

Techniques of Satire

The Case of Saltykov-Ščedrin

by

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Foreword

Satire has attracted scholarly minds for a long time. Thanks to their efforts, a great deal is known about that strange and fascinating literary animal. Numerous studies trace its origins, explicate its modes of operations, and consider its functions, motives, forms, plots, and typical devices. Although the phenomenon of literary satire has been scrutinized quite extensively, by and large scholars took a macroapproach to analyses of its mechanisms. It is well known that a satirist disturbs his readers by showing the world in a distorted mirror - that is, presenting it as looking strange. But it seems that there is not enough knowledge about the satirist's extra-fine job of bending the surface of the mirror that he presents to a society. His technique still makes it possible for people to see themselves and yet makes them laugh at their own image.

While studying the art of satire of individual writers, some scholars attempt close textual analyses of the satirical devices. Few took a step further into analyses of a satirist's use of the power of laughter. One such work is Paul Lewis' book, *Comic effects: Interdisciplinary approaches to humor in literature*. Others concentrated on a satirist's skill to achieve a particular comic effect in his work.¹ This study represents an attempt to undertake a comprehensive examination of satirical mechanisms and to discuss their comic faculties in the light of existing theories of the laughter. For instance, when analyzing satirical characterization, it is, of course, not this researcher's discovery that a satirist may use a device of presenting a human being as an animal. In fact, satirists have used such a device from the time of the satire's very start as a special brand of literature. It is of greater interest to this researcher to discover how this device contributes to the comic effect as a satirist's conscious objective: to make his readers laugh.

This was certainly the case with Saltykov-Ščedrin, not only, perhaps, the greatest Russian satirical genius, but a world-class satirist whose creative power has not been adequately presented to the Western reader. One task of this book is to better acquaint Western readers with the nineteenth-century Russian satirist. Since Saltykov

inherited, directly and through his great predecessor Nikolai Gogol, the art of the comic from many Western satirists from Rabelais to Dickens and used many of their comic discoveries, a study of Saltykov's comic devices in essence is a study of the devices employed by many satirists who are widely known to contemporary readers.

The western public's belief that the great works of nineteenth-century Russian literature are invariably somber and even grim is well known and possibly even justified. Indeed, in the great novels of Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy one finds little gaiety; excursions into the realm of the comic are sporadic. This is not the case, however, when one turns to works of Russian satire, a genre of the Russian literary scene that has long suffered from a lack of respect. Western scholars sometimes fail to notice Russia's longstanding satirical tradition. In the nineteenth century, critics as radical as Alexander Dobroljubov and as conservative as Vasilij Rozanov noted that Russian literature not only began with satire, but during certain periods was to a considerable extent dominated by it.

Indeed, it is well known that modern Russian literature began with the satires of Kantemir and Sumarokov. The imitative, Boileau types of satire were soon replaced by satirical works deeply rooted in Russian soil. From then on, the tailoring of borrowed French and English satirical models to the Russian scene (the literary movement known as "*sklonenie na naši nravy*" 'adaptation to our mores') took place in the satirical plays of Lukin, Fonvizin, Kapnist and Krylov. The names Griboedov, Gogol, Saltykov-Ščedrin, A. K. Tolstoy, and Suxovo-Kobylin are enough to remind us of the achievements in the satirical genre in nineteenth-century Russian literature. The genre picked up again in the early twentieth century with the satirical verse and prose of the Symbolists and the publication of the widely acclaimed journals *Satirikon* [Satiricon] and *Novyj Satirikon* [The new satiricon]. Under the new social order in the 1920s, satire not only survived but definitely dominated the Russian literary scene. The names Zoščenko, Il'f and Petrov, Oleša, Bulgakov, Ėrenburg, and Kataev alone are enough to prove the prominence of satire.

Russian satire has traditionally exhibited a highly attractive feature which is sometimes missing in its Western counterpart - it is predominantly comic. Indeed, if one looks back to the early days of

Russian satire, one finds that practically all major Russian satirists produced works that made their readers laugh. This is the case with the plays of Fonvizin and Kapnist, Griboedov and Gogol, the plays and fables of Krylov, the prosaic works of Gogol, Saltykov-Ščedrin, early Čexov, and the verses of A. K. Tolstoy and Koz'ma Prutkov. The tradition of "funniness" in satirical works carried through to this century. The truly biting and at the same time funny verses and stories of Saša Černyj, Doroševič, Averčenko, and Teffi represent satire in the years preceding the 1917 revolution. The same quality is also highly characteristic of Soviet satirists of the 1920s. Not only Zoščenko, Bulgakov, Il'f, Petrov, and Kataev but also scores of minor satirists produced works highly varied in form but all having one common feature - they were all imbued with the comic spirit. Thus, when the acknowledged master of Soviet satire of the 1920s, Mixail Kol'cov, stated that if a satirist's work is not funny it should be discarded as unsuccessful, it was not merely an expression of personal taste but a statement about the Russian satirical tradition.

Nevertheless, literary scholarship has paid very little attention to the comic side of the works of Russian satire. There have been very few individual studies on the technique of the comic in Russian literature. Besides a slim volume of Slonimskij's, *Texnika komičeskogo u Gogolja* [Gogol's technique of the comic], published in the 1920s, in which the author primarily deals with the philosophy of Gogol's humor rather than with textual and linguistic analysis of the phenomenon, only a few works on the subject have appeared.

There are several reasons for this. First, although satire is a genre known since the time of Aristotle, satire that evokes laughter has frequently been wrongly assessed. The "funniness" of Gogol's and Saltykov's work led to a misreading of their works by both enemies and admirers. The theoretical basis for dealing with the problem of laughter in a literary work was developed quite slowly due to the complexity of psychological, linguistic, and methodological problems one must deal with in studying "funny" satire. This theoretical basis has been laid in a relatively recent period with advances made by Bergson, Freud, Koestler and other distinguished researchers. Due to the inability of Soviet scholarship to accept the works of the aforementioned theoreticians for ideological reasons (Soviet opposition to Freud is especially notorious),² Soviet studies of satire

have shown a tendency to accentuate the ideological. Russian scholars have avoided a more formal approach to the studies of the techniques of the comic in satire. However, the work of satire is funny not because of who is attacked but because the satirist deliberately chooses to imbue his work with laughter.

Bakhtin's profound work on Rabelais occupies a special place in studying laughter. However, as Bakhtin himself repeatedly warned, the study of laughter in this work is limited to its carnivalesque forms of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Although Rabelais strongly influenced comic writers of the following epochs - Saltykov is definitely among them - the role of laughter in purely satirical works is distinct from the role of laughter in Rabelais. Therefore, while examining Saltykov's comic devices, references will be made to Bakhtin's discoveries wherever appropriate, but the art of the comic in Saltykov will primarily be examined insofar as it is *purely satirical* - a definition which undoubtedly applies to Saltykov's work.

Saltykov is the least fortunate of the great Russian classic writers of the nineteenth century. His reputation in the West rests primarily on the strength of his family chronicle, *The Golovlyovs*. Although it is impressive and deserves to be considered a classic of world literature, the novel, one of the gloomiest and most depressing novels about the moral and physical decay of a gentry family, ill represented Saltykov's talent as a comic writer to the Western reader. In his native land the author of *The Golovlyovs* enjoys quite a different reputation. He is widely accepted and revered by his compatriots as one of the funniest Russian writers of all times - the "Russian Swift," as he is often called.³

The question is why works so widely appreciated by educated Russians were so difficult to transplant to a foreign soil. One explanation has to do with the fact that the bulk of Saltykov's work consists of satirical sketches and observations on the social and political events of his time. In his excellent introduction to a collection of Saltykov's writings, I. P. Foote (1977: 1) explains that the lack of interest in Saltykov in the West is that he is "too literary for the historian and too historical for the student of literature". Indeed, the satirist himself remained rather skeptical about the value of his work for future generations of readers because it is "so steeped in the present time".

He felt that his writings, so full of hints, allusions, and other devices for eluding the censor's knife, could only be appreciated by readers with a considerable knowledge of Russian history. This artistic maneuver, labeled by him "Aesopian (or slavish) language", is also difficult to convey to a foreign reader not familiar with the sociopolitical atmosphere of Saltykov's time.

Nevertheless, time has proved him wrong. As has happened more than once in the history of literature, the virtues of Saltykov's works have saved them from oblivion and ensured that time would not erode but rather preserve them. A certain amount of erosion in meaning is, of course, inevitable. But, just as contemporary readers of Swift enjoy his works without knowing the details of British history of Swift's time, Saltykov is widely read and appreciated by his compatriots despite the fact that they are not always able to identify many specific circumstances about which Saltykov wrote.⁴ Saltykov was much more than a simple chronicler of his time. As Foote (1977: 9) rightly assessed, Saltykov did manage not just to satirize, but to penetrate deeply into the underlying causes of Russian problems, as no other Russian writer had before and, perhaps, after him. Saltykov, as many of his contemporaries confirm, had a thorough first-hand knowledge of his country; he was not only a satirist ridiculing the shortcomings of Russian life, but also a psychologist and sociologist with keen insights into the root causes of these shortcomings. Maxim Gorky considered Saltykov's works invaluable for understanding Russian history in the second half of the nineteenth century. He once said that Saltykov had an "almost prophetic vision" of Russia. What he meant by this is that Saltykov was able to foresee how Russia was to develop in the years immediately following the appearance of his work.

Further historical developments on Russian soil throughout this century have proven an even greater longevity for Saltykov's insights.⁵ The fundamental traits of the Russian national character, developed through centuries of oppression, backwardness, and the imposition of violence as a legitimate means of controlling human lives, traits which Saltykov ridiculed so mercilessly, have survived to the present day. This is why his satires are still widely read in his native land. His work demonstrates a profound knowledge of the mentality of the Russian people and a keen understanding of the

relationship between state and individual as it developed in Russia. The depth of Saltykov's vision of the Russian nation has made him especially popular in the last twenty years; as deficiencies of the Soviet system have become more and more obvious, Russian liberal intelligentsia have often turned to Saltykov in their attempts to discover root causes of national problems. It is not by chance that in the late 1960s a play version of the *Contemporary idyll*, *Balalajkin i kompanija* [Balalajkin and his company] was staged at Moscow's "Sovremennik theater" and enjoyed tremendous popularity among theatergoers; the opportunism and servility as the prevailing traits of Russian social life of the time described in the *Idyll* were easily recognizable to the Russian public a hundred years later. In 1977, a film based on Saltykov's book and under the same title, *Pošexonskaja starina* [The old time in Pošexon'e], was produced in the USSR and also enjoyed popularity with the public. The new historical developments in Russia have not outdated Saltykov. In 1989, in his film entitled *Ono* [It] director Sergej Bočarov used the satirical images of *History of a town* to clearly state that the heritage of tyranny, mismanagement and inefficiency of the Russian rulers of the past has been well preserved by the Soviet rulers, be it Stalin, Khrushchev, or Gorbachev.

The second reason why Saltykov has had a hard time "getting through" to the Western reader lies in his strength as a writer, in the linguistic complexity of his writing. A supreme innovator and master of Russian language, he enriched the language with many neologisms and expressions. His comic takeoffs, parodies of various styles, and sophisticated use of a rich linguistic apparatus to achieve his comic effects present formidable tasks to the translator.

Thus, the topicality of his work and the difficulty of his linguistic style are the two chief obstacles to Saltykov's reaching a Western reader. The situation, however, is gradually improving. Besides *The Golovlyovs*, his *History of a town* and fairy tales have appeared in English. The most recent addition to this list is another of Saltykov's masterpieces, *The pompadours*. The following investigation is intended to draw further attention to the work of this great Russian satirist, and to show Western readers his comic achievements and the virtuosity of his artistry in evoking satirical laughter.

What is true for Saltykov is in most cases true for other satirical writers as well. While this study primarily concentrates on Saltykov, I have attempted to consolidate into a more general approach the task of defining the devices a comic writer may use. The strategy of scrutinizing a satirical work from the point of view of its comic devices may be applied to many other literary texts for the purpose of a similar literary analysis. One will find, then, throughout this study, numerous references not only to Gogol, but also to other outstanding Russian comic writers: Sumarokov, Fonvizin, Krylov, and Griboedov, to name a few.

This work is divided into six chapters and a conclusion. Chapter one, rather uncharacteristic for this book, has a sole purpose to acquaint those readers who are unfamiliar with Saltykov's life and works with the various targets of his satire. Chapter two demonstrates how a lack of knowledge about the nature of the comic and concomitant difficulty in assessing "funny" satire led to a considerable misunderstanding of Saltykov's work. In this respect, he has shared, to a considerable extent, the plight of Gogol, possibly the general plight of the comic genius - he is usually either misinterpreted or taken too lightly by his contemporaries. A comparable complaint has been made at various times by widely varying comic geniuses of such distinct and diverse types as Chekhov, Charlie Chaplin and Woody Allen.

Because there is considerable disagreement among scholars as to the definitions of satire, humor, wit, and the comic, Chapter two clarifies this terminology as applied in this study and establishes the methodology of the study. While in the realm of the comic a work in hand quite often presents a mixture of satire, humor, and wit, the following definitions are suggested and used here as they concern a literary work:

The comic is an element of a text that is capable of evoking a smile or laughter (if the overall mood, attitude, or other conditions on the part of a writer and reader do not impede this emotion).

Satire is a genre of literature whose goal is not only to point out a social vice but to make it clear that this vice is intolerable; in modern works of satire the comic element is usually present to some degree, but is not absolutely necessary.

Humor is a genre of literature in which shortcomings and contradic-

tions of human nature are exposed, but their presence is shown as an incurable part of human beings that the author accepts as unavoidable. Any attempts to eradicate these shortcomings are deemed fruitless by the author. The presence of the comic element is obligatory.

Wit is the discovery of paradox in the realm of words and ideas. In its pure form, wit is ideologically neutral, although it is often associated with satire and humor.

Laughter is a physiological reaction to the comic element. Depending on the conditions and purpose of its evocation, laughter varies widely in volume and quality, from a smile to boisterous laughter, and from a good-hearted and sympathetic laughter (humor) to vicious and intolerant laughter (satire).

Chapters three and four are devoted to Saltykov's main satirical device, that is, denigration, in both its non-metaphoric and metaphoric forms. Following Gogol in this respect, Saltykov's use of this device was an inspiration to the next generation of Russian satirists. One need only consider Bulgakov's *The heart of a dog* to see how Saltykov's comic ideas were further developed.

Chapter five deals with the more formal techniques of the comic, namely linguistic comic effects. Concepts developed here to assess Saltykov could be used to study similar devices of other Russian writers known for linguistic play, such as Leskov and Platonov.

Most special instances of the comic discussed in Chapter six are not unique to Saltykov. Thus, the concepts of exaggeration and the grotesque could be applied to a discussion of similar devices, for example, those in Bulgakov's *Fatal eggs* or *Diaboliad*. The analysis of the technique of comic naming, which we discuss in conjunction with a similar device in Gogol's work, could be extended to the comic stories of Čexov or Il'f and Petrov. One finds the Saltykovian device of the "apocryphal" appearance of famous literary heroes in Bulgakov's work, as in his story "Čičikov's adventures".

One important warning: it is natural for the reader of a book devoted to the comic to expect to derive a direct enjoyment from the samples given of the artist's work. In this case the reader might find himself or herself disappointed. Most of the samples may not seem funny at all. As discussed in Chapter two, "funny" and "comic" are not the same. While all samples of Saltykov's work used in this study are

comic to one degree or another (sometimes very slightly, as in the case of most of Saltykov's neologisms discussed in Chapter five), it does not necessarily mean that one would find them funny. The reasons for this are numerous and are addressed in great detail in Chapter two (see the section on the double nature of laughter). In addition, in contrast with a humorous work, assessment of the funny elements in satire is difficult when a sample is taken out of context, as must be done in a study.⁶ One-liners, for example, encapsulate the comic to such a degree that an elaborate setup is rarely necessary. To enjoy the comic element of a larger text, more information is needed. For instance, in the price list for expected insults which appears on the face of one of Saltykov's characters, *Očiščennyj of Contemporary idyll*, one needs to know much more about him. Only then can the comic qualities of the list itself be fully appreciated. In addition, one should keep in mind that the term "satirical laughter" does not by and large mean that the work is overtly funny. Laughter in satire is usually not joyful; "embittered" and "poisonous" are the two of most frequent epithets that are applied to satirical works. For this reason, I have deliberately tried to avoid the word "funny" wherever possible.