

Ekphrasis in *Red Cavalry*: Letters about "A Letter"

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Dear Greta,

I'd like to continue a conversation that began with a comment you made in class a couple of years ago, about the photograph at the end of "A Letter," the third story in Babel's *Red Cavalry* cycle. It's an odd, distinctly modern(ist) moment of ekphrasis in the cycle. Typically, when people talk about ekphrasis in *Red Cavalry*, they focus on the paintings of the itinerant artist figure Pan Apolek,¹ which are obviously analogous to Babel's stories in that they create art from life, mix the sacred with the profane, etc. Most importantly (and typically for the "classic" instances of ekphrasis), they are unmistakably the work of a particular artist—one whose signature technique seems to be "inappropriateness," as when he depicts various degenerate locals as members of the Holy Family, and offers to portray "the client's enemy [...] in the figure of Judas Iscariot" for "ten zlotys extra."² The photograph in "A Letter," though, doesn't originate from Lyutov (or from any recognized "photographer," though it's clearly a posed family portrait and not just a candid snapshot. In that sense, I guess it occupies a sort of grey territory somewhere between "art" and "life"). Here's how Babel/Lyutov introduces it, in the coda to the story (the translation is David McDuff's, from the Penguin edition of Babel's collected stories):

This is Kurdyukov's letter, of which not one word has been altered. When I had finished he took back the closely written sheet of notepaper and hid it in his shirt, next to his bare skin.

"Kurdyukov," I asked the boy, "was your father a bad lot?"

¹ See, for example, Robert A. Maguire, "Ekphrasis in Isaak Babel," in *Depictions: Slavic Studies in the Narrative and Visual Arts in Honor of William E. Harkins*, ed. Douglas M. Greenfield (Dana Point, CA: Ardis, 2000); and Tamar Yacobi, "Fictive Beholders: How Ekphrasis Dramatizes Visual Perception," in *Iconotropism: Turning Toward Pictures*, ed. Ellen Spolsky (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2004).

² Isaac Babel, *Collected Stories*, trans. David McDuff (London: Penguin, 1995), 108. Unless otherwise noted, translations will be drawn from this volume, hereafter cited parenthetically in the body of the text.

"My father was a dog," he replied surlily.

"And is your mother better?"

"Mother is as she should be. If you want to see — here's our family..."

He held out to me a broken photograph. It showed Timofey Kurdyukov, a broad-shouldered country constable in a uniform peaked-cap and a beard with a parting; immobile, high cheek-boned, with a glazed stare in his colorless, vacant eyes. Beside him, in a little bamboo easy chair glimmered a tiny peasant woman in a house-jacket that had been let out at the seams, with highly-coloured, consumptive and shy features. And against the wall, against that shabby provincial photographic background of flowers and doves, towered two lads—monstrously huge, slow-witted, broad-faced, goggle-eyed, frozen as if on drill parade, Kurdyukov's two brothers—Fyodor and Semyon. (100–101)

The story ends there. It seems as if the photograph is being proffered to us as documentary evidence of the authenticity of the story—a visual equivalent to the *skaz* in which Babel renders the letter itself, which comprises the bulk of the story and which has supposedly been dictated to Lyutov by the illiterate Vasily Kurdyukov himself. By giving us the text of the letter in substandard Russian, Babel/Lyutov compels us to believe that it's a real document—not just a story he made up. By proffering the photograph at the end of the story, he provides further "proof" that the letter, and its "true author," are for real. But at the same time, of course, the photograph isn't really a photograph—it's a verbal description of a photograph, or as Alexander Nemser says, in an essay that I just stumbled upon while writing to you, "a high-jacking [*sic*] of the effects of one medium (photography) by another (prose)."³

Nemser finds in Babel's/Lyutov's/Kurdyukov's photograph (whose is it, actually??) "a sharp, implicit commentary on the nature of photographs," one which includes "the notion of the photograph as the most truthful record or proof of something's past existence" while at the same time "ironically" representing "a haunting vision of a scene which is impossible to see." We learn the fates of Kurdyukov's family members through the story he tells in his letter to his mother, but (in a reversal of conventional narrative practice) "see" them only at the end, through the medium of the verbally represented photograph. So, how are we to read

³ Alexander Nemser, foreword to the catalogue essay for *Landscape, Film and Photography* (London: Lyndhurst Way, 2007), <http://www.spaceplatform.net/landscapeessay.html>.

this verbally represented photograph? As a documentary gesture? A moment of ekphrasis? Or something else? What do you think?

Rebecca

Dear Rebecca,

It is interesting that you should suggest that the photograph at the end of "A Letter" "occupies a sort of grey territory between 'art' and 'life,'" because *Red Cavalry* as a whole, and this story in particular, constantly blurs the border between historical fact and artistic invention. *Red Cavalry* reads like a documentary account of the Soviet-Polish war, littered as it is with dates, convincing-sounding descriptions of troop movements, towns and rivers. Yet, as Norman Davies carefully demonstrates, the stories' apparent facticity is a mere illusion,⁴ or, to quote Charles Rougle: "Wrong time, wrong river, wrong highway, wrong cities, wrong armies—one can sympathize with the historian who laments such "burglary" of history."⁵ Babel's detractors, like the angry Budyonny (the leader of Babel's cavalry division) attribute the author's "mistakes" to his ignorance or, even worse, to his cowardice: Babel does not really know what was happening on the front lines because he spent the whole war hiding in the rear. But I think they actually reveal something fundamental about Babel's quasi-historical, quasi-autobiographical art, which always toys with what might have happened, but didn't, what could have happened, what should have happened.

In "A Letter," perhaps more than anywhere else in *Red Cavalry*, Babel/Lyutov insists on the authenticity of the "document" that he presents to his reader. At one and the same time, however, he undermines the very illusion of authenticity that he has so carefully established. Babel/Lyutov writes that he "copied it [Kurdyukov's letter] without embellishment, and [is] presenting it word for word, in accordance with the truth [*v soglasii s istinoi*]."⁶ (This last phrase, incidentally, has a distinctly Biblical ring to it, which suggests Babel/Lyutov may be striving not so much to capture the literal facts here, as some more transcendent "truth"). Four lines later, however, our author breaks his promise and blithely skips many, many words, in fact,

⁴ Norman Davies, "Izaak Babel's 'Konarmiya' Stories and the Polish-Soviet War," *Modern Language Review* 67, no. 4 (1973): 845–57.

⁵ Charles Rougle, *Red Cavalry: A Critical Companion* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 18.

⁶ My translation.—GMG

skips the entire section of the letter in which Kurdyukov lists his relatives: "This we shall omit. Let us pass to the second paragraph" (96). On the one hand, this reference to Kurdyukov's heap of relatives makes the letter seem more genuine; on the other hand it seriously diminishes Babel's/Lyutov's reliability. His idea of rewriting the letter "word for word" means omitting entire paragraphs? What else might he have omitted? When, toward the end of the story, Babel/Lyutov repeats that "not one word [of the letter] has been altered" (100) it only erodes the reader's trust further. We cannot forget what has been left out.

What is more, Lyutov's story of how he came by the letter in the first place beggars belief: if Lyutov transcribed the letter and then gave it back to Kurdyukov to post, where did Lyutov get a copy of it? Presumably he was not writing on carbon paper. Did he just memorize it? And if so, how can he be certain that he is recreating it "word for word"? I suggest that Babel/Lyutov does not actually want us to believe his story, that he gently, but repeatedly, draws attention to his own unreliability, and to the unreliability of the "document" that he outwardly claims is genuine.

If we read the ekphrasis of the photograph at the end of "A Letter" as a documentary gesture (which I think it is, at least in part), then it reenacts, or rather epitomizes, the game of quasi-authenticity that Babel/Lyutov has been playing throughout the entire story. Nemser, as you have mentioned, calls the ekphrasis of the photograph the "hijacking" of one art by another. And even though it is only a verbal description of a photograph, it almost carries the weight of visual documentary evidence; it *reads* like a real photo (and I would be curious to know what you think creates this convincing ekphrastic effect. The description of the father's deadened eyes, which rings so true to turn-of-the-century family photographs? Or is it his mention of the cheaply painted flowers and curly-cues on the backdrop, which "feels" so real?) It seems important to note that in the early 1920s the documentary power of photography and film was under hot discussion in Soviet artistic circles. In fact, the August-December 1924 issue of *LEF*, the very issue in which "A Letter" was first published, included a short piece called "Photo-Montage," which claimed that "A photograph is not a drawing of a visual fact, but rather its exact fixation. This exactness and documentary quality lends the photograph a power of impact on the viewer that a graphic depiction could never achieve."⁷ I would argue that it is precisely this "exactness and documentary quality," photography's "power of

⁷ "Фото-снимок не есть зарисовка зрительного факта, а точная его фиксация. Эта точность и документальность придают фото-снимку такую силу воздействия на зрителя, какую графическое изображение никогда достичь не может." L. Popova and P. Tsitroen, "Fotomontazh," *LEF* 4 (1924): 41.

impact," which Babel/Lyutov "hijacks" in his prose. We read the description of the photograph and we feel as though it is real, proof that the Kurdyukov family actually existed, that this story of filicide and patricide actually took place.

But here, as elsewhere in "A Letter," Babel/Lyutov immediately casts doubt on the authenticity of the "evidence" he has given us. For even if we were inclined to accept his description of the photograph as reliable (an accurate detailing of a real photograph depicting the real Kurdyukov family), something should make us stop in our tracks. The picture depicts Kurdyukov's mother, his father, and his two brothers, but someone extremely important is missing—Vasily Kurdyukov himself, the letter's author, the only link between Babel/Lyutov and the story he recounts. Vasily's unexplained absence (why wouldn't he appear in his *own* family portrait?) should make even the most trusting reader hesitate. Does this photograph even depict the Kurdyukov family at all? Maybe Kurdyukov just found an old photo and is passing it off as a picture of his family? Or perhaps there never even was a Kurdyukov, and Babel/Lyutov has invented the entire story, using the photograph as his inspiration? Or perhaps the photograph itself is a fiction, the verbal description of an image that never existed?

Greta

Dear Greta,

Ha, I was going to bring up the LEF connection as well (by the way, I think "A Letter" was actually reprinted there, after first appearing in a local Odessa paper a few months earlier—not that that in any way diminishes the significance of the association). The essay on photo-montage that you quote is a great example of the "documentary moment" then taking hold in Soviet aesthetics, which Elizabeth Papazian writes about in *Manufacturing Truth*. As Papazian points out, "documentary" genres (photography, film, the *ocherok* or sketch-from-life) foreground the "authenticity" of their *content* as a "seemingly objective record of [...] reality" even as they "render the[ir] discursive apparatus [...] (their formal structure) virtually invisible"; that is, they pretend to a "transparency of transmission of [...] information" that conceals what is actually a "tension between their simultaneous status

as *evidence* and *discourse*."⁸ *LEF* No. 4 seems to argue for the immediacy of the photographic image—the impact of that "authenticity" and "transparency"—even as it presents two photomontages by Citroen and Popova that are anything but unmediated. Something similar is going on in the Babel story, where Lyutov presents the photograph as documentary "evidence" even as his description of the photo reveals the essential tension between this evidentiary content and the obvious artifice of the formal structure (the "shabby provincial photographic background of flowers and doves").

I want to come back to the "tension between [...] evidence and discourse" represented by the photo, but first (in response to your last paragraph) about the missing figure of Kurdyukov. I think you have put your finger on it exactly: the documentary gestures represented by Babel's use of convincingly illiterate *skaz* and his proffering, at the end of the story, of the "broken photograph" (*sломannuiu fotografiu*) are both undermined in precisely the same way, that is, by *absence*. Specifically, by the absence of certain people: Lyutov promises to give the letter word for word, then immediately skips most of the (purported) first paragraph, erasing from existence a whole list of "relatives, godmothers, [and] godfathers." And then he holds out to us the photo that Kurdyukov, supposedly, holds out to *him*, a photograph from which the very figure of whose existence we most need "proof," Kurdyukov himself, is absent—unaccountably so, as you note, since it's obviously a photograph that belongs to a very specific genre, the posed family portrait taken in a studio with a canned background of "flowers and doves." Unless Vasily Kurdyukov himself is the photographer (a possibility? but not one that seems supported by any of the details in the letter), he should be in that photo!

Robert Maguire, in an article on ekphrasis in Babel, notes that one of the classic uses of ekphrasis is "to amplify the personage most closely associated with the object being described"; he gives the classic example of Achilles's shield in the *Iliad*. However, he notes, the fact that Lyutov himself (and not an "objective" third-person narrator) is responsible for all the ekphrases in *Red Cavalry* means that those ekphrases are "subject [...] to [Lyutov's] own limitations [...] Yet precisely because his perspective is narrow, and because any specimen of ekphrasis tends to take on a life independent of its observer, the 'real' author, Babel, can enter silently into the narrative and show us sides of Lyutov that would otherwise remain [...] invisible."⁹ Now, what "side of Lyutov" does the photo

⁸ Elizabeth Papazian, *Manufacturing Truth: The Documentary Moment in Early Soviet Culture* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009), 5, 13 (my emphasis).

⁹ Maguire, "Ekphrasis in Isaak Babel," 15.

illuminate? Well, he is absent from the frame, an onlooker (and interpreter) only, as he is throughout most of the *Red Cavalry* cycle. Here, though, as you note, our "interior narrator"—Kurdyukov—is excluded from the frame as much as Lyutov is; both are bystanders, observers, narrators of the story, rather than protagonists in it. (Kurdyukov reports that he had written an earlier letter narrating the murder of his brother Fyodor, but "Papasha" intercepted it; later, when "Papasha" meets his comeuppance, Kurdyukov is "sent away" and thus neither witnesses nor participates in his father's death directly.)

In short, Kurdyukov's exclusion from the photograph reveals a structural parallel between him and Lyutov—or to put it more strongly, reveals (perhaps) that Kurdyukov is nothing more than a mask worn by Lyutov.

Here it's worth noting that the seed of "A Letter" seems to be in Babel's diary entry for Aug. 9, 1920, where he records a story told by the *divcom's* dispatch rider, Lyovka, "about whipping his neighbor Stepan, who had been a village policeman under Denikin" (the word for "policeman," *strazhnik*, is the same one used for the father, Timofey Kurdyukov, at the end of "A Letter"; thus I think we can assume, with the usual caveats about looking for literal correspondences between life and literature, that Timofey maps onto the real-life Stepan). Apparently this Stepan returned to the village where—while serving Denikin—he had "ill-treated the locals," and was ill-treated by them in turn: they forbade anyone to kill him and instead got their revenge by beating and torturing him in prison. It was then that, according to Babel's diary entry, "an epic conversation took place":

Does that feel nice, Stepan? Awful. And those you mistreated, did it feel nice to them? It was awful. Did you think it would be awful for you someday? No, I didn't. Well, you should have, Stepan, we here think that if we'd got caught you would have cut our throats, sure you would, so now we're going to kill you, Stepan.¹⁰

This, evidently, is the conversation on which the one between Semyon Kurdyukov and his father at the climax of "A Letter" is based—and it is transferred into the story very nearly "word for word" and "without any embellishments," as Lyutov promises re: Vasily Kurdyukov's letter. Not *entirely* without embellishments, though: the key element of the story, its status as a *family* saga, is added by Lyutov, or by Babel-as-

¹⁰ Isaac Babel, *1920 Diary*, trans. H. T. Willetts (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995), 60.

Lyutov. (If we take "Babel" as the narrator of the diary, and "Lyutov" as the narrator of *Red Cavalry*, it makes sense on some level to suggest that it's "Lyutov" who embellishes the story.) Here is where I'd like to re-invoke Papazian's "tension between [...] evidence and discourse" (a tension that obviously closely mirrors the more familiar one in prose, "content" vs. "form," or in Formalist terms, *fabula* vs. *syuzhet*) and suggest that this is precisely the tension Babel/Lyutov is playing with, even inverting, in the presentation of the photograph. The photograph, as we said at the beginning, is presented as *evidence*, as some sort of documentary proof that the story is not made up. But in fact what the photo—exactly like the sub-literate *skaz* in which the story is rendered—draws our attention to, on closer inspection, is its own status as *discourse*.

As I was saying, the key ingredient added to the narrative by Babel (if we take the scene from his 1920 diary as the seed of the story) is its family aspect: the "fathers and sons" story narrated in a letter to the mother. That same element—which, let's be clear, is a *formal* one (the events, the *fabula*, are taken from life, but Babel/Lyutov reworks them into a form that participates in a classic literary genre)—is what's "documented" by the spurious photo. So in a way, the absence of our interior narrator, Vasily Kurdyukov, from this otherwise so-conventional family photo, is a clue to what is *not* documentary in the story:

(1) the photograph reproduces the essential truth that Kurdyukov does not "exist," that he is simply an avatar or aspect of Lyutov (who is in turn an avatar of Babel). At the same time,

(2) the photograph's conspicuous participation in the self-consciously artificial genre of the "family portrait" draws our attention to the fact that the story itself participates in such a genre: the family saga, with its typical themes of intergenerational struggle, parricide, the long-suffering mother, and so on.

So the form of the photo mirrors the form of the story—and it's these formal details that connect "A Letter" to the larger frame of *Red Cavalry*. Fathers: the father of the pregnant Jewish woman in "Crossing the Zbrucz" begs his Polish assailants to kill him where his daughter can't see, but to no avail; conversely, Semyon Kurdyukov makes a point of sending Vasily away so he can't witness his father's death. Mothers: that pregnant Jewish woman (who reappears in "The Sun of Italy") is the first of many debased mothers in the cycle, who also include the various desecrated Madonnas (too numerous to mention, but those in Pan Apolek's paintings are an obvious example), and Mama Kurdyukov, who

is profaned by her husband in "A Letter."¹¹ What if we also think about the Kurdyukov photo in relation to other moments of ekphrasis in the cycle: the pottery shards in "Crossing the Zbrucz," the paintings in "Pan Apolek" and "At St. Valentine's," the photograph in "The Sun of Italy"? Does any general pattern seem to emerge?

Rebecca

Dear Rebecca,

I have decided to take up your challenge, and have been taking a closer look at the instances of ekphrasis in "Pan Apolek," "At St. Valentine's," and "The Sun of Italy" (I am going to discount the pottery shards in "Crossing the Zbrucz," since they are only mentioned, not described, and so do not meet the criteria of ekphrasis according to most definitions of the term). At first I was tempted to conclude that the descriptions of art and photography in *The Red Cavalry* cycle are self-referential, mirrors of Babel's own art on a miniature scale. Just as Pan Apolek's paintings are analogous to Babel's stories in that they "create art from life, mix the sacred with the profane," the description of the family portrait at the end of "A Letter" reenacts the quasi-documentary form of the story itself (as you have shown incredibly persuasively). But I think I would be selling Babel short if I stopped my analysis here, and treated his ekphrases as if they were something we could detach and analyze separately from the stories themselves, as if they were verbal illustrations to be read *alongside* the text, rather than integral components *of* the text.

I love your idea that the illiterate Kurdyukov of "A Letter" is only a mask worn by Lyutov (himself a mask worn by Babel), and I think we can make the same claim about Pan Apolek. Because it is almost impossible to tell where Pan Apolek's paintings end and the (non-painted) world described by Lyutov begins. Apolek's figures literally refuse to stay in their frames. When Lyutov first sees the icon of John the

¹¹ Actually, the *very* first of these "desecrated Madonnas" is a purely verbal one, found in the second paragraph of the story that opens the cycle: "Someone sinks [into the river Zbrucz], and loudly defames the Mother of God." This verbal desecration of the quintessential Mother is followed by her embodiment in the degraded figure of the pregnant woman in the Jewish household where Lyutov is billeted that night in Novograd, and then by her re-disembodiment and metaphorization in the form of the "Holy Virgins encrusted with precious stones" that occupy an ambiguous place between devotional icon and illicit hoard in the recesses of the secretive church (also in Novograd) abandoned by its corrupt priest—whose former assistant is in turn disembodied-and-aestheticized into Pan Apolek's St. John.

Baptist, what he describes is not a two-dimensional painting, but an actual body extending into space: "Straight towards me, descending from the blue depths of the niche, came the long figure of John" (104). The ekphrasis of Apolek's depiction of Jesus Christ in "At Saint Valentine's" is still more startling. Even the reader starts to doubt: is Lyutov describing a motionless work of art, or a real running, bleeding, suffering person? One of the Cossacks is so terrified by the sight of Jesus's all-too-real figure that he himself screams and begins to run.

And not only do Apolek's figures have a habit of stepping out of their frames, his images do, too, sometimes making unexpected appearances in one of Lyutov's other tales. For example, Apolek has painted John the Baptist with a snake dangling from his lips: "From the grinning mouth hung the tiny body of a snake with highly colored shiny scales" (104). In "The Sun of Italy" Lyutov's roommate, Sidorov, uses nearly the exact same image in a letter to his fiancée: "And the leader listens to him, strokes the dusty barbed wire of his curls and passes out through his rotten teeth the long snake of his muzhik's grin" (113). Conceivably Sidorov could have seen Apolek's John the Baptist and borrowed its imagery for his letter, but I don't think that Babel's stories operate according to that kind of strictly causal logic. Instead I would suggest that Apolek's and Sidorov's use of the same image, one in paints, one in words, hints at a more fundamental truth: the two men are actually variations of the same person, Lyutov (Babel?) himself. It cannot be a coincidence that at the end of "The Sun of Italy" Lyutov compares Sidorov's face to (what else?) a *mask*: "And now the night, full of distant, painful bell sounds, a rectangle of light in the damp and darkness, and inside it the deathly face of Sidorov, a lifeless mask suspended over the candle's yellow flame" (116).

I suppose I am trying to argue that we think about Babel's ekphrases not so much as "analogies" to his stories, but as the very heart of his image-laden verbal art, bursts of creative energy that echo and resonate throughout the cycle. "A Letter" only makes that much more obvious how impossible it is to parse Babel's ekphrases from the stories that encompass them. Pan Apolek's paintings do not stay in their frames; Sidorov's photographs of Rome do not quite stick to the pages of his album (Lyutov sees a picture of Rome, not on the page where it belongs, but mysteriously floating behind Sidorov's head: "Over his round back gleamed the crenellated ruins of the Capitol and the arena of the Colosseum" [115]). But in "A Letter" the figures in the photograph do not simply step out of their two dimensional space, rather they confidently stride out, becoming the protagonists of the entire tale. Or does it work the other way around, and the characters instead stride out

of the *letter* and into the verbally-rendered photograph? (After all, Lyutov presents us with the letter *before* he "shows" us the picture). The verbal and the visual spheres in Babel's fiction are so inter-penetrable, so interwound one with the other, that it is impossible to tell.

Greta

Dear Greta,

Your reading is so subtle and persuasive that I have little to add. That is a brilliant catch, the fact that Sidorov's letter in "The Sun of Italy" re-uses the image of the snake issuing from between the lips, from Apolek's icon of St. John in "Pan Apolek." I suppose it remains only to ask what we learn about Lyutov from each of these successive "masks" he wears. It's in this context that I thought of the pottery shards from the very first story, "Crossing the Zbrucz," for although as you point out they don't meet the classic criteria for ekphrasis as such, they *are* (the fragments of) aesthetic objects that appear in Lyutov's text having been ostensibly "made" by someone else—so that he is, in relation to them, a viewer rather than a creator—and they share in the ekphrastic function identified by Maguire, of "amplify[ing] the personage [...] associated with the object being described." Specifically, the pottery shards offer (as many critics have noted) our first clue that Lyutov is Jewish, since only a Jew, or at least someone who had attended a Seder or two, would recognize in a few scraps of shattered earthenware "the sacred vessels used by the Jews once a year, at Passover" (92). And, of course, like the photographs and Pan Apolek's paintings, they serve as a kind of analogue for Babel's own art: in this case, they mirror the status of the *Red Cavalry* stories as "telling fragments" which the viewer (reader) must reassemble in order to access their meaning.

And this is the final note I'd like to add to your brilliant analysis: these moments of ekphrasis in *Red Cavalry* offer us a chance to see Lyutov not only as a creator, but as a viewer; they tell us, as you've so beautifully demonstrated, how Babel approaches writing, but they also offer models for the act of reading. In each case (pottery, photographs, paintings) what we get as readers is not an "objective" description of an artifact, but a record of Lyutov's perception of it—the cognitive process by which he registers, observes, identifies, and assigns meaning to it. In each case, what is rendered is not only the object itself, but the workings of Lyutov's imagination on the object: a trace of Lyutov himself (which

allows us to amplify our understanding of him),¹² but also an example of how such readings are to be performed, at least with respect to the kinds of artworks depicted in the text (which we've already agreed function analogously to, and in your interpretation inseparably from, the stories themselves). And it's probably not accidental that in each case, a "full" reading—one that brings the figures to life, allows them to "stride out of their two-dimensional space" as you put it—involves seeing something that isn't there: a Seder plate amid fragments of shattered crockery. A narrator who is mysteriously absent from his own family photo. The "plump creased back" of the infant Jesus in Pan Apolek's depiction of the Nativity (the child is lying on his back, so it can't actually be visible!) and the motions of his adult Jesus as he flees his pursuers, "raise[s] his hand to ward off the blow" being aimed at him, and "writhe[s]" with the pain of his lacerations (181). Patricia Carden even suggests that "[t]he howl of hatred of the painted crowd is 'heard' by the people observing the painting" of the fleeing Jesus, explaining the "hoarse wail" that Lyutov reports "rent my ears" (181) as he contemplated the image.¹³

Perhaps it's too pat to suggest (returning to Papazian's opposition between "evidence" and "discourse") that this kind of vivid reading depends on our perceiving the "discursive" in the "documentary" and vice versa. Or perhaps I'm being too influenced here by Elif Batuman's brilliant essay on the struggle to balance *imitatio* (the imitation of literary forms) and mimesis (the imitation of real life) that she perceives as central to Babel's art.¹⁴ But at all events, I think Lyutov's presentation of the photo at the end of "A Letter" offers such rich possibilities for interpretation because it holds out to us simultaneously a kind of proof and a kind of discrediting; a presence and an absence; an act of narrating/creating and an act of "reading"/interpreting.

And on that note I end my own letter to you. Thank you for delving into this question with me, and for the original comment in class that started it all!

Rebecca

¹² Tamar Yacobi suggests for example that what allows the figure of St. John to step off the canvas in the passage you cite from "Pan Apolek" is the delayed recognition that results from Lyutov's status as "an atheistic Jew," rather than the devout Christian who is presumably the painting's intended viewer. Yacobi, "Fictive Beholders," 80.

¹³ Patricia Carden, "Red Cavalry: Art Renders Justice," in *Modern Critical Views: Isaac Babel*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 130.

¹⁴ Elif Batuman, "Pan Pizar?: Clerkship in Babel's First-Person Narration," in *The Enigma of Isaac Babel: Biography, History, Context*, ed. Gregory Freidin (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).