

Title: The Poetics of Odessa: Tricksters and Looking-Glass Logic
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Vladimir Toporov writes: “The text enters along with other facts into the plural quantity (*mnozhestvo*) understood as space, and the space together with other kinds of texts forms the plural quantity understood as the text.” While not all such “spaces” are cities—haunted forests and sacred mountain-tops also, surely, figure in the mythical landscapes which writers, in their literary mapping, both record and create—the city, itself a “poem” in the etymological meaning of “thing created,” is the literary place par excellence, and the one that seems most thoroughly to inscribe itself on literary works (which in turn re-inscribe themselves on it). Regarding the city of Odessa in particular, Elena Karakina writes that the “character of the city [is one] where literature naturally, smoothly and harmoniously flows into life, and life into literature.”

Modeling themselves on the tricksters and rogues of Odessa lore, Isaac Babel and other Odessa writers of his generation created a narrative mode anchored in a specific, and highly symbolic, place, connecting the personal myth of the Odessa writers to the literary and cultural mythology of Odessa. This mythology, like that of Petersburg, had begun to accrue from the very founding of the city, and the “Odessa text” in canonical Russian literature was over a century old by the time the writers of the “South-West” came to prominence. This paper explores how Babel et al. took ownership of this “city text,” originally produced by the exoticizing gaze of nineteenth-century Russian authors, by locating their autobiographical experience within it. In a gesture that would become characteristic of Odessan modernism, they reversed the direction of colonization, using autobiographical discourse to make stories—in this case, the stories about Odessa—come true.