SKAZ AND ORAL USAGE AS SATIRICAL DEVICES IN ISAAK BABEL'S RED CAVALRY

Given the density and intricacy of his short story collection Red Cavalry, justifiably regarded as one of the great prose works of twentieth-century Russian literature, Isaak Babel is notoriously difficult to pin down. Even the briefest of his tales masterfully develops the subject central to all of them: the violence inherent in the October Revolution and the civil war that followed it. No writer explores this theme more cogently than Babel. There is no single element in his stories that more strikingly underscores the horror of this violence than Babel's use of skaz and images from the folktale.

Babel's employment of skaz, coupled with his references to oral literature, reminds us that he is writing about semi- or illiterate people who are still immersed in traditional culture. The very word skaz, from skazat' ("to say" or "to tell") suggests oral usage, which itself can variously encompass oral folk narrative (typically, in folktales, in prose) or can appear as the speech of a semi- or uneducated narrator quoted by the actual author. Oral usage incorporates the epithets, turns of phrase and images typically encountered in Russian oral literature, whether heroic tales or skazki (folk-tales or fairy tales); for reasons of space, only skazki will be considered here. Since no discussion of skazki would be complete without consulting Vladimir Propp's Morphology of the Folktale, that work will also figure in my analysis. Propp considers the actions/functions of characters in the skazki to be the central element, the key to understanding these tales. The pur-pose of this essay is to pinpoint examples of skaz and oral motifs in Babel, to attempt to discover his reasons...
for incorporating these motifs, and to discuss them as parodic/satirical devices.4

Skaz figures prominently in two Red Cavalry stories: “Pis’mo” (The Letter) and “Sol’” (Salt).5 In the first, Babel’s narrator Liutov reproduces for his readers a letter dictated by the youngest son of a family in which, in a microcosmic version of the Civil War, the father has killed one of three brothers and is in turned executed by another. Sub- or non-standard forms abound, emphasizing the oral or traditional orientation of this tale: “Ia est’” for “I am,” “zdesia” instead of “zdes’” for “here,” “prosiu” for “proshu” (“I ask, request”).6 So does the traditional discourse associated with the skaz-ka: “A takzhe nizhaiushche vam klaniaius’ ot bela litsa do syroi zemli....” (“And likewise do I bow down low to you from my white face to the damp earth,” with “matka syraia zemlia,” “mother damp earth,” understood here, “Pis’mo,” 12).

In “Sol’,” the narrator Balmashew repeatedly says “Raseiu” (“Russia”) instead of the standard literary form “Rossiiu” (“Sol’,” 97), “anteresnoe” (“interesting,” “odd,” a foreign word) rather than “interesnoe” (“Sol’,” 97), “prosiut” for “prosiat” (“to request,” “ask for”) (“Sol’,” 98). The skazka appears linguistically rather than situationally in the introduction of Balmashew’s letter to the “comrade editor”: “za trideviat’ zemel’, v nekotorom gosudarstve, na nevedomom prostranstve” (“beyond the thrice ninth land, in a certain country, in an unknown place”). (“Sol’,” 94).7 This pattern would be right at home in Afanas’ev’s collection; in “Ivan Bykovich,” the formula is: “V nekotorom tsarstve, v nekotorom gosudarstve, zhil-byl tsar’ s tsaritsiu” (“In a certain kingdom, in a certain country, there dwelled a tsar’ with a tsaritsa”)8 Bal-


5. There is even a story called “Salt” (#242) in Afanas’ev’s collection. A. N. Afanas’ev, Narodnye russkie skazki v trekh tomakh (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1938), 2: 341-44.

