

*Fat Tuesday in Odessa:
Isaac Babel's "Di Grasso" as
Testament and Manifesto**

By GREGORY FREIDIN

I am ashamed to take a close look at Babel.

Viktor Shklovskii, "I. Babel": kriticheskii romans."

If one were to search among the painters of the past for an illustrator who could do justice to the collected works of Isaac Babel, the name of Peter Bruegel the Elder, the Hellish Bruegel, would surely be the first to come up. For even though they were separated by four centuries, both the artist and the writer looked at life in a similar way—as a ceaseless combat between the upside-down world of Carnival and the grim and right side-up world of the philistine Lent.¹ The editor of this hypothetical illustrated collection of Babel's writings would most likely assign "Di Grasso" (1937) the ultimate place. Written two years before the author's arrest and disappearance, the story deserves to be read as a testament or, better still, as a retrospective manifesto that Babel issued as a parting festive shot at the encroaching army of Lent. The story's very title would justify the editor's choice, for the title "Di Grasso" refers not only to the central character of the tale but also to the festival, central to the carnival tradition, namely, Shrove or Fat Tuesday, Mardi gras or, in Italian, MartecK *Grasso*.

Indeed, carnivalesque vision, to borrow the term from Mikhail

* I would like to dedicate this essay to the memory of Il'ia LVovich Slonim, a Russian sculptor and a long-time friend of Babel, whose remarkable stories about the writer planted the first seeds of my special interest in Babel's art. As I was preparing this essay for publication, I greatly benefited from the suggestions, comments and encouragement offered by Edward J. Brown, Robert P. Hughes, Robert A. Maguire, William Mills Todd III, and Reginald Zelnik. Needless to say, the responsibility for the final version is mine alone. An earlier draft of this essay was presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies in Philadelphia in November 1980.

¹I have in mind the famous painting of Peter Bruegel the Elder, "The Tournament Between Carnival and Lent."

Bakhtin, informs most, if not the whole, of Babel's fiction.² He promised to develop this tradition as early as the programmatic sketch "Odessa" (1916),³ and his stories—from the first major cycle *The Tales of Odessa* (1921-23) to the penultimate "Di Grasso"—demonstrate that he never failed in this pledge. His seemingly incongruous but highly effective and well-ordered style that allowed him "to speak in the same voice about the stars above and about gonorrhoea"⁴ comes from the same allegiance to the carnival tradition with its festive world whose image Babel cherished in the works of Gogol, Maupassant and, of course, Rabelais.⁵ But the carnival is not the only aspect of "Di Grasso" that lends the story its significance as a testament-manifesto.

As often happens in Babel, "Di Grasso" is structured around an epiphany,⁶ in this case, in fact, two epiphanies—one of passion and violence, the other of tranquility and contemplative beauty. The echoes of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*⁷ reverberate through "Di Grasso" with as much power as in an earlier story "Pan Apolek"—a story about a Polish painter who imitated in his name and life the Dionysian demigod Pan and the god of plastic beauty Apollo. In "Di Grasso," as in many other of his stories, Babel's concern with an integral aesthetic, encompassing beauty and ugliness, pleasure and pain, runs parallel to his preoccupation with psychological problems of individuation, the

² In discussing the function of the carnival tradition in literature, I rely for the most part on the seminal work of Mikhail Bakhtin, *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kuVtura Srednevekov'ia i Renessansa* (Moscow, 1965). All references to this book are made to Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helen Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA, 1968). According to the "Foreword" by Krystyna Pomorska, Bakhtin completed the manuscript in 1940, and to anyone familiar with the work of Bakhtin and Babel, the chronological coincidence of the two authors' writing careers must appear more than incidental. In working on this essay, I also found useful the work of Caesar L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form in Its Relation to Social Custom* (Princeton, 1959), as well as Northrop Frye's *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, 1957).

³ Isaac Babel, *You Must Know Everything: Stories 1915-1937*, trans. Max Hayward, ed. Nathalie Babel (New York, 1966), pp. 26-30.

⁴ Viktor Shklovskii, "I. Babel': Kriticheskii romans," *Lef* 5, kn. 2 (1924).

⁵ James E. Falen, *Isaac Babel: Russian Master of the Short Story* (Knoxville, TN, 1974), p. 8.

⁶ Lionel Trilling was the first to apply the Joycean notion of epiphany to the work of Isaac Babel. See his "Introduction" to Isaac Babel, *The Collected Stories*, trans. Walter Morison (New American Library, 1955). As a translation, this book is thoroughly inadequate and inaccurate. The following passage, for example, is a true abomination: 'In the room I was given I discovered turned-out wardrobes, scraps of women's fur coats on the floor, human filth [excrement, in the original], fragments of the *occult crockery that the Jews use only once a year, at Eastertime*' (p. 42).

⁷ James Falen has extensively documented Nietzsche's influence on Babel (*Isaac Babel*, pp. 160-64, 170-73), but his interpretation of it differs from the one offered here.

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quest for manhood, and, of course, sex, especially sex. His search for truth and justice in the humble, "primitive" form of popular culture, so obvious in *The Tales of Odessa*, also finds its way into "Di Grasso." Finally, the story contains a number of motifs that reappear throughout the body of Babel's writings with remarkable regularity. These are various forms of decapitation in an erotic context, transfer of masculine attributes to a female (or the other way around), as well as the motif of paternal threat, whether it comes from the father himself or from father-like authority figures. Keeping all of these observations in mind, I propose, then, to examine "Di Grasso" both separately and in relation to a number of other stories in the hope that a discussion of this sort will help to illuminate some of the underlying and, therefore submerged, patterns which shape and support the complex edifice of Babel's fiction.

Written in the form of a childhood recollection, "Di Grasso" nevertheless is rather different from Babel's other fictional reminiscences, such as "The Story of My Dovecote," "In the Basement," "First Love," and "The Awakening." First of all, it is much shorter both in the amount of time that it covers and in its actual length. Secondly, its thematic content, packed into a compact frame, possesses an unusual depth, since the main narrative incorporates within itself another narrative, a play performed by a travelling troupe of di Grasso. Yet, the story's matter-of-fact beginning ("I was fourteen years old.") assumes the reader's familiarity with Babel's other "childhood" stories, thereby suggesting that the author planned to include "Di Grasso" into a cycle of autobiographical fiction, analogous to *The Tales of Odessa* and *The Cavalry*.⁸ But now, before proceeding with the discussion, I would like to pause in order to present the story in a brief outline.

At the time of the story, the narrator is a fourteen-year-old boy who is making money by scalping tickets at the Odessa Theater. The season has not been profitable and in order to maintain himself in the business, the boy had to steal his father's gold watch and pawn it for cash to the head of the scalpers, Kolia Schwartz, a man of habit, who preferred drinking Bessarabian wine, instead of tea, for breakfast. Considering Shaliapin's fee too steep, the theater impresario decided in desperation to invite an inexpensive Sicilian troupe led by a tragedian actor di Grasso. The sight of the troupe, which looked like a band of gypsies on peasant carts, did not bode well. Nor did di Grasso himself inspire much confidence in the bankrupt scalpers. Upon arrival in the city, he went to the market with a humble shopping bag and, carrying the same shopping bag, appeared at the theater before the performance.

⁸Patricia Garden, *The Art of Isaac Babel* (Ithaca, NY, 1972), pp. 152 ff.

Things were going from bad to worse. The opening play, a "Sicilian folk drama," was singularly unassuming—ordinary "as the change from day to night." The daughter of a well-to-do peasant betrothed to a humble shepherd (di Grasso), abandons him in favor of Giovanni, a city slicker, who came to the village for the country fair. During the intermission between Act One and Act Two, the girl has ripened for the ultimate betrayal. Neither the shepherd's passionate pleas nor his invocation of the Holy Virgin can change her frivolous mind, and in the Third Act the audience *sees* di Grasso taking revenge on the haughty Giovanni. As a barber was shaving Giovanni in the middle of the village square, di Grasso—suddenly and in apparent defiance of the laws of man and nature—leaps across the stage in a single bound and, landing on Giovanni's shoulders, bites through his neck and proceeds to suck the blood out of the wound. The curtain falls, thus concealing the murderer and his victim. This quite literally transcendent leap brings down the house and earns di Grasso the title of the "greatest tragedian actor of the century," so, at least, in the next morning's paper.

The success of the first performance turns out to be so great that the scalpers hawk the tickets at five times their nominal prices, and the boy makes enough money to redeem his father's watch. But Kolia Schwartz, a man of habit, has by now gotten used to the gold watch and refuses to return it even though he has already accepted the boy's money. The character of the boy's father was no different from that of the unyielding Kolia Schwartz, and, terrified by the prospect of his father's wrath, the boy resolves to run away to Constantinople. But he cannot leave Odessa before paying his last homage to di Grasso, the great actor, who has taught him that "in the frenzy of noble passion there was more hope and justice than in the joyless rules of this world."

Luckily for the boy, Kolia Schwartz brings to the final performance his wife, a woman "fit to be a grenadier and as long as the steppe with a crumpled-up little face at the edge of the horizon." Leaving the theater and touched to tears by di Grasso's passionate performance, Madame Schwartz gives a dressing down to her husband, scolding him for all the "animal things" he has done to her without any display of love or affection. The boy, who followed the couple from the theater, is now weeping nearby. Madame Schwartz takes pity on the boy and, speaking from the position of emotional strength commensurate with her size, orders her husband to return the watch. Left alone, with his father's watch regained, the boy experiences an epiphany of tranquility and beauty which serves as a counter point to the earlier epiphany of di Grasso's passion and pain. The end. "Di Grasso" is obviously one of those stories which may be character-

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ized by their central thematic intent: art, no matter how "primitive," and passion, no matter how violent, redeem life. This is not a new theme for Babel. Some of his more famous stories, such as "Pan Apolek," "The Rabbi," "In the Basement," "The Awakening," "Guy de Maupassant," and "My First Honorarium," make the same point. All of them, likewise, possess a strong carnivalesque quality, expressed in the motifs of debasement, often androgyny and sexual license, and always laughter.⁹ But in none of them is the carnival as much in the foreground as it is in "Di Grasso." The theatrical nature of the carnival is presented here as it were directly, in the framed "Sicilian *folk* drama," while the line that separates the life of the audience from the life on stage is erased as completely as it can only happen in a true carnival where everybody is an actor and a mask.¹⁰ Here is how Babel describes the transformation of the money- and status-conscious Odessa following the first performance of di Grasso:

A stream of dusty, pink sultry air was let into the Theater Lane. Shopkeepers in felt slippers took out into the street small barrels with olives and large green bottles of wine. In huge vats before the shops, macaroni was cooking in boiling frothy water, and the rising steam was dissolving in the distant skies. Old women wearing men's boots were hawking sea shells and souvenirs, and yelling in loud voices, were pursuing the hesitant customers. Rich Jews with their parted well-combed beards were arriving at the Hotel North and were knocking softly on the doors of the mustachioed fat brunettes, the actresses from di Grasso's troupe. Everybody was happy in the Theater Lane, except for one man, and that man was I. . .

All the constraints that have been giving shape to the "official" (Bakhtin's term), non-festive life have been loosened: food and wine are in abundance and are brought out into the street, age and gender distinctions have become blurred, and even the respectable Jewish patriarchs are now indulging their sexual appetites with unusual abandon.

This carnivalesque blending of theater and life in Babel's narrative makes it legitimate to analyze the characters without paying much attention to the distinctions between the main and the framed story. Two groups of characters emerge once these distinctions are put aside: one

⁹Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, pp. 170-79. Needless to say, not all of these motifs are present simultaneously at every instant or in any one story. In "The Rabbi" for example, only the androgyny and laughter are present, one in the description of IFia as effeminate, the other as the subject of Liutov's discourse with the Rabbi. Nor is the story short on the motif of debasement, as it includes such actions as spitting in the face of the Rabbi's son. "In the Basement" does not contain androgyny either but the other three motifs are amply represented. Only two motifs, debasement and laughter, find their way into "The Awakening," which does not diminish, however, its carnivalesque flavor.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 254-55.

festive and the other "Lenten." The first group includes the "Lord of Misrule" di Grasso,¹¹ who is the shepherd of the play, and the androgynous and emotional Madame Schwartz together with her protege, who is the narrator of the story. Opposed to them are the Lenten combatants: the comic Kolia Schwartz, who is the unfair lord of the scalpers, the play's Giovanni, and the oppressive shadow of the boy's father, who shares some nasty attributes with Mr. Schwartz. Given this set-up, the plot of the story may be represented as a carnivalesque uncrowning of the official king¹² (Kolia Schwartz and, by implication, the boy's father) and the establishment of the rule of the carnival—the fat day, Mardi gras or Martedi grasso.

Babel was thoroughly familiar with French literature (some of his juvenilia was, in fact, written in French), and there can be little doubt that he knew and appreciated the carnival tradition, especially in the monumental work of Rabelais. It is in the context of this tradition that the dispute over the *fathers watch* acquires an unmistakable archetypal significance. Time, over the ages, has become firmly associated in this tradition with the father of Zeus, Kronos.¹³ The primarily oral dissemination of the myth is, to a large extent, responsible for the eventual obliteration of the difference between Kronos (xporpg) and Chronos (%QOT]og), which in the popular consciousness helped to fuse the story of succession with the mythic concept of time. Perceived at once as an attribute of the warring father and son, time has become an ambivalent entity, a "carnivalesque" image, implying indivisibility of death and renewal.¹⁴ In the non-festive culture, however, with its inflexible hierarchical structure of authority, time belonged to the "elders," who frustrated the process of renewal,¹⁵ as the mythic Kronos attempted to do when he kept swallowing his own children. A father and a god, an authority figure *par excellence*,¹⁶ Kronos was unwilling to yield his place to his own progeny, preventing the new generation from supplanting him—in short, he wanted to stop time. The Roman festival of Saturnalia (sometimes known as Kronia) served a ritual function of

¹¹I am not suggesting that Di Grasso is *actually st.* Lord of Misrule, but he certainly possesses a strong resemblance to the carnival master of ceremonies. See Sir James Frazer, *The New Golden Bough* (New York, 1959).

¹²Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 197 ff.

¹³Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 2 vols. (Middlesex, 1955), 1:38. See also the descriptions of Saturnalia in Frazer and Bakhtin.

¹⁴Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, pp. 219, 255 ff.

« Ibid., pp. 166, 212 ff.

¹⁶Sigmund Freud discusses the myths of Uranus and Kronos (and in so doing makes a Freudian slip) in terms of the Oedipal conflict with all its implications in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York, 1965), pp. 290, 290 n; and in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, trans. James Strachey (New York, 1965), pp. 218, 218 n.

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loosening the grip that Father Time, in his negative connotation, held on the succession of generations. Mardi gras, a direct descendent of Saturnalia, functioned in very much the same way, uncrowning and putting to death the mock king at the end of the festivities. In his book on Rabelais, Bakhtin cites an incident that Goethe recorded in his *Italian Journey* in order to demonstrate how deeply the theme of rivalry between the father and son, the old and the new time, was embedded in the tradition of the Roman carnival, Martedì grasso. On Shrove Tuesday, as the festival was drawing to a close, Goethe saw a boy blow out his father's candle while calling out: "Sia ammazzato il signor padre!" ("Death to you, sir father!")¹⁷

In Babel's work, this theme of the father, preventing his son from asserting himself, plays a prominent role. While other themes may obscure it in such stories as "The Story of My Dovecot" and "The Awakening," it comes to the foreground as the main vehicle of the plot in "The Sunset," the play and the companion story with the same title. There, Mendel, the father of the famous Benia Krik, schemes to abandon his old wife and marry a young Russian girl, Marusia. But his wish comes to naught when he is beaten into a pulp by his children who are as concerned with the fate of their inheritance as they are with maintaining the natural succession of generations:

"Benia," he said, "let us pluck up our courage, and people will come and kiss our feet. Let us kill our father, who is no longer called Mendel Krik by the Moldavanka. The Moldavanka calls him Mendel Pogrom."

"This is not the time," Benia replied, "but the time is coming. Listen to its footsteps and make way for it..."¹⁸

It should not take a great effort to see in this story a version of the archetypal mythos of Kronos, struggling to defeat his father Uranus, or the well-known sequence to it, the story of Kronos defeated in a similar manner by his own son Zeus.

In "Di Grasso," the heavy burden of playing the role of the archetypal Saturn falls on the feeble shoulders of Kolia Schwartz, the mock alter ego of the boy's father. And just as in the myth of Kronos, it is the

¹⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 257. Osip Mandel'shtam recalls a similar incident from Goethe's *Italian Journey*, perhaps, at the same time as Bakhtin was writing his book. See Mandel'shtam's "Tunost' Gete," *Sobranie sochinenii*, ed. G. P. Struve and B. A. Filippov, 3 vols. (Washington, 1967-69), 3.79. This was a broadcast that Mandel'shtam wrote for the Voronezh radio in 1935.

¹⁸ Isaac Babel, "The Sunset," *You Must Know Everything*, p. 134. In connection with this passage, one may wish to recall the "knocking of time in Ibsen's *The Master Builder* and an ingenious reworking of the motif in Blok's poem "Shagi Komandora." The title of Osip Mandel'shtam's reminiscences *The Noise of Time* (*Shunt vremeni*) also points to the same motif of generational change.

god's wife, Madame Schwartz, who delivers the child from what seemed like sure perdition. Now the father will get back his watch and spare his son, following Kronos, who swallowed instead of Zeus a stone wrapped in swaddling clothes. All of this is the work of the Lord of Misrule, di Grasso, who has transformed the formidable Kronos-Schwartz into a mock king to be ritually put to death at the end of Martedi grasso.

The "Sicilian folk drama" in which di Grasso played the role of a superhuman shepherd functions as a pivot around which the plot of the story turns, for it establishes the pattern according to which the events in "real life" will actually unfold. The everyday, as it were "Lenten," life of Odessa where money and wealth threaten happiness and renewal will yield in the third part of the story to the "frenzy of noble passion," eros, that will transcend the "rules" and will set the world aright. The humble shepherd whose being *is* embedded in the succession of cycles in nature has defeated the young city lord (*barchuk*) Giovanni, who tried to impose the joyless rules on the natural order of things. Erotic passion gives di Grasso the power to make his transcendent leap and to murder the haughty Giovanni.¹⁹ But the unusual manner in which di Grasso performs this crime of passion—"he landed on Giovanni's shoulders and, having bitten through his throat, began, growling and with his eyes darting sideways, to suck the blood out of the wound"—that unusual manner requires special elaboration.

As I have mentioned earlier, the motif of decapitation, partial or complete, reappears throughout *Babel* with uncanny regularity. I use the term "decapitation" as a shorthand for the motif, since it includes not only beheading proper but other forms of damage inflicted on the uppermost part of the body, namely, the neck and the head. It would, of course, be possible to dismiss this group of images as just another instance of a modernist's penchant for grotesque violence, but the fact that these images consistently appear in a highly charged erotic context begs for a more careful treatment. So, let us put our shame aside and take a close look at *Babel*.

19 "The Satyr, like the idyllic shepherd of more recent times, is the offspring of a longing for the primitive and the natural; but how firmly and fearlessly the Greek embraced the man of the woods, and how timorously and mawkishly modern man dallied with the flattering image of a sentimental, flute-playing, tender shepherd! Nature, as yet unchanged by knowledge, with the bolts of culture still unbroken—that is what the Greek saw in his satyr who nevertheless was not a mere ape. On the contrary, the satyr was the archetype of man, the embodiment of his highest and most intense emotions, the ecstatic reveller, enraptured by the proximity of his god, the sympathetic companion in whom the suffering of the god is repeated, one who proclaims wisdom from the very heart of nature, a symbol of the sexual omnipotence of nature which the Greeks used to contemplate with reverent wonder." Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1967), p. 61.

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Indeed, in the very first story of *The Cavalry*, "Crossing the Zbruch," a story that is not even two pages long, the motif appears at the emphatically "thin necks" of the Jews hosting Liutov for the night, the eyes of the Brigade Commander that fall to the ground after he is shot in the eyes by Savitskii (Liutov's dream), and finally, the "ripped out throat" of an old Jew, the father of the pregnant woman who wakes up Liutov from his nightmare.

Likewise, Pan Apolek's icon of the decapitated John the Baptist presides as the central image in the two stories taking place—one in the Cathedral of Novograd, the other at St. Valentine's Church in Berestechko ("Pan Apolek" and "At St. Valentine's"). In "Pan Apolek," we find out that Pan Romuald, the castrated aide of the Novograd priest ("The Church at Novograd") served as a prototype for the cut-off head of John the Baptist, an icon that regularly elicits raptures from the narrator of *The Cavalry*.

John's head was cut off at a slant from his jagged neck. It rested on a clay platter clasped firmly by the big yellow fingers of a warrior. The face of the dead man looked familiar. I sensed the augury of a mystery. On the clay platter, I saw the dead head copied from Pan Romuald, the aide of the run-away priest.²⁰

Pan Apolek, the one who painted the icon, struggled with the Church's denial of robust sensuality and with its fastidious haughtiness and he eventually prevailed, affirming the "lowly," base, and natural forms of art and existence. Such was the mystery whose solution Liutov sensed in the icon of John the Baptist, linking the decapitated prophet with the *castrated* sexton of the Novograd Church.

In "Berestechko," the scene of another decapitation, this time of a Jew accused of spying by the Red Cossacks, Babel points to another aspect of the motif, seeing in it, albeit ironically, a form of a fertility ritual. But even though he encloses his statement in an ironic parenthesis—the murder is a cruel absurdity—the blood that flows out of the cut throat of a helpless victim cannot but suggest a ritual slaying, preparing the ground for the birth of a new era. It was, after all, in a similar manner that the murder of John the Baptist paved the way for the victory of Christianity.

... I walked out into the street. Notices were already posted announcing that the Division Commander Vinogradov will give a speech in the evening about the Second Congress of the Comintern [read: will preach the new Gospel, G.F.]. Right in front of my windows, several Cossacks were trying to shoot an old Jew with a silvery beard who was accused of es-

²⁰ Quotations come from I. BabeF, *Izbrannoe* (Moscow, 1966), pp. 39-40 (hereafter cited as *Izbrannoe*).

pionage. The old man was screaming and tried to tear himself away from the Cossacks. Then Kudria from the machine gun regiment took him by his head and tucked it under his arm. The Jew grew calm and straddled his legs. With his right hand, Kudria drew out his dagger and carefully cut the old man's throat without besplattering himself...²¹

"At St. Valentine's Church" offers another instance of Babel's use of the motif, reminiscent of Nietzsche's words about the voluptuous, "seductive" aspect of Christian martyrdom:²²

This Berestechko church possessed its own seductive point of view on the mortal sufferings of the sons of man. In this church, the saints marched to the execution with the picturesque air of Italian singers, and the black beards of executioners were shimmering like Holophernes's beard [the first chord of the motif, G.F.]. Right above the altar, I saw the sacrilegious picture of John the Baptist, belonging to the heretical and intoxicating brush of Apolek. On this icon, the Baptist was beautiful with that ambiguous and reticent beauty for the sake of which the concubines of kings lose their half-lost honor and blooming life.²³

Even Liutov himself, this puny bespectacled Jew, who had "suffered greatly on the field of learning," is drawn into the decapitation revelry of the Cossack world. In the famous "My First Goose," which properly ought to be called "My First Gander," Liutov is sent through the rites of passage²⁴ by the "giant and beautiful Savitskii" who alerts him to the Cossacks' habit of cutting up people for wearing spectacles. This, it should be remembered, is the same Savitskii who in Liutov's nightmare ("Crossing the Zbruch") performed a symbolic castration on the Brigade Commander for ordering his soldiers to retreat.²⁵ At first ut-

²¹ *Izbrannoe*, p. 91. Professor Edward J. Brown has drawn my attention to the striking similarity between this episode and the beheading of Khadzhi Murat in Tolstoi's *Khadzi Murat*. But what Tolstoi has done in the heat of battle contrasts sharply with the cold-blooded, matter-of-fact execution in "Berestechko." The comparison, if Babel indeed intended any, which seems probable, will be all the more damning for Kudria.

²² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, sel., trans., and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1954), p. 589 (section 21) and p. 637 (section 53). The latter reads: "The deaths of the martyrs, incidentally, have been a great misfortune in history: they *seduced*."

²³ *Izbrannoe*, p. 109.

²⁴ A highly perceptive and thought provoking analysis of the "rites of passage" motif in *The Cavalry* is contained in a yet unpublished study "Rites of Passage in *Konarmia*" (Senior thesis, Yale University, 1978) by Lisa Schneider, who is currently working towards a doctorate in Comparative Literature at Stanford University.

²⁵ Morison's translation of this passage is thoroughly inadequate and misleading. The passage ought to read:

. . . . I am dreaming about the Commander of the Sixth Division. Riding a heavy stallion, he is chasing the brigade commander and fires two bullets into

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terly despised by the Cossacks, Liutov eventually wins their favor by proving to them that he can speak their ritual language nearly as well as they can:

"God, soul, mother—fuck you all!" I muttered in annoyance, shoving my first into the old woman's chest. "I am not gonna waste my words on you..."

And turning away from her, I saw somebody's saber lying nearby. A severe-looking gander was loitering around the yard, carelessly preening its feathers. I caught up with him, pressed him to the ground, and the gander's head burst under my boot—burst and emptied itself out. . . .²⁶

. . . "The guy will suit us fine," one of the Cossacks said about me.

The erotic symbolism of this incident, taken in isolation, may not be obvious. It is worth recalling, therefore, the advice that the quarter master offered Liutov before introducing him into the regiment: "If you mess up a lady, and the cleanest lady at that, then the soldiers will love you." Liutov proved to be a fast study, and he passed the test admirably by crushing the gander's head (symbolic castration) and by debasing a helpless old woman (symbolic rape).

Seen from this perspective, the choice that confronts Liutov again and again throughout the action of *The Cavalry* may be summarized in the following manner: he will either join those who behead and debase, renewing time with robust sensuality, violence and often cruelty, or he will remain with those humane, sacrificial victims whose heads will inevitably roll. Babel carefully links the moral and political dilemma that faces Liutov to his narrator's problematic virility, for Liutov, as he remarks once in an off-hand manner, had been married and abandoned by his wife before joining the Red Cavalry. What this implies is that Liutov entered the Cossack army at the point in his life and history when people like him, those with weak eyes, so to speak, were offered an opportunity to transform themselves into the far-sighted *Vbermenschen* of the dawning age. But Liutov, an intellectual and a Jew with a law degree from St. Petersburg University, is naturally wracked by ambivalence. Torn between his allegiance, on the one hand, to the

his eyes [not "between the eyes," as in Morison]. The bullets pierce the Division Commander's head, and his two eyes fall to the ground. "Why did you order the Brigade to retreat?" Savitskii, the Commander of the Sixth Division, is shouting at the wounded man. At this point I wake up ____ (p. 28)

To perceive the sexual significance of this dream, one needs only to compare it with the story of Oedipus. If that proves insufficient, one may wish to consult Freud's discussion of E. T. A. Hoffmann's "Der Sandmann" in "The Uncanny," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, 24 vols. (London, 1953-74), vol. 17 and *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 433 and elsewhere, even though that may seem like gilding the lily.²⁶ *Izbrannoe*, p. 55.

"emasculated" Jewish world and the humanistic values of his education and, on the other, his wish to remake himself in a new image, he never takes the full advantage of the historical opportunity. Nevertheless, as he ponders over the choice in story after story, he continues to shape the world of the narrative according to the pattern of his inner conflict which echoes polyvalently the various versions of the Kronos myth.

The theme of revolution, of course, lends itself easily to the personal and collective mythology of death and renewal,²⁷ but Babel used his version of the myth consistently even in the stories which either thematically or chronologically had nothing to do with the Revolution. A little-known story of his, "Barat-Ogly and the Eyes of His Bull" (1923), which takes place in timeless and exotic Central Asia, is one such example. In this story about a bull's gelding, Babel makes the association of eyes with male genitals quite explicit. Given this link, Aleksandr Kerenskii's proverbial myopia ("Line and Color" 1924) acquires, as it were, a lower significance.²⁸ Babel's view of his profession as a writer likewise fits into this pattern. "My First Honorarium" (1922-28) and a companion version of the same story, "A Reply to an Inquiry," belong to the same category, as does the famous "Guy de Maupassant" (1932). In this last tale about art and seduction, the motif of beheading appears once again, and it is worth pausing for a moment in order to examine how Babel weaves the motif into the pattern of the story.

As in "Di Grasso," the characters of "Guy de Maupassant" are divided into two groups: those who have displaced their erotic energy onto the acquisition of wealth (the males of Raisa's household), and those who can respond to the call of "noble passion," specifically, the inept translator of Maupassant, Raisa, and the young aspiring writer who is helping her with the translation. Married to a rich Jewish merchant, Raisa lives in an opulent house, so well fortified with the philistine values of her husband that the destitute writer, who narrates the story, would have forever remained in his garret if it were not for the translation

²⁷ Cf. Kenneth Burke, "Freud and the Analysis of Poetry," *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (New York, 1957).

²⁸ It may be recalled that Kerenskii's refusal of the narrator's advice to correct his myopia with a pair of spectacles robs the politician of the opportunity to study the "silver stocking of Froken Kirsti and the line of her already mature leg" (p. 202). Kerenskii's poor eyesight apparently serves as a metaphor for his inability to identify with the earthly passion that rules the world at critical moments of transition. The narrator says as much in the conclusion: "The meeting was held in the Popular Assembly Hall. Aleksandr Fedorovich gave a speech about Russia—our mother and wife. The people in the crowd were stifling him with the sheepskins of their passion. What did he see in the rising hackles of these sheepskins—he, the only spectator without the binoculars? I do not know. After him Trotskii [who, of course, wore a pince-nez] climbed the podium, twisted his mouth and in an implacable voice began: 'Comrades!'"

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project which left the back door open to the youthful champion of art and love. The theme of seduction, the main plot line of the story, is developed in two stages. At first, the narrator wins Raisa over to his view of a writer's art with the often quoted motto which becomes erotically suggestive in the context of the story: "No steel is capable of penetrating the human heart with the icy precision of a timely full stop." As the narrator went on with his lecture, Raisa

. . . was listening with her head bent and her painted mouth half open. A black ray was gleaming in her polished hair, parted and smoothly pressed. Her legs, glazed in tight stockings, with their powerful and tender calves were spread apart on the carpet ____

The actual seduction, that "timely full stop" in the other sense, is reserved for the end of the tale when Babel leaves Raisa and the narrator alone, having carefully dispatched the other members of her family to the opera house. And while the two are enjoying each other's company, intoxicated by wine and Maupassant, Raisa's relatives are made to watch Shaliapin, playing the role of Holophernes in A. Serov's opera *Judith*. Babel kills his two favorite birds with one stone: he beheads, albeit by implication, the moneybags while paying homage to the good old god of noble passion.

The story, however, ends on a more somber note, with a beheading of another sort, when the narrator, following the seduction, descends into the nether world in order to catch a glimpse of the underside of festive art and eros. Unable to go to sleep after he returned home, he reads a biography of Maupassant where he finds out that his idol was afflicted with congenital syphilis to which he finally succumbed after attempting suicide:

. . . Fertility and joy, contained in him, resisted the disease. . . . He struggled furiously, dashed around the Mediterranean in a yacht, fled to Tunisia, Morocco, Central Africa—and wrote all the while. Having achieved fame, he cut his own throat, lost a lot of blood but survived. They locked him up in a madhouse. There, he crawled on all fours. . . . The last notation in his painful record reads:

"Monsieur de Maupassant va s'animaliser" ("Mr. Maupassant has turned [sic] into an animal"). He died at the age of forty-two. His mother survived him.

I finished the book and got up from my bed. The fog has approached the window and concealed the universe. My heart contracted. I sensed the augury of truth.³⁰

²⁹ *Izbrannoe*, p. 273.

³⁰ In recounting Maupassant's last years, Babel refers specifically to Edouard MayniaTs *La vie et Voeuvre de Guy de Maupassant* (Paris, 1906). I do not know

The sentence with which Babel concluded the story appeared once before when the narrator of *The Cavalry* approached the secret of Pan Apolek's art, recognizing in the icon of John the Baptist the face of the castrated sexton Romuald: "I sensed the augury of a mystery" ("Predvestie tainy kosnulov' menia"). Then as now, this was the mystery and the truth of the ambivalent eros, Eros-Thanatos, and the formative role played by this mythic pattern in the aesthetic representation of reality. In its specific Babelian interpretation, this pattern defined the fundamental shape of the author's vision, and in the "childhood stories" of the 1920s and 1930s, Babel explored the origins of this by no means new intuition in the fictional record of his early life.³¹

"First Love" (1925), the story of a childhood trauma, offers an insight into one of the more powerful sources of Babel's unique view of art and reality. At the time of the story, October 1905, the ten-year-old narrator is madly in love with a young married woman, Galina Rubtsova, whose full name includes a rather suspicious-sounding patronimic: Apollonovna. The narrator, as we know from the companion tale "The Story of My Dovecot," has just narrowly escaped death at the hands of one of the participants in the famous pogrom that followed the announcement of the Tsar's October Manifesto. At the end of "The Dovecot," the boy has learned that his great-uncle was not so lucky. He sees the grotesquely disfigured corpse of the old man with a still fluttering fish that the murderers stuck in his mouth. The other fish lay stuck in the fly of his trousers. These details are important, and Babel focusses on them not merely to manipulate the reader's emotions but, rather, in order to establish an analogy between the sexual and respiratory organs, the analogy that he will exploit in "First Love."

The boy, though still alive, does not look much better than his great-uncle: the intestines of the pigeons that he bought on the eve of the pogrom are still covering his face. He thus arrives at the house of his old passion Galina, who is now harboring his family from the pogrom. Galina takes the "little rabbi," as she calls the boy, to the kitchen to

whether the biography had been translated into Russian by the time Babel wrote the story, but the quotation in French makes the mistake in tenses all the more puzzling (*va* is *prevrashchaetsia*, not *prevratilsia*, as Babel would have it). Further, the sentence itself comes not from Maupassant's medical record, but (in rather distorted form) from Edmond de Goncourt's diary. On 30 January 1893, Goncourt wrote that Maupassant's Dr. Blanche, whom he had met in a salon, "laisse entendre qu'il Maupassant est en train de *s'animaliser*." See Edmond de Goncourt, *Journal de Goncourt*, ed. Robert Ricatte, 4 vols. (Paris, 1956), 4:357. A close comparison of Babel with Maynial, for which there is no place in this essay, will yield valuable insight into the relationship between Babel and Maupassant, a subject that I intend to pursue in the near future.

³¹ On the fictional nature of this "record," see Garden, *The Art of Isaac Babel*, p. 153 ff.

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wash his face, and as the two are walking there, the boy's head is pressed against Galina's hip—the "hip that was moving and breathing." Borrowed from the famous story of *The Cavalry* cycle, a goose is roasting on the stove above which, appropriately, Babel hangs the portrait of the pogrom Tsar, Nicholas II:

... Galina washed the remains of the pigeons off my face. "You'll make a good bridegroom, my pretty boy/* she said, kissing me on the lips with her slightly swollen mouth, and turned away*³²

While the narrator was thus taking advantage of the unexpected physical proximity with Galina of the swollen mouth and the breathing hips, his dishevelled father was outside, rolling in the dust, pleading with a passing Cossack regiment to save his shop from the pogrom crowd. All in vain, needless to say. After the father, called in by the boy, walks into the room, the boy's mother begins to shame him for his love of money:

"Cursed pennies," said mother as we were entering the room, "your life, our children and our unhappy happiness—all you have squandered for their sake. . .³³ Cursed pennies," she shouted in a coarse voice, twitched and fell silent

It is at this point, when all the critical ingredients of the Babelian brew have been measured out, that the boy's hysterical hiccups begin. After Galina admonished him for these involuntary spasms—"You ought to be ashamed, my pretty boy"—his mind begins to spin out a heroic fantasy in which, as a member of the Jewish self-defense, he is fighting an enormous pogrom crowd. As he runs out of ammunition and is about to lose his life, Galina is watching him from an "embrasure" at the top of a "giant purple tower," while her half-dressed officer husband is affectionally kissing her exposed neck.

The narrator focusses once again on the boy's hysterical symptom later on in the story and, as before, he does so in the context of the mother invoking shame: "Look, how our child is suffering, why can't you hear his hiccups, why, Manus?" Isaac *Emmanuilouich* Babel, even in this fictional account of the events that probably had never taken place, did not hesitate to use his father's real name.

The boy seems to be the only member of his family who is capable of transcending shame. His passion for Galina and the shock and fear of death are so powerful that they absorb his entire being and for a moment overshadow even shame. Yet, his condition has been getting worse and worse:

³² *Izbrannoe*, p. 222.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

... A roaring sound was bursting out of my chest. A tumor pleasing to the touch was swelling on my neck. The tumor was breathing, swelling, blocking my windpipe and bulging out of my collar. . . . And when in the evening I ceased to be a big-eared boy that I had been all my life, when I became a writhing ball, then, my mother, wrapping herself in a shawl and looking taller and more slender, went up to Galina who by now had grown deadly pale.

"Dear Galina," my mother said in a melodious and strong voice, "we are disturbing you and your whole family . . . I am so ashamed, my dear Galina ___"

Her cheeks blushing, my mother was trying to ease Galina out of the room, then she dashed toward me and shoved her shawl in my mouth in order to stifle my groans.

"Please stop, sonny/* she was whispering in my ear, "stop for your mother's sake ..."

And even though it would have been possible for me to stop, I would not, for I no longer felt any shame.

Thus began my illness. I was ten then. In the morning, they took me to the doctor. The pogrom went on, but we were spared. The doctor, a fat man, diagnosed a nervous disorder ___³⁴

Enough examples have been cited by now to demonstrate that in those stories of Babel where the decapitation motif occurs, necks and heads function as phallic images, just as does the "swollen neck" in "First Love." But in no other story, does this image seem so polyvalent as in "First Love." Sexual arousal and sexual frustration of a ten-year-old boy are merely one aspect of it. Death is another. The father's willingness to humiliate himself for the sake of money before the Cossacks and the mother's readiness to humiliate her husband in front of Galina contribute equally to the boy's predicament. The mother's excessive sense of shame which prompts her to stifle her child rather than face embarrassment, too, finds its way into the grotesque image. The historical events, the Revolution of 1905 and the October Manifesto which, according to the story, triggered the pogrom, likewise left their imprint. In fact, since Babel wrote "First Love" (1925) shortly after completing most of *The Cavalry*, one may see in the boy's swollen neck one of the fictional sources of Liutov's symbolic rhetoric which draws a sharp distinction between the world of the virile Cossacks and the passive world of the Jews where men have emphatically thin necks and exceptionally poor eyesight³⁵

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 226. "

³⁵ The Jews in "Crossing the Zbruch" have emphatically thin necks—virtually, their only attribute—and these necks, as Liutov observes, "turn and swell" while they are preparing his bedding. In *The Cavalry*, another Jewish character of distinction, GedaM ("Gedali"), is nearly bHnd. For Babel, as for Tolstoi, a thick neck must have been a mark of virility (cf. Tolstoi's fixation on the thick neck of Nikolai Rostov in *War and Peace* and the similar, often repeated characteristic of Vronskii in *Anna Karenina*). Ironically, neither writer could boast of a healthy constitution, and both suffered from weak eyesight.

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Nietzsche's intuition concerning the dual origins of art and life, which is so important in Babel, also becomes integrated into the story's central image. It is, after all, Galina *Apollonovna* with her progressively distant beauty who nearly causes the boy, speaking literally and figuratively, to lose his head. And it is the same daughter of Apollo who gives refuge to the boy and his family from the grisly "Dionysian" orgy of the pogrom—indeed, a Bacchanal, for the boy's great-uncle was killed not by men but, expressly, by Russian women (*katsapki*).

Returning to "Di Grasso" after this lengthy detour, it becomes easy to recognize in the grotesque murder of Giovanni—named so, of course, after John the Baptist—the decapitation motif that runs like Ariadne's thread throughout the terrifying and playful labyrinth of Babel's fiction. In fact, if one is to believe one of Babel's fictional asides, the preoccupation with the motif constituted an old family obsession, going as far back as Babel's grandfather, the author of a never-finished volume of memoirs, entitled *A Man Without a Head* ("In the Basement"). At this point, a psychoanalytically-minded critic would, of course, be tempted to reduce the significance of the motif to the author's or, to be more sophisticated, to the authorial persona's castration anxiety and, thus, would call it a day.³⁶ But this would be grossly unfair to Babel, for the curse of this anxiety, in one way or another, is said to afflict the whole of humanity, while only a select few can make as much out of it as did Isaac Babel. No doubt, the profound multi-level significance of this motif in "Di Grasso" is related to the "universal castration complex," but so is an acorn related to a mature oak tree. Yet, only by looking at the tree, and not the acorn, can one come closer to an understanding of what is both unique and universal in this individual member of the species and begin to decipher the record left on it by the seasons and the earth.

When Babel was writing "Di Grasso," the acorn had already grown into an oak tree, and to his readers, the central element of the motif—Giovanni's neck—came as a highly complex metaphoric and metonymic image, a product of a life-time's condensation and displacement.³⁷ This metaphor of an uncertain virility, individuation from the tyranny of the family, the tribe, and the state—of what is fearsome in life and needs

³⁶ Since symbols, sexual and otherwise, when they appear in dreams, constitute the result of "overdetermination," they can never be reduced to a single meaning. This is a rule that Freud established in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and the fact that he himself at times broke it should not be taken as an example to follow. See *The Interpretation*, pp. 182-83 and elsewhere. The same rule ought to apply to the interpretation of the symbolic in literature.

³⁷ On the analogy between metaphor and metonymy and condensation and displacement, see Roman Jakobson and M. Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague, 1956), especially the last section. This analogy has been further developed by Jacques Lacan; see, for example, his "The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis" *The Language of the Self*, trans. Anthony Wilden (New York, 1968).

overcoming—contains also the metonymic record of Babel's growth as a writer and an imprint of his environment, his age. To appreciate the complexity of this image, one needs only to recall the gelded bull of Barat-Ogly in whose doleful eyes Babel's narrator once beheld his own wasted youth, manhood, and innocence.

In "Di Grasso," treading softly, almost imperceptibly, Babel arranges the key images of his fictional life—Odessa, popular and classical art, sex, and carnival abandon—around the totem pole of Giovanni's throat. Once established, the polyvalent image begins to radiate the allusive energy of the entire motif accumulated in the body of Babel's fiction. One of the century's gods who gave Babel perhaps the most powerful insight into the mystery of art and life, Pan-Apollo or, simply, Friedrich Nietzsche, presides invisibly over the feast of epiphany prepared for the boy from Odessa. But though invisible, as befits a true deity, he is generous when it comes to divine manifestations. And woe unto those who cannot read his signs. They will be either bitten in the neck or shamed by their wives in the presence of children. Or they will have to give up their gold watches and be cut off, pun intended, from the regenerative power of time.

But think how lucky are those who are able to recognize the god's Dionysian features in the confusing kaleidoscope of life and pay homage to him by imitating his passion. Their necks will grow strong and invincible. They will become great artists, reap box office success, and if they are too young, will command premium prices at the theater where the god is celebrated. They will also be allowed to get away with pawning their father's gold watches. Time will be theirs.

For those few among them who can also recognize the god's other face, the face of Apollo, there is an even more precious gift. In order to qualify for it, one has to be able to appreciate the order and magnificence of Doric architecture, the contemplative serenity of sculpture and the dream-like tranquil restraint of classical art—so, at least, according to *The Birth of Tragedy*,³⁸ the foremost among the god's gospels. At the conclusion of "Di Grasso," this mystery is revealed to the boy from Odessa:

... I stood alone, clutching the watch. Suddenly, with the kind of clarity that I had never experienced before, I saw the columns of the City Duma running upwards, the illuminated foliage of the boulevard, Pushkin's bronze head gleaming opaquely in the moonlight—I saw for the first time what surrounded me as it really was: tranquil and ineffably beautiful.

38 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York, 1967), p. 47 (section 4) and elsewhere.

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Judging by Babel's writings this gift must have been the shield of Perseus, for what else could allow one to fight Medusa so successfully without looking into her eyes but only at her reflection?

Unfortunately, as all gods' gifts to mortals, this one, too, came with a proviso. The shield's magic could work, it seems, only as long as it was possible to celebrate Martedì grasso. But after Fat Tuesday came lean Wednesday and with it the long Lent. That happened some time in the late 1930s (experts differ on the exact date), when the Great Lenten Father of all progressive people suddenly realized that he had run out of fatted calves, but, seeing that they were no more, he did not close his Slaughterhouse.

POSTSCRIPT

After this essay had been prepared for publication, I was lucky to learn that Babel's di Grasso did indeed have an actual prototype in Giovanni Grasso (1873-1930), a Sicilian actor of considerable renown.³⁹ As a subsequent trip to the library revealed, Grasso was born into a family of famous Sicilian puppeteers who performed in their own theater, Teatro Machiavelli, in Catania, Sicily. Grasso's career began when he was seven years old and at the age of fifteen, after his father's death, he took over the family theater. In the mid-1890s, he was "discovered" by a famous Italian actor Ernesto Rossi who encouraged Grasso to give up his marionettes in favor of the legitimate stage. Grasso soon formed his own company and began touring Italy with a repertoire of popular Sicilian drama. He achieved his first major success at Teatro Argentina in Rome in 1902, thereafter making his name known to the whole of Italy—all of this despite the fact that his company performed only in the Sicilian dialect which is barely comprehensible outside his native region. In 1908, Grasso's company began touring European capitals, first Berlin and London, then Paris, and finally, St. Petersburg. In Europe, Grasso enjoyed a tremendous popularity, and he could count among his admirers such connoisseurs of the stage as Anatole France, Gerhardt Hauptmann, Gabriel d'Annunzio, Edmondo de Amicis, Henry Irving, and even Anatolii Lunacharskii, not to speak

³⁹ An anonymous Italian translator of "Di Grasso" actually entitled the story "Giovanni Grasso a Odessa." See *Tempo presente* (Rome) 1 (September-October 1956): 490. I am indebted to Patricia Carden for alerting me to the existence of the real Grasso.

of King Edward VII.⁴⁰ He also performed in New York in 1921 and again in 1928, earning high praise from the city's foremost critics who, incidentally, found the language barrier entirely insignificant.⁴¹

Grasso came to Russia in 1909 (or late in 1908)⁴² when Babel, born in 1894, was indeed fourteen years old. I have not been able to determine, however, whether Grasso actually visited Odessa at that time, and the repertoire that Babel cites in his story is rather different from the one Grasso brought to St. Petersburg (*Othello*, *Anmmzio's La figlia di Jorio* and a dozen or so popular plays).⁴³ The Petersburg public greeted Grasso with reserve but, according to *Ezhegodnik imperatorskikh teatrov* for 1909, the critics found him worthy of lavish praise.⁴⁴ A few excerpts from a contemporary review of Grasso's performances in St. Petersburg will help to put Babel's admiration for the actor in perspective:

Grasso brought to us the sultry sun of Sicily, the enraptured passion of the South, the arrogant, virtually savage elan, the freshness of the fervent Italian gesture, the rapid speech of the provincial Italian dialect.

The bubbling health of the people ignorant of our neurasthenic moods wafted from the stage, making palpable the fragrance of the green pastures, familiar to us from the Ukrainian drama; and all of us in a single voice proclaimed them at once "our Italian Ukrainians...."

. . . And over all of this, there reigned di Grasso—the flesh and blood of the people, the son of the crowd, the artist who has ascended to us from the "lower depths" of the people in order to tell the whole Europe about them, about their love, suffering and joy....

. . . The interest in di Grasso among our public has been limited primarily to theoretical discussions, and his name appears more often in newspapers than at parties or in salons. He left his imprint only in the hearts of the true lovers of the stage.. ♦⁴⁵

⁴⁰ This information was compiled from the following sources: "Grasso," *Enciclopedia dello Spettacolo*, vol. 5 (Rome, 1956); "Grasso," *Teatral'naia entsiklopediia*, vol. 2 (Moscow, 1965); A. Izmailov (Smolenskii), "Dzhovanni di Grasso," *Ezhegodnik imperatorskikh teatrov*, 1909, vyp. 1, pp. 90-100. It is ironic that in Russia, Giovanni Grasso, this "man of the people" in the words of the Russian critic, acquired a stage name of a country gentleman, di Grasso. Had this not happened, it would have required more ingenuity to come up with the "Martedi grasso" argument. On the other hand, knowing Grasso's genealogy and his family's long-time association with the puppet theater, it is not unlikely that the puppeteers received their name by virtue of their role in popular festivities, the chief of which was, after all, Martedi grasso.

⁴¹ Alexander Woolcott, "An Actor in the Bowery," *The New York Times*, 10 September 1921, p. 12:3. See also "Il tesoro d'Isacco" by Walter Littlefield, *The New York Times*, 26 January 1928, p. 17:1.

⁴² Izmailov, "Dzhovanni di Grasso," pp. 90-100.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 91,92, 93.

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Thanks to this review, I have been able to come close to identifying the play that so deeply impressed the fourteen-year-old boy from Odessa. It is *Maria-Rosa* by a Catalan dramatist Angel Guimera who reworked it specifically for Grasso, giving the version a new title *Feodalesimo*.⁴⁶ The plot does differ somewhat from what we know from Babel's story, but this should not be surprising, since Grasso "virtually in every play had the role of a young peasant, always poor, always in love, and always jealous, suffering and vengeful."⁴⁷ But, perhaps, there is yet another identifiable reason why Babel chose to alter the plot of the play: he had already used it in *The Cavalry*, namely in "The Biography of Pavlichenko, Matvei Rodionovich." As in Guimera, Pavlichenko, the *shepherd* of Babel's story, marries a peasant girl who becomes the object of the landlord's sexual appetites to which she eventually falls victim. After the Revolution, the shepherd returns to his village to have his revenge and murders the lord in a manner unusually brutal even for Babel (he tramples his enemy to death).

But it is the final scene of *Feodalesimo* that makes a perfect fit with Babel's "Di Grasso." The same Petersburg reviewer describes it as follows:

. . . Vanni [the shepherd] finds out that Don Carlo would not give up pursuing his wife even though she no longer shows any interest in the landlord. Vanni attacks his enemy like a real beast. He tears Don Carlo's hair so convincingly that you expect it to start flying at any moment. Then, he lifts up the scoundrel into the air and sinks his teeth into the landlord's throat. With his throat bitten, Don Carlo dies.

This is the kind of a scene where the terrible comes the closest to the ridiculous. . . . It took the whole of Grasso's ardent temperament in order to come out the winner, in order to stir the audience and to create an impression which, though not entirely pleasant, was tragic, not comic. . . .⁴⁸

Izmailov, the author of the review published in 1909, was, of course, writing from the perspective of the realistic theater, and he found it unsettling that such passions may exist in the world outside. But he reassured himself and his readers by pointing out that "biting a throat was a device unknown to the European stage" and that, therefore, "love, jealousy and revenge of this kind could be encountered only in Sicily and, perhaps, in India and Africa."⁴⁹ Isaac Babel and Matvei Pavlichenko—both natives of Russia even though their literary genealogy may be traced to more exotic climes—would have disagreed with that last remark. Their lives and their books taught them to know better.

⁴⁶ "Guimera," *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo*, vol. 6.

⁴⁷ Izmailov, p. 94.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 95 ff.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*