

RESURRECTION AND REBIRTH IN BABEL:  
*МОЙ ПЕРВЫЙ ГУСЬ*

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In Babel's heart there was a kind of fighting – he was captivated by the vision of two ways of being, the way of violence and the way of peace, and he was torn between them. (Trilling 1974: 14).

1. In much of the critical literature of Babel's principal work of fiction, *Конармия*<sup>1</sup> (*Red Cavalry*), one of the central points at issue is the personality or *type* of the hero. Lionel Trilling's observation with which I have begun is but one of many.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, one of the main questions of this work of fiction and its criticism is whether Liutov could be construed as a *hero* in the everyday sense of the word, although his status as the "sentient centre" or narrative focus is largely uncontested (Shcheglov 1994).<sup>3</sup> What I want to do in this present paper is to examine Liutov's role in the cycle (Luplow 1982: 111-12),<sup>4</sup> with particular reference to its eighth

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1 All references to this work will be to the following edition: Babel 1966: 27-156.

2 For other discussions of the hero and his character, see, *inter alia*, Luplow 1982: 31 ff., Falen 1974 and Carden.

3 Most studies of *Конармия* discuss Liutov as a «normal» literary character. For Yuri Shcheglov this approach is not necessarily the correct one. He comments:

“One can argue that the narrator of *Red Cavalry*, Kirill Vasil'evich Liutov, is not endowed with the same unique and «dense» individuality as are the other characters in the book, even those who are minor and episodic. Much of the time he appears as a more or less formal figure, subject to various elements of authorial voice and outlook (...) Only occasionally does Liutov thicken from a purely functional figure into a semblance of a hero in his own right.”

4 Again, the use of this term is not quite as straightforward as might be thought. Luplow comments:

“Although *Red Cavalry* is clearly meant to be a larger unified whole and not just a collection of stories, it still does not as a cycle have a «finished», «unified», closed quality. It presents the stories, rather, as a series of parallels and contrasts, as juxtapositions and variations on main themes. This lack of structural closedness, however, fully accords with and

story, *Мой Первый Гусь*, in the light of some of Lotman's work on cultural typologies, narrative structures and narrative space, along with reworkings of Lotman, as well as some similar approaches to plot typologies and narrative space in Bakhtin ("chronotopes"). The aims of these discussions will be to attempt to answer the questions raised by the application of Lotman's work to this cycle, and to move towards some tentative conclusions concerning the autobiographical "hero's" position in this highly polyphonic and enigmatic work.

2. The work by Lotman to which I first refer is his article *Происхождение сюжета в типологическом освещении* (Lotman 1992: 224-42).<sup>5</sup> In this article Lotman outlines his interpretation of the central features of narrative, many of which are exactly applicable to the characters and plot-lines of both *Конармия* in general, and to *Гусь* in particular. Lotman sees characters typologically as either „подвижной” or „неподвижной”:

Нетрудно заметить, что персонажи делятся на подвижных, свободных относительно сюжетного пространства, могущих менять свое место в структуре художественного мира и *пересекать границу – основной типологический признак этого пространства*, и на неподвижных, являющихся, собственно, функцией этого пространства. (Lotman 1992: 229, *my italics, J.A.*)

Lotman then goes on to refine this typology to an even simpler and more fundamental model:

Элементарная последовательность событий в мифе может быть сведена к цепочке: *вхождение в закрытое пространство – выход из него* (цепочка эта открыта в обе стороны и может бесконечно умножаться). Поскольку закрытое пространство может интерпретироваться как «пещера», «могила», «дом», «женщина», (и соответственно наделяться признаками темного, теплого, сырого), вхождение в него на разных уровнях интерпретируется как «смерть» «зачатие»

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contributes to the sense of thematic and philosophical irresolution which is central to the complex and paradoxical world of *Red Cavalry*.”

5 This article was originally published in *Статьи по типологии культуры*, Tartu 1973: II: 9-41. An English version, *The Origin of Plot In The Light Of Typology*, is in "Poetics Today", 1979: 1/1-2: 161-84.

«возвращение домой» и т.д., причем все эти акты мыслятся как взаимно тождественные. Следующие за смертью-зачатием *воскресение-рождение* связаны с тем, что рождение мыслится не как акт возникновения новой, прежде не бывшей личности, а в качестве обновления уже существовавшей. (Lotman 1992: 230, *my italics, J.A.*).

It is important to note some of the key concepts in these definitions because, as I will argue, they are central to an understanding of *Конармия*. They are: „вхождение – выходение”, „дом”, „женщина”, „смерть”, and „воскресение”. Indeed, later in this same piece, Lotman moves on to refine these definitions to even more elementary units, in regarding „смерть – половое общение – возрождение” as “the most archaic mythological complex” (Lotman 1992: 234).

3. In these positions, however generative they may be, Lotman is seemingly blind to gender difference. Important refinements to Lotman’s model are added by Teresa de Lauretis in her powerful article *Desire in Narrative* (de Lauretis 1984: 103-57), where she persuasively re-reads (and re-writes) Lotman, to demonstrate the roles allotted typologically to male and female characters in underlying narrative structures and models. Women, as Lotman notes, are seemingly interchangeable, even synonymous with “cave”, “grave” and so on. In Lotman’s model, narrative typically, and typologically, concerns male destiny, indeed how the hero forms himself and is defined, as Liutov seeks to do throughout *Конармия*. Indeed, as de Lauretis convincingly reinterprets Lotman, the narrative hero *must* be (at least morphologically) male, because the space is morphologically female (“woman=closed space”):

the mythical subject [,] is constructed as human being and male; he is the active principle of culture, the establisher of distinction, the creator of differences. Female is what is not susceptible to transformation, to life or death; she (it) is an element of sub-space, a topos, a resistance, matrix and matter. (de Lauretis 1984: 119).

As I have argued elsewhere (Andrew 1989), women are indeed largely peripheral to the intensely male world of *Конармия*, but there are several significant encounters with women for the typological hero Liutov, which play a significant part in his quest

for self-definition. Developing Lotman's equation of «woman= enclosed space», de Lauretis traces the function of female characters in hero narratives to ancient sources, although what she has to say will apply very closely to Babel's work:

Medusa and the Sphinx, like the other ancient monsters, have survived inscribed in hero narratives, in someone else's story, not their own; so they are figures or markers of positions – places and *topoi* – through which the hero and his story move to their destination and to accomplish meaning. (Andrew 1989: 109).

This argument does not go far enough, however, and de Lauretis soon develops it to note that these “monsters” are “obstacles man encounters on the path of life, *on his way to manhood* (...); they must be slain or defeated so that he can go forward to fulfil his destiny – and his story” (Andrew 1989: 110).

4. Lotman himself has, of course, developed these ideas in a number of places and I would now like to dwell briefly on another illuminating piece, namely, *Заметки о художественном пространстве* (Lotman 1992: 448-64). Here we find significant developments around the semiotics of „дом”, which will also be of some importance for an understanding of the semiotics of space in *Конармия*. Lotman begins the second section of this article (*Дом в «Мастере и Маргарите»*) by noting:

Среди универсальных тем мирового фольклора большое место занимает противопоставление «дома» (своего, безопасного, культурного, охраняемого покровительственными богами пространства) антидому, «лесному дому» (чужому, *дьявольскому пространству, месту временной смерти, попадание в которое равносильно путешествию в загробный мир*).<sup>6</sup> (Lotman 1992: 457, *my italics, J.A.*).

Even more pertinently for our present purposes, Lotman then proceeds to discuss the Dostoevskian hero and his path through narrative, noting that he „должен (...) пройти через мертвый

6 See also van Baak 1990, where we find similar text-modelling. For example: “The opposition House/Cosmos – Chaos has the following spatial parallels: interior, ordered, protective space of culture vs. exterior, chaotic, hostile or unsafe space (sometimes equivalent to Nature)” (p.3).

дом, чтобы воскреснуть и возродиться” (Lotman 1992: 458, *my italics, J.A.*).

5. In the same year that Lotman first published his seminal *Происхождение сюжета*, 1973, Bakhtin added his important “Concluding Remarks” to his equally seminal (and perhaps more famous) piece, *Формы времени и хронотопа в романе* (Bakhtin 1975: 234-407). In these remarks, Bakhtin develops a series of very powerful and productive chronotopes which both echo and develop Lotman’s typologies. In particular, it seems to me, Bakhtin’s chronotope of „порог” should be regarded as an important and fruitful extension of Lotman. That is, in entering „закрытое пространство” the narrative hero, fairly obviously, must cross the threshold of this space. And, indeed, the semiotics of the threshold, in Bakhtin’s development of this concept, bear strong similarities to Lotman’s discussions of the semiotics of narrative space. Thus, according to Bakhtin, the threshold „это хронотоп кризиса и жизненного перелома” (Bakhtin 1975: 397, *his emphasis, J.A.*). Particularly in Dostoevskii, this and the related chronotope of the staircase, and their continuation, the street and the square are the main loci in his works, „где совершаются события кризисов, падений, воскресений, обновлений, прозрений, решений, определяющих всю жизнь человека” (*ibid.*, *my italics, J.A.*).

6. A recent article by Yuri Shcheglov (1994) seeks to analyse Babel, and primarily *Гусь*, in terms of the archetypes with which it deals. I shall return to Shcheglov’s findings from time to time in the following pages. For the moment, I draw attention only to the principal archetypes he has uncovered, as they are strikingly similar to a number of the concepts to which Lotman in particular also refers, in that Shcheglov sees the central motif complexes in the story, and perhaps in the cycle as a whole, as “initiation” and “*Visiting the Otherworld*” (Shcheglov 1994: 658-9).

7. In the light of all these various sources, we can now move to synthesising what we might call the “*typological motif clusters*” (TMCs) which form the basis for narrative, and which, I will argue, are very important in developing an understanding of the dynamics of *Конармия* in general, and *Гусь* in particular. The overall TMC may be synthesised thus:

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The hero is male, and mobile; he leaves home,<sup>7</sup> crosses the boundary/threshold and enters enclosed space. This space can be thought of as «death/the grave/descent into the otherworld/the devil's kingdom/the house of the dead»; here he encounters/overcomes/slays immobile [female] obstacles/antagonists and/or engages in sexual relations. These encounters (or equivalents) lead to emergence from this space, to rebirth/resurrection, in the form of a new identity or the renewal/confirmation of the old identity.

And this last stage in the thread, in a sense, leads us back to where we started with Lionel Trilling's words: Babel and his "hero" Liutov are "torn between (...) two ways of being". In other terms, this fictional world is profoundly *dialogised*, seen in terms of the dialectic (Luplow 1982: 57-9): the question will be whether Babel is able to find a synthesis between the oppositions he so brilliantly dramatises.

8. My main focus will be *Мой Первый Гусь*.<sup>8</sup> It seems to me, as to others, that this is one of the most significant, even pivotal stories for an understanding of the cycle as a whole. My procedure will now be as follows: I will examine the stories which precede it, in terms of the TMCs identified; then *Гусь* itself will come, followed by a general account of the remaining stories, viewed typologically.

9.1. The opening story, *Переход через Збруч*, is of great significance in terms of these typologies. Much attention has already been paid to this story in the critical literature. For Luplow the story "symbolizes the entrance into a war world as a descent into a hell of destruction and desecration" (Luplow 1982: 47), while Gronggaard notes the whole cycle is set in *border* territory (Gronggaard 1979: 63).<sup>9</sup> Marc Schreurs is especially illuminating on the symbolic significance of the story and of the river-crossing more generally.

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7 Of course, it may be argued that all these typologies ultimately derive from Propp's work on the folktale: "leaving home" is indeed one of the functions he specifies for the folktale. Equally, Bakhtin's chronotope of „дорога" should also be remembered at this point.

8 For an earlier investigation of this story by the present author, see Andrew 1984.

9 Falchikov (1977: 125) suggests that „переход" may be an echo of Dostoevskii's „Преступление (и наказание)".

He draws our attention to Babel's debt to *Слово о Полку Игореве*, while noting that the Donets in the tale "is also the borderline between light and darkness, good and evil, heaven and hell, God and the devil. In Babel's story, too, the river has a symbolical meaning of this type" (Schreurs 1989: 104).<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, the very first word of the cycle, „переход”, announces, as it were, the author's intention to invoke ancient archetypes. This story, standing first and acting as a kind of prologue to the rest (Schreurs 1989: 153, 173), marks the theme of "entry into enclosed space/crossing the threshold" as the initial theme, and, perhaps, the main theme to come. It is also of significance that Liutov's company, in historical equivalent terms, was heading from east to west, implicitly, perhaps, to forge a new cultural identity. The motif of entering enclosed space is further marked and developed both in this story and the next, in that they not only cross the river/boundary, but then drive on into Novograd, before the narrator finds his billet with a Jewish family, and enters their dirty flat.

9.2. The secondary characteristics of the TMC are soon evident as well: we enter with the "hero"/narrator "the world/house of the dead".<sup>11</sup> This is apparent in the very first paragraph of the cycle, in which the troops progress along the „шоссе (...) построенному на мужичьих костях Николаем Первым" (27). Indeed, it could be said that death permeates this opening story, just as it will much of the cycle. We read that the setting sun rolls across the sky „какотрубленная голова" (27), and a little later, „Запах вчерашней крови и убитых лошадей каплет в вечернюю прохладу" (27): even the "cool" is redolent of the grave. And, of course, the most striking aspect of this story is the narrator's discovery that he has spent the night virtually embracing the hideously murdered father of the pregnant Jewish woman.

9.3. The motif of "evening" („вечернюю прохладу") is also of some significance. As Shcheglov remarks in connection with *Гусь*, in the Romantic tradition, "twilight and the evening landscape constitute a *borderline chronotope* in which the *otherworldly* is at its closest to the terrestrial" (Shcheglov 1994: 660, *my italics, J.A.*).

10 See also p.146 for the more general historical significance of this river and p.191 for the variety of interpretations of this crossing, as well as pp.171-99 for a full analysis of the story.

11 See Andrew 1989 for a discussion of the theme of death in the cycle. See also Luplow 1982: 47, 49, as well as Carden and Falen 1974.

And, it seems to me, it is but a short step from the “otherworldly” to the devilish. This is corroborated by the many echoes in this story, as in *Гусь* and in others, of *Тамань*, and in particular of that story’s “uncanny/devilish” atmosphere to which Shcheglov also draws our attention. In this light we should also remember Liutov’s remark to the Jewish woman: „Как вы грязно живете”: „грязно” is of course a virtual synonym of the „нечисто” (denoting lack of icons/devilishness) of Lermontov’s story.

9.4. As I have noted elsewhere (Andrew 1989: 11), this woman, like most of those encountered by Liutov remains unnamed: her consequent anonymity (and, of course, her “immobility”) render her part of the “space” through which the hero is beginning to move. She is not yet an “obstacle/antagonist” but is a pre-echo of the later „старухи” Liutov is to attack. The woman is pregnant, again an intimation of the motif of „половое общение” which will be, in a travesty form, an important part of Liutov’s typological progress. Another element of sexuality which is later to be much developed is implied in another of this story’s celebrated images, in Liutov’s dream of Savitskii. In the dream Savitskii shoots another officer in the eyes, „и оба глаза его падают наземь” (28): castration is an obvious interpretation of this dream, and I shall return to this motif, and its related cluster of decapitation and blindness.

9.5. In conclusion, then, we may say that this opening story, *Переход через Збруч*, fulfils many of the aspects of the first half of the TMC: the question that will need to be answered in due course is whether Liutov will emerge reborn from this nether world.

10. As Schreurs has noted, the second story, *Костел в Новограде*, is a kind of continuation of the first, and it too is structured around the chronotope of “the threshold” (Schreurs 1989: 69-70). Equally, the key motifs of entry (or rather *descent*), death and sex saturate the text. Having already crossed into Poland, then entered Novograd, Liutov, in his search for his Commissar, goes into the eponymous church. Alarmed by the Gothic sights that await him (silver skulls on a broken coffin), „В испуге я бросаюсь вниз, в подземелье” (30). Now indeed he has entered the underworld. Death is also evident in the skulls and coffin, as well as in many other details of the story. So too is sex, in the „лифчики” hung on the crucifixes or in the startling imagery of „я вижу раны твоего бога, сочащиеся семенем, благоуханным ядом, опьяняющим девственниц” (30). These motifs are brought



together in the concluding lines of the story: „– Прочь, – сказал я себе, – прочь от этих подмигивающих мадонн, обманутых солдатами (...)” (31). The narrator has descended into an alien world he cannot understand, in which death and sex are intimately and strangely interconnected, and from which he is already desperate to emerge.

11. Although there are a further five stories before *Мой Первый Гусь*, Liutov plays no active part in any of them, so that, in narrative terms, it may be argued that *Гусь* follows *directly* after the scenes of *Костел*, and will indeed be a direct continuation of the motifs discussed so far. Before moving to a discussion of this most pivotal story,<sup>12</sup> it only remains to pick out the main motifs of the intervening stories, as they are relevant to the present analysis.

11.1. The theme/motif of „дом/антидом/бездомье”<sup>13</sup> continues to be an important spatial organising principle (as it will remain throughout the cycle), both in general terms as Liutov “literally and philosophically wanders” (Luplow 1982: 32) through eastern Poland, and more explicitly when the hero/narrator remarks in *Пан Аполек*: „По городу слонялась бездомная луна. И я шел с ней вместе” (45, *my italics*, J.A.). This story, as well as *Солнце Италии* and *Гедали* all take place in the evening or at night. Apart from the “uncanny” associations noted by Shcheglov, this time of day also has traditional associations with death. This motif itself remains a *dominanta* of the work, in the many allusions to death in this last-mentioned story, for example. Amongst other details we should note the references to „чучело орла” (50), „охотничий винчестер” (50), „мертвая бабочка” (51), „черепов” (51), „мертвых цветов” (51), „умерших цветов” (51) and „легкий запах тления” (51).

11.2. A further allusion to death develops another aspect of this motif which is to become increasingly important (and is crucial in *Гусь*), namely, the cluster of decapitation/ castration/blindness.<sup>14</sup> In

12 Indeed, according to Shcheglov 1994, this story had a far-reaching impact: “The conciseness and density of *My First Goose*, reinforced by its wealth of archetypal connotations, make this story an almost emblematic prototype of many works of later Soviet fiction that address analogous themes” (p.670).

13 See Lotman 1992: 458 ff. for the theme of „бездомье”.

14 For a discussion of the collocation “blindness/castration” in *Тамань*, see Andrew 1992, especially pp.468-70, as well as the later discussion in the present paper.

*Пан Аполек*, in amongst his other religious subjects, an important figure is John the Baptist, whose demise is depicted in the graphic detail that is typical of the work: „Капли крови блистали в круглых застежках плаща. Голова Иоанна была косо срезана с ободранной шей” (39). This dwelling on detail draws our attention to the decapitation, and the significance of this will later emerge as we dissect the mosaic-like structure of Babel’s imagery. Another thread in this cluster is the motif of „очки”, which again will become significant in *Гусь*.

11.3. Before finally moving to this story, it is important to remark upon a more general aspect of the cycle. A central aspect of the “dialectic” to which Trilling and others have drawn our attention is the struggle within Liutov between the Cossack approach to life and death, on the one hand, and on the other, “the way of peace”, and prominent in this latter tendency are the Jewish characters. It is therefore clearly significant, in considering *Конармия* as a *cycle*, that *Гедали* immediately precedes *Гусь*, as it is in this story that the Jewish theme is first fully developed, while it is in *Гусь* that he first really encounters the Cossacks. The “two ways” are thus placed in “conflict montage”.<sup>15</sup>

12. That this story marks a new departure in the cycle, and one that will make it pivotal, is, in a sense, obvious from the very title. It is the first story, and indeed the only one, that refers to the narrator/hero in its title („мой”). Similarly, the second word of the title leads us to expect something novel. That said, the third word introduces the notes of bathos and travesty which will be so important to an overall reading of the story.<sup>16</sup>

12.1. Although it is disguised by the long preamble concerning the appearance and behaviour of Savitskii, the opening of the story, in the end, clearly locates it well within the paradigm of „вхождение в закрытое пространство”. (Indeed, as Mendelson has noted, this is Liutov’s first contact with the Red Cavalry corps: in this sense it marks his *first arrival* [Mendelson 1982: 115].) Moreover, as in the first two stories of the cycle, or *Тамань*, there is in fact a *series* of entrances and spatial switches. Having arrived, and been dealt with by Savitskii, he goes off to seek „ночлег”:

15 For an illuminating discussion of various types of “montage” in the cycle, see Schreurs 1989.

16 Yuri Shcheglov 1994: 657-8 also draws our attention to this aspect of the story: see also Luplow 1982: 45.

„Мы подошли к хате” (54). That he is away from home/on the road/homeless is also marked in his observation that the pork „дымилась, как дымится издалека родной дом в деревне” (54). By implication, at least, he is in the „антидом”, the nether world.

12.1.1. Another important aspect of Lotman’s work on spatial semiotics is the „верх/низ” dichotomy (Lotman 1970: 275), and we see this as a vital ingredient of textual organisation here. Thus, great emphasis is placed at the outset on Savitskii’s “highness” („Он встал (...) разрезал избу пополам, как штандарт разрезает небо” [53]). In reverse, Liutov, as in *Костел* („подземелье”), plunges down: he crawls on the ground (like an animal?) to retrieve his papers, before we read that he „лег на землю” (55). As I have argued elsewhere (Andrew 1984), it is quite difficult to pinpoint the peripeteia in this story: in the light of the present argument, this could be said to come when Liutov notes: „Тогда я отложил газету и пошел к хозяйке” (55). Obviously he „встал” in order to be able to do this: his ascent/resurrection has begun.

12.2. As noted earlier, the story is set in the evening. The specific description of this is also of interest: „умирающее солнце испускало на небе свой розовый дух” (54). The general collocation of “evening=death” is here laid bare (twice). But, as we would expect from this cycle, the fact that the narrator has descended into the world of the dead is apparent in many details of *Гусь*. We see this in Savitskii’s written command („уничтожение”, „шлепну на месте”), in Savitskii’s remarks („тут режут за очки”), in the old woman’s repeated wish to hang herself and, of course, in the central, bathetic event of the story, the killing of the goose: death is prevalent at every turn.

12.3. In reading *Мой Первый Гусь* as a kind of microcosm of the whole cycle in terms of the TMC, we need to investigate the parabola of the plot development. Liutov has entered enclosed space, descended into the grave: will he arise? In order to address this question we need to examine the “dialectic” of this particular story, which is made most manifest in the contrasting relationships he enters, with the Cossacks on the one hand, and the old woman on the other.

12.3.1. The dilemma for Liutov in this new world is summarised by the quartermaster:

– Канитель тут у нас с очками и унять нельзя. Человек высшего отличия – из него душа вон. А испортить вы даму, самую чистенькую даму, тогда вам от бойцов ласка. (54).

And, indeed, his relations with the Cossacks follow this dialectic, and mirror the overall lineaments of the plot. Put simply, at first they reject him, and then gradually accept him.<sup>17</sup> The turning point would seem to be when he begins to behave *like a Cossack* (by assaulting the old woman and killing the goose). In terms of the present argument, we might say that his rebirth begins when he adopts the manners of the denizens of this underworld. His acceptance („ласка”) is marked in a number of ways. After the assault and killing, one of the Cossacks remarks: „парень нам подходящий” (55); later he is lent a spoon, and joins them for their meal of pork.<sup>18</sup> (I shall return to the later stages of Liutov’s integration into the group, and to what extent this constitutes „воскресение”.)

12.3.2. Much more than the Cossacks, the old woman is clearly an almost purely emblematic character. In de Lauretis’s terms, she is an “element of sub-space”, an “obstacle” to be overcome and/or destroyed. Many details corroborate this view. She is unnamed, while the appellation „старуха” is redolent of a witch. She is also referred to (three times) as „хозяйка”, which suggests Baba Yaga (Shcheglov 1994: 666-7). Liutov’s treatment of her is also important, especially in the context of the cycle as a whole: at the very least, his rejection of her represents his aspiration to adopt the Cossack style.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, she is clearly linked to the motif of death („Я желаю повеситься” [55]): in turning from her path, Liutov, arguably, begins to move back to the world of life.

12.4. One very important aspect of the old woman is her blindness, which is compounded with her wearing glasses. („Старуха блестя слепотой и очками” [55]). Again, this is suggestive of Baba Yaga,<sup>20</sup> and adds to her emblematicism. Equally, it links her to the bespectacled narrator, whose glasses had

17 See Andrew 1984 for a detailed discussion of this.

18 The fact that a Jew eats pork is clearly of some significance! – a mark of either how liberated he is, or how desperate.

19 For a fuller discussion of this, see Andrew 1984.

20 I am again indebted to Shcheglov for this point: he also reminds us that in Тамань there is both blindness and an old woman, although the two are not fused in the one character.

earlier threatened him with disaster („тут режут за очки” [54]). In rebuffing her, Liutov rejects as well his potential (metaphorical) blindness, and all this symbolises. As Toril Moi has noted, “as the example of Oedipus demonstrates, the fear of blindness is the fear of castration” (Moi 1985: 134).<sup>21</sup> This encounter, then, draws together all the threads of this cluster, whereby “glasses= blindness = castration = decapitation = death (in general)”. In turn, it seems to me, this motif cluster could more broadly be construed as a subset of the death/ grave/underworld cluster.

12.5. Returning to the main parameters of our initial TMC, part of Lotman’s core typology is the motif of „половое общение” consequent upon death, and leading to rebirth/resurrection. Like much of *Конармия*, this story is saturated with sexuality, to such an extent that it is difficult to know with whom the “hero” may or may not have had „половое общение” as there are so many candidates!

12.5.1. For the opening description of „начдив шесть”, Savitskii is rightly famous and much discussed. We should note here, first of all, that it is heavily foregrounded: in a story of three and a half pages, over one page is devoted to the appearance and behaviour of a character *who will play no part in this particular narrative*. And this appearance has some strikingly sexual notes: „От него пахло духами (...) Длинные ноги его были похожи на девушек” (53). Even more to the point we note Liutov’s later comment: „завидуя железу и цветам этой юности” (54). The “hero” as he arrives in the enclosed space would seem to be sexually drawn to this splendid young man. He next encounters the group of Cossacks, and again the physical attractiveness of one is highlighted: „Молодой парень с льяным висячим волосом и прекрасным рязаньским лицом” (54). Significantly, it is precisely this one who proceeds to emit the „постыдные звуки” (54), once more suggesting homosexual links between the hero and a character of this underworld. Indeed, as Shcheglov notes, this obscene behaviour also has devilish connotations (Shcheglov 1994: 662-5). It is, in fact, the case that throughout all of the diegesis of *Конармия* Liutov has no real contact with sexually attractive women, except in dreams, whereas in other stories as well as here, he seems strongly drawn to „общение” with other men.

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21 The Biblical Samson is another instance of the fusion of blindness and (symbolic) castration.

12.6. The old woman, as we have already seen, is an emblematic “obstacle” with folk demonic connotations. Even here, however, sexual relations are possibly hinted at, in that Liutov pushes her „кулаком в *грудь*” (55). So too, with the killing of the goose, as I have noted elsewhere (Andrew 1984: 75): its „белая шея” (55) clearly echoes the „самую чистенькую даму”. But, if Liutov can be said in one sense to engage in „половое общение”, then it is a clear travesty of the typology, a grotesque mockery of a “hero’s’ behaviour” (Luplow 1982: 45).

12.7. As we have already seen, the killing of the goose allows Liutov to have „общение” of a general kind with the Cossacks, and this becomes more specific at the end of the story, when they retire for the night, in a scene that is once more clearly sexual, if again in a parodic mode: „Мы спали шестеро там, *согреваясь друг от друга, с перепутанными ногами*” (56): this is perhaps the „ласка” he had been promised for spoiling the purest of ladies. Finally, „дамы” as such do appear, or rather „женщины”, but only in his dream: as already noted, it seems that Liutov is only able to relate to women while asleep!

12.8. The third part of Lotman’s core triad is „возрождение”, and we must conclude our discussion of *Мой Первый Гусь* by reposing the question as to whether Liutov does emerge from this enclosed space reborn. The simple answer to this question is that there can be no „возрождение” because there is no „выхождение”: we leave Liutov asleep with the five Cossacks, dreaming his dreams. Indeed, it is only at the very end of the cycle as a whole that there is any indication of re-emergence from „закрытое пространство”, and much of the rest of the collection witnesses ever deeper immersion in death and the “grave”. Be all this as it may, these issues are addressed in the present story, and we now need to retrace our steps to look at Liutov’s progress through this section of the underworld.

12.8.1. It is Savitskii who first addresses this issue, in his parting words to Liutov, as he sends him out to meet his challenge which will define him (or not) as a hero. He says: „Тут режут за очки. *Поживешь с нами, што ль?*” (54). At the beginning of the exposition of the plot, then, the lines are drawn: will the “hero” survive his ordeal? Liutov at first is confident, declaring simply: „*Поживу*” (54). And as we have already seen, he does not only survive, but finds a measure of acceptance, not only by his travesty rape and murder but also, as I have noted elsewhere (Andrew

1984: 71, 75-7), by displaying to the Cossacks his intellectual gifts. The fact that he recovers from his prostration at the feet of the tormenting Cossacks is also suggested by one of the many striking images that convey the setting of the story: „Вечер завернул меня в *живительную* влагу сумеречных своих простынь” (56). In some senses at least, the hero is indeed reborn as a result of his ordeal, and the sexual relations he engages in. At the very least, we may be sure that this is the beginning of a new status in his life.<sup>22</sup> It now remains to be seen to what extent these processes are continued in the remaining twenty-seven stories of the cycle.

13. Looking at these stories does indeed confirm the view that *Мой Первый Гусь* is a pivotal story in that the motif clusters that are so important there are repeated throughout the remainder. Thus, „вхождение в закрытое пространство” remains an important organising principle, as in *Берестечко*, *У Святого Валента* and *Замостье*, for example. Liutov remains on the road, in the world of „антидом”, and, indeed, in „мертвый дом”, in that death remains as prevalent as before, or rather increases in frequency – and awfulness. The motif of parody/grotesque „половое общение” also remains. Thus, two stories after *Мой Первый Гусь* Liutov comments: „Я испытываю восторг *первого обладания*” (63). This does not refer to an amorous conquest, however, but his proud ownership of a „тачанка”! True heterosexual eroticism involving Liutov there certainly is, in *Замостье*:

Женщина, одетая для бала, приблизилась ко мне. Она вынула грудь из черных кружев корсажа и понесла ее ко мне с осторожностью, как кормилица пищу. Она приложила свою грудь к моей. Томительная теплота потрясла основы моей души, и капли пота, живого, движущегося пота, закипели между нашими сосками. (130).

This is the only sexual encounter between the hero and a woman. However, it is only a dream, and moreover, even there, the relationship is not straightforward in at least two ways. The apparent offer of milk suggests a maternal rather than sexual link. Even more striking is the fact that the dream shifts to one of the

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<sup>22</sup> Shcheglov 1994: 667-8 also draws our attention to the way Liutov is healed in this story, and achieves a new status.

dreamer's own death (with another blindness/castration motif, to which I will return).

13.1. As before, in reverse, most of Liutov's close relationships and quasi-erotic encounters are with men. In *Смерть Долгушова* he regrets the loss of friendship with Afon'ka Vida, „первого моего друга” (68), while he mourns the loss of Khlebnikov in similarly elegiac terms:

Я был опечален, потому что Хлебников был тихий человек, похожий на меня характером. (...) Мы оба смотрели на мир, как на луг в мае, как на луг, по которому ходят женщины и кони (87).

This emotional closeness becomes the same kind of physical sustenance that we saw at the end of *Гусь* in *Иваны*: he sleeps „согреваемый прелым сеном и телом Ивана Акинфиева” (121).

13.2. The rest of the cycle also sees a marked assimilation of Liutov into the Cossack ensemble. In *Учение о Тачанке* (just two stories after *Гусь*) he notes that he has acquired a driver and that „я перестал быть парией среди казаков” (62). Thereafter, he frequently uses „мы” to describe the ongoing military activity. Equally, in part at least, he shows himself capable of the kind of aggression which characterises Babel's depiction of the Cossack way: in *После Боя* (admittedly one of the last stories) we see him physically fighting another man.

13.3. Indeed, as many commentators have observed (Luplow 1982: 44-7), Liutov vacillates between the “two ways of being” virtually to the very end: he remains immured in the „мертвый дом”. One indication of this is the continuing reference to the motif-cluster of “glasses/blindness/decapitation/castration”. Shortly after *Гусь*, in one of the much quoted episodes of the cycle, he finds himself unable to kill the disembowelled Dolgushov. His “first friend”, Afon'ka Vida, upbraids him: „Жалеете вы, очки-тые, нашего брата, как кошка мышку” (67). To wear glasses, in this world, is to be impotent, incapable of action, even a “mercy killing”. In *У Святого Валента*, he encounters another blind old woman, whom he again rebuffs, while in the same story the references to Holofernes and John the Baptist remind us of another thread of this motif. In *Замостье* a number of these strands come together. In Liutov's dream Margot, having offered him her breast, now moves to much more sinister behaviour: „Она укрепила два истертых пятака на моих веках (...) потухающие зрачки



медленно повернулись под медяками” (131). Sexual relations lead to blindness (castration) – and to death, whether or not through decapitation.

13.4. Virtually all the material adduced so far would seem to suggest that the “hero” remains lost in „закрытое пространство”. Indeed, it is also the case that after *Гусь* he has three more encounters with “obstacles/antagonists” who must be “slain or defeated”, in the guise of more „старуха/хозяйка” figures. Indeed, it is the case that *virtually* every female with whom he has a close encounter is of this type. Perhaps the most grotesque instance of this reincarnated Baba Yaga is in *У Святого Валента*. In the eponymous church Liutov is accosted by a „старуха с распущенными желтыми волосами (...) Зрачки ее были налиты белой влагой слепоты и брызгали слезами” (108). Once more there are sexual hints: Liutov takes her by the hand, before „Старуха целовала мои сапоги с нежностью, обняв их, как младенца” (108). (We should also note the travesty mother motif once more [„младенца”].)

13.4.1. This motif becomes even more apparent in *Замостье*, which has much in common with *Гусь*. As in the earlier story, the woman is „хозяйка” as well as „старуха”; Liutov verbally assaults her (and threatens worse); she is the source of food (which includes the quasi-sacramental bread and wine);<sup>23</sup> Liutov shares food with a Cossack. Significantly, unlike in the earlier story, in *Замостье* Liutov *does* leave this particular village, he emerges from „закрытое пространство”. Then in *Песня* (only three stories from the end), this motif of the hero’s encounter with the underworld antagonist moves absolutely centre-stage. The first line of the story announces that this will be the story’s theme: „На постое в сельце Будятичах мне пала на долю злая хозяйка” (146). Many of the earlier motifs are recapitulated. He enters „закрытое пространство”, it is evening, he demands food from the woman, and threatens her and she reproaches him for his “Cossack” behaviour.<sup>24</sup> And it is indeed the case that this abuse of

23 Shcheglov 1994 has some very illuminating things to say about the use of ritual (in the literal and not merely metaphorical sense) in *Гусь*.

24 Luplow 1982 comments:

“There are, in fact, three stories – *My First Goose*, *The Song*, and *Zamostye* – in which Lyutov exposes the baseness of violence by

old women is the only such behaviour that Liutov is capable of on a consistent basis. Equally, it is significant that Babel devotes one of the last stories to this theme. De Lauretis says of the Sphinx: “She only served to test Oedipus and to qualify him as hero” (de Lauretis 1984: 112). These encounters with „старухи” (there are at least five in all) may be said to have a similar function, although any conclusion as to Liutov’s “heroism” must remain guarded. Be that as it may, taking this unnamed „старуха/хозяйка” as an echo of Baba Yaga, it would appear that, as regards the cycle as a whole, the “hero” remains in the kingdom of the dead.

14. It is only in the last two stories that there are any strong indications that the triad that Lotman described („смерть – половое общение – возрождение”) is to be completed. In the penultimate story, *Сын Рабби* (the last of the cycle for several years, of course), we see the bedraggled Russian army returning from Poland: the hero leaves enclosed space with them. Finally, in *Аргамак* the narrator announces that „Я решил *перейти* в строй” (152), a deliberate echo of the „переход” of the opening story. This last story also shows Liutov learning to ride properly and being accepted by the Cossacks. It would seem, particularly remembering that Babel added this story some years after the others, that the author was attempting to add something of an upbeat ending. In terms of our present analysis the case is not clear. In one sense Liutov has left the world he has been inhabiting by virtue of his decision to seek a transfer. But it is hard to find real evidence that this departure will do anything other than take the hero to another room in the „мертвый дом”, or that any real „возрождение” has taken place. From beginning to end, apart from a few intimations, the world of *Конармия* is almost entirely synonymous with the spaces of „антидом”, and more exactly, „мертвый дом”, from which, on the evidence available, there is precious little hope of escape, still less of „возрождение”.

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offending old women who have already been victimized by the war to the point of anguish and despair”.

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