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See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil: The Poetics of Violence in Isaac Babel's Red Cavalry

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See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil:

The Poetics of Violence in Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry*

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Introduction

Fictionalized Realities: Isaac Babel and Autobiography

He was arrested in 1939, his papers seized, his family given no information. His name was erased from dictionaries, syllabi, and written records, his books banned. Though the physical details of his interrogations by NKVD investigators were unclear, he was made to admit his complicity in anti-Soviet plots and to denounce his friends and associates. In January of 1940 he was tried by a military council, accused and convicted of participation in a Trotskyite terrorist conspiracy and of espionage for the French and Austrian governments, crimes to which he had confessed in the early stages of his imprisonment, though in the months before his trial and during the trial he asserted that these were fabricated admission given under duress. Through the 1940s his fate was not publicly known; he was alternately thought to have been under house arrest somewhere in Russia or to have been deported to a concentration camp or to have died in Siberia. His certificate of death, received by his family only in 1954, lists simply his name, his birth date, and his death date (given as March 17, 1941), but the place and cause of death are left unwritten.¹ In the same year, his family received a document rehabilitating the murdered writer, asserting that his case had been reviewed and that

The sentence of the Military Council dated 26 January 1940 concerning Babel, I. E., is revoked on the basis of newly discovered circumstances and the case against him is terminated in the absence of elements of a crime. (N. Babel "Notes" 532)

The particulars of the sentence are never given, only vaguely referred to. The details of his crime, as well as the new circumstances, remain unexpressed in this document. After the fall of

¹ The details of Isaac Babel's arrest, execution, and his family's subsequent discovery of his last days are compiled from the following sources: Vitaly Shentalinsky's *Arrested Voices*, Nathalie Babel's "Preface" and "Notes" to various volumes of Babel's collected works, and Jerome Charyn's *Savage Shorthand*.

the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent opening of previously secret archives, the truth was discovered: following a twenty-minute trial in one of NKVD chief Lavrenti Beria's private chambers, for which a sentence had been pre-decided, Isaac Emmanuelovich Babel was shot by firing squad on January 27, 1940.

The distances between the actual execution and the false officially-given account of death, between the initial misinformation and the overdue unveiling of truth, and between the real event and its distorted written expression are versions of the same distance that Babel explores so extensively in his stories. For Babel, there is a gap between reality and fiction, and accordingly, his works often approach autobiography without becoming autobiographical. Babel's stories and story cycles appear to depict events that occurred to him and yet there is a remarkable fictionality in them—a deliberate literariness in structure, tone, figurative language, and other narrative devices the writer uses to convey narratives based on his own experiences. Babel's desire to estrange the traumatic events of his own past reveals a fixation on blurring the boundaries between the real and the imagined. Because of it, and sometimes in spite of it, many critics and readers have erroneously conflated Babel's narrators with their creator, directly ascribing the views and experiences of fictional characters to the author who prefers to remain elusive. Although the war narratives Babel is especially famous for are not written as memoirs of his service in the Red Cavalry, their semblance of autobiography is what draws many readers in, leading to errors of attribution, such as Renato Poggioli's assertion, in reference to the story "Gedali," that "Babel seems to know where the good ends and evil begins. For him, revolution is good and the counterrevolution is bad" (Poggioli 51). Directly conflating Babel's views with dogmatic points spoken by his narrator—overly-simplified points which do not cohere with the more nuanced critical depiction of the Revolution and its actors that Babel gives in this very

story as well as in others—assertions like Poggioli’s ignore the complexities of Babel’s craft in favor of simpler definitions of the writer. Or critics assume that Babel is the narrator of his work. Lionel Trilling, for instance, writes about Babel’s relationship with Cossacks and Babel’s inability to kill a fellow soldier, never even supposing that the episodes he examines are fictionalized experiences of Babel’s narrator (Trilling 36-38).

Babel’s death certainly has a large part to play in this conflation. As Walter Benjamin, in his famous essay “The Storyteller,” writes:

A man...who died at thirty-five will appear to remembrance at every point in his life as a man who dies at the age of thirty-five...[t]he nature of the character in a novel cannot be presented any better than is done in this statement, which says that the ‘meaning’ of his life is revealed only in his death. (Benjamin 373)

According to Benjamin, one’s death determines how others retroactively view one’s life, be he an author or a layman. Babel’s tragic and obscured death, too, affects the perception of his life, and determines how its narrative is written or spoken, again and again, in biographies, critical essays, and stories written for general cultural consumption. Instead of appearing as an author, endowed with great agency to relate events of the past, he becomes a character in others’ reconstructions and summaries. A fascinating character, one needs to add here, and understandably so, for the confluence of his Jewishness and revolutionary ardor, his relationship to the Soviet government as both an acclaimed writer and a political target, his exaggerated focus on silence in an increasingly censorial state, his graphically violent yet complicated stories, and the cold cruelty of his execution make for an interesting story. For a reader, it is easy and tempting to find meaning in Babel’s life through his death, while for a critic, casting him as a heroic man tragically victimized by a totalitarian government also has a thrill of particular intensity. Take, for example, a brief sentence from Peter Stine’s analysis of Babel’s relation to

violence: “That such a reverence for life led to his disappearance into the Gulag during the purges seems now a tragic yet inevitable destiny” (Stine 231). Or consider another statement by Trilling: “[W]hen Soviet culture was brought under full discipline, the fighting in Babel’s heart could not be permitted to endure. It was a subversion of discipline” (Trilling 26-27). These two instances of exaggerated valorization of Babel offer us an insight into how easily critics can dramatize real events of the writer’s life can be dramatized by critics. These can be easily transcribed onto an epic, man-against-the-government conceptual framework.

This kind of narrative would not be of note had it not so often precipitated or accompanied certain errors in the discussion of Babel’s work. In addition to this dramatization of Babel and to the conflation of author and narrator, one of the main mistakes is to simplify and misinterpret Babel’s relationship to violence. Frank O’Connor’s assertion that “only by romanticizing violence could [Babel] live with it,” is typical of this trend: Babel is too easily seen as possessing adulatory opinions toward violence (O’Connor 58).² Later critiques—such as Carol Luplow’s suggestion that Liutov possesses an ambiguous attitude toward violence though he often admires Cossacks, or Andrei Sinyavsky’s point that Babel frequently conceals the meaning of violent events, diluting their heroism with reserved diction—add a sense of nuance to the statements of their predecessors and provide a less-easily reducible survey of violence in Babel’s stories (Luplow 218; Sinyavsky 90). In my analysis, I attempt to avoid the pitfalls of oversimplification in order to more accurately analyze Babel’s craft, taking emphatic note of his trickiness so as to be aware of his own complex views and the equally complex views of his narrators. Babel based many of his stories on his own life events, often creating narrators who,

² Babel’s depiction of Cossacks was certainly not seen as romantic or glorified to many of his readers: Semyon Budyonny, characterized unflatteringly in *Red Cavalry* and displeased with Babel’s portrayal of Red Cavalry fighters, publicly condemned Babel for his depictions (Ermolaev 24).

like himself, were Jewish intellectuals born in Odessa and educated in St. Petersburg—timid narrators who wore glasses and expressed themselves with a terse poeticism, who were fascinated by violence but could not perpetrate it, and who in certain stories, were even given the surname ‘Babel.’ This is why his works have an unavoidable element of autobiography. And yet the similarity of Babel’s background with that of his protagonists, it must be noted, does not make the stories themselves truthful or autobiographical.

In my analysis, I focus on Babel’s *Red Cavalry* cycle. Published in 1926, it is narrated by Kirill Vasilievich Liutov, an intellectual Odessan Jew serving as a propagandist in the Red Army during the Polish-Soviet War of 1920.³ He joins a cavalry regiment of Cossacks, traveling through Galicia and Volhynia, and witnessing numerous atrocities committed by the enemy and by his own comrades. Though he is only mentioned by name several times, the idiosyncratic style of narration and the characterization of a poetic narrator incapable of committing violence unite the stories of *Red Cavalry*, suggesting that they are various tales told from a single perspective.⁴ Moreover, the entire cycle is based on Babel’s own similar set of experiences as a propagandist in Semyon Budyonny’s cavalry regiment, during which he kept a diary of events that *Red Cavalry* closely resembles. However, as critic Carol Avins points out, we should see the diary as a source of ideas for Babel’s fictions rather than a document by which we may identify elements of his story cycle as true or false (Avins 695). What matters in my interpretation of the *Red Cavalry* cycle is the way Babel’s narrator reacts to the war’s generation and perpetration of

³ “Kirill Vasilievich Liutov” is also the name under which Babel wrote articles during his time in the Red Cavalry (Charyn 71; Avins 694).

⁴ There are, of course, multiple *skaz*-style oral accounts transcribed in the book given by Cossack characters; however, they represent a minority of narratives, and the majority of stories seem to be told from the perspective of a single narrator, who critics mostly agree is Liutov. Others such as Jerome Charyn disagree, asserting that because the name “Liutov” is only mentioned near the end of the cycle, we cannot definitively know if there exists a single unifying narrator (Charyn, 72). Due to the consistency of style and diction throughout the cycle, the recurrence of supporting characters, and the references to many of the same experiences and personal traits of the narrator, my analyses presupposes that Liutov narrates the majority of *Red Cavalry*.

terror. I assert that through the mediation of his narrator, Babel obscures the acts of violence depicted in *Red Cavalry*, creating distance between the violent act and its narrative expression. This action constitutes a device essential to Babel's writing: the defamiliarization of violence.

Defamiliarization, according to the theories of Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky, is the purpose of art:

The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.* (Shklovsky 12)

By making something familiar seem unfamiliar, art allows the reader to approach the once-familiar object at a new distance. This process opens up the reader's perceptions, compelling him or her to rethink their relation to the object. Shklovsky asserts the pure aesthetic value of art through this technique; defamiliarization nonetheless forces the awareness of the object, distinguishing it from the other objects the reader perceives automatically and without consideration. According to critic Viktor Erlich, the ideological implications of this device do not matter to Shklovsky as much as the fact of the device's utilization; the aesthetic effect of defamiliarization is fascinating in itself, as it allows for new perceptions of familiar objects (Erlich 176-178).

In Babel's craft, then, violence is defamiliarized—made strange through any number of literary devices—and by this token Babel draws the reader's attention to violence all the more emphatically. With this reinforced focus on violence, Babel suggests that atrocity is inseparable from war, and that the easiest way for his narrator—an educated, squeamish, nonviolent man—to live with this horror is to distance himself from its perpetration. In fact, by virtue of both his involvement with the rapacious Red Army and his rare interference in the unnecessary acts of

violence he witnesses, Liutov really distances himself from his responsibility and complicity. *Red Cavalry* is a narrative that follows Liutov's denial of his relationship to violence, and appropriately involves him obscuring his own role in the excessive brutalities his comrades indiscriminately wreak on nonviolent people. In Liutov's attempt to avoid the truth of his complicity, Babel shows us the dilemma of the observer and the tensions between ideology, moral stance, the role of the bystander, and the undertaking of actions by an individual. In Babel's world, I believe, one's agency to positively alter their surroundings and fight against massive, impersonal forces that abuse power and inflict unimaginable devastation upon their victims is nearly decimated by this endeavor's inordinate difficulty.

In my analysis, I am using the critical framework of Russian Formalism, as well as approaches embedded in narratological analysis as established in the works of Mieke Bal; these sources serve as tools with which I will analyze the defamiliarization and distance that is present in Babel's poetics of violence. I will additionally use the phenomenological writings of Susan Sontag and John Berger in my discussion of the intersection of visuality, violence, and verbal expression, as well as make a brief mention of Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* in my exploration of the physical placement of buildings and their symbolic implications in some scenes. I will reflect on greater trends in Russian literature, using Lev Tolstoy's *The Cossacks* as a springboard for my examination of Liutov's own identity and relation to his comrades. My discussion is primarily based in close readings of Peter Constantine's translation of *Red Cavalry*, though I do make occasional use of the original Russian *Konarmiia* when scrutinizing specific sentences and phrasings—for example, in my investigation of pronoun use and narratorial identification. My utilization of *Konarmiia* is chiefly intended to assert that certain strange

constructions and images I analyze are present in the Russian as well as the Constantine translation.

In my first chapter, I use the theories of Sontag and Berger in order to explicate how Babel's narrator verbally expresses the experience of seeing visual representations and suggestions of violence, particularly in the stories "A Letter" and "Italian Sun." I compare this ekphrastic dissection of photographs and paintings with other characters' written and spoken depictions of violent acts they have witnessed or intend to commit, which vastly differ from Liutov's own distanced, dehumanizing descriptions of the actual violence he has seen. I emphasize the viewer's distance from violence, as well as the reader's distance from the narrative articulation of violence and from the narrative as a whole.

In my second chapter, I discuss the trope of silence in *Red Cavalry* and its relation to violence, contrasting Babel's dehumanization of silent people with his anthropomorphization of animals and objects through metonymy, metaphor, and exaggeration. I explore how Babel uses the fragmentation of narratives and the omission of information to structurally silence his characters, even his narrator. I examine a number of stories, including "Gedali," "The Rabbi," and "Crossing the River Zbrucz," in order to analyze the devices Babel uses to emphasize how the victims of horrendous atrocities are silenced by their oppressors, by death itself, and by a narrator. In my opinion, through the one-sidedness of his narration, Liutov deprives these victims of a voice in the conversation about their own suffering. In light of this muteness, I focus on the narratorial expression of distance from these violent acts and the onlooker's role in the potential breaking of silence.

In my third chapter, I investigate Liutov's alternating self-identifications in their relation to the acts of violence he observes, commits, and recounts. Beginning with a review of the image of the Cossack in Russian literature, I use Tolstoy's *The Cossacks* as a quintessential example of the Cossack ethos that Liutov grapples with and that Babel ambiguously presents in *Red Cavalry*. I examine how Liutov remains distant from the violence he expresses, extensively analyzing the story "Berestechko" in order to evaluate Liutov's position in relation to violence. His inability to behave violently like a Cossack precludes his continued acceptance into the group, yet at the same time he refuses to identify himself with the victimized Jews he encounters. I assert that Liutov denies his close relation to the machinery of violence with his self-imposed distance from both perpetrator and victim, unsure of his ability to act and unable to accept his own complicity in the atrocities he sees.

Throughout my analysis, I focus on Liutov's difficult position in relation to violence as expressed through Babel's writing, without asserting that Babel is anything more than an author, the artful creator and manipulator of a conflicted narrator in a troubled time. I use *Red Cavalry* as a broader tool with which we can explore the fictionalized mind of a person in war who cannot live with yet must rationalize the unending violence that surrounds him. It appears that distance and denial may be the simplest defense mechanism—a grim conclusion that may just be true. Perhaps Babel's whole enterprise of fictionalization is the same sort of distancing from his own role as witness of or perpetrator in violent, horrible acts. We can conjecture about this possibility, but we cannot know, as we do not experience Babel's own life narrative when we read *Red Cavalry*; what we read is an ambiguous literary invention.

Chapter 1

Articulating Violence: Babel's Visual Dramas

In the *Red Cavalry* story “At St. Valentine’s,” Isaac Babel’s narrator Liutov is struck by a strange scene he sees in a church:

In the depths of the niche, against the backdrop of a sky furrowed with clouds, ran a bearded little figure wearing an orange Polish caftan—barefoot, his mouth lacerated and bleeding. A hoarse wail assailed our ears. The man in the orange caftan was being pursued by hatred, and his pursuer had caught up with him. The man lifted his arm to ward off the blow, and blood poured from it in a purple stream. The young Cossack standing next me yelled out and, ducking, started to run, even though there was nothing to run from, because the figure in the niche was only Jesus Christ—the most unusual portrayal of the Son of God I have ever seen in my life. (Babel, 289)

Though Liutov is indoors, the initial reference to “the backdrop of a sky” can be easily missed by the reader. It may seem that the violent scene described occurs directly in front of Liutov, in his field of vision. This illusion arises from Babel’s word choice, which emphasizes the violent details of the act, and from his delayed final acknowledgment that what Liutov sees is a painting, not a brutal crime committed in a church. Of course, this story is placed late in the cycle, when Liutov has already seen copious graphic violence in churches, homes, and everywhere else; this scene could easily be real to him. The hoarse wail too blurs the boundary between reality and painting, as the identity of its utterer is at first unclear. That it truly comes from the young Cossack near Liutov only adds to the impression we receive of this painting—its depiction of violence is powerful enough to confuse characters in the novel and muddle how they relate to the experience. From this scene, we see how visual art that reproduces reality may be mistaken for it, and how the experience of seeing may affect the act of communicating what has been seen. This kind of tension between image and word is at the heart of Babel’s exploration of the viscosity of violence.

In this chapter I examine the method by which Isaac Babel employs the visual art that his characters observe in the *Red Cavalry* cycle, focusing on the violence within the images and in the distortion of their meaning. In a way, this analysis deals with two types of violence in Babel's narratives: the metaphorical violence of the image, symbolically represented or implied, and the literal, physical violence within the narrative, as recounted by Babel's narrator. I will explore how differences of medium and perspective affect the representations of crimes committed, contemplated, or described. I will analyze both the verbal representation of visual objects and the narrative description of related acts of violence, noting how they intersect. My endeavor involves several forms of media—including photographs, paintings, and letters—all of which Liutov faces within the narrative; they are perceptible to the reader only through Liutov's narration. In discussing Babel's presentation of visual violence, I will use the theoretical writings of Susan Sontag and John Berger, though unlike these critics I will not examine any real-world interaction between visual perception and symbolic assault. However, I will investigate the visual experience of Babel's characters on a narrative level, applying Sontag and Berger's concepts to Liutov's perceptions and to the symbolic violence experienced within the narrative, which Babel communicates to us through his text. My main goal in this chapter is to determine the role of the observer in relation to violence in Babel's story cycle, through the exploration of Babel's poetics of violence, distance, and sight.

I will primarily focus on the stories "A Letter" and "Italian Sun," though I will mention other *Red Cavalry* stories as well. These stories are central to my understanding of Babel's intersecting depictions of visual and verbal violence, because they contain both described images

and embedded texts which situate the visual in narratives of violence.⁵ As Liutov narrates Babel's cycle, he describes these images, noticing his reactions to them. At the same time, he acts as a conduit for stories of violence that other characters tell him. With these stories, we can observe how Babel creates this juxtaposition and particularly how he shapes it by means of contrasting visual art and the narratives of people depicted in it. Babel constructs his visual descriptions through the use of ekphrasis—the direct verbal or written description of a work of art.⁶ His method is consistent throughout the cycle: we receive a relatively brief ekphrastic exposition of a photograph or painting, with special attention paid to its subjects' faces and other characterizing physical features. Babel does not often describe the physical background of these images, but when he does, he dedicates to it no more than a full sentence. Instead, he almost entirely focuses on the depiction of characters and their constitutive defining visual attributes, rarely offering any explicit narratorial or authorial interpretations of these images. As a result, the images described reach the reader in a reduced form—the reader approximates a visual experience through its written transmutation, mediated by Liutov's narration. Thus, the reader is distanced from the image, as he experiences it in a verbal, not a visual medium, and through a narrator who emphasizes certain features while obscuring others. Liutov's experience, though recounted in depth, is nonetheless radically different from the reader's.

Babel's use of ekphrasis and his interest in the distance that different media create between idea and expression, memory and reality, and observer and the observed find suitable partners in Sontag's *On Photography* (1977) and Berger's *About Looking* (1980). These theoretical works focus on the visual experience of photography and the photograph's cultural

⁵ An embedded text, as defined by Mieke Bal, is a text written by an actor or character in the narrative and contained within the text that we read—the primary narrator's text (Bal 52).

⁶ Babel's ekphrastic tendency is examined with detail in Robert Maguire's essay "Ekphrasis in Isaak Babel".

position in society. Sontag's aim, in her words, is to examine "the problems, aesthetic and moral, posed by the omnipresence of photographic images" (Sontag⁷). Babel too explores these themes beyond the realm of photography, as his entire poetics of visibility in *Red Cavalry* center around Liutov's observational role, his preoccupation with aesthetics, and his moral quandaries in relation to violence. Sontag and Berger's theories and Babel's method of depicting visual art and observed violence, then, share thematic foci and similar aesthetic concerns with the representation of violence in visual culture. In my analysis, I focus on how Babel forms Liutov's visual experience and how he expresses it through a written medium; though this differs from Sontag and Berger's discussions of an actual visual experience and its symbolic implications, their theories are applicable to *Red Cavalry* because Babel's characters have the visual experience of violence and subsequently must deal with its symbolic repercussions. As readers, we simply receive the verbal expression of these characters' perception through Liutov's narration on the narrative level and, ultimately, through Babel's manipulation of the narrative as a whole. Though these theories do not apply to our experience as readers, they apply to the experiences of Babel's characters. We read their mediated visual experiences, gaining a distanced look at the symbolic implications of the art in *Red Cavalry*.

For Sontag, photography is a symbolically violent act. This definition does not depend on an actual depiction of explicit violence in a photograph. Instead, the violence is metaphorical and based on what she conceives as the acquisitive nature of photography. She asserts that through photography, we get the sense that we can hold the world in our hands and heads, due both to the physicality of the medium and to the sheer efficacy of its dissemination through physical space—this object is easily mass produced, carried, and kept (Sontag 3). Whether the viewer is

⁷ This quotation is found on an unnumbered page of *On Photography*, prior to the table of contents.

connected to the photograph or not, Sontag argues that the image is a “surrogate possession of a cherished person or thing” (Sontag 155). Through physical acquisition of a photograph, then, one procures the symbolic representation of its subject. One does not actually need to be connected to this subject; it is acquired as information, rather than experience, so the relationship between the two can become simply that of consumer to product. This commodifying link is not inherent in photography, but simply is a result of the mass-production of photographs (Sontag 156). Yet even the private photographs to which the viewer is emotionally attached may be defamiliarized, for in a Shklovskian sense the depicted subject is made unfamiliar by the medium and distanced from its original quiddity.⁸ That the experiences of looking upon a photograph and looking at a person involve different degrees of distance, physicality, and immediacy only emphasizes that the viewer’s perception is altered, prolonged and made difficult through photography. The observer is alienated from the context of the subject’s world—which Sontag defines as a metaphorically violent act of aggression against the subject (Sontag 121). She justifies her argument, writing:

To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they can never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. (Sontag 14)

In Sontag’s view, a photograph objectifies people, symbolically relegating them to positions of weakness; not only is the photograph an acquirable object, but its subject is also reduced to a commercial product. The content of the photograph notwithstanding, the acquirer always has power over the depicted. Even if the acquirer is respectful toward the photographic subject, even if the observer only looks upon a photograph—in each case the subject is mute, distant, and

⁸ My reference to Shklovsky hinges upon his definition of “defamiliarization,” which I cite and summarize in my introduction. He does not discuss photography in relation to defamiliarization, but here I find it useful to include his terminology and theory, which I have previously discussed.

unable to control the appropriation and meaning of their circulated image and the reality that it represents. Simply by seeing a picture of someone who is not there, Sontag maintains, the viewer is complicit in the symbolic violation of the subject.

This violation is made all the more harsh by the subject's distance from the viewer. A viewer's relation to a person or event depicted in a photograph determines the interpretation of the photograph as well as the alienation they may feel. John Berger explains that this is a matter of context, or the difference between private and public:

The private photograph—the portrait of a mother, a picture of a daughter, a group photo of one's own team—is appreciated and read in a context which is continuous with that from which the camera removed it. (The violence of the removal is sometimes felt as incredulousness: “Was that really Dad?”) Nevertheless such a photograph remains surrounded by the meaning from which it was severed...the contemporary public photograph usually presents an event, a seized set of appearances, which has nothing to do with us, its reader, or with the original meaning of the event. It offers information, but information severed from all lived experience. If the public photograph contributes to a memory, it is to the memory of an unknowable and total stranger. The violence is expressed in that strangeness. (Berger 55-56)

Like Sontag, Berger posits the photograph as a symbolically violent creation, a piece of memory that gives information without experience. For Berger, however, this violence does not result from the violation of symbolic possession, but from the symbolic severing of subject from its original context, as well as the distance between subject and viewer. Berger asserts that this detachment is not a necessary product of its medium: the private photograph usually is continuous with its context, though alienation may still emerge from incredulousness toward a photograph's depiction of a previous reality. For an unrelated observer, however, a private photograph becomes analogous to any public photograph—the observer is cut away from context and thereby cannot truly experience the photograph's meaning. This is the same kind of relation we find in Shklovsky's defamiliarization—the device involves cutting an object out of its

habitual context, an act by which the object is made unfamiliar (Erich 177). Defamiliarization, then, is symbolically violent as well, for it distorts and destroys contextual links.

The private photographs that appear in Babel's cycle are symbolically meaningful, though they do not depict explicit violence. Yet they fit within the framework laid by Sontag and Berger—they illustrate the symbolic violence of both possession and severed context. The photographs that Babel describes are family photographs, which in Sontag's theory, assert a group identity: she writes that "through photographs, each family constructs a portrait-chronicle of itself—a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness" (Sontag 8). The family photograph is evidence that the family existed as well as a temporal cut from context. A photograph makes its subject nearly immortal or at least extends its subjects' existence beyond the time frame of the depicted event, and beyond the death of the depicted person (Sontag 11). Every photograph is a piece of a past world, a point which Sontag expands upon, writing that "Photography came along to memorialize, to restate symbolically, the impaired continuity and vanishing extendedness of family life" (Sontag 8). Thus, the family photograph functions as a memorial, symbolically asserting the existence of a group that may no longer be.

In Babel's story "A Letter," the photograph that is mentioned depicts a boy's broken family. Narrated by Liutov, the story contains an embedded text—the letter, which Liutov writes down, as dictated by Vasily Kurydukov, an illiterate boy in his regiment. Addressed to Vasily's mother, Evdokiya Fyodorovna, it includes information about the boy's current situation, and appeals to home for food and favors. Most importantly, this text contains a story that details Vasily's experiences in war; through Liutov he recounts a tale of interfamilial violence between the head of the Kurdyukov household, Timofey Rodyonich, who serves in the White Army, and his sons—Vasily, Fyodor, and Semyon—who fight in the Red Army. Opposing allegiances

heighten into actual violence and the bonds of family are broken beyond repair when Timofey slaughters Fyodor and is later killed by Semyon in retribution. Framing this embedded text, the narrative touches upon Liutov writing the letter, offers his brief subsequent dialogue with Vasily, and includes a description of a photograph of the boy's split family. Liutov describes the picture as if holding it in front of the reader's eyes:

He held out a tattered photograph. In it was Timofey Kurdyukov, a wide-shouldered police constable in a policeman's cap, his beard neatly combed. He was stiff, with wide cheekbones and sparkling, colorless, vacant eyes. Next to him, in a bamboo chair, sat a tiny peasant woman in a loose blouse, with small, bright, timid features. And against this provincial photographer's pitiful backdrop, with its flowers and doves, towered two boys, amazingly big, blunt, broad-faced, goggle-eyed, and frozen as if standing at attention: the Kurdyukov brothers, Fyodor and Semyon. (Babel 212)

With this image the story ends. Liutov does not mention the photograph further. Vasily Kurdyukov appears again later in the cycle, in "At Saint Valentine's," but does not have a continued presence in the narrative. Babel gives the reader this photograph without offering any explicit commentary about it.

By holding on to the photograph, Vasily attempts to hold on to his dispersed family. He memorializes the unity that once was, cherishing the only object that remains. This is the "impaired continuity" and vanishing *directness* of family life (Sontag 8). Ruptured by violence, geographical distance, and death, the Kurdyukov family only exists as such in the photograph from the past, and thus is cut from temporal context. The event depicted in the photograph is a family posing, and we can assume that this event actually occurred and that its visual expression is relatively undistorted. However, the photograph is a forced image, with lighting, angle, exposure, and aesthetic quality of the image chosen by the photographer. The furniture—a bamboo chair and a backdrop with flowers and doves—is not representative of the family's daily realities of living, but of the photographer's taste. It does not depict life, but casts an image of the

family as it was before separation and as it will never yet be. The flowers and doves, symbols of beauty and peace, are painted, artificial, and “pitiful,”—through these symbols, Babel stresses the incompatibility between the family’s reality and its projected, posed image. Compared with the usual households we see in Babel’s cycle—ransacked, ruined homes or primitive huts—this backdrop is out of place.⁹ Through its orderliness and staged quality, Babel differentiates it from the poverty and messiness of everyday peasant life in and out of war. The image is the cherished object of longing for the family, representing what they desire, even before their division: the ideals of peace and unity.

Even after the Kurdyukovs tear themselves apart through war, Vasily continues to desire this ideal. By Vasily’s own claim, the photograph depicts his family, though this depiction no longer reflects reality. Yet even in this ideal picture, Vasily is distanced from his kin—he is absent from the photograph. Babel has been symbolically severed the boy from his family. His existence is denied, as any character viewing the photograph without narrative context from Vasily could not know that the family is incomplete in their picture. It is possible that Liutov, in his description of the photograph, has simply omitted mention of Vasily, as he already knows Vasily, and is focusing on the family, not the boy. Yet he defines the Kurdyukov brothers as only Semyon and Fyodor. If Liutov’s depiction is representative of the scene in the photograph, then Vasily simply was not photographed. Regardless, Babel has structured Liutov’s description of this photograph to symbolically assert that Vasily is an “other” to his family. Perhaps later, when he chooses sides, joining his brothers in the Red Army against his father and the White Army, his value as part of a group is symbolically asserted. But his absence in the earlier photograph underscores his insignificance to his own family. Even when the family is together, in a group-

⁹ For a glimpse of these ransacked houses, see the stories “Crossing the River Zbrucz,” “Prischepa,” “Zamosc,” and “The Song.”

defining photograph, it is incomplete. And though war is the main destroyer of families in *Red Cavalry*—the cycle is full of murdered kin, fatherless and motherless children, and accounts of soldiers from every side killing civilians—this family, and presumably others, Babel tells us, has already begun its destruction in peacetime.

The photograph itself does not contain explicit violence, but it nonetheless is implied in the family's poses. They visibly hold the potential to do violent acts. In expressing the attention that Liutov gives to this violent potential, Babel emphasizes the size and masculinity of Timofey, Semyon, and Fyodor: Timofey is a "wide-shouldered police constable," near whom "towered two boys, amazingly big, blunt, [and] broad-faced" (Babel 212). These three have power in their stances, strength in their resting poses. This violent masculinity is bolstered by the men's proximity in the photograph and in the paragraph to Vasily's mother, who is described as a tiny peasant woman with small, timid features. Babel's exaggeration of stereotypically masculine traits only increases the association of the three men with brutality and power, visually characterizing them as beings capable of violence in its many forms: material, political, sexual, and symbolic. Though the Kurdyukov men in the photograph are frozen in time, stiff, and still, the three are brimming with the signifiers of social roles that experience and create violence. We learn that Timofey has been accustomed to violence since before he joined the White Army: he is, in the photograph, a police constable. Semyon and Fyodor appear to be standing at attention—and this phrasing foreshadows their future military roles.

The physical manifestation of this potential to do violence—the actual violence that occurs in "A Letter"—is anecdotal to Liutov, as it is described only through Vasily's narrative. Vasily himself does not give an emotional depiction of the atrocities he sees; instead Babel has him encompass their horror in simple language. He mentions his brother's death three times, in a

singular words and phrases: his father “hacked my brother...to pieces,” “began hacking away at Fyodor,” and “hacked away at him until sundown until my brother Fyodor Timofeyich died” (Babel 209). Elsewhere, Vasily repeats the same phrase or similar iterations: the soldiers desire to “heroically hack the damn Pole to pieces,” his brother Semyon, the regimental commander, “threatened to hack to pieces everyone,” and as a commander has true power: “when some neighbor offends you, then Semyon Timofeyich can completely slash him to pieces” (Babel 209-210).¹⁰ Additional mentions of whipping and slapping are given, but Vasily’s primary mode of expressing violence is to speak of ‘hacking to pieces.’ With this phrase, Babel creates a clear image of the violence Vasily sees: it is the primal, direct physical violence of sharp, close-range weapons, as distinct from the more modern and distanced violence of rifles. This separation into pieces is an act familiar to Vasily, both in its physical manifestation (mangled bodies) and in the related symbolic event (his family’s split). Vasily is so accustomed to all sorts of hacking that he has grown numb to it, and therefore does not react to it with much surprise or recount it in much detail. The reader may imagine a more complete mental picture of any of this violence, but Vasily himself will not or cannot express the horrific particulars. Later in the letter, when Vasily uses a longer, different phrase, he says “I had to bear suffering like our Savior Jesus Christ” (Babel 209). The suffering itself has traumatized Vasily, depriving his already meager vocabulary of an ability to express what has occurred to him. As neither Vasily nor Jesus was hacked to pieces, the essence of Vasily’s suffering remains a mystery. The particulars, however, do not matter to Vasily as much as the fact that he has suffered; his hyperbolic language serves to exaggerate his suffering to his mother, appealing to her religious convictions and referencing the

¹⁰ In the Russian, several different words are used: «Папаша начали Федю резать»; «резали до темноты»; «желает...с геройским духом рубает подлую шляхту»; «грозились всех порубать»; «Семен Тимофеич может его вполне зарезать» (Babel, “Konarmiya” 240-242). However, all are simply expressed, and all refer to the act of cutting or slaughtering, so “hack” is an appropriate rendering in the English translation.

well-known image of Christ as a symbol of suffering in order to arouse her sympathy. In any case, Babel obscures the event through Vasily's word choice, leaving the specifics to the reader's imagination, so that there are countless possible visualizations of his violent suffering.

Through Vasily's simple vocabulary, Babel also highlights an important aspect of the verbal depiction of violence: its purpose. Vasily, dictating a letter to his mother, does not need to give a detailed and excursive account of the violence that he has experienced. He is an illiterate Cossack boy, lacking a complex vocabulary with which to describe visual experience. Liutov, in contrast, is an educated member of the intelligentsia, interested in art, history, and poetry. He is more concerned with aesthetics, and because such brutal acts draw his attention and stand out to him, Liutov describes them in detail. Babel manipulates and uses Liutov's descriptions to defamiliarize violence more emphatically, for Liutov is able to constantly perceive and express the unfamiliar aspects of what he observes. When he sees art that includes violence, then, such as a painting of John the Baptist in the story "Pan Apolek," Liutov narrates his visual experience vividly:

The sun had cast a ray straight on the foot of the icon. Sparkling dust swarmed in it. The tall figure of John came straight at me from the blue depths of the niche. A small black cape hung triumphantly on that inexorable, repulsively thin body. Droplets of blood shone in the cape's round buckles. His head had been hacked diagonally off the flayed neck. It lay on an earthen platter that was held by the large yellow fingers of a warrior. (Babel 216)

When reading this passage, the reader follows Liutov's gaze, imagining each detail of the painting in the order that Liutov notices them. Liutov's ekphrastic depiction moves from the bottom of the painting, up John's whole figure, to the bottom of his cape, to the buckles at the cape's top, and finally to the headless stump of John's neck. The attention Liutov gives to the painting allows him to describe it in such vivid detail, including even the angle of beheading. He

has the time and focus to gaze, remember, and recount it. Like Vasily, Liutov speaks of hacking, but he depicts the entire scene, using the word to denote a part of the violent action instead of using the word to express the action's totality.¹¹ Liutov, however, is still distant from the act of violence, as the painting only depicts the fragmentary results of the act—the body, the blood, and the severed head. By having Liutov mention John's headlessness only at the end of this ekphrastic passage, Babel defamiliarizes the image, using Liutov's observation to distance him, as well as the reader, away from the act of violence made strange and memorable.

Of course, Liutov is not witnessing actual violence. He views Pan Apolek's artistic recreation of a Gospel scene—which refers to an event that happened two millennia earlier. Babel offers an ekphrastic description of a painting of a legendary act that the painter did not witness, and these increasing layers of distance should mute the depiction's effect on us. Yet his choice of words allows him to express Liutov's experience of the painting—it startles the narrator and stands out to him, and his description appropriately builds slowly so as to stand out to the reader. This startling feature is what Roland Barthes calls the *punctum* of a photograph—it is the element that pricks the viewer, any little detail that stands out, fundamentally altering the viewer's perception and absorbing their attention (Barthes 26-27). For Liutov, the *punctum* in this painting is the face on St. John's head, which is copied after his former acquaintance Pan Romuald. This resemblance is startling because while a painting, like a photograph, objectifies its subject, it does not make the same claim to verity that photography does. The painting is more explicitly the creation of the painter, while the photograph may at least seem a piece of reality

¹¹ Here Liutov uses a word with the same root as most of the words Vasily uses: «срезана» (Babel, "Konarmiya" 245). Thus, "hacking" is again an appropriate substitution and may be discussed as such.

(Sontag 6).¹² Liutov's reaction to the painting is based in his visual and personal knowledge of Pan Romauld—his vocabulary just lets him express the strange attachment he feels to this painting, which visually defamiliarizes a face he knows well, placing it in a new, alien context.

When Liutov's observations go beyond the experience of art—when he sees actual violence—his method of description is not radically different. Describing the aftermath of a violent hacking in the story "Crossing the River Zbrucz," Liutov gives a vivid picture: "An old man is lying there on his back, dead. His gullet has been ripped out, his face hacked in two, and dark blood is clinging to his beard like a clump of lead" (Babel 204). This singular depiction of violence illustrates how the man looks and how he died. Liutov again moves through details as though describing a painting to the reader, and his ekphrastic manner expresses the intensity of his observation—he is giving the corpse much more than a cursory glance. The man's face has pricked his curiosity, and his plight is of aesthetic interest to our narrator. However, Liutov is still distant from this recounted image's context—the act of violence, which he has not witnessed. As an observer he has the privilege of emotional detachment, and Babel uses this detachment to defamiliarize the result of graphic violence as though it were a piece of art.

In a comparable set of depictions, Babel makes Vasily dehumanize his father, simply calling him "A dog," while Liutov dehumanizes his hosts in "Crossing the River Zbrucz" in a more florid manner, narrating that "They hop around in silence, like monkeys, like Japanese acrobats in a circus, their necks swelling and twisting" (Babel 211; Babel 204). Liutov displays this dehumanization in movement, in an illustrative verbal picture, denying his subjects their

¹² A photograph is certainly the creation of the photographer, but its more direct representation of its subjects lets it assert a claim to truthfulness in a way a painting cannot. Photographs are assumed to reflect real life, and the danger of forgetting the photographer's artistry is possible if the viewer does not consider the chosen aesthetics of the photograph or the forced nature of its staging. Documentary photographs make it easier to mistakenly assume verity throughout all photography.

dignity. Unlike Vasily, Liutov has a capacity for language and therefore can inscribe images with specificity. His more detailed descriptions, however, emphasize the strangeness of his observatory role: he watches intently enough to describe motion and think of poetic similes. Liutov gazes at people both live and dead as though they were objects or photographic subjects; his immediate role as perpetual witness, as well as his structural position as narrator makes his gaze akin to a camera. By granting his narrator his kind of observation power, Babel defamiliarizes the act of violence from the reader and transfers the role of acquisitive observer onto him. In other words, Liutov's habitual stare, established through his erudite vocabulary, becomes the lens through which we experience Babel's narrative.

Liutov's more complicated descriptive language is a result of his experience in life and his observational position. He does not attempt to create poetic images from other people's experience, instead letting them tell their own stories. Babel replicates this position by embedding secondary stories within the main narrative and filtering them through Liutov's narration. This allows him to present Liutov as a conveyer of other characters' narratives. He focuses on the details of the strange and unfamiliar things he sees, giving others a chance to deliver simpler narratives for the events he hasn't seen, such as the deaths of Vasily's brother and father. These scenes in transmitted narratives naturally are not as affecting as the scenes that Liutov has witnessed firsthand, for, more broadly, the vocabulary of a witness determines their ability to describe and communicate violence. Acts witnessed are distorted simply by the eyes and mind of the witness, who may misremember or misinterpret their observations. The subsequent distortions that result from verbal communication to another, from the act of writing, and from any following transcription necessarily alter the recounted event. Thus, the closer one is to the event or to the verbal or written manifestation of a capable witness's observation, the

closer one is to understanding of the act. Babel's persistent use of defamiliarization makes the recounted events in his narrative all the more distinct, and though this may well alter our perception of the acts, it nonetheless allows for a greater emotional effect and for greater attention to be paid to the violence itself.

Similar to "A Letter," in which violence is implied in a photograph, recounted to the narrator by another character, and distant from both the narrator and the reader, the story "Italian Sun" includes photographs which, though not containing explicit violence, are imbued with violent intention by a character through a related embedded text. In the story, Liutov secretly reads his comrade Sidorov's love letter. Liutov later watches Sidorov look at photographs, describing the scene to the reader:

He sat down at the table and opened the picture album of Rome. The magnificent book with its gilt-edged pages stood opposite his expressionless, olive-green face. The jagged ruins of the Capitol and the Coliseum, lit by the setting sun, glittered over his hunched back. The photograph of the royal family was also there. He had inserted it between the large, glossy pages. On a piece of paper torn from a calendar was the picture of the pleasant, frail King Victor Emmanuel with his black-haired wife, Crown Prince Umberto, and a whole brood of princesses. (Babel 226)

Though violence is not explicitly depicted in these photographs, it is present in the narrative that surrounds them. Sidorov has acquired these objects as physical manifestations of his desire to travel to Italy in order to kill the Italian king, proclaiming that "All they need is a few shots. One of these shots I shall fire. It is high time that their King be sent to join his ancestors." (Babel 225). At the same time, the photographs offer an escape to Sidorov; he claims that "The army bores me. I cannot ride because of my wound, which means I cannot fight." (Babel 225). Unable to take part in the cavalry's violent acts, Sidorov aims to exercise his violent potential through an act that, though more distanced from the victims than hacking, nonetheless physicalizes his desire.

The photograph of the royal family, at least in Liutov's description, provides Sidorov with easy targets. Like the Kurdyukov photograph, the males in the King's family are emphasized. However, the focus of the description is not physical: the King is frail, unlike the strong, massive, capable Kurdyukov men. As he is the projected future victim of violence instead of its possible perpetrator, the King's slowness and lack of exaggerated masculine traits are unsurprising: he does exude the physical potential to do violence. He and his son Umberto nevertheless stand out in this photograph because their names and titles are given, while the other family members are nameless. The Queen is mentioned not as such but as a wife. The princesses are a brood; this word, used for animal offspring and hatchlings, dehumanizes the group, casting them as unimportant and denying their dignity.¹³ This unimportance arises from comparison—an unnamed, unnumbered horde of animal young juxtaposed next to the named and titled King and Prince—and from their sheer multitude, which Babel undermines by expressing it in very few words. The photograph is, in a way, the preemptive memorialization of the unity to be disrupted, a portrait-chronicle and publicly available representation of the royal family. Though Sidorov is unrelated to the photographed family, he romanticizes Italy, its royal family, and its ruins. He plans to kill the King, yet he seems to take joy from the image of Rome. The “glittering” ruins in the “magnificent” book give a sense of grandeur and beauty which contrasts starkly with the drearier ruins to which Sidorov is accustomed. The fine landscape and relatively intact Italian locale—which is not comparably war-ravaged—appeal deeply to Sidorov. If this photograph is a memorialization, then it is a gleeful, preemptive memorialization, not of a close loved one, but of future victims, with expectation of the future disruption of their unity.

¹³ In the original Russian text: «ВЫВОДОК», meaning “brood,” “hatch,” or “litter;” this is related more to animal offspring than to human children (Babel, “Konarmiya” 255).

The royal family, literally torn from its context in a calendar, is severed from its historical and emotional context, as Sidorov is personally unconnected to their lives—he is not even their subject. He nonetheless symbolically violates their existence with his desire to kill, a desire manifest in his stark gaze at their photograph and at the pictures of Rome. Unfamiliar with their lives, as an acquirer Sidorov gives their pictorial representations his own personal meaning, exercising his power as observer. Just as Kurdyukov expresses his impossible desire for an unbroken family through his continued possession of his private photograph, Sidorov expresses his unrealistic desire for violence through his acquisition of a public photograph; though their distances from their photographs are different, neither gets closer to achieving his desire or to experiencing the reality of the depicted subject.

Yet the images we receive are not from these characters that possess the photographs. Liutov mediates our experience, and as the photographs are alien to him, they are described as alien to us. Liutov's ekphrasis extends beyond visual media, however—he describes the scene of Sidorov's gaze as though the subjects depicted in the pictures and Sidorov himself are in the same plane of reality: "The jagged ruins of the Capitol and the Coliseum, lit by the setting sun, glittered over his hunched back" (Babel 226).¹⁴ Babel obscures the light's origin, and although Sidorov is actually looking at the picture at night with the light of a candle and the setting sun is located in the pictures, Babel's phrasing makes it seem as though a sunset behind Sidorov gives light from a window and glitters in reflection on the glossy pages of his picture book. Equating Sidorov with the pictures he sees, Babel suggests that to Liutov both are merely photographic subjects—detailed depictions with an emotional and narrative allure, that nonetheless can be easily confined to the pages of a book and forgotten. The images can be experienced and given

¹⁴ In Russian this phrase is equally vague: «Над круглой его спиной блестели зубчатые развалины Капитолия и арена цирка, освещенная закатом» (Babel, "Konarmiya" 255).

attention for a brief moment, but Liutov does not have full context—he appropriates their images for his own interpretations and writings, only gaining partial contextual information, at least in this story, by violating Sidorov’s privacy and reading his personal unsent letter. With Liutov’s distance from the subjects he observes, snoops in on, and treats as aesthetic curiosities, Babel creates a parallel that applies directly to his readers.

Much like Liutov, it is easy for us to blur the boundary between what exists in our world and what only exists within the media we consume. It is similarly easy to treat the characters and events of *Red Cavalry* as episodic objects of our attention presented simply to be consumed and forgotten, instead of as fictionalized creations that nonetheless artistically represent real struggles and problems. These are not the real people and events of Babel’s life, but localized examples emblematic of greater trends. With *Red Cavalry*, Babel depicts the horrors of war, and as readers we are enticed to pay attention to his depiction of violence, which he defamiliarizes so that they can affect us with strength and memorability. Babel emphasizes the distancing nature of artistic mediums, suggesting that contextual knowledge cannot be grasped in its entirety.

Chapter 2

Seeing the Unheard: Voice and Silence in the *Red Cavalry* Cycle

Dreaming of a distant lover in the story “Zamosc,” Isaac Babel’s protagonist, Liutov, attempts to verbally express his longing for this woman, but he experiences a terrible inability:

I wanted to shout these words, but my jaws, clamped shut by a sudden frost, would not unclench...She pressed two worn five-kopec coins onto my lids and stuffed fragrant hay into the opening of my mouth. A moan tried in vain to flutter through my clenched jaws; my expiring pupils slowly rolled beneath the coppers coins; I could not unclasp my hands, and...I awoke. (Babel 312)

Unable to speak or move, Liutov is left without agency in his dream. Clamped shut by frost, stuffed with hay, and clenched, Liutov’s jaws are disabled by nature, by his dream lover, and by the dream itself. There is no reason for his suffering—the coins on his eyelids, a symbolic reference to death, emphasize the helplessness that pervades his dream. Yet Babel uses this kind of silencing as mirror for its equivalents outside of the dream world. Just as Liutov is muted, senselessly bound, and left for dead in his dream, so are the people caught in the middle of the Polish-Soviet war silenced, oppressed, and slaughtered. Liutov’s dream lets him symbolically impersonate these victims without experiencing their actual pain—he remains a distant observer of the horrors of war.

In this chapter I argue that Babel uses the trope of silence as a means of emphasizing the alienation of the victims and perpetrators of war’s crimes from each other and from the world. I assert that he uses includes metaphor, metonymy, and exaggeration to defamiliarize silent people, places, and things, thus creating textual scenarios in which quietness humanizes objects and dehumanizes people. The muteness of these people means, for Babel, that they cannot comment on their lot; they are unable to speak of their own silence. The narrative of *Red*

Cavalry, as well, includes gaps in its structure of which Liutov does not speak—these are established through the frequency of questions or letters left unanswered and through the wealth of information omitted from the text. Babel creates layer upon layer of silence, making each depiction unfamiliar in order to draw the reader’s attention to what is not said and what is not written. Though perpetually a witness to the Red Army’s brutal war crimes—crimes that leave their victims silent or dead—Liutov nonetheless attempts to break this silence.

In constructing these scenes in *Red Cavalry*, Babel often does not specifically assert the presence of silence, instead building the impression of a lack of communication and self-expression through metonymy, metaphor, and association. In “Gedali,” Liutov wanders through the town of Zhitomir, looking for “the timid star” of Judaism (Babel 227). He recounts a setting in his journey:

Here before me lies the bazaar, and the death of the bazaar. Slaughtered is the fat soul of abundance. Mute padlocks hang on the stores, and the granite of the streets is as clean as a corpse’s bald head. The timid star, blinks and expires. (Babel 227)

Here Babel creates a scene of silence, yet he distances the reader from both the silence itself and from the events that lead to it. The silence is metonymical and associative: it is not established explicitly, but through the image of “mute padlocks,” a phrase that anthropomorphizes these physical objects so that silence can be applied to the scene as a whole. Using the imagery of the dead bazaar, abundance slaughtered, and the granite streets “as clean as a corpse’s bald head,” and then juxtaposing them Liutov’s vision of the “timid star,” Babel anthropomorphizes parts of the setting and metaphorically associates the marketplace with emptiness and death. That death is itself an emptiness in numerous realms (such as physical or mental) only potentiates the association between the two, as does the simile presenting the clean streets as a corpse’s bald head. Both are visually bare, as well as deathly.

Babel repeatedly features this relationship—silence, emptiness, and death—throughout various stories, especially those which concern Jewish ghettos. Metonymy, which fills up an associative void, is an apt device for creating these scenes. In “The Rabbi,” Liutov is led to meet Zhitomir’s rabbi and Babel again uses metonymy to establish the extreme quietness of a scene, articulating everyday sounds in order to imply that the ghetto is nearly empty of life:

Gedali and I walked up the main street. White churches glittered in the distance like fields of buckwheat. A gun cart moaned around the corner. Two pregnant Ukrainian women came out through the gates of a house, their coin necklaces jingling, and sat down on a bench. A timid star flashed in the orange battles of the sunset, and peace, a Sabbath peace, descended on the slanted roofs of the Zhitomir ghetto. (Babel 234)

Glittering, moaning, jingling and flashing; all of these participles give the reader a sense of being jarred by reality and by repeated visual and aural stimuli. Though glittering and flashing are not auditory phenomena, the bursts of light they produce simulate the bursts of sound created by the gun cart and the necklace. These accumulated effects create an expectation of something more, an inkling of the sound-making or light-flashing object or person in the distance. Through these sounds and images Babel prepares the reader for a vision of the symbolic “timid star” and later, the people it represents. Though Babel does not explicitly mention silence, he creates through the separate, specific details of the scene. The jingling and moaning are not consistent sounds that dominate the soundscape—they are periodic sounds that stand out only because their surrounding environment (the Sabbath night in a war-ravaged, partially depopulated ghetto) is exceptionally quiet. This is where silence and emptiness come together. This is why the jingling of coins is distinctly audible to Liutov, even though it is not loud. By using the auditory details to shape and enliven the overall scene, Babel prepares the reader for a silence that, in his story cycle, is characteristic of the Zhitomir ghetto—and to which he connects this setting by mentioning the “timid star.”

This emptiness, death, and silence comprise “the wasteland of war,” as Liutov calls it later in “The Rabbi” (Babel 236). It is associated time and again with the timidity and humility of Jews.¹⁵ By comparing the Jew’s silence with the scenic quiet, Babel acknowledges the apocalyptic quality of contemporaneous Jewish life in Eastern Europe especially during times of war. And in this particular period of war, the life was especially harsh for Jews. From 1918 to 1920, over 1,500 pogroms took place in Ukraine alone—and this area includes many of the small town shtetls that Liutov and Babel experienced. Though the actual number of victims in these pogroms is unknown, sources estimates that between 50,000-200,000 Jews were killed, 200,000 were seriously injured, and tens of thousands more raped, widowed, or orphaned (Budnitskii 216-217). In addition, antisemitism was deeply ingrained in the Russian Imperial Army well before the Revolution, and it remained in the hearts of men in every army during the Revolution, the Russian Civil War, and the Polish-Soviet War. Pogroms were committed by every army: the Whites, the Polish, and the Ukrainian nationalists attacked Jews for many reasons, usually scapegoating the victims as spies or pro-Bolshevik enemies as a justification; the Red Army murdered Jews often during its retreats, claiming that they were counterrevolutionaries; Cossacks on both sides, especially Denikin’s forces and in Budyonny’s First Cavalry Army, notoriously carried out pogroms with a zealousness exceptional even among these antisemitic groups (Budnitskii 221-226; 245-249; 267-270; 391; 399-401). In such a hostile, hellish political environment, Babel’s assertion of this “wasteland of war” and of the timidity of the Jews almost

¹⁵ Note that I am not asserting an agreement with Lionel Trilling’s essay “The Forbidden Dialectic”. Trilling argues that Babel creates a binary dichotomy—the Jews are always timid, weak, feminine and to be pitied; the Cossacks are always brave, strong, masculine and to be envied—which underlies his every depiction of Jew and Cossack. I find this identification to be reductive, as these traits, while often present in Babel’s characters, are not as strictly delineated or definitive as Trilling maintains. In *Red Cavalry* (as in Babel’s whole oeuvre) Jews are not only and not always weak or pathetic, just as Cossacks are not always brave. Trilling simplifies nuanced, complex characters into two sharply defined categories—to an excessive extent. Thus, when I discuss this timidity and humility of the Jews, I do not refer to a timeless trait inherent in the group, but to the specific depiction of one Jewish community, from which we can gain some knowledge of the general, wider sociopolitical position of Jews in Eastern Europe, as reflected through Babel’s literary work.

seems understated. Yet his construction of this overwhelming silence through association and metonymy establishes the emptiness, bleakness, and horror of the Jewish life he depicts.

When Babel establishes silence through more direct means—like actually mentioning the quiet—he defamiliarizes silent people, places and things. Just as he anthropomorphizes inanimate objects in certain scenes for metonymic effect, Babel denies the identities of his silenced subjects, preferring always to depict them in unfamiliar, distorted ways. In contrast to his anthropomorphized, animalized, or animated objects, Babel casts humans as animals or as objects. Thus silence becomes an act of transfiguration, to which nothing is exempt. In “Crossing the River Zbrucz,” after Liutov has entered the ransacked house in which he is billeted, he orders its Jewish inhabitants to clean their quarters. Babel, through Liutov, describes their movements:

They hop around on their felt soles and pick up the broken pieces of porcelain from the floor. They hop around in silence, like monkeys, like Japanese acrobats in a circus, their necks swelling and twisting. (Babel 204)

Though the reader does not yet know that Liutov is Jewish (this passage occurs in the first story of the cycle), on a second reading it is startling to see him refer to his fellow believers as metaphorically subhuman. His simile is likely unrepresentative of racial or religious views; it is a poetic device, not a program. Yet the Volhynian Jews are denied any degree of similarity to Liutov when he dehumanizes them. Though Babel has Liutov compare the family to Japanese acrobats as well, this does not negate the previous comparison. The use of a two similes in a row, in which the same subject is indecisively defined, increases the depicted distance between Liutov’s perception of the family and the reality of their identities. Through Liutov’s dehumanizing expression, Babel defamiliarizes the family, drawing the reader’s attention to their frantic, intensely physical movement, as well as to Liutov’s own adoption of the hostility that

Cossacks feel toward their Jewish victims.¹⁶ This dehumanization reflects a mindset of devaluing others which underlies the prevailing mentality of the oppressor, and makes their acts of violence easier to carry out and justify. Liutov has here internalized the oppressor's vocabulary of dominance. Babel distinguishes the victims through dehumanization and through their silence: though their necks grotesquely twist and swell, they do not vocally express pain in howls, screams, or with words. And without verbalization, the family cannot assert their grievances against the armies who have ruined their land, slaughtered their kin, and seized their meagre supplies of food.

As the Jewish family is deprived of speech, Babel applies this silencing to their land as a whole. Earlier, in "Crossing the River Zbrucz," Babel transforms their region—a much larger and more abstract entity than a human being—into an embodiment of the silent acceptance of one's fate:

Silent Volhynia is turning away, Volhynia is leaving, heading into the pearly white fog of the birch groves, creeping through the flowery hillocks, and with weakened arms entangling itself in the underbrush of hops. (Babel 203)

The entire geographical and cultural mass of Volhynia comes to life; at first the reader may be perplexed whether it is a human or an animal. Yet it has become something unfamiliar. In Babel's description, Volhynia becomes a fleeing victim, a physical being that does not (or cannot) speak of its troubles. In a literal sense, the land itself cannot voice the atrocities committed within its bounds. In his metaphor, though, Babel uses figurative language to make Volhynia's passive stance mirror the region's geopolitical lot in the Polish-Soviet War and the

¹⁶ I discuss Liutov's conflicted attitude toward other Jews and his adoption of Cossack biases more extensively in my third chapter.

more specific, various fates of its peoples as victims of the military conflict.¹⁷ By focusing on the gesture of turning away, he underlines the region's inability to escape or ignore the marauding armies' atrocities. The Volhynian peoples' suffering is at the core of this trope. When Babel metaphorically takes away Volhynia's voice, he represents how its people lose their voices.

This silence, so often paired with physical emptiness and violence, is tied too with death. The Jewish ghetto is, time and again, the target of the violence that maims and kills its inhabitants. Its empty and noiseless streets provide a deathly, pale picture of war. But even in battle itself, Babel exaggerates this deathly silence. In "The Commander of the Second Brigade," Captain Kolesnikov is promoted to the titular command post and immediately leads his troops into battle. Remaining at camp, Liutov tells of how "pointless shrapnel burst above the forest. And we heard the great, silent skirmish" (Babel 247).¹⁸ Exaggerated yet simple, this statement is self-negating, contradicting itself several times over. Calling a skirmish "great" is odd, as it is normally a smaller engagement around the scene of a larger battle, and is not massive in scale. Even more out of place, the mentioned skirmish is silent—an unlikely proposition, considering the noise of guns and artillery, and the moans of the dead and wounded. Yet somehow Liutov hears this skirmish that does not have sound. At least one, if not all, of these words—"heard," "great," "silent," "skirmish"—must be exaggerated or ironic. By creating such a contradictory set of words, Babel makes their combination distinct, defamiliarizing the action of the skirmish.

¹⁷ Though the Polish Army was not passive, ultimately managing to repel the Soviet invasion, this story occurs as the invasion begins, well before the retreat of the Red Army. With this personified Volhynia, Babel represents the people caught in this war—specifically the Jews mistreated by both the Polish and Red Armies.

¹⁸ In Russian, there is one notable difference: «Ненужная шрапнель лопнула над лесом. И мы слышали великое безмолвие рубки» (Babel, "Konarmiya 273). «Рубки» translates to "cuttings" or "slashings;" a more accurate word for skirmish would be «пестрелка», which relates more directly to the act of shooting. Nonetheless, in both versions, shrapnel bursts, soldiers die, and the violence that occurs is not a grand battle; it would still be difficult to imagine a series of "cuttings" as completely soundless.

He emphasizes that this violence is pointless and mournful, and that the main result of such an event is more silence—the silence of death.

For Babel, this contrast of silence and noise accentuates the unfamiliarity of death, even to those who see it regularly. Each death still may surprise and affect both Liutov and the reader. In “Salt,” a group of Cossacks allow onto their train a woman with a baby in her arms. Discovering that the baby is a sack of salt dressed in rags, the Cossacks’ captain, Nikita Balmashov, throws the woman off the train and shoots her. In this story, Babel uses instances of sound and silence as small structural hints, which are inconspicuously built into different paragraphs as seemingly ornamental bricks of scene setting. The story, narrated by Balmashov, begins on a “quiet glorious night,” on a train not yet in motion (Babel 273). This silence is broken by the bells ringing prior to the train’s departure, the Cossacks’ yelling, and then the sound of the train’s movement: “the wheels clattered and clattered” (Babel 274). As these are unexaggerated examples of actual noise, they contrast with the initial stillness of the story, though they do not seem notable. These details however, can be identified as the thematic foundation of “Salt,” for they point to and prefigure the story’s central narrative turn—namely, that the woman’s baby has made no sound throughout the course of the night not due to the deafening loudness of the train or because of her baby is sedated, but because the baby is entirely absent and has never existed in reality—the woman holds a disguised sack of salt. Babel uses the earlier constant noise as a point of contrast with the baby’s silence and the unfamiliarity of a baby that does not cry. Balmashov’s revelation is, however, preceded by one metaphorical, alliterative reference to sound: “the red drummers drummed in the dawn on their red drums” (Babel 275). Though the other instances are literal, this metaphorical drumroll of dawn brings the true alienating nature of silence back to the narrative, which is continued when that silence

reveals the inconsistency between the image of ‘the baby’ and its actual identity as an object. There is no dehumanization here, only the narrative assumption of the baby’s humanity, which is shown to be false. What is thought to be a person is literally an object. Silence again leads to violence and death.

With this empty and deathly silence, Babel defamiliarizes the representations of those that cannot speak. Yet Babel’s text itself is filled with silences and gaps in communication, which are much harder to see because they are the silences of omission built into the structure of the narrative. This is reflected in the greater sociopolitical sphere by the ever-present silence about silence, the recursive fact that those who are silenced cannot speak of their muteness. Such voicelessness is not, in this case, a reflection of state censorship of the victims as much as an effect of the horrors of war. In *Red Cavalry*, this silence is not imposed by war, but is established by the narrator himself, and by the one-sidedness of his narrative. I attribute it to Liutov over Babel, as Babel was relatively free to write about the Polish-Soviet war without being censored extensively, at least before the 1930s.¹⁹ Babel, through Liutov creates this silence in *Red Cavalry* by omitting information from his story cycle, fragmenting his narrative, and withholding answers from his characters in dialogue and from his readers through his text.

The greater narrative as a story cycle necessarily creates structural partitions. Babel fragments his narrative through the omission of complete sets of embedded texts, such as letters. Much of the correspondence in *Red Cavalry* is partial; Babel only shows a single letter or text in

¹⁹ Soviet censorship in the 1920s was rather light. Babel’s first edition of *Red Cavalry* required only thirty corrections; critics were concerned more with his absurd, insulting depiction of certain named Red Army officers and generals than with his description of the victims of Revolutionary violence. Babel altered several character names and deleted parts of certain scenes (which have not surfaced in later editions), but he was not required to lessen or eliminate very much violence. *Red Cavalry* was not subjected to more extensive revisions until the 1930s (Ermolaev 13, 24, 31, 59).

a larger correspondence, omitting the recipient's reply.²⁰ In "A Letter," discussed in depth in my previous chapter, Kurdyukov's mother, Evdokiya Fyodorovna, is left outside the reach of the narrative. Her suffering is not seen, but some of its pieces can be collected—her husband and sons have fled, some have killed each other, and she has learned of all these potentially life-altering events well after the fact, by means of Kurdyukov's letter, which does not show concern for any pain she might be experiencing. By omitting her reply, Babel turns the reader's attention away from her suffering at home, as she is physically distanced from the violence of this war. Similarly, the story "Treason" is a reply to a Comrade Burdenko's investigation of Nikita Balmashov's conduct. Yet the reader is given only Balmashov's testimony—Burdenko's initial questioning document is not included, nor is an account of the consequences for Balmashov. Along with Sidorov's letter to his lover Victoria in "Italian Sun," and Balmashov's letter to a distant editor in "Salt," these letters voice the narratives of single characters—and leave the recipients voiceless, at least in Babel's narrative space. Babel's omissions here emphasize the power of the narrator and compiler, who may pick and choose narratives at will. By structurally silencing characters through the omission of other narrative parts, Babel draws attention to the silenced, making these specific instances of silence more forceful and prominent. And by later including a piece of a letter from 1820 that Liutov finds in an estate in "Berestechko," Babel asserts that these fragmentary narratives are not confined to a single time period. In fact, he implies that one side of a correspondence may be all the compiler finds, and that for every narrative received or discovered, there are always other characters whose suffering remains untold.

²⁰ Babel does include two sides of a correspondence in "The Continuation of the Story of a Horse," but this is an exception less indicative of *Red Cavalry* than the more numerous examples of epistolary omission.

Furthermore, even in the narrative that is given, omissions occur. Through the presentation of a set of related yet temporally separate stories, Babel fragments time itself, including only snippets of Liutov's experiences. Liutov offers scant information about the events that occur between stories—months pass in war, yet rarely is the reader told how much time has elapsed since the last story or what, if anything, has happened in the meantime. Instead, stories often begin as immediate accounts of movement without temporal details, such as "I'm making my way to Leshniv, where the division staff has set up quarters," or "We were advancing from Khotin to Berestechko," from the stories "Prishchepa" and "Berestechko," respectively (Babel 260; 270). Here and elsewhere Liutov gives information about where he is heading, but neither relays when this is happening nor how any of these movements came to be. The troops simply approach a new city; the end of the previous story and this new goal are not connected. When Liutov does refer to time, the reference is unspecific. For example, stories such as "Crossing the River Zbrucz" begin simply "today," but their events are not situated in dated time (Babel 203). Others like "The Church in Novograd" and "Italian Sun" happen "yesterday," again, without a date given (Babel 205; 223). The time given is always relative, never dated, and constantly vague, if it is given at all. With an unsure timescale and unclear temporal relations between stories, Babel fragments Liutov's perception of events. Every report is from a witness who has just seen the events described; the narrator is always in the moment or close to it. This relativistic sense of time establishes the consistent nature of brutal warfare: the scenes we see are isolated and fragmented because the horrific events they portray could occur on any other day, and even if altered, they would still suffice to get at the reality of living through war.

In addition to creating fragmentary narratives, Babel distances his narrator from the text. Though the reader learns of most events through Liutov's mediation, Liutov is aloof from the

reader. He does not offer many biographical details of life before this campaign, mentioning his family and occupational history only in passing. In “After the Battle,” when the reader finds out that Liutov rode into battle with an unloaded gun, it is not from narrative exposition or by the narrator’s admission, but in dialogue. Ivan Akinfiev berates him: “You rode in the attack...but didn’t put any cartridges in” (Babel 326). Babel allows Liutov to guard his own personal information, letting other characters tell the reader about him. In the same way, Liutov does not even mention his own name; it is only revealed as “Liutov” in dialogue in the latter half of the cycle in “Squadron Commander Trunov” (Babel 292). The name is spoken only several times more in stories closer to the end. Liutov’s first name and patronymic—“Kirill Vasilievich”—likewise, are given just one time, very late in the cycle in “Czesniki” (Babel 322). By omitting Liutov’s name until stories near the end of *Red Cavalry*, Babel muddles the reader’s perception of him as a narrator, a protagonist, and an onlooker. By offering no expository introduction of Liutov in any form, Babel places the reader immediately in the middle of the narrative action. Thus, Babel obscures Liutov’s character by withholding information—further distancing the reader from the narrative.

Through this process of distancing, the stories we read become unfamiliar and mysterious, as we are left to piece the plot together and create our own meaning. The gaps in the narrative, however, cannot be ignored. We experience a number of scenes, most of which Babel uses to show Liutov as a nonviolent, meek man. But the war is much longer and larger than these scenes, and Liutov has undoubtedly witnessed much more brutality, perhaps even committing other, unmentioned acts of violence. Though we see his actions and his characterizing traits, though we do receive vivid depictions of the brutality of war, we cannot know of this character’s experience in its entirety; the medium of the story cycle here precludes ultimate knowledge. I do

not assert that Liutov is necessarily untruthful or that his accounts are unreliable, but that the narrative cannot be complete, as it depicts a fragmented narrative of a much larger war. Yet such total knowledge is impossible; even those who witness war only see localized, partial iterations of its violence. Liutov, then, is like the reader—always bereft of full information.

With only partial knowledge, and in the role of onlooker, Liutov refrains from action. When Liutov is met with explicit appeals or rhetorical questions from other characters during their dialogues, Babel omits his reply—usually because the question asked is unanswerable. Yet we do not know if Liutov simply does not answer, or if his answer is just not included in the text. In “Crossing the River Zbrucz,” the omission occurs because the question is the story’s final line; the Jewish woman who houses Liutov shows him her dead father and demands: “I want you to tell me where one could find another father like my father in all the world!” (Babel 204) This demand is rhetorical; it is impossible either to satisfactorily answer or to fulfill the woman’s request. Through its placement at story’s end, Babel bolsters the question’s emotional effect on the reader and emphasizes the terrible nature of warfare, which takes away, irreversibly and irreplaceably, the people close to its victims. Liutov may well give an answer or attempt to say something, but as far as the reader is concerned, he remains silent; Babel includes no answer in the text, and although the woman returns in “Italian Sun,” her father is gone forever. Even if some answer was included in the text, this answer would help no one and could not satisfy the suffering woman, as her longing for her father cannot be fulfilled. In addition, though Liutov represents an oppressive power structure, it is not the structure that has perpetrated this violence: the woman’s father is killed by the Polish, not the Red Army. Thus, Liutov easily remains an observer, and although we do not know his response, this is because our narrator too does not know how to respond.

Such rhetorical questions, engendered by impassioned anguish, are impossible to answer in a satisfactory manner; therefore, no answer is given in the text. Whether they are addressed to another person, to God, to fate, or to death itself, these pleas neither offer solace nor effect change. The woman's question to Liutov addresses a specific concern based upon the woman's personal experience of brutal violence; this experience and the hopelessness expressed by the question asked can be widened to encompass the entire Jewish community, as the specific incident here is indicative of daily living for Jews in the midst of the Polish-Soviet war and, more generally, in the Pale of Settlement. In "The Cemetery in Kozin," Liutov describes the eponymous location, the resting place of three hundred years' worth of shtetl Jews. Written on the sepulcher of four generations of the family of one Rabbi Asriil is the appeal: "O death, O mercenary, O covetous thief, why did you not, albeit one single time, have mercy upon us?" (Babel 259) Again, Babel ends his story with an open-ended demand, strengthening its emotional appeal to the reader by its conclusive placement. Naturally, this question cannot be answered: it is an address to a personified death. It is a request that is not even spoken, but written into stone, more an expression of the Kozin Jewish community's unending grief than a reflection of a desire for an answer. And after this plea, Babel does not give any theodical explanation in *Red Cavalry*—he does not attempt to explain evil. His Jews do not suffer to be led to goodness, or to atone for their sins, or even because God wills it: they simply suffer because suffering is an inescapable quality of human life.

When Babel has Liutov give justifications for the Jews' suffering in the Polish-Soviet war, these assertions are based not on religious arguments but on rote Communist dogma. In conversation with the titular character in the story "Gedali," Liutov responds to his questions without giving actual, satisfying answers. Gedali asks: "So let's say we say 'yes' to the

Revolution. But does that mean that we're supposed to say 'no' to the Sabbath?" (Babel 228)

The only answer Liutov has in regards to the compatibility of traditional religion and revolution is that "the sun cannot enter eyes that are squeezed shut...but we shall rip open those closed eyes!" (Babel 228) Liutov speaks in ideological rhetoric, offering nothing concrete to Gedali. Implied in his answer is a goal of the atheist Bolshevik state: to eliminate organized religion, replacing it with loyalty to the Revolution, and to open the people's eyes to their ideological imperative. However, Liutov only declares the revolutionary phrases, refusing to explain himself or adequately assuage Gedali's concerns. When Gedali continues, he laments the requisition of his beloved gramophone (a symbolic silencing of his individual expression). He also questions the Revolution's assertion that he does not know what he loves and wonders why that the Revolution must shoot, to which Liutov replies: "The Revolution cannot not shoot, Gedali...because it is the Revolution" (Babel 228). This tautological explanation attempts to form a sort of theodicy based on Communist ideology; beneath Liutov's phrases exists the idea that the Revolution must cause suffering in order to bring about its utopian promises. But this idea fails to convince, because it remains on the periphery of the conversation. Liutov offers his reflexive phrase, but still does not explain to Gedali why the Revolution must take his gramophone, and more, why the Revolution asserts it must take whatever its proponents please. Liutov gives answers, but they are short dogmatic answers that do not get to the core of the struggle between religion and ideology that occurs in the world and within Liutov himself.

This is why when Gedali asks an even more difficult question, Liutov is struck by the sheer impossibility of answering it. Gedali reasons out that:

A good man does good deeds. The Revolution is the good deed done by good men. But good men do not kill. Hence the Revolution is done by bad men. But the Poles are also

bad men. Who is going to tell Gedali which is the Revolution and which the counterrevolution... Woe onto us, where is the sweet Revolution? (Babel 228-229)

Liutov does not respond because he cannot respond to Gedali's logic or its conclusion. Gedali is concerned with means, not ends, while Liutov's statements supporting the Revolution seem predicated upon asserting its necessity, regardless of the means' morality. That Liutov does not tell Gedali that the Revolution's goal justifies its brutalities shows that Liutov is unsure about the ideology he attempts to deliver. Liutov's inadequacy at expressing just where "the sweet Revolution" is for Gedali emphasizes the Revolution's uncompromising nature; it is not the path by which the Jews can escape their suffering. The Revolution only cares for itself, deeming the destruction of people and places unimportant when compared to its great utopian end goal. For the Jews caught in between, the Red Army is effectively no different from the Polish Army. These Jews are dehumanized and denied actual justice, just as the man who represents the oppressive regime that triggers and perpetuates this violence stays silent and passive. Their pleas for mercy and for explanation are left unanswered, or are answered with violence, and their plight is ignored by the Polish and Red Armies.²¹ Even when they express themselves verbally, the Jewish victims are not acknowledged by their oppressors. By depriving Liutov of actual, satisfying answers to Gedali's questions, Babel reflects Liutov's fragmented role as revolutionary: he parrots phrases, but he does not do the actions he claims to support, and he cannot justify revolutionary violence, externally to others or internally within himself.

After Liutov's lackluster responses to Gedali's questions, Babel shifts the power balance of the scene, making Liutov ask Gedali a question. Liutov wonders "Where can I find some

²¹ As Jews were both the main commercial class and the radical intelligentsia of Poland, both armies in the Polish-Soviet War persecuted them, although for differing reasons. The Red Army was friendly to the radicals, while hostile to the commercial interests. The Polish Army, conversely, attacked the intelligentsia while favoring the merchants, who were linked with the Polish gentry and middle class (Davies 240).

Jewish biscuits, a Jewish glass of tea, and a piece of that retired God in the glass of tea?” (Babel 229) Though the “piece of that retired God” is figurative, it refers to the food that represents Liutov’s Jewish identity. This question is answerable, as it a practical request, but the answer is unsatisfactory. Gedali, unlike Liutov, explains why the request cannot be fulfilled: he says that the people in the tavern next door do not serve or eat food, but only weep (Babel 229). Though Gedali’s phrasing exaggerates the expression of the people’s woes instead of detailing why they weep, the reader is actually told what needs to be known. The tavern is in the middle of a war-torn ghetto that has been devastated by the Polish and strained to accommodate the occupying Russians, so it cannot be open. The very Revolution that Liutov tries to make palatable to Gedali makes his request impossible, through the violence of war and oppression. And symbolically, Gedali asserts that Liutov cannot find or reclaim a Jewish identity: he has become part of a violent state machinery, so he is complicit in its acts. He is at once perpetrator, victim, and observer, and thus does not know how to orient himself. Through Liutov’s replies, Babel shows that Liutov cannot justify violence. He may attempt this task, but does not know enough to do so; his information, like his answers, is always inadequate.

Liutov learns to take violence for granted; rarely again does he attempt to justify its perpetration, instead remaining silent. Yet this imposed silence is not a trait found exclusively in the victims and observers of the Cossacks’ violence; it is applicable to any victim of violence, including the Cossacks. In “Crossing the River Zbrucz,” as Liutov falls asleep he dreams of Savitsky reprimanding a brigade commander:

[Savitsky] shoots two bullets into his eyes. The bullets pierce the brigade commander’s head, and his eyes fall to the ground. “Why did you turn back the brigade?” Savitsky, the commander of the Sixth Division, shouts at the wounded man. (Babel 204)

This question is specific and focused—it is possible, if not easy, to answer. However, it is not meant to be answered. Savitsky has shot out the brigade commander's eyes, piercing his head; by killing the brigade commander, he has taken away any chance of a response. Though Liutov asserts that Savitsky yells “at the wounded man,” this identification is metonymical.²² The man's wounds, for Liutov, define him. Instead of calling him “the dead man”—which would be more accurate, as bullets have pierced the commander's skull through his eye holes—Liutov refers to him as though he may still be alive, defamiliarizing him. Therefore the reader initially assumes that an answer may still be given. The brigade commander, however, has been doubly handicapped; he has been blinded by Savitsky and muted by death. And more, the truth of his voicelessness is denied because Liutov omits direct mention of death or muteness, suggesting the possibility of speech and life, but hiding the man's true physical state in the details given. That this all is part of Liutov's dream in only increases the alienation of the brigade commander: as a dream character, he is only an emotionless visual representation of a man. He has no agency and cannot have a voice. Liutov here humanizes an image in his head, creating a picture of ultimate voiceless that is quickly glossed over.

The dream image, however, accurately reflects the reality of war—anyone can become a victim. This is especially true for the subordinates of the cruel Savitsky: Liutov's dream figure of Savitsky acts just as the real life Savitsky does. In “My First Goose,” he orders his inferior Ivan Chesnokov to advance his division and destroy nearby enemy forces,

The destruction of which...I hold the selfsame Chesnokov completely responsible for. Noncompliance will incur the severest punitive measures, in other words I will gun him down on the spot, a fact that I am sure that you, Comrade Chesnokov, will not doubt... (Babel 230)

²² This phrase is translated literally. In the Russian, it is the same: «кричит раненому Савицкий» (Babel, “Konarmiya” 236).

Chesnokov does not reply. In fact, he never appears again; after Savitsky's words, Babel makes no mention of Chesnokov leaving. The omission of Chesnokov's answer and of any detail of the rest of his life from the narrative nearly means that he is a character who exists simply to be ordered. But he has no choice in the matter. Chesnokov is given an unfair task with the terms stacked against him: failure to destroy the enemy is redefined as noncompliance—which he does not have complete control over. He can only answer in the affirmative; it is safe to assume that Savitsky actually may gun him down on the spot for any disobedience. Chesnokov is left without agency, given no options by Savitsky, and afforded only a brief mention by Babel, who does not let the Cossack speak or play any sort of important role. His voiceless compliance with authority does not ensure him life; like the Jewish pogrom victims he is doomed to suffering and death. Serving an uncaring and cruel military power, Chesnokov must act if he does not want to become its next victim.

Also faced with the possibility of violence no matter his position, Liutov clings to the role of onlooker. He acknowledges the horrors of war, attempting to give voice to them. His movement from observer to actor is, however, rarely effective. Babel displays this shift in a structural, symbolic manner, as in the story "Evening," which begins with a second-person prose ode to the statutes of the Russian Communist Party, which have "transformed three bachelors their hearts filled with the passion of Ryazan Jesuses, into editors of the *Krasny Kavalerist*" (Babel 277). The reader is led to expect that the story will concern these three men, who Babel shortly thereafter identifies as Galin, Slinkin, and Sychev. The story continues with Babel's description of Galin's desire for Irina, their train's washerwoman. Except for a few uses of pronouns such as "our," the first half of "Evening" is a third person narrative. However, the pronouns are used generally—the deeming of the "Polit-otdel train" as "our[s]" does not

necessarily mean that the narrator is in the story, just that he identifies the train as something common to his group (Babel 277). It is only in the middle, when Irina and her lover, the cook, depart, that Liutov reveals himself:

They closed the kitchen door, leaving Galin alone, with the moon hovering high above like a nagging splinter. I sat opposite the moon on the embankment by the sleeping pond, wearing my spectacles. (Babel 278)

Asserting both his and Galin's positions in relation to the moon, Liutov shows that he was present the entire time, and having thus viewed the action of the story, albeit from a physical distance, was able to narrate the scene to the reader. Babel alters the reader's perception of the narrator's perspective: Liutov is transformed from an omniscient narrator whose identity is unclear into a dramatized narrator who later transcends his silence, telling Galin "I am sick, my end is near, I am tired of life in the Red Cavalry!" (Babel 278) This statement is a reflection of Liutov's personal pain and unhappiness—and not a moral assertion against the Red Cavalry's brutality—but it expresses progress in the relation between silence and observation that Babel thematically constructs. By moving away from a general omniscient narrator and toward Liutov's specific point of view, and from a narrator who watches without being involved to a narrator who watches and interacts with the characters he observes, Babel lets the observer become an actor. This movement from silence to speech destroys observational distance, and asserts Liutov's potential as someone who can speak up, even if he initially is silent and distant.

Potentially able to break his silence, Liutov nonetheless is entirely ineffective. He attempts to occupy a more active, vocal role several times, but does not succeed. In "At Saint Valentine's," he writes a report detailing Cossack abuses of a church that leads to a military tribunal for the guilty parties, yet the church is also subsequently closed (Babel 289). The tribunal potentially causes good, but the closure of the church deprives its people of their

religious center. In the story “Squadron Commander Trunov,” Liutov threatens to report the prisoner-of-war-slaughtering-Trunov to headquarters, to which Trunov replies “At headquarters they’ll chalk it up to the rotten life we live” (Babel 295).²³ Though Trunov is killed shortly thereafter, his statement touches upon a harsh truth: even if Liutov does report abuses of power to his superiors, there is no guarantee any action will be taken. As he is member of the Red Army, Liutov is part of the institution of oppression. There is only so far that his attempts to give voice to crimes of war can resound; he is nearly powerless.

Yet in contrast to Liutov’s inability to effectively break the silence as a character, he is able to wield much more power in his role as narrator of Babel’s narrative. Though Liutov cannot give voice to the silenced, he observes their suffering and does not let himself forget it. What he sees affects him deeply; in “The Road to Brody,” he maintains that “The chronicle of our everyday crimes oppresses me as relentlessly as a bad heart” (Babel 237). Liutov’s experiences stay with him, affecting his inner life, as Babel’s similar wartime experiences presumably stayed with him, oppressing him and motivating him to voice his conscience. Though Liutov and Babel are not perfectly interchangeable copies of each other, Liutov is Babel’s tool, a literary representation that Babel can use to show the reader the horrors of war and to express the internal conflicts of those who witness unimaginable atrocities. Babel’s needs to give voice to his conscience and to discuss the suffering of the silenced that he has seen are met through a textual medium. His experiences as text can be more rapidly and widely disseminate than reports or oral accounts, and therefore can have more of an effect on society. Though the story cycle is fictional, it is nonetheless expressive of the harsh realities of war. Specifics may be altered or exaggerated, but this is not non-fiction, and the pathos of suffering is

²³ Executing prisoners of war was, however, not uncommon during the war. The Soviets shot captured officers and often slit the throats of priest and landlords, just as the Polish also frequently shot captured commissars (Davies 38).

more important to Babel than a direct and simple condemnation of the perpetrators. Rather, suffering is universal. Perpetrator and victim are not mutually exclusive categories, but sides of all people, especially in war. Though Liutov does not effectively break his silence, Babel does—giving a voice to the silent sufferers through his fictionalized narrative, and expressing artistic variants of his own internal struggles as a complicit observer of violence.

Chapter 3

Distancing the Self: Babel's Narrator as a Witness

In Isaac Babel's story "My First Goose," his protagonist, Liutov, is initiated into the Cossack social circle of his military companions by his completion of a violent act for their approval. Formally assigned to Savitsky's Sixth Division as divisional staff, Liutov is immediately singled out for his education and affiliation with the intelligentsia, so in order to counter the Cossacks' ridicule, Liutov decisively acts:

I saw someone's saber lying nearby. A haughty goose was waddling...I caught the goose and forced it to the ground, its head cracking beneath my boot, cracking and bleeding. Its white neck lay stretched out in the dung, and the wings folded down over the slaughtered bird. (Babel 232)

Having committed an act of brutal violence against the goose, Liutov is now welcomed by the Cossacks, called "brother" and invited to share their food (Babel 233). With this immediate shift in Liutov's status, Babel asserts that the primary entrance ritual into Cossack society is not only the perpetration of a violent act, but a violent act against the helpless. The Cossacks respect one's assertion of strength over others, regardless of its context. Though Liutov's act is relatively minor in scale—he kills to eat—it is nonetheless graphic and committed not with the useful saber, but with Liutov's own hands and feet. This refusal to use the more efficient instrument of violence to kill, along with the blood and dung that Liutov encounters, show to the Cossacks that Liutov is willing to undergo foulness in order to be accepted. This eagerness to go out of one's way to commit violence in a more intensive physical manner than necessary, as well as the acceptance of the dirty and profane, is essential to the Cossack worldview. As the Cossack Pavlichenko later asserts in his eponymous story, one must "spend a good hour...kicking the enemy" instead of shooting him, because "with a shot you cannot get to a man's soul" (Babel

258). Such a sentiment represents a core facet of Cossack values: direct and unneeded brutality both thrills the perpetrator and gives him the illusion that the knowledge he gains is the knowledge of life. For the Cossacks, this knowledge is that one has inflicted pain. In their world, the perpetrator feels his own agency by means of the effect he has on the victim, whose suffering is graphic, graspable and concrete. For Liutov, however, the knowledge that comes from witnessing pain is not so existentially comforting. As a member of a different social class and a representative of a superior cultural milieu, he finds the act of violence itself painful solely because he is aware of its existence, regardless of whether he sees or hears about it or commits it. In a passage indicative of his attitude toward violence, after slaughtering the goose, Liutov dreams that his “heart, crimson with murder, screeched and bled” (Babel 233). Though he has killed, Liutov in his role as perpetrator find himself to be a sufferer as well, racked with a guilty conscience that a Cossack could and would not have.

In this chapter, I will examine Liutov’s shifting self-identities as they relate to his observation, involvement, and recounting of violent acts. Violence as an entry ritual is something that Liutov may approximate, yet he cannot commit acts of violence as the Cossacks do, that is, with confidence and viciousness. He is unable both to kill the enemy and to attack the innocent. He cannot carry out a minor act of violence with the certainty and passion of a Cossack—one who considers violence part of his lifestyle. This inability proves that Liutov does not fully embody a Cossack identity. Babel is well aware that his narrator’s very association with the Cossacks during a time of war affects his relation to the Jewish people he encounters, and leads to him adopting distanced attitudes toward his religious brethren. For even though Liutov never becomes a true member of the Cossack group, he still represents this group in his relations with Jews and Poles, who see him as part of this oppressive power—as a man complicit in its brutal,

inhuman acts. The purpose of this chapter, however, is not to insist upon Liutov's identity as shaped or dominated by any group he belongs to. Nor is its goal to assert the preponderance of any single cultural identity over all others. Rather, I am presenting Liutov as a man placed in between social barriers, and thus as someone who has to adopt shifting identities that depend upon his company and surroundings. What may be seen as Liutov's ultimate identity comes through in Babel's portrayal of his relation to the act of violence. My study of character is focused on how Babel uses Liutov's self-identification as a device with which he can physically and metaphorically distance Liutov from perpetrators and victims alike as he witnesses, hears about, and commits acts of violence. More generally, I aim to emphasize how Babel uses Liutov's shifting identities as a device to portray avoidance of complicity during times of war and mass terror.

Babel's depiction of Cossack culture, while strongly influenced by his own stint in the Red Army with a Cossack cavalry unit, is nonetheless rooted in the Russian literary tradition. Mythologized as a drunken, savage, and superhuman warrior, the Cossack was to many writers a romantic figure who existed on the geographical and social margins of the Russian world. This kind of character was both Russian and "other," both a seeker of freedom and a tool of repression. Moreover, he always appealed to the literary elite as a symbol of the old Russian soul, of Slavic strength, or as a foil to meeker characters (Kornblatt 13-17). The values of this mythic hero, in the eyes of the non-Cossack writers who mythologized him, are epitomized in Lev Tolstoy's novel *The Cossacks*, written in 1863. This literary prototype is especially pertinent to Babel, as he deeply respected Tolstoy and took influence from him. In *The Cossacks*, Tolstoy's third-person omniscient narrator asserts that the group's chief characteristics are "the love of freedom, of leisure, of plunder and of war" and that a Cossack "is inclined to hate the less

dzhigit hillsman who maybe has killed his brother than the solider quartered on him to defend his village” (Tolstoy 178). Raised on the borderlands of Russia in a community constantly at war with Chechens, the typical Cossack is primed to value violence. He thinks that “a Russian peasant is a foreign, savage, despicable creature” and “acknowledges none but Cossacks as human beings, and despises everyone else” (Tolstoy 178). Developed through generations of violent conflict, these cultural values center around a person’s behavior; though the Cossacks do consider their ethnic group superior to others, Tolstoy asserts, they feel a closeness and respect for those who share their values, even if they are ethnically different. The Cossacks value bravery in physical combat over all other concerns. Thus, their enemy is laudable if heroic and tough, and despicable if cowardly and nonviolent. Violence, essential to the survival and livelihood of Cossacks, becomes for them the most important social marker of a person.

Concurrently with the importance of violence and heroism to the Cossack myth, their main form of social advancement is, for Tolstoy’s narrator, merit-based—directly dependent upon one’s actions. The Cossack Lukashka’s trajectory exemplifies this facet of their culture. He is an ethnic Cossack, but his relatively high and respected social position is a direct result of his actions and his character traits. His behavior indicates his potential as someone who will act and lead the Cossacks in the future. He is initially brave and calm:

Though he had only lately joined the Cossacks at the front, it was evident from the expression on his face and the calm assurance of his attitude that he had already acquired the somewhat proud and warlike bearing peculiar to Cossacks and to men generally who continually carry arms. (Tolstoy 187)

Already possessing the physical stance, appearance, and attitude of a Cossack, Lukashka naturally fits in. He excels beyond this surface level identification, though—his manual skills are enough that “every kind of work prospered under Lukashka’s fingers” (Tolstoy 191). Lukashka

confirms this general assertion of his ability to act successfully with his well-targeted violent actions: he kills boars and birds to feed his community. His killing of a pheasant is a prototype of Liutov's own killing of the goose, with a similar focus on the bird's wings and bleeding head, though Tolstoy presents Lukashka's action as more graceful and effortless: "Lukashka drew a little knife from under his dagger and gave it a swift jerk. The bird fluttered, but before it could spread its wings the bleeding head bent and quivered" (Tolstoy 192). However, all of these traits and actions only mark Lukashka as a member of the Cossack tribe. His true acceptance and even prestige come after he commits the truly definitive act of killing another man. Shooting an enemy scout, Lukashka embodies the bravery that Cossacks value, especially as "the idea that he himself might be killed never entered his head" (Tolstoy 200). After this act, Lukashka is lauded by the Cossacks and immediately treated as a social superior—he shouts to them "in a commanding voice," to which they respond by "obeying him as though he were their chief" (Tolstoy 204). Lukashka has proven himself capable of behaving as a true Cossack does, and thus he is singled out as a leader and as a valuable member of Cossack community.

It is important to note that the views expressed in this novella do not allow Tolstoy to make assertions about the true nature of Cossack culture, but instead, allow him to distill the image of the Cossack and add it to the list of other mythological or highly mythologized heroes in Russian literature. Nevertheless, whether the generalizations made by Tolstoy or the characters he presents are historically accurate or not does not matter to us, as our concern is with the myth of the Cossack and its representation in a work of literature. Imbuing his characters with these stereotyped traits, Tolstoy does not unequivocally assert that all Cossacks always possess them or that they are necessarily true. Instead, these characteristics are a reflection of his protagonist Dmitri Andreich Olenin's initial conception of the Cossacks. Olenin,

after all, is a wealthy, well-read member of the Petersburg elite—and his romanticized image of the Cossack is representative of the normal views of his social stratum. Olenin, like Liutov after him, is an outsider whose idea of the Cossack is indebted to the Russian literary canon.

Similarly, Babel, like Tolstoy before him, plays on Liutov's acceptance of this mythologized Cossack figure. In other words, there is a tradition of another great writer's authority behind Babel's choice to introduce to his readers characters that have more to do with literary myth than historical reality.

The figure of the mythologized Cossack dominates Liutov's accounts of his war experiences. Whether their outlook encompasses the primacy of violence as a social ritual, the esteeming of brave warriors, the disgust for cowardliness, or the indifference to the rule of law—which is clear in their proclivity for violence, rape, looting, killing prisoners, and the like—the Cossacks of *Red Cavalry* share the values of the Cossacks who dominated Russia's literary imagination for over a century.²⁴ Their literary provenance is perhaps best typified in the story "Prishchepa," in which the title character tells Liutov his life's tale. We receive this narrative through Liutov's mediation. Notably, our narrator describes Prishchepa as a typical Cossack in Babel's cycle: "a tireless roughneck, a Communist whom the party kicked out, a future rag looter, a devil-may-care syphilitic, [and] an unflappable liar" (Babel 260). Furthermore, Prishchepa displays himself as an embodiment of the Cossack ideal in the story he tells to Liutov: having lost his family to the Whites after fleeing, Prishchepa returns to his village to take revenge upon the neighbors who ransacked his home. Liutov describes the scene:

²⁴ These values were also shared by the actual Cossacks in the Red Army. Historian Norman Davies describes these men as those who "detested intellectuals, professionals, officers, bureaucrats, Jews, westerners, foreigners, in fact most of the people who ran the Bolshevik Party. They disliked orders and mistrusted theories. They were, in Stalin's words, the 'good fellows' who got things done" (Davies 118). This generalization aptly describes Babel's Cossacks.

Prishchepa went from one neighbor's house to the next, the bloody prints of his boots trailing behind him...he left hacked-up old women, dogs hung over wells, icons soiled with dung. The people of the village smoked their pipes and followed him sullenly with their eyes. Young Cossacks had gathered on the steppes outside the village and were keeping count...he locked himself in the hut and for two days drank, sang, cried and hacked tables to pieces with his saber. (Babel 260)

This image is the image the Cossacks desire to project. Prishchepa, noted as a liar by Liutov, is likely lying or at least exaggerating his tale. Yet this figure—the vengeful warrior, allowed to bypass all rules of law, admired by the young, feared by his enemies, hard-drinking, larger-than-life, and able to subdue an entire village by himself—embodies the Cossack cultural ideals, albeit ideals magnified to an extreme extent. This melodramatic overstatement, however, is not important to us because it is larger than life, but because it represents the kind of mythic figure Babel's Cossacks strive to be, and consequently has great bearing on Liutov's own attempt to fit in with the Cossacks.

Liutov's assimilation, however, remains contested throughout the entire *Red Cavalry* cycle. Babel never lets us see Liutov commit a violent act as the Cossacks do. On the contrary, his protagonist continually distances himself from the act of violence. His narration, his physical and social position, and his self-identification are defined by other feats and thus, other values. In "Prishchepa," specifically, Babel creates several layers of distance between Liutov and the violent act. The violence is mediated by a narrative that is not Liutov's own, but is conveyed to him by a character defined as a liar. The violence therein is not actually described; the reader is only given secondary details that have resulted from the Prishchepa's supposed cruelty. Thus, Liutov mentions "hacked-up old women" without the explicit inclusion of the act of hacking

(Babel 260).²⁵ Similarly, the bloody prints of Prishchepa's boots trail after him, but the event that made the boots bloody is obscured. Separating the tale further from its original teller, Liutov's diction is nothing like a Cossack's—his restrained, literary style cannot be mistaken for the rougher speech of Cossacks such as Pavlichenko, Konkin, or even Balmashov. Through these methods of depiction, Babel distances the act of violence both from Liutov and from the reader. The act itself can be imagined, but it cannot be appropriated fully by Liutov, who can only show it indirectly.

Even when Liutov actually commits violence, it is distinguished from the violence of the Cossacks by a multitude of descriptive features. His violence stands out in "My First Goose" because it is the peak of Liutov's brutality. Able to crush the skull of an animal, Liutov is otherwise unable to physically hurt others. Even when he does hurt a person, as in "After the Battle," his account of the act is circumlocutory: "I pushed the epileptic back and hit him in the face. He keeled over onto his side, hit the ground, and began bleeding" (Babel 327). Without the context of the rest of the story, this seems like a merciless act against a helpless victim. And yet Liutov only hits the epileptic Akinfiev because Akinfiev attacks him first, after insulting Liutov for not loading his gun. The multilayered presentation of this actual act of violence helps Babel to establish that Liutov can only inflict pain either in a social ritual against an animal or in his own self-defense. As Babel's narrator, Liutov does not connect his strike at Akinfiev with the blood it makes his victim shed—the cause and effect are separated into different sentences, and the bleeding is presented as though it occurs independently of Liutov's punch. In a similar vein, Liutov threatens people, but never follows through on his threats. In "Zamosc," after lighting

²⁵ Though in the Russian, Babel uses the word «подколотых», which roughly means "pinned-up," the difference in meaning is not as important as Babel's use of an adjective describing violence without an actual depiction of the violent act (Babel, "Konarmiya" 285).

straw on fire in the house of an old woman who will not give him food, Liutov is brash: “‘I’m going to burn you old woman,’” he “mutter[s], drowsily” (Babel 314). Yet he only threatens violence, never committing it, only weakly claiming he will act, having lost his inhibitions due to his tiredness. Likewise, in “The Song,” Liutov asserts, referring to another unyielding old woman, that he “would have made her own up with [his] revolver,” though this formulation is theoretical—Liutov does no such thing (Babel 328). He does commit several acts of violence, but there are always extenuating circumstances which make his violence less brave, less powerful, less impressive to anyone, and less indicative of any Cossack-like characteristics within. His single act of excessively graphic violence against a helpless animal victim is committed for immediate social acceptance. Since he cannot really kill or hurt another human being, he chooses to rhetorically distance himself from all violence, whether he commits or sees it.

The discussion of Liutov’s actions and their relation to the Cossack norm concern primarily the Cossack mindset and the others’ view of Liutov’s identity. Liutov himself constantly shifts his own perception of his allegiances, however, usually after witnessing other acts of violence. Babel extensively explores Liutov’s relation to the act of violence in “Berestechko,” the story that most fully exemplifies Liutov’s multiple identities and his strained relation to each. Babel establishes this effect by following Liutov’s shifting self-identification with different groups as he wanders through the eponymous shtetl, distancing himself—physically and metaphorically—from each group that he encounters. In order to display this process, I will examine the step-by-step movements that Liutov takes and the associated allegiances he espouses and rejects. Initially, Liutov considers himself a part of his regiment:

We were advancing from Khotin to Berestechko. *Our* fighters were dozing in their saddles...Muzhiks in white shirts raised their caps and bowed as *we* passed...*we* rode past the Cossack burial mounds...*we* listened to the song in silence, then unfurled the standards, and burst into Berestechko to the beat of a thundering march. (Babel 270, emphasis mine - BD)

Liutov is not an individual here, but one part of a greater group: he travels with and is immersed in the throng of Cossacks who ride together and fight together. Muzhiks bow to the formidable assembly of cavalry; Liutov himself is not as imposing, dangerous, or deserving of respect apart from the Cossacks. Known for their violent natures, the Cossacks engender fear in the people they pass, and Liutov is assumed to be one of them. He thereby adopts their socially dominant role of oppressor and is seen as such.

Following this grand collective march into the shtetl, Liutov is separated from the group when he is solitarily billeted with a local woman. He becomes individualized, and thus now begins to use first-person pronouns; it is no longer “we” but “I”. This shift in voice is followed by a greater shift: Liutov undergoes a ritualistic cleansing—“I washed off the dirt of the road and went out into the street”—with which he rids himself of his group identity, his Cossack guise (Babel 270). He and the Cossacks no longer share any brotherly relations. In fact when Liutov sees an act of violence committed by a Cossack, he reacts to it as a bystander:

A couple of Cossacks were getting ready to shoot an old silver-bearded Jew for espionage. The old man was screeching, and tried to break free. Kudrya from the machine gun detachment grabbed his head and held it wedged under his arm. The Jew fell silent and spread his legs. Kudrya pulled out his dagger with his right hand and carefully slit the old man’s throat without spattering himself. (Babel 270-271)

Upon witnessing the act of violence, Liutov does not identify with either the aggressor or the victim; his narrative speaks of Cossacks and a Jew, but not of “us”. Instead, Liutov is the solitary onlooker, who observes the violence caused by his companions and the regime he represents without empathetically feeling the pain of the act. Kudrya slits the old man’s throat with cruelty

and cold-blooded care, but Liutov emphasizes how he is distant from what he records, carefully avoiding verbal markers of his complicity. His use of singular first-person pronouns mirrors his shift from a member of the Cossack group to an individual who classifies himself as neither Cossack nor Jew. Furthermore, Babel emphasizes this moment of violence as a catalyst for Liutov, defamiliarizing the act of slaughter by drawing it out, exaggerating the victim's shift from noise to silence, and demonstrating the care with which Kudrya slits the old man's throat—a precision that is distinct and memorable to the reader because Babel's Cossacks are not usually so morbidly gentle. Thus, Babel forces the reader to pay attention to this act and underscores its importance to Liutov's changing roles.

The cleansing that Liutov uses to wipe away his association with the Cossacks prefigures Liutov's own discussion of the dichotomy between cleanliness and dirtiness as it relates to the politics of identity and national affiliation. He describes Berestechko in terms of its various inhabitants: the Poles, the Jews, and the Russians who “live cleanly” on the outskirts of the village (Babel 271). Though the exact meaning of this phrase is unclear, Babel uses it to relate Liutov to the Russians and their way of life which, somehow, appears to be pure and right. He stays focused on this idea of cleanliness:

That they are three diligent and entrepreneurial races living next to each other awakened in all of them an obstinate industriousness that is sometimes inherent in a Russian man, if he hasn't become louse-ridden, desperate, and besotted with drink. (Babel 271)

Though in this passage, Babel's narrator asserts the similar national character of all three peoples, the very fact that he attributes an overarching national characters to them displays his untroubled acceptance of the idea that a race or nationality can be reduced to several stereotypical characteristics. By singling out a strain of prototypical Russian man, however, Babel seems to suggest that dirtiness and cleanliness may be established through one's lifestyle

in addition to their national affiliation. He manipulates Liutov's perceptions to assert this stereotype of dirty living as a means of contrast, for his character does not have too many options of separating himself from the world of aggressors and victims. Russians may be the only group at this moment with which he would be willing to identify. Their listed traits may or may not be indicative of their national character, but what matters for Liutov is not the truth, but the possibility of an existing exception to the general rule of war. In his matter-of-fact mentioning of Russians' cleanliness, Liutov distances himself from Cossacks and Jews, exaggerating his role as observer and recorder, as well as distinguishing the generalized people of each group from his own self-assertion as a nuanced, culturally heterogeneous individual who can move from group to group.

Further on in "Berestechko," Liutov continues to separate himself categorically from the groups that partially comprise his identity and others' perceptions of that identity. His position is conflicted: Liutov notes that "The Jews live here in large houses" as though he is not one of them (Babel 271). Yet his heritage is still lurking underneath; Liutov claims that the Jews' sheds "are indescribably gloomy and replace *our* yards" (Babel 271, emphasis mine).²⁶ By using the inclusive first-person pronoun "our" for the first time since his association with the Cossacks, Liutov subtly admits his own relation to the Berestechko Jews and his slight leaning toward the group whose victimization he has just witnessed.²⁷ After seeing the act of violence against the old Jewish man, Liutov does not explicitly voice sympathy for him, but his later reference of their shared religion and culture hints at his acknowledgment that the next victim could very well

²⁶ In the Russian, again, this odd pronoun usage is the same: «Сараи эти, неописуемо мрачные, заменяют *наши* дворы» (Babel, "Konarmiya" 293, emphasis mine).

²⁷ It is possible to read this quotation as an assertion that the increasing Jewish population encroaches on some other ethnic group's land, aggressively building sheds on yards that are not their own, and that thus Liutov's "our" refers to his new identification with this other group whose yards are being replaced. He would then be distancing himself further from his Jewish identity. However, I take the phrase to mean that the Jews replace their own yards with sheds—that they build large, gloomy sheds which take up most of the room in their own yards.

be himself; the Jewish identity he hides from the Cossacks and understates in himself could, if revealed, irrevocably define him in the Cossacks' eyes as a Jew and nothing more.²⁸

Liutov's feeling of separation from the Polish Jews, however, is more based in culture and nationality than in religion. In "The Tachanka Theory," he describes them in comparison to the Odessan Jews of his home:

The image of southern Jews...jovial, potbellied, sparkling like cheap wine. There is no comparison between them and the bitter aloofness of these long bony backs, these tragic yellow beards. In their fervent features, carved by torture, there is no fat or warm pulse of blood. The movement of the Galician and Volhynian Jew are abrupt, brusque, and offensive to good taste. (Babel 241)

Though Liutov does feel some relation with the shtetl's inhabitants due to their shared Jewish background, he sees generalized national differences in demeanor and social setting as boundaries impossible to cross. Having internalized ideas of national character, Liutov creates a divide between the victims he sees and himself, based on their differing outward expression of emotion. Through his exaggeration of the Polish Jews' unwelcoming features—features that are effects of their constant victimization and suffering—Liutov denies that he has a relation to them. Thus, he attempts to ignore his own Jewish identity, even if the Jews from whom he distances himself have, in his perception, a different stereotypical national character than he does. His idea of this national character is a convenient tool by which Liutov can deny his likeness to the Jews he encounters, internally setting himself apart from them so as to better identify with their persecutors, the Cossacks, or to at least adopt their attitude toward Jews in order to simply survive in their ranks. While Liutov does not explicitly reject his own Jewishness

²⁸ Though many Jews did actually fight in the Red Army, the presence of antisemitism within the ranks was impossible to ignore. Many Jews therefore preferred to fight in a fully Jewish unit instead of the typical mixed units (Budnitskii 363-365). Budyonny's First Cavalry Army, in particular, was the most virulently antisemitic, engaging in pogroms, banditry, and drunkenness to the extent that most political commissars either could not control them, or instead joined in the violence. (Budnitskii 391-392). Keeping his identity a secret, then, is necessary for Liutov's survival.

in the cycle, he refuses to value his shared religion with Polish Jews in favor of emphasizing their more superficial generalized behavioral differences, and thus in effect denies the importance of Judaism as a shared ethnic background. However, this refusal to identify may be a method by which Liutov can cope with the brutal violence he sees his comrades commit against Jews; in distancing himself from this part of his identity, Liutov tries to deny his own victimhood and survive his complicity with the Red Army's brutal crimes.

Liutov rejects fully asserting his Jewish heritage because a public identity as a Jew would necessarily preclude him from even partially penetrating the Cossack group. Due to his fear of the Cossacks' hostility to Jews and their enthrallment with violence, Liutov adopts the nationality-based rhetoric of cleanliness and dirtiness, and professes attitudes that mirror the Cossacks' opinion of Jews (in content, not in style of speech). In his discussion of the underground parts of the Jews' homes, Liutov notes that

In times of war, people hide in these catacombs from bullets and plunder. Over many days, human refuse and animal dung pile up. Despair and dismay fill the catacombs with an acrid stench and the rotting sourness of excrement.

Berestechko stinks inviolably to this day. The smell of rotten herring emanates from everyone. The shtetl reeks in expectation of a new era, and instead of people, fading reflections of frontier misfortune wander through it. (Babel 271-272)

Equating the Jews' dwellings and the Jews themselves with dirtiness, Liutov reacts with disgust toward this part of his identity. As in the earlier passage distinguishing Polish Jews from southern Jews, Liutov exaggerates unflattering traits in order to assert his own difference from the people depicted, regardless of his own Jewish identity. Liutov does not express sympathy for the victims of this side of the Jewish tragedy, who must hide in filthy tunnels to be safe from their oppressors; instead, he affects a distance, emphasizing a preference for physical cleanliness that denies the dirty truth of his background. This dirtiness, however, is not exclusive to the

Jews: the foul stench originates from the Jews' catacombs but metonymically permeates the entire shtetl, contaminating the 'clean' Russians along with all of Berestechko's residents. Liutov denies these people their humanity—they, who are only reflections of misfortune—and through this Babel asserts that Liutov cannot be a part of any of these groups. He adopts different identities to survive, but Liutov still separates himself from Cossacks and Jews through his use of pronouns of association and individuality, and uses his disgust of foulness to distinguish himself from everyone else. He chooses to be neither victim nor perpetrator, but aloof observer.

Liutov, with his attitude of distanced superiority, deems the people of Berestechko reducible to various stereotypical traits and to one foul smell, while asserting his own fluidity and ambiguity—he walks between groups, remaining an individual who is harder to truly define. And as Liutov places himself metaphorically higher than all the people of Berestechko, Babel ensures that he places himself physically above them as well. Liutov exits from the shtetl's foul center, walking "beyond the edge of the town, climb[ing] the mountain, and reach[ing] the abandoned castle of the Counts Raciborski, the recent owners of Berestechko" (Babel 272). In this act Liutov isolates himself, aligning himself in attitude and in locale with the previous social superiors of Berestechko. This association mirrors how, as an educated member of the intelligentsia, Liutov feels socially superior to the uneducated, stinking masses that he finds in the shtetl's center. His feeling of superiority is bolstered by the physical barriers that now emerge—the walls of the castle, the physical distance from the outskirts of Berestechko, and the height of the mountain—all of which accentuate Liutov's self-imposed alienation.

The vertical polarity between the catacombs and the mountain castle iterate a potent symbolic dichotomy of height and depth. These qualities, especially in reference to dwelling places, have strong metaphorical associations in the unconscious human mind. Gaston Bachelard

explores this kind of relationship between the experience of inhabiting buildings and its reflection in dreams and in poetry in his book *The Poetics of Space*. Discussing symbolic associations with different part of one's house, Bachelard contrasts the rationality related to structures such as the roof and the tower (near which thoughts are clear, organized, and practical; places of intellectual projects and tranquil solitude) with the irrationality related to the cellar (the place of deep passions, in which lurk the dark, primordial entities and energies that we fear) (Bachelard 17-26). These relations appear and persist in Liutov's subconscious system of symbolic value. The depths of the catacombs house what he represses and denies in himself—his desire to hide from violence as the Jews do, his very identity as a Jew (and the associated ancient traditions), and his ultimate inability to commit violent acts. Liutov is disgusted by these inner truths, which to him are as foul as excrement, so he thrusts them back down and moves away toward the higher, isolated space of the castle where he can avoid them.

Liutov's focus on cleanliness differentiates him from the rural, rough, and dirty Cossacks, who value their uncleanness—he is, relative to them, a pampered intellectual city boy. Naturally they see him as squeamish and ineffectual; he is made sick by the rot and decay that is inseparable from life and from violence. In "After the Battle," threatened with a saber by a Kirghiz man in his regiment, Liutov does not anticipate the thrill of violence, but instead notes that "I felt a wave of nausea from death's closeness and its tight grip" (Babel 325). Though he scratches the Kirghiz's face, this is an act of self-defense, a last resort. More importantly, the sentiments Liutov expresses are alien to the danger-loving, death-embracing Cossacks. Liutov, a man who cannot kill, fears battle, and looks down on the unclean, can never be a Cossack. He cannot even continue to take part in simple activities that assert a group identity. In "Ivan and Ivan," a Cossack cuts him a piece of meat from an ox leg, but "At the sight of the festering meat

I felt overcome by weakness and desperation, and gave my piece back” (Babel 303). The others eat the rotten meat without complaint or squeamishness. By refusing food, on a surface level Liutov rejects its dirtiness and potential for spreading disease. But on a metaphorical level, Liutov rejects the Cossack group; he will not eat with them because he cannot bear the immediate foulness of the leg and the overarching foulness of war’s brutality. Liutov is alone, marked by his education, his refusal to take part in the physical violence that is unavoidable in life, and by his disgust for excrement and the figurative stench of his own baser drives and desires. He begins at a distance but only increases his alienation through his actions.

Babel subtly creates a similar kind of distance between Liutov and the Cossacks in “The Road to Brody.” Using a series of contradictions, Babel explores Liutov’s relation to the power he represents, providing several narratives that mirror larger arcs in the cycle as a whole. The story begins as Liutov laments for certain war casualties: “I mourn for the bees. They have been destroyed by warring armies. There are no longer any bees in Volhynia” (Babel 237). Liutov asserts his personal emotions with the first statement. He shows the cause of his mourning in the second statement, attributing it to the impersonal and vague “warring armies.” In the third statement Liutov moves to a general, definitive assertion. With these lines, Liutov sympathizes with the devastated community of bees, as though he is a casual onlooker. However, Liutov’s role is not neutral:

We desecrated the hives. We fumigated them with sulfur and detonated them with gunpowder. Smoldering rags have spread a foul stench over the holy republics of the bees. Dying, they flew slowly, their buzzing barely audible. Deprived of bread, we procured honey with our sabers.” (Babel 237)

Structurally distancing Liutov from the act of destruction, Babel tricks the reader initially, making it seem that the narrator is not to blame. Once the collective pronoun is used, however,

Liutov's hypocritical place is made clear: he has taken part in the devastation of the bee community. Even if Liutov has not committed the act of violence itself, even if he has not manually lit the hives on fire, even if he has initially distanced himself from the act, he explicitly identifies himself as part of the group who has done the deed, and is therefore complicit.

This passage functions as an apt summary of Liutov's views and relationship toward his actions. The bee hives, as a microcosm of their setting—the towns across Galicia and Volhynia—give an ominous prediction for the future of the war-town land. Liutov sees in the burning hives the core elements of Cossack involvement in on the Polish Front. He again notices the stench of destruction as something disgusting. The victims have been silenced by the large, impersonal forces crushing their society. Yet he gives little sympathy to these victims; the perpetrators themselves feel “deprived” of their due, and using this language as though they are the ones who suffer, they loot the hive. These actions typify the behavior of Cossacks in this war, as well as express Liutov's feelings toward both the Polish Jews and the bees. Furthermore, through Liutov's expression of identification with the perpetrators, Babel asserts that though Liutov cannot be a Cossack, he is nonetheless part of a destructive power, even if he does not initially realize it. This passage is not explicitly a symbolic condemnation of Liutov, but it serves to emphasize the role he refuses to acknowledge, suggesting that his association with the Cossack-filled Red Army makes him a part of the problem. Without accepting the larger spread of destruction and violence caused by his group, Liutov can do nothing to stop it.

The Cossacks, however, are themselves incongruous in their revolutionary guise. Babel sees this, and creates a warning to Liutov and to the reader through an embedded narrative told by Liutov's occasional friend, Afonka Bida. After destroying the hives, Afonka tells Liutov a Cossack tale about a bee at Christ's crucifixion:

Christ is hanging tormented on the cross, when suddenly all kinds of gnats come flying to plague him...a bee flies around Christ. ‘Sting him!’ a gnat yells at the bee. ‘Sting him for us!’—‘That I cannot do,’ the bee says, covering Christ with her wings. ‘That I cannot do, he belongs to the carpenter class.’ One has to understand the bees...I hope the bees hold out. We’re fighting for them too! (Babel 239)

This parable is what Mieke Bal defines as a “mirror-text,” or an embedded narrative that presents a story which resembles the primary fabula (Bal 55-58). The resemblance is veiled, as the events of this embedded narrative do not seem to reflect the primary fabula of *Red Cavalry* (Liutov’s experience traveling with his cavalry regiment). However, this resemblance is thematic, and mirrors Liutov’s actions in subplots, as well as the developments of his character and of the true character of the Cossacks. The resemblance is clearer when, later in the cycle, we discover that Liutov cannot kill another man. The bee will not hurt or kill those who belong to the carpenter class; Liutov cannot hurt or kill those who belong to the human race. Though the bee’s reasons are more virtuous than Liutov’s—the bee values those who build, while meek Liutov simply does not possess the capacity to kill (his reluctance may be out of a respect for human life, but this is not suggested by Babel’s narrative)—the parallels remain. Liutov and the bee are the nonviolent individuals among a violent mass.

If we follow this metaphor, then just as the Cossacks, as part of the Red Army, will fight for the nonviolent bees, they should fight for the nonviolent Jews as well—people who, like Gedali, ardently despise their Polish masters and hope for a fairer social system. Yet the Red Army’s Cossacks are the troops who destroyed the hives of the very bees for whom they proclaim to fight. In the same way, they destroy the towns of the Jews, while spouting dogmatic Communist ideology that is never practiced in real life. The idea of bees as workers and builders may be appealing to the Communists, but it does not cohere with Afonka and the Cossacks’ actions against them. This quality, however, is not unique to the Cossacks—revolutions easily

turn on their supporters, destroying those they claim to protect. By using this mirror text to show the ideological contradictions of the Cossacks' justifications of their actions, Babel creates a scenario in which ideology is only a tool—a device by which its users gain what they want. For the Cossacks, this is violence, plunder, and physical gratification. They are no revolutionaries, but opportunists who will behave as they prefer regardless of their ostensible allegiance.

Similarly, Liutov's jaunt with the Red Cavalry may be motivated by his belief in the Revolution, but his behavior precludes his zeal. Liutov cannot perpetrate revolutionary violence: he feels sick in its presence and prefers to remain an observer. But there is little place for observers, and little place for those who deny the necessity of revolutionary violence or cannot commit it. Liutov likewise cannot be like the Cossacks, gleefully engaging in atrocities for their own pleasure. Yet in order to survive his time with them, he must conceal his Jewish background, rejecting this identity while adopting an outlook that asserts stereotyped ethnic generalizations. This position does not bring him closer to the Cossacks; Liutov ultimately expresses disgust for all the groups he encounters, choosing to isolate himself from any group identification. He is alone, passive, and unable to act—perpetually at odds with what he professes to believe. Through the parable of the bees and through Liutov's narration of the hives' desecration, Babel hints that Liutov's strategy of denying his identity and his complicity in the violence of war cannot guarantee his life; the powers ostensibly fighting for him may just as easily betray and destroy him. Liutov's tragedy is that although he must live in denial to survive, this may not even save him. Whether or not he asserts his identity and acknowledges his complicity, the violence of the Revolution's imperfect actors may catch up with him and terminate him with the utmost nonchalance, ease, and disregard for his individuality and personal

struggles. No matter his choices, Liutov can neither escape nor distance himself from the horror of violence.

Conclusion

Red Cavalry, Nuance, and Closure

By the end of *Red Cavalry*, it is unclear exactly what happens to Liutov. In many editions, the cycle finishes with the story “The Rabbi’s Son.” Its narrative involves Liutov encountering the titular character, Ilya, who he had previously met in “The Rabbi.” After pulling him onto the Polit-otdel train, Liutov watches the boy succumb to his wounds. He ends the story poetically:

He died before we reached Rovno. He died, the last prince, amid poems, phylacteries, and foot bindings. We buried him at a desolate train station. And I, who can barely harness the storms of fantasy raging through my ancient body, I received my brother’s last breath. (Babel 333)

In certain later editions of *Red Cavalry*, the final story is “Argamak,” in which Liutov, volunteers to join the soldiers at the front and is given the Cossack Tikhomolov’s horse Argamak. Liutov cannot ride well and injures the horse, gaining the ire of the Cossacks. The horse, however, is returned to Tikhomolov, and the story ends with Liutov’s assimilation or disappearance into the Cossack ranks:

I got myself transferred to the Sixth Squadron. Things went better there. The long and the short of it was that Argamak had taught me some of Tikhomolov’s horsemanship. Months passed. My dream had become a reality. The Cossacks’ eyes stopped following me and my horse. (Babel 349)

Regardless of the ending, Babel does not give the reader a sense of closure. “The Rabbi’s Son” can be seen as hopeful—Liutov asserts his brotherhood with Ilya and acknowledges some ancient presence in his body. This is perhaps a subtle embrace of his Jewish identity, a rejection of the passivity of denial, and a more definitive rediscovery of self for Babel’s narrator. However, this ending also may be foreboding—Ilya’s death could symbolize the greater

suffering and death of Jewish communities during the war, as well as anticipate future peril for the Jews. The ending of “Argamak” is similarly ambiguous. Though the Cossacks seem to accept Liutov—who appears to have progressed beyond his initial cowardly inability—this ending is not conclusive. Though their eyes and our eyes stop following Liutov, the war does not end, the plight of victims does not cease, the Red Army does not become more ideologically honest, and there is no certainty that Liutov truly fits in with the Cossacks. We do not experience his assimilation over time or in detail; instead, we are left with a simply-phrased paragraph that, with dreamlike quickness and directness, instantly gratifies Liutov’s desires. But Liutov does not say that the Cossacks accept him; they simply stop looking at him because he can passably ride a horse. With this circumlocutory phrase, Babel use a metonymical assertion, appearing to bring Liutov closer to the Cossacks—the movement of their eyes away from Liutov seems to represent their whole slackening attitude toward him.

Yet Babel keeps Liutov at a distance, omitting the details of his apparent assimilation and leaving the end of this cycle open, for neither ending gives definite closure. Just as Babel defamiliarizes violence in order to draw the reader’s attention to it, he exaggerates the abruptness of this ending in order to emphasize its strangeness. Though it seems that Liutov chooses an identity in each ending, I do not consider these hinted choices final, for a defining characteristic of Liutov is his complex web of personal identifications. Liutov outwardly identifies as whatever group he must seem to be in order to survive, but at his core he always isolates himself, remaining an observer of others’ actions. Babel distances Liutov from the acts of violence he sees, from the perpetrators and victims with whom he sporadically associates himself, and from the narrative itself. And although Liutov continually asserts his individuality—and his incongruity with every group he encounters—he is not much better off for it. He still cannot

accept his complicity in the horrible acts of violence that the Red Army commits, and can neither mitigate nor prevent his comrades' pursuit of atrocity. Unable either to admit his role or to lessen the suffering of others, Liutov remains distant, living in denial in order to live at all. He is caught between powers much greater than himself, and cannot escape from the violence around him.

Nor could Babel. He was surrounded by violent events at every turn of his life, and his fascination with the roles of perpetrator, victim, and observer stems from his own experience. Just as Liutov's end is ambiguous, his author's end was likewise vague—at least until the details of his execution became known half a century later. Yet Babel's life and death cannot be mistaken for Liutov's. Though author and narrator face many of the same kind of struggles—with state violence, with personal identity, with conflicting ideologies, and with the individual's place in a hostile, oppressive world—Babel uses Liutov's narration as a device to explore these ideas, fictionalizing his experiences and exaggerating his description of violence in order to show a horror that is universal. Unlike Liutov, Babel does not deny his own roles as observer, perpetrator, and victim—he has the means to express himself through the *Red Cavalry* cycle. Though these stories are fictional, their power lies not in any claim to verity but in their pure artfulness and in their encapsulation of the brutality of war. What Babel understands and expertly conveys through *Red Cavalry* is the complexity of living in war; though his phrases often are terse and seemingly simple, they, like his narrator, possess incalculable nuance. Thus, in analyzing Babel, we too must attend to nuance, avoiding the simplification and reduction of his complexities. This is the only way we can understand Isaac Babel, for in his works nothing is as simple as it seems.

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