родов. Девочку назвали Басей. Ее бабушка по матери жила в Тульчине. Старуха не любила своего зятя. Она говорила о нем: Фроим по занятию ломовой извозчик, и у него есть вороне лошади, но душа Фроима чернее, чем вороная масть его лошадей...

Старуха не любила зятя и взяла новорожденную к себе. Она прожила с девочкой двадцать лет и потом умерла. Тогда Басья вернулась к своему отцу. Это все случилось так.

The very first word of the story is unusual: nobody called Froim ever entered Russian literature before. The fact that he used to be married is the first information given about him. With mind-boggling rapidity, Froim becomes a widow within three sentences. This is somehow ironic as matrimonial affairs will later become the focus of the story. Froim’s daughter also bears an exotic name: Basya. The sentence Девочку назвали Басей (“The girl was called Basya”) is surprisingly elusive. Her mother died giving birth, and we do not know whether her father was involved into finding her name.

The first paragraph indicates that the narrator is not a very sophisticated and skillful one: he enumerates facts using short sentences and does not seek precision (когда-то, давно). We have yet to learn that the story happens in Odessa, but we are told that the grandmother lived in Tulchin. When the grandmother dies, the grown-up Basya comes back to her father,
who has not seen her for twenty years, since the moment of her birth. The narrator presents this homecoming as the most mundane thing to do, but the strangeness of the events strikes us.

In the second paragraph, two repetitions from the first paragraph can be noticed. The first one “The old woman did not like her son-in-law” brackets the direct speech insert in which the grandmother speaks ill of her son-in-law. The absence of quotation marks underscores the desire of Babel to fuse the narrator’s voice with the direct speech. This insert illustrates and emphasizes the claim that the grandmother disliked Froim. This is the first long sentence, contrasting with the short ones opening the story. The pace is suspended because of the grandmother. She either obsessively thinks these words, or whispers them to herself, or complains among Tulchin’s elderly. The ellipsis suggests that she is going on and on, but that the narrator spares us from listening to her rumbling. Traits of Jewish stylistics are perceptible in her linking the color of the horses’ coats to the color of Froim’s soul. The words that she uses are very strong and suggest that she took away the newborn girl to protect her from what she sees as Froim’s devilish features. Through the thoughts of the grandmother, Babel also informs us of Froim’s profession.

The second repetition “twenty years” contrasts with the initial imprecision—making “it was a long time ago” redundant—and emphasizes the fact that Basya spent all those years far from her father and maybe in the sole company of her grandmother. It anticipates her meeting with Kaplun: “she had never seen such a man as Solomonchik Kaplun”.

The grandmother dislikes her son-in-law, and she takes away the newborn girl. The narrator pretends just to present the facts without apparently understanding their whole
significance. He does not logically link the two parts of the sentence but only juxtaposes them. The reader has to connect the dots and infer the degree of enmity. We understand the reason why the grandmother took away Basya from her direct speech, which the narrator inserts but apparently fails to interpret. He also omits to tell us what Froim’s reaction to such a hostile act was.

The causal relationship in He does not logically link the two parts of the sentence but only juxtaposes them. The reader has to connect the dots and infer the degree of enmity. We understand the reason why the grandmother took away Basya from her direct speech, which the narrator inserts but apparently fails to interpret. He also omits to tell us what Froim’s reaction to such a hostile act was.

The causal relationship in “His wife gave him a daughter and died in childbirth”) is also suggested in “She lived twenty years with the girl and then died”). Basya is renamed Bas’ka: the narrator had introduced her with a stylistically neutral name, but he now uses this informal/impolite form, as if he had spent twenty years in Tulchin with her. Babel makes the presence of the narrator perceptible here. Froim’s wife and the grandmother are marginal characters: they are not even named but only referred to in relation to Froim and Basya. Once the background has been set up, the narrator announces that the story begins: “That’s how everything happened”) and the narrative voice changes.

В среду, пятого числа, Фроим Грач вез в порт на пароход “Каледония” пшеницу из складов общества Дрейфус. К вечеру он кончил работу и поехал домой. На повороте с Прохоровской улицы ему встретился кузнец Иван Пятирубель.
The narrator now sounds awkward: we absolutely do not need to know that the action happens on a Wednesday, the fifth. The specificity is absurd and inconsequential, and пятого числа is informal. Иван Пятирубель is an Ukrainian name. His speech is broken: до твоего помещения—instead of до твоего дома/жилья—is strange. Pyatirubel is presented as someone well-known to the narrator or Froim, but he will never reappear. He is unable to recognize Basya and estranges her.

— Почтение, Грач,— сказал Иван Пятирубель,— какая-то женщина колотится до твоего помещения...

Грач проехал дальше и увидел на своем дворе женщину исполинского роста. У нее были громадные бока и щеки кирпичного цвета.

— Папаша,— сказала женщина отглушительным басом,— меня уже черти хватают со скуки. Я жду вас целый день... Знайте, что бабушка умерла в Тульчине.

Грач стоял на биндуге и смотрел на дочь во все глаза.

— Не крутись перед конями,— закричал он в отчаянии,— бери уздечку у коренника, ты мне коней побить хочешь...

The ellipsis makes us wonder whether Froim answers Pyatirubel and talks with him for a while before going on, whether he ignores him, or whether he hurries because what he has just heard worries him. Babel plays with our ability to recognize Basya. We may have already guessed who the woman is, but Папаша reveals her identity to Grach. It echoes
the title of the story in the different stylistic key of direct speech. Within half a page, the newborn has become a gigantic woman исполнинского роста, with enormous hips and brick red cheeks (as if the color reinforced her outrageous size), who bangs at doors and shouts in a deafening bass voice. Hyperbolization is used to describe her features, and all details point in the same direction.

Basya complains that she has been waiting for her father all day long. It contrasts with the fact that they could have both been waiting for their reunion for twenty years. Not a word is uttered about the strangeness of the situation. Basya’s speech has surprising inflections, that we interpret as part of the Jewish jargon of Odessa: мени уже черти хватают со скуки.

Grach learns his mother-in-law’s death in the most casual way. Again, Tulchin is mentioned as if of significance. The news of his mother-in-law’s death does not move Grach at all: he has a dark soul so might not feel anything; or he did not like his mother-in-law and is relieved; or he is so struck by the encounter with his daughter that all other emotions yield to this one. He only stares at Basya, and we do not know if it is because he cannot believe that such a gigantic woman exists; or because he is surprised to see his daughter; or because he is concerned about his horses, as the next sentence suggests. во все глаза shows how stunned Froim is but is also retroactively ironic: Grach is one-eyed. The narrator has not noticed it yet, or he betrays his lack of sophistication by choosing inappropriate expressions.

Греч стоял на возу и размахивал кнутом. Баська взяла коренника за уздечку и подвела лошадей к конюшне. Она распрягла их и пошла хлопотать
In this paragraph, whereas he just scolded Basya (*Не крутись перед конями* (“Don’t wiggle in front of the horses”)), Grach nervously plays with his whip, maybe to regain composure in front of his enormous daughter. It is effective, as Basya immediately obeys her father and takes care of the horses, as if she had done it her whole life. She then busies herself in the kitchen. There, she instantaneously metamorphoses from женщина into девушка. However, despite all of her efforts to be a well-behaved girl and a good housewife, she cannot overcome the negative image of her that is conveyed by the narrator. поряники is vulgar and contrasts with девушка. Babel presents a paradoxical character. Uncertainty is heightened by the atmosphere of skaz. Words are passed on from characters to the narrator, for example here with a chiasmus: уздечку у кореньника, кореньника за уздечку. The narrator then withdraws, and no obvious sign of low style is found in the rest of the paragraph.

— **У вас невыносимый грязь, папаша,** — сказала она и выбросила за окно прокисшие овчины, валявшиеся на полу, — но я выведу этот грязь! — прокричала Баська и подала отцу ужинать.

Basya would not use the term папаша to address her father if she had grown up with him. The strangeness of this appellation is enhanced by the use of the polite form у вас. Basya incorrectly uses the masculine form of the adjective невыносимый and reoffends,
insisting: этот грязь. Herculean woman, she immediately takes on the task of getting rid of the dust, which perhaps no one has attempted to do in the past twenty years. The adjective прокисший is usually applied to молоко or сметана, not to овчины. This usage is a poetic metaphor from Babel, or it shows that the narrator possesses little control over the Russian language. Basya shouts her decision, maybe as a battle cry, or because she anticipates some reluctance from her father, or simply because her voice is unwomanly loud and coarse. The narrator does not further describe the battle, though, and he breaks the expected progression: и подала отцу ужинать (“and she gave her father his dinner”).

Старик выпил водки из эмалированного чайника и съел зразу, пахнувшую как счастливое детство. Потом он взял кнут и вышел за ворота. Туда пришла и Баська вслед за ним. Она одела мужские штиблеты и оранжевое платье, она одела шляпу, обвешанную птицами, и уселась на лавочке. Ветер шатался мимо лавочки, сияющий глаз заката падал в море за Пересыпью, и небо было красно, как красное число в календаре.

The first component of the dinner is vodka, which Grach drinks out of a teapot. This teapot, which Basya previously scrubbed with sand, can now be seen as enameled: it indicates that she succeeded in her cleaning enterprise. The excessive size of the pot is commensurate with Basya’s outrageous proportions. пахнувшую как счастливое детство (“smelling of happy childhood”) is a strange poetic comparison. Whose childhood does the narrator refer to? Grach’s (who has just been called старик)? Basya’s? The meatball’s? The narrator
notices, in this order, Basya’s men’s boots, her dress of the most exotic color, and her sophisticated hat. Basya changed clothes maybe after cleaning, or because she wants to be beautiful for the evening. Her dress seems more than is necessary to sit on a bench with her father, though.

Two poetic devices are found in the next sentences. Through the colloquial usage of шата́ться, the evening is used as a metonymy for the people who wander around without purpose at dusk. The sunset, with its shining eye, is personified. The last simile contrasts with the almost poetic description preceding it. Whereas the earlier sentences were stylistically neutral, such a simile reminds us of the narrator’s presence. The sky is red, like a red-lettered day on a calendar, perhaps suggesting the mood in which Basya and her father should be.

Grach and Basya sit down on a bench, and the show begins, now justifying Basya’s formal dress.

Вся торговля прикрылась уже на Дальнейской, и налетчики проехали на глухую улицу к публичному дому Иоськи Самуэльсона. Они ехали в лаковых экипажах, разодетые, как птицы колибри, в цветных пиджаках. Глаза их были выпучены, одна нога отставлена к подножке, и в стальной протянутой руке они держали букеты, завороченные в папиросную бумагу. Отлакированные их пролетки двигались шагом, в каждом экипаже сидел один человек с букетом, и кучера, торчавшие на высоких сиденьях, были
украшены бантами, как шафера на свадьбах. Старые евреи в наколках лениво следили течение привычной этой процессии — они были ко всему равнодушины, старые евреи, и только сыновья лавочников и корабельных мастеров завидовали королям Молдаванки.

The inept narrator betrays himself by using the inappropriate abstract noun торговля to describe the various shops. He is apparently familiar with the brothel—and assumes that we are, too—since he uses the informal Иосья Самуэльсон to name its owner. It enhances the atmosphere of skaz. The narrator becomes a stage director while all movement is stopped, and the focus shifts to description. The gangsters are painted in colorful jackets, like hummingbirds, wearing an exotic outfit. The simile is absurd: hummingbirds are not dressed up in jackets. The efforts of the narrator to elevate his style through figurative language are doomed to failure. The bouquets of flowers are wrapped in cheap cigarette paper, which contrasts with the lacquered carriages. Gangsters are taken all together and treated as a lumped quantity. All of their eyes are goggled. At the same time, only one leg rests on the running board, which makes the description awkward: we do not know if out of all the legs, only one is resting on the running board, or if in each carriage, they each have one leg placed in such a way. Their hands are made out of steel, which by its brilliance echoes the lacquered carriages. The drivers are compared to best men at weddings. The narrator does not see that such a comparison is improper for a procession to a brothel. Similarly, Grach will later not find it inappropriate to seek a husband for his daughter in such a depraved place. Covered in bows, drivers would be—to our eyes—covered with ridicule. The gangsters’ bravado is undermined by the language: завороченный is an improper substitute for завернутый; оглаженный suggests that the carriages have just been covered by
lacquer, which is absurd. The gangsters were named so at the beginning of the paragraph (налетчики), but they are now estranged: in each carriage seats one *man* with a bouquet. The most generic term человек is used. The procession is shown as something unusual, never before encountered, while, as is clear from the text, such processions happen every day in the Moldavanka, which is why the old Jewish women have lost interest in them. The narrator seems to blame these old Jewish women for their lack of interest. He points his finger at them, and старые евреи is repeated with a pejorative connotation. The estrangement ends with the paragraph: gangsters have become the kings—or at least they are seen as such by the sons of shopkeepers and dockworkers. The plural of kings is justified by the absence of individuality in the previous description of the gangsters, but it also overlaps and contrasts with the story *The King*, in which only Benya Krik is called so.

Соломончик Каплун, сын бакалейщика, и Моня Артиллерист, сын контрабандиста, были в числе тех, кто пытался отвести глаза от блеска чужой удачи. Оба они прошли мимо нее, раскачиваясь, как девушки, узнавшие любовь, они пошептались между собой и стали двигать руками, показывая, как бы они обнимали Баську, если б она этого захотела. И вот Баська тотчас же этого захотела, потому что она была простая девушка из Тульчины, из своекорыстново подслеповатого городишки. В ней было весу пять пудов и еще несколько фунтов, всю жизнь прожила она с ехидной порослью подольских маклеров, странствующих книгонош, лесных
The narrator synchronizes the procession of gangsters to the brothel and the encounter of Basya and Kaplun. Solomonchik and Monya are—formally—introduced by their first and last names and the profession of their fathers. The narrator seeks precision but seems unable to distinguish the “real” last name (Kaplun) and the nickname (Artillerist). He also puts the two “professions” grocer and smuggler on the same level without suspecting the irony of the gesture. блеск was hinted previously by the adjective лаковый. Going to the brothel is seen as an achievement, an enviable success, and a joyous festivity. Whereas earlier the evening slouched by the bench (Ветер шатаелся мимо лавочки), here Solomonchik and Monya wiggle past Basya (они прошли мимо нее, раскачиваясь). While Basya wears men’s boots, Solomonchik and Monya sway like girls who have just discovered love. Despite all of her formidably “masculine” features—as previously reported by the narrator—Basya attracts Solomonchik’s and Monya’s attention and seems to be to their taste. They mimic with their arms how they would embrace her and appear as vulgar marionette puppets. Basya sets her cap at Kaplun, not even noticing Monya, who vanishes from the story. The narrator explains that Basya immediately wants to be embraced, because she is a simple girl from Tulchin, as if such a behavior were normal and the explanation logical. The diminutive городишка is used with disdain. We do not know if Basya needs this word to describe Tulchin because she has an inferiority complex when seeing such a colorful city as Odessa, or if only the narrator feels this way. Tulchin is personified: своекорыстный, подклеповатый. As if it were her only distinguishing attribute, Basya’s excessive weight is given—five pood and a
few pounds over—for the sake of precision. The narrator could not gauge it anyway, and
the exaggeration and precision only aim at impressing us. He can hardly control the words
he is using. поросль (scions) is inappropriately used in this context to describe the sons of
Podolian brokers. The adjective злойдный (malicious, spiteful) can be used to modify faces
but not to modify the word offspring. The narrator keeps emphasizing Basya’s men’s boots.
As we do not need such a detail, Babel makes the presence of the narrator perceptible. Basya
shuffles her fat feet, like a bull ready to charge.

— Папаша,— сказала она громовым голосом,— посмотрите на этого
господинчика: у него ножки, как у куколки, я задушила бы такие ножки...
— Эге, пани Грач,— прошептал тогда старый еврей, сидевший рядом, старый еврей, по фамилии Голубчик,— я вижу, дите ваше просится на
травку...
— Вот морока на мою голову,— ответил Фроим Голубчику, поиграл кнутом
и пошел к себе спать и заснул спокойно, потому что не поверил старику.
Он не поверил старику и оказался кругом неправ. Прав был Голубчик.
Голубчик занимался сватовством на нашей улице, по ночам он читал
молитвы над зажиточными покойниками и знал о жизни все, что можно
о ней знать. Фроим Грач был неправ. Прав был Голубчик.

Solomonchik’s teeny-tiny feet (ножки) contrast with Basya’s fat feet squeezed into men’s
boots. The term ножки should only be used to describe babies’ feet, though. The verb
 emphasizes the strength of Basya’s feelings. She appears as a praying mantis, a man-eater. Golubchik has a weird name, which is ordinarily used as a tender address (“my dear”). He improperly uses the feminine Polish term пані to address Grach, and he employs the expression просите на травку, which could only be used if Grach were holding his baby daughter in his arms.

Вот морока на мою голову is an idiomatic Jewish expression. For twenty years, Grach has been spared from all the troubles of parenthood. He is dismayed by the implications of his daughter’s apparition, but despite his concerns, he sleeps soundly. According to the narrator, this is because he does not believe Golubchik. However, we have just heard Grach’s expletive, and it contradicts the narrator’s explanation, which discredits him. Like Monya’s father, Golubchik exercises a respectable occupation, namely matchmaker. Words are carried over in systematic repetitions, which a normal prose writer would have avoided. In a philosophical twist, only getting married and dying deserve discussion. Specialized in both, Golubchik knows all one can know about life—according to the narrator. He, at least, understands how things work in the Moldavanka, since he reads prayers only for the well-to-do who have passed away.

И действительно, с этого дня Баська все свои вечера проводила за воротами. Она сидела на лавочке и шила себе приданое. Беременные женщины сидели с ней рядом; груды холста ползли по ее раскоряченным могущественным коленям; беременные бабы наливались всякой всячиной,
This paragraph marks a shift in the narration. Instead of staging a single event, the narrator now describes the habitual patterns of everyday life. Two timelines are superimposed: a single evening is presented as an example of what happens every night (“Баська все свои вечера проводила за воротами”, “Она сидела на лавочке”, “Беременные женщины сидели с ней рядом”, “и в это время мужья их, один за другим, приходили с работы”).

Basya’s only preoccupation is with getting married, and she sews her own trousseau. The absence of any potential groom does not prevent her from thinking ahead. She sits among pregnant women, as if this anticipated her own pregnancy as the next natural step. This pregnancy can add a few pounds to her already enormous weight: the theme of pregnancy and the theme of the massive body of the young woman are interwoven.

холст (fabric) has no specific shape and is a singular uncountable noun: the narrator is doubly incorrect when he uses the term груды (stack). The emphasis brought by могущественный (powerful) is also out of place; such an adjective can be applied to persons but not to parts of the body, and it cannot be used to describe колени (knees). раскоряченный seems to indicate that Basya’s knees are looking in two opposite directions. бабы belongs to lower style and/or suggests lower-class women. наливались всякой всячиной (“filled with all kinds of things”) is not decent. The narrator’s speech becomes metaphoric, as spring does not have milk. Comparing the women (and even not the women’s breasts) with a cow’s udder is unpoetic and bears erotic connotations. The procession of husbands coming back from work mirrors and contrasts with the procession of gangsters.
going to the brothel that we saw just a page ago.

Мужья бранчливых жен отжимали под водопроводным краном всклокоченные свои бороды и уступали потом место горбатым старухам. Старухи купали в корытах жирных младенцев, они шлепали внуков по сияющим ягодицам и заворачивали их в поношенные свои юбки.

Husbands wring out their beards beneath the water fountain. We do not know if they have been drinking or washing their faces, but the shortcut seems absurd, because the action that precedes—washing their beards under water—is omitted. горбатая старуха is a metaphor indicating that the old women are bent with age (сторбленные, with the same root горб). The narrator fails to use the correct expression and coins his own.

The fat babies mentioned in the first clause of the next sentence turn out to be the old women’s grandsons in the second, which also gives the status of grandmothers to the old women. The grandmothers slap their grandsons’ shiny—since just washed—bottoms to dry them. Their frayed skirts contrast with Basya’s newly sewn trousseau, as if symbolizing a juxtaposition of two ages.

И вот Баська из Тульчина увидела жизнь Молдаванки, щедрой нашей матери,— жизнь, набитую сосущими младенцами, сохнущим тряпьем и брачными ночами, полными пригородного шику и солдатской неутомимости.
We are once again reminded that Basya comes from Tulchin, which explains why everything surprises her. The Moldavanka with her exotic, colorful features is presented as a generous mother. The narrator’s voice is heard distinctively: щедрой нашей матери. His ineptness, low cultural level, and the fact that Russian is likely not his mother language are underscored by the use of the inappropriate word набитый (stuffed with) instead of полный (full of). Babies are given back to their mothers and are suckling breasts—or maybe they are still with their grandmothers and only suckling their fingers. The unpoetic and disparaging term трянье (rags) clashes with the description of the Moldavanka as generous. Marital life (брачными ночами) appears filled with city sparkling chic and soldiers’ tirelessness. The association is unusual, as the sexual vigor of soldiers would be more appropriate for brothel nights than for conjugal ones.

As Solomonchik and Monya envy gangsters going to the brothel, Basya envies Moldavanka’s women. In a twist, the narrator has sublimated her sexual appetites for Solomonchik (И вот Баська тотчас же этого захотела) into a desire for marital life and motherhood. Still unmarried, she is appropriately referred to as девушка. тут (there) is incorrect and тут же (immediately, right away) should be used instead, unless the narrator means that it is there, in the Moldavanka, that she realized that she could not count on a suitable match. The detail that Grach is one-eyed is only given now, as if being one-eyed—rather than income or status—is the impediment. Ironically, Basya never called her father “Father” before but called him only папаша, which is an informal and warm way...
to address someone who is not one’s father.

—Рыжий вор,— кричала она ему по вечерам,— рыжий вор, идите вечерять...

И это продолжалось до тех пор, пока Баська не сшила себе шесть ночных рубашек и шесть пар панталон с кружевными оборками. Кончив подшивку кружев, она заплакала тонким голосом, непохожим на ее голос, и сказала сквозь слезы непоколебимому Грачу.

Unless Grach is precisely red-haired, рыжий вор is doubly offending. Again, the narrator superimposes two timelines: по вечерам indicates a habitual scene, and an instance of it is given. The narrator and Basya use words with the same root and very close sonorities (по вечерам, вечерять), while a wide array of other possible terms would have avoided the repetition and would have been more pleasant to the ear. Basya curses at her father, but she still invites him for dinner. She is split and has ambivalent feelings toward him.

We learn exactly what the trousseau consists of— six nightgowns and six pairs of bloomers with lace frills, well-suited for the Moldavanka’s conjugal nights. The refined lace contrasts with Basya’s unwomanly body and men’s boots. She cries in a faint little voice, which is a tone we hear for the first time. The inept narrator makes a redundant comment непохожим на ее голос (“unlike her voice”). He uses the word непоколебимый (unwavering) inappropriately, as if Basya had tried to convince her father for a long time, whereas the perfective заплакала indicates a single event. The narrator is trying to express that Basya’s
tears cannot move Grach. Alternatively, the word непоколебимый anticipates Basya’s efforts to get her father to do something, and it would have been better placed after her direct speech. It would then indicate that Grach hears his daughter out only after insistent requests. Temporality is treated with playfulness.

—Каждая девушка,— сказала она ему,— имеет свой интерес в жизни, и только одна я живу как ночной сторож при чужом складе. Или сделайте со мной что-нибудь, папаша, или я делаю конец моей жизни...

Грач выслушал до конца свою дочь, он одел парусовую бурку и на следующий день отправился в гости к бакалейщику Каплуну на Привозную площадь.

Basya calls her father папаша again, as if she had forgotten her previous resolution, or as if she were coaxing him. я делаю конец моей жизни is a clumsy way to say that she wants to commit suicide, which sounds like a calque from a foreign language. She might be confused with emotion, but her speech has already proven that, even in normal circumstances, she lacks mastery of the Russian language.

It is unclear if Basya says all that she wants to say at once, or if she keeps repeating it until Grach finally listens to her. Words are also misplaced in the next sentence, separated as if actions happened at different times and were unrelated, which is absurd: we get the impression that Grach puts on his sailcloth cloak, sleeps in it, and goes to visit Kaplun the next day. We do not know why it is significant that he puts on a sailcloth cloak.
—Я подумаю,— ответил ей Беня, закрывая простыней Катюшины голые ноги,— я подумаю, пусть старик обождет меня.

— Обожди его,— сказала Любка Фроиму, оставшемуся в коридоре,— обожди его, он подумает...

Grach has come to Lyubka, who—like Ioska Samuelson at the beginning of the story—owns a brothel. When she explains the matter to Benya Krik, he replies that he needs some time to think about it. It would indeed be a good idea to sleep on it, but he covers Katyusha’s bare legs with the sheet (закрывая простыней Катюшины голые ноги), and we come to the conclusion that he already has plans for the night, which will compromise any thinking. Benya shows little respect for Grach: even if he recognizes his age and affectionately calls him an old man (старик), he does not hesitate to leave him waiting in the corridor and then even forgets about him. It also suggests the power of sex. Lyubka repeats Benya’s exact words to Grach, inverting them in a chiasmus, as if the word of a king should not be altered, which creates a comic effect.

Хозяйка придвижула стул Фроиму, и он погрузился в безмерное ожидание. Он ждал терпеливо, как мужик в канцелярии. За стеной стонала Катюша и заливалась смехом. Старик продремал два часа и, может быть, больше. Вечер давно уже стал ночью, небо потемнело, и млечные его пути исполнились золота, блеска и прохлады. Любкин погреб был закрыт
Grach’s wait is endless (безмерное) and his patience infinite (терпеливо), maybe because the issue that he is about to discuss—which we do not know yet—is of the uttermost importance to him. As he did with Basya’s weight, the narrator seeks to define with unnecessary and illusional precision the amount of time that Grach is waiting, and he inadvertently compares the Jewish brothel to a Russian government office. Babel plays with sound repetitions (За стеной стонала Катюша). These very same words are repeated many hours later, as if Katyusha had done nothing else all night long. The narrator tries to be poetic, but Milky Ways (млечные пути) should be singular. The sudden coolness (прохлада) confirms that time is passing. Drunks are compared to broken furniture (сломанная мебель), which suggests that they were thrown out of Lyubka’s cellar. Katyusha is praised for the dedication that she puts into her work (обстоятельная Катюша). The approbation seems sincere on the narrator’s part but is laughable, as she is a prostitute. Insidiously, Babel leads us to pass a judgment on her. The verb накалять (to heat, to incandesce) contrasts with the coolness of the night (прохлада). The adjective расписной (painted) pursues the metaphor, as it would be used to describe a stove. румяный (rosy) usually modifies cheeks, which perhaps have flushed from heat. These two explicit adjectives, расписной and румяный,
are ingeniously applied to the figurative рай (paradise).

Человек,— сказал он,— неужели ты смеешься надо мной?

Тогда Беня открыл наконец двери Катюшиной комнаты.

— Мой Грач,— сказал он, конфузясь, сияя и закрываясь простыней,— когда мы молодые, так мы думаем на женщин, что это товар, но это же всего только солома, которая горит ни от чего...

Grach shows his irritation and uses the general term человек to address Benya Krik, who is ashamed of himself (конфузясь), but still shining (сияя), maybe because of Katyusha’s fire. Benya opens the doors of Katyusha’s room. The plural of doors (двери) is surprising and reminiscent of her paradise (рай). The narrator’s language and Benya’s speech are improper. закрываясь should be прикрываясь; на женщин should be про женщин. The word товар (merchandise) sounds like a pejorative objectification, but Benya actually wants to express that initially, women are thought to be of value. солома, которая горит ни от чего recalls Катюша все еще накаляла and is improper (солома, которая горит should be used instead). Without him noticing, it also puts Benya’s virility and nightly vigor into perspective. Benya’s rides roughshod over women, and his disdain contrasts with the
conversation about his marital contract that immediately follows.

И, одевшись, он поправил Катюшину постель, взял ее подушки и вышел со стариком на улицу. Гуляя, доспили они до русского кладбища, и там, у кладбища, сошлись интересы Бени Крика и кривого Грача, старого налетчика.

The narrator refers to Benya Krik only by his name, whereas he provides Froim Grach with title and adjectives: кривой Грач, старый налетчик (“crooked Grach, the old gangster”). Their criminal activities bring Krik and Grach together. The fact that Grach is a gangster has never been alluded to so far, and this other plane in his life is revealed here, at the very end of the story, with a mixture of great respect and sarcasm. This asymmetry in designation of Benya and Grach almost suggests that the arrangement is favorable to Grach.

Они сказали на том, что Васька приносит своему будущему мужу три тысячи рублей приданого, две кровных лошади и жемчужное ожерелье. Они сказали еще на том, что Каплун обязан уплатить две тысячи рублей Бене, Васькиному жениху. Он был повинен в семейной гордости — Каплун с Привозной площади, он разбогател на константинопольских маслинах, он не пощадил первой Васькиной любви, и поэтому Беня Крик решил взять на себя задачу получения с Каплуна двух тысяч рублей.
The verb сойтись is repeated, as if the clauses of the contract were listed in an official document. Benya is referred to as Basya’s future husband (свой будущий муж), which gives the impression that Grach and Benya are discussing the interests of a third man, or that the deal is already concluded. The narrator insists on the new relationship (Баськин жених), which seems unnecessary for such a simple story that does not involve many characters.

The money exchanged confirms мы думаем на женщин, что это товар (“We think about women, that they are merchandise”). Basya is once again referred to as Bas’ka. Surprisingly, she will bring to her future husband a very aristocratic pearl necklace, whose origin is unknown and shady. The narrator gives his support to the money extortion and provides its justification. Поэтому presents Benya as defending the honor of Basya, who has been so violently treated. He will get his revenge for her wounded self-esteem. Family pride expressed earlier by Mrs. Kaplun is recalled and frowned upon, and Kaplun is found guilty of it. The two family prides are mixed: out of pride, and to keep up the branch of the family (держать нашей бранки), Kaplun rejected Basya. It becomes a crime for which Kaplun is held responsible because it hurt Basya’s family pride. Regard for Basya seems only an excuse for Benya to extort money from Kaplun, though. Solomonchik is considered Basya’s first love, as if she were now doting Benya. Her earlier almost bestial attraction is rewritten as romantic love, on which Kaplun stomped. The narrator’s envy—alike Grach’s—is perceptible through what he remembers: Privoznaya Square reminds the magnificent character of the place, and the Constantinople olives refer to the exotic abundance that can be found in the shop. The narrator also underscores that this is Kaplun from Privoznaya Square, seemingly to avoid any confusion with another Kaplun—as if there were any other one in the stories. However, Kaplun will pay as an example for others; not only him but all grocers will be
punished.

—Я возьму это на себя, папаша,—сказал он будущему своему тестю,—
бог поможет нам, и мы накажем всех бакалейщиков...

Benya starts calling Grach папаша, as Basya did. Their languages fuse. Again, the
narrator emphasizes the new family relationship (будущей своей тесть).

Это было сказано на рассвете, когда ночь прошла уже,— и вот тут
начинается новая история, история надежд дома Каплунов, повесть о
медленной его гибели, о поджогах и ночной стрельбе. И все это — судьба
высокомерного Каплун и судьба девушки Баски — решилось в ту ночь,
когда ее отец и внезапный ее жених гуляли вдоль русского кладбища. Парни
tацили тогда девушек за ограды, и поцелуи раздавались на могильных
плитах.

The dawn is already there; the discussion has taken the whole night (Grach knocked at
Katyusha’s door at one in the morning), because the subject was so important and evolved.
Babel forebodes a totally different story, but his promise will remain unfulfilled. He stirs
our curiosity: the two thousand rubles that Benya extorts from Kaplun is a large sum, but
not enough to immediately trigger the downfall of Kaplun’s family. Instead of providing
a conclusion, Babel starts a new story. It is a playful and equivocal ending. Not much is
said. The future story is alluded to in vague terms, and a series of events is hinted. The
appellation Bas'ka sounds too informal and contrasts with the almost tender девушка, next
to it.

Another writer would stop before the last sentence. Instead, the story closes on the
cemetery. It conveys the theme of death, which contrasts with the story’s main themes
of love and marital life. The theme of death and the theme of marital life were also
introduced together at the beginning of the story, as Grach immediately became a widower.
As Shklovsky noted: “Babel’s principal device is to speak in the same tone of voice of the
stars above and of gonorrhea.”37

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