



Odessa  
Literature Museum

## Literary Odessa

Many proclaim Odessa's unique character and spirit, as well as its special place amongst the cities of the former Soviet Union. And this is not simply because Odessa is a city on the sea.

It is the literature, created by authors who were born or spent time here, which gave rise to a mythological image of Odessa. This idea of Odessa, in turn, inspired and inspires new works. The relationship is symbiotic.

One of the very first authors to sing the praises of Odessa was Alexander Pushkin, who was exiled by the Tsar in 1823/24 for his freedom-loving thoughts:

*"There, where everything exudes Europe and sparkles of the South ..."*

The poet Vasily Tumansky perceptively remarked, that simply by describing Odessa in "Onegin's Travels" (from "Eugene Onegin"), Alexander Pushkin bestowed upon the town "a charter of immortality".



Pushkin Monument  
in front of the  
Pushkin Museum

Pushkin describes Odessa as a free merchant town, a port:

*Глядишь – и площадь запестрела.  
Все оживилось; здесь и там  
Бегут за делом и без дела,  
Однако, больше по делам.  
Дитя расчета и отваги,  
Идет купец взглянуть на флаги,  
Проведать, шлют ли небеса  
Ему знакомы паруса.  
Какие новые товары  
Вступили нынче в карантин?  
Пришли ли бочки жданных вин?*

*Look now – the square has put on motley.  
All is alive: the people there,  
On business or without, run hotly,  
But most of them with some affair.  
The merchant, child of cautious daring,  
Tells from the ensigns how he's faring,  
Whether he's favoured by the skies  
With sails that he can recognize.  
What novel wares from sundry nations  
Have entered into quarantine?  
Where are the promised casks of wine?  
What news of plague and conflagrations?  
Of famine or another war,  
Or something new, but similar?*

(From the translation of Eugene Onegin by Stanley Mitchell, 2008)

This concept of Odessa as a “free town” lives on today, recently articulated by a modern Swiss literary scholar, visiting the town for a literary festival: “Odessa has a great history and emanates a cosmopolitan, a liberal atmosphere” (Hans Ruprecht).

Odessa had already taken its current, indisputably important place in the history of Russian literature by the start of the 1920s. During these years Odessa also became the capital of literature written in Yiddish and Hebrew. The figure of Tevye Molochnik (Tevye The Dairyman), created by the genius Sholem Aleikhem, is still a presence on the world's theatrical stages today.

Isaac Babel, Ilya Ilf, Evgeny Petrov, Valentin Kataev, Yuri Olesha are names regularly heard, even today, amongst the reading public. Their talent unfurled in Odessa. This is the city where they were born and soaked up its atmosphere of freedom. Paustovsky can also be said to belong to this “Odessa School”, although he was not actually born here.

In his autobiographical work “Story About Life” and, in particular, the fourth book “The Time of Great Expectations”, the name Babel, an author shot by the Bolsheviks in 1940, was returned to Odessa. After his execution, Babel's books were outlawed for a long time and he was practically forgotten in Odessa, until the publication of Paustovsky's work after Stalin's death in 1959. In this work Paustovsky reminisces about the time the authors spent together in the city. All these authors created the image of 20th century Odessa: an open, hospitable, sunny and frivolous city, bursting with inimitable Odessan wit.

We strongly recommend the inquisitive traveller to read, “Cursed Days” written by the Nobel Laureate Ivan Alekseyevich Bunin. It is a type of diary



that the author kept in Odessa from 1918 to 1919. For a long time, in the West, this diary did not get the acclaim it deserved. It is an indictment of Bolshevism and an analysis of the human behaviour of those who find themselves in circumstances which demand courageous opposition to violence. It is no accident that during Soviet times this diary only came to be included in the complete works of Bunin in the mid-1980s, during the more relaxed period of perestroika.

If “Cursed Days” is an indictment of Bolshevism, then “The Twelve Chairs” and its sequel “The Little Golden Calf” by Ilf and Petrov are bright satires that use the sparkling Odessan humour to poke fun at the Soviet Union of the 1920s.

On the centenary of Petrov’s birth, the Odessan Mikhail Zhvanetsky, a famous author, humourist and poet said:

*“The wittiest of authors. Every line is a formula. The Twelve Chairs is a textbook on humour. To avoid constantly flicking the pages back and forth, it’s better simply to learn it by heart. And learn it by heart, we did!”*

- **Babel Exhibition in the Odessa Museum of Literature**  
Photo © The Blackwell Family



**Impressions from the  
Literary Festival 2015,  
held at the Odessa  
Museum of Literature**

From 1 to 4 October 2015, Odessa convened its first International Festival of Literature. This confirmed that the literary tradition of Odessa is alive and well, that the interest in literature is high and, most essentially, that Odessa has its own, perhaps not yet famous, but nevertheless talented young authors and poets.

*“In its best moments, the festival was a party and everyone, authors and visitors alike, forgot the war, the split of the country, the blood stain of destruction. Odessa, the city port on the Black Sea, both playground and home to Pushkin, Chekhov and Bunin crept out from the periphery and came to be the cultural centre of things once again.”*

Finally, we would like to add that Odessa boasts a remarkable Museum of Literature, rich in terms of the completion of its archives, as well as its amazing atmosphere of friendship and democracy. Odessa is worth a visit for this place alone! We have created a special programme of study for fans of literature that will take place in the museum.