CHAPTER III

A HISTORY OF *SKAZ*

In the previous chapter we saw that *skaz* can be defined as a form of narration in which the narrator employs a language that deviates from the norm language of literary narration.[1] Whereas the overriding concern in that chapter was to examine and analyse the various concepts of *skaz* for their internal coherence, and consequently any reference to individual writers was necessarily in passing, in this chapter I intend to test these theoretical formulations of *skaz* against the use of *skaz* by a number of writers. In particular, I shall be employing the distinction between parody and stylisation, and attempting to see how well these terms describe the actual practice of *skaz* by authors prior to Zoshchenko who are mentioned in one or more of the critical accounts of *skaz* discussed above. At the outset it must be conceded that parody and stylisation can be further subdivided. Among the reasons why a writer might want to stylise the language of the people are an ethnographic interest in that language and mindset, an egalitarian sym-pathy for the down-trodden, a nationalist identification with one's compatriots, and a love of the raw but poetic beauty of the language of the uneducated. Parodic *skaz* too may be employed for a myriad of purposes: a writer may want to invite laughter at a way of thinking or writing for political, social, or aesthetic reasons. Such parody may be part of an attempt to encourage a broader epist-emological scepticism akin to Romantic irony. The possibility that *skaz* might be a mask adopted in order to avoid the censors also needs to be explored: the very ambivalence of *skaz* makes it an attractive, but at the same time a highly in-efficient form for the encoding of satirical messages.

In writing this history, I hope to address a common weakness of the more extended accounts of *skaz* hitherto: they have been intended to describe one writer, and have consequently produced theoretical treatments of the term inadequate for even the briefest of histories of the uses of *skaz* narration.[2] Although this study focuses on Mikhail Zoshchenko's use of *skaz*, it is also a study about *skaz*, the purpose of which is to bequeath a definition of the term adequate to a des-cription of all its uses. This, it seems to me, can best be

1. See, in particular, Levin, '"Neklassicheskie" tipy povestvovaniia', *passim*; Titunik, 'The Problem of *Skaz* in Russian Literature', *passim*; and Kozhevnikova, 'O tipakh povestvovaniia v sovetskoi proze', *passim*.
2. This is not true of Mushchenko *et al.*, *The Poetics of Skaz*.

achieved by relating its most celebrated instances to one another in a chronological framework. In doing so I aspire not to reassess the various *skaz* writers, such a project would clearly be beyond the bounds of what is possible in a single chapter, but briefly to sug-gest avenues for the reassessment of their uses of *skaz*. In many instances, critics working with rather makeshift definitions of *skaz* have already perceived the dual possibilities of stylised and parodic *skaz* at work in a text by dint of the depth of their knowledge of its author, and their native insight.[3] Where I per-ceive this to be the case I am only too pleased to recapitulate their analysis or restate it in more rigorous terms.

A further objective of the present chapter is to evaluate the claim that *skaz* is a deviation from the norm of literary narration. This can be best done by examining, even if briefly, the language of the individual writers who employed *skaz*. Moreover, in this chapter I propose to explore some of the ramifications of transgression of the literary norm for *skaz* and *skaz* writers. In particular, I shall seek to understand to what extent the choice of *skaz* narration implies a school of writing, to what extent it gravitates towards a given genre and how far it is possible to make statements about *skaz* that are applicable throughout differ-ent historical contexts. Literary techniques exist in specific historical and critical contexts, and an attempt to relate these questions to *skaz* entails reference to and a retelling of Russian literary history and some discussion of Russian literary criticism. In so doing I aim to test the claim made by Eikhenbaum and others that *skaz* consitutes an alternative narrative tradition to the novel.[4] To rewrite or reassess Russian literary history in the light of *skaz* would clearly be a task beyond the scope of this book, and it is not my intention to undertake that labour here. Rather, so as to aid the understanding of *skaz*, I seek to relate *skaz* to the major commonly accepted trends in Russian literary history, i.e. to Realism and Symbolism, and to the cultural effects of the Revolution.

The Literary Norm

As we saw in Chapter II, *skaz* was defined in the work of critics such as Titunik and Levin as deviation from the ‘unmarked’, norm language of literary nar-ration. For Levin and Kozhevnikova, the notion of such a norm is based on the Russian term *literaturnyj qzyk*.[5] This is a concept of standard Russian that can

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3. Hugh McLean seems to me such a critic. See Hugh McLean, *Nikolai Leskov: The Man and his Art* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard U.P., 1977).
4. Eikhenbaum, ‘Leskov i sovremennaia proza’, *passim*.
5. Levin, ‘“Neklassicheskie” tipy povestvovaniia’, p. 245; *Idem*, ‘Literaturnyi iazyk i khudozhestvennoe povestvovanie’, in *Voprosy iazyka sovremennoi russkoi literatury* (Moscow, Nauka, 1971), pp. 9–96 (*passim*). Kozhevnikova, ‘O tipakh povestvovaniia v sovetskoi proze’, p. 99.

encompass the spoken language and pronunciation as well as written Russian.[6] As Levin has argued, in the 19th century both the norm language of literary narration and the standard Russian language gravitated towards the language of educated society.[7] This norm of narration he calls 'klassiheskoe povestvovanie'.

By contrast, *skaz*, according to Levin, is defined by its deviation from that linguistic and narrative norm. The deviations from the linguistic norm of the standard Russian language that occur most commonly in *skaz* are *prostorehie*, which may be translated as popular speech, and usages specific to regional dialects. *Prostorehie* is generally seen as a 'coarse' (*grubovatoe*) item of the spoken language of the Russian people, and often implies town-dwellers. In contrast to dialect usages, *prostorehie* is not limited to the language use of a given region.[8] These definitions employ the rather loose term familiar from Chapter II: *narod*, the people, and *narodnyj qzyk*, which can also be trans-lated as popular language. As a class, rather than as a nation, the *narod* may be best defined negatively, as not meaning the gentry. It often seems to imply the peasantry, but does not have to. It can include the merchants, priests, and lower social classes in towns such as the proletariat. Moreover, someone from the *narod* could learn to speak and write the standard Russian language. Furthermore, educated society itself had many subclasses. Belinsky, for example, was a *raznohinec*. Furthermore, the picture was in constant flux. Throughout the 19th century, the standard Russian language was evolving, constantly incorpor-ating elements from other linguistic spheres, including *prostorehie* and dialect usages.[9] This evolutionary process was accelerated many times over in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, when the very notion of a standard language and the definition of it were open to question, as we shall see in Chapter V. However, during the 1930s, *literaturnyj qzyk* came to mean the standard Russian language, and became a rigidly normative concept employed

6. An example of the use of the concept of *literaturnyj qzyk* with regard to the spoken language is A.N. Gvozdev, *Sovremennyi russkii literaturnyi iazyk: posobie dlia pedagogicheskikh institutov (v dvukh chastiakh)* (Moscow, Gosudarstvennoe uchebno-pedag.-oe izd. ministerstva prosveshcheniia RSFSR, 1963), *passim.* However, not all commentators use the term in this way. Some see the term as referring exclusively to the written language. See, for example, A.I. Sobolevskii, *Istoriia russkogo literaturnogo iazyka* (Leningrad, Nauka, 1980).

7. Levin, '"Neklassicheskie" tipy povestvovaniia', p. 246.

8. Aleksandr Efimov, *Stilistika khudozhestvennoi rechi* (Moscow, Izd. Moskovskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta, 1957), pp. 220–21. For suggestions that *prostorehie* is urban, see S.I. Ozhegov, *Slovar' russkogo iazyka*, 9th edn. (Moscow, Sovetskaia entsi-klopediia, 1972), s.v. 'prostorehie'. Also see V.V. Vinogradov, *Ocherki po istorii rus-skogo literaturnogo iazyka XVII–XIX vekov*, 2nd edn. (Leiden, Brill, 1949), pp. 421–43.

9. See Vinogradov, *Ocherki po istorii russkogo literaturnogo iazyka*, *passim*.

to under-pin the notion of Realism.[10]

If *skaz* deviates from the linguistic norm underpinning 'classical' literary narration of the 19th century, as Levin and Titunik argue, then what are the ramifications of this deviation? What is its relation to the cultural forms and traditions that moulded and were moulded by that style of literary narration? That is to say, what is its relation to Realism and to the novel?

Skaz and The Realist Novel

Russian literature of the 19th century was dominated by the Realist novel. Yet there is no work of *skaz* that can be unambiguously classified as an example of the novel, and only with considerable critical effort can any example of it be classified as Realist. *Skaz* appears to represent an alternative current of narrative form to the Realist novel. However, before discussing the relation between the two, I should note that though I consider the term Realism helpful for an under-standing of the nature of *skaz* and of its historical uses, the term is problematic, even in the historical sense in which I employ it, and must be handled with care. To this end, I shall address the question of the specific nuances of Realism in the Russian context. First, I intend to adumbrate the features of *skaz* that determine its problematic relation to the prescriptions of the Realist novel as such.

The essential contrast between *skaz* and Realism is one of narrative form. Realism strives to depict and hence depends upon the notions that telling leaves what is told unchanged and that the message or content is more important than its presentation. Indeed the narrative strives towards complete transparency. Christopher Nash, a contemporary critic, describes this well:

> It positively invokes the conception that its 'telling' leaves what is told untouched. As a transparent medium (a window, a mirror) it has no qualities other than clarity. Since it claims to offer as its 'subject' a reality that is always already there, it disavows the influence of 'form' (*discours*) upon 'content' (*histoire*).[11]

Nash argues that there was a deception in this technique:

> there is an overwhelming (indeed overweening) deception lodged in the gap between a *histoire* concerning such characters, for whom existence may be as problematic as you please, and a *discours* that is as clear cut and reassuring as you could imagine.[12]

In its pursuit of transparency, the Realist novel attempts to avoid drawing at-

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10 An interesting example of the 1930s insistence on a normative conception of *literatur-nyj qzyk* used to underpin a rigid conception of Realism can be found in Viktor Gofman, *Iazyk literatury (ocherki i etiudy)* (Leningrad, Gosudarstvennoe izd. khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1936), pp. 130–36.

11. Christopher Nash, *World-Games: The Tradition of Anti-Realist Revolt* (London, Methuen, 1987), p. 20.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

tention to the language in which it narrates. Indeed, even discussions of Realism, be they in the Russian or Western contexts, tend deliberately to avoid discussion of the language of narration. To give the appearance of formal transparency, Realism employs a normative, socially and regionally neutral, and therefore unmarked language, shifting all socially and regionally marked language to the speech of characters.[13] J.P. Stern sees this language as a balance between a completely faithful record of the way in which people speak, which he calls naturalism, and the linguistic creativeness of poetic discourse:

> The language of realism needn't of course have the awful flatness of our conversation (...) On the other hand it will have to eschew the linguistic creativeness that is the hallmark of symbolist poetry, of the Joycean stream of consciousness, and the like. The verbal innovations it offers (...) will be infrequent and unobtrusive – realism avails itself of what is given in the broad spectrum of natural language as it avails itself of what is given in experience.[14]

By contrast, the *skaz* narrator adopts a colloquial, socially and often regionally marked language.[15] This was not the language of the reading public of pre-revolutionary Russia, and as a consequence it tended to draw attention to itself and problematise the narrative rather than simply acting as a vehicle for the story. However, as Stern indicates, the use of such language might also serve the purposes of representation, by meticulously reproducing 'the awful flatness of our conversation'. In other words *skaz* might also be used to recreate the way people actually speak, because the author values that language. This possibility, that of the stylisation of a socially marked language, has been eschewed by the mainstream of Realist writers in both Russian and Western European contexts. I suggest that their reason for doing this was a fear that it should hamper the task of representing an extra-linguistic reality.

In its striving towards transparency, the narrative voice of Realist fiction typically attempts to avoid all personality and partiality. As we have seen in Titunik, these are the traits of the characters, not those of the narrator. Personality in the narrator was seen as part of the Romantic heritage that Realism was attempting to overcome. The Realist text depends on the implicit assumption that:

> since among the greatest obstacles to our perception of the truth is the complexity – and inclination toward *parti pris* – of each individual subjective consciousness and

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13. Most commentators accept that in fact there is no neutral language. For a discussion of this norm, see Levin, '"Neklassicheskie" tipy povestvovaniia', and Titunik, 'The Problem of *Skaz* in Russian Literature'.

14. J.P. Stern, *On Realism* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 75.

15 As a result of their socially and often regionally marked language, *skaz* writers are consistently said to be untranslatable: e.g. Mirsky of Gogol (p. 149) and of Leskov (p. 315) – D.S. Mirsky, *A History of Russian Literature*, ed. and abridged by Francis J. Whitfield (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949).

> the diversity among the 'subjectivities' that compose human experience taken collectively, the greatest effort must be made towards the ostensibly most '*objective'* articulation of the data as possible ('nothing but the truth'), with the minimal visible intervention on the part of the 'teller.'[16]

Philippe Hamon's analysis of the features of Realist discourse similarly stresses that in its efforts to present itself as a faithful and transparent record of reality, Realism eschews all reference to the act of storytelling: it 'takes a lot of trouble to conceal the place from which it speaks as well as its author's pedagog-ical status'.[17] He continues:

> Realist Discourse, like pedagogic discourse, will in general reject reference to the process of articulation, and move instead towards a 'transparent' writing dominated only by the transmission of information. This leads to what could be called a neutralization or a detonalisation of the message, that is to say, to a symmetrical absence of participation by author and reader.[18]

The *skaz* narrator, as we have seen, displays some of the features of a charac-ter. At an extreme pole he is a participant in his own story, and incapable of giving a balanced account: he forgets, digresses, concentrates on the peripheral at the expense of the central, and generally shows himself to be untrustworthy. As a consequence, the act of narration itself becomes problematic, and the narrator falls short of the neutral and reliable standard of Realism.

In doing this the *skaz* narrator sacrifices his claim to be an impartial mediator of the truth. He shows himself instead to be biased, unreliable and open to question. This characteristic of *skaz* makes it suited to parodic purposes. Here lies the essential problem of *skaz* outlined in the previous chapter: is the author adopting the mask of the *skaz* narrator because he sees that language and mindset as valuable in itself (stylisation), or is he adopting it in order to ridicule it (parody), implicitly demanding that we compare the substandard language and values of the *skaz* narrator with a linguistic or social norm? As we saw in Chap-ter II, in order to distinguish between parodic and stylised *skaz* we must attempt to ascertain the writer's intentions in using *skaz*. What in his world-view or artistic project attracted the writer to *skaz*? There are two ways in which we can do this. The first is an analysis of the *skaz* texts themselves. The second is an analysis of available extra-textual evidence about the writer's own views and the prevailing climate of aesthetic thought. In tracing the use of *skaz* in Dal', Gogol, Leskov, Bely, Remizov and Zamiatin I intend to use both of these methods, supplementing readings of the texts with

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16. Nash, *World-Games*, p. 9.
17. Philippe Hamon, 'On the Major Features of Realist Discourse', in *Realism*, ed. by Lilian R. Furst (London, Longman, 1992), pp. 166–85 (p. 170).
18. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

extra-textual evidence.

However, before undertaking such an analysis, we must first consider the question of whether or not there is something specific to the definition, understanding or practice of Realism or the novel in the Russian context that would enable it to recuperate *skaz* as a part of that tradition. Donald Fanger, for example, has asked whether the distinctive quality of the Russian novel lies in the literary means by which it conveys its messages. This peculiarity would be a formal freedom, in particular in the handling of plot and in the deployment of the 'narrative persona', which he detects both in Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* and in Gogol's *Dead Souls*.[19] Fanger certainly seems to have a point, but although the notions of a free 'narrative persona' and a loose plot may describe some of the untrustworthiness of narrators in parodic *skaz*, they fail to describe the most sig-nificant aspect of *skaz*, and the feature that distinguishes it from *Ich-Erzählung* and the 'unreliable narrator': its deviation from the norm language of literary narration. Consequently, although it does justice to Gogol's *Dead Souls*, Fan-ger's is not an account of the Russian novel that can assimilate *skaz*.

In the Russian context, as elsewhere, accounts of Realism often concentrate on an examination of the work's perceived ideological content or the author's ideology so far as virtually to exclude consideration of a text's form. However, in Russia, this has had unusual and specific consequences: Realism's association with the representation of lower social strata, or with the so-called 'little man' was attributed a lofty moral purpose, in particular the championing of a demo-cratic cause and the criticism of shortcomings in Russian society. These inten-tions were imputed to Gogol, most influentially by Chernyshevsky. The effect of this was that he was interpreted as an archetypal Realist writer, despite his digressive and disruptive narrative form. Ultimately, this interpretive practice meant that if a critic could find 'realist' intentions in the writer and infer a corresponding content in his work, then any particularities of the narrative, including the narrator's use of substantandard linguistic forms, could be over-looked. However, where such intentions were not in evidence, then the narra-tor's excessive use of *prostorehie* would be condemned as an unhelpful or self-indulgent distraction. Through such critical practices, *skaz* could be accept-ed as Realist, but only where the author held, or was seen as holding, the requisite political views. Of the writers I shall discuss here, this was the case only with Gogol. This is indicative of the fact that the difficulties of tracing a Realist or even an 'anti-Realist' tradition in the Russian context centre upon interpretation of Gogol. We shall confront these difficulties below, in our discussion of that writer.

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19. Donald Fanger, 'Influence and Tradition in the Russian Novel', in *The Russian Novel from Pushkin to Pasternak*, ed. by John Garrard (New Haven, CT, Yale U.P., 1983), pp. 29–49 (p. 29).

Russian Literature in the 1830s

Russian prose of the 1830s was in a state of flux, a fertile chaos in which disparate influences competed. The Russian reading public, its cultural institutions, and the Russian literary language, were still in a formative state. Literate society was animatedly debating the questions of national identity and the extent to which the imitation of foreign models was desirable for Russian literature and the Russian language. Realist fiction and the novel had yet to gain the dominant position they were to maintain for the greater part of the century. As most commentators have noted, *skaz* comes to the fore in periods in which the literary language is undergoing radical change.[20] It is no surprise, therefore, to see the first uses of *skaz* in Russian literature coming in the 1830s, initially in the works of writers such as Bestuzhev-Marlinsky (1797–1837) and Dal', before being employed by Gogol.

• Dal'

Vladimir Dal', like many of the writers who have employed *skaz*, had a strong interest in ethnography and lexicography. However, none pursued this interest so consistently as Dal' who published a universally acclaimed dictionary of the Russian language, collections of proverbs and articles on the Russian dialects. Dal''s use of *skaz* is highly folkloric and can be seen as part of his general interest in ethnography. Indeed contemporaries called his works 'poetic ethnography'.[21] His is the most unambiguous case of sympathetic stylisation. We can find ample evidence of Dal''s zealous desire to bring written Russian more in line with the spoken idiom of the people:

> ... According to Dal', even as a child it struck him as strange that people who had received an education spoke Russian differently from the common people. It seemed even stranger that the speech of the common people with its particular turns of phrase almost always exceptional in its brevity, compression, clarity, definiteness, and had far more life in it than had the bookish language, and the language which educated people spoke. And he began to love the language of the people.

Dal' wrote:

> While I was still in military college, I half-consciously noticed that the Russian grammar which we were being taught with the aid of the birch and the silver snuff-box, was nothing more than a load of nonsense, complete rubbish. Of course, at that point I could not then have understood that there was as yet no such thing as Russian grammar, and that the rubbish which they called 'Russian grammar', was not made up to suit our ways, just like Peter the Great's transformations: the live spoken language, the laws of which had not been studied or researched, had been

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20. See, for example, Szilárd, '*Skaz* as a Form of Narration in Russian and Czech Literature'; Eikhenbaum, 'Leskov i sovremennaia proza'; Vinogradov, 'Problema skaza v stilistike'.

21. V. Deriagin, 'Predislovie', in Vladimir Dal' [Kazak Luganskii], *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh* (Moscow, Stolitsa, 1995), Vol. I, pp. vi–xv (p. viii).

> taken and squeezed into a Latin framework and glued there with German glue.[22]

With both his scientific and literary work, Dal' attempted to redress this imbalance. In 1832 he published his first collection, on the basis of which he has been called a *skaz* writer: *Russian Folktales, Transposed to Modern Written Russian from Popular Oral Tradition, Adapted to Everyday Life and Embellished with Current Sayings by the Cossack Vladimir of Lugansk: the First Five* .[23] This included stories such as "Of Ivan the Young Sergeant, Who is Bold-headed, Without Kith or Kin, and for No Particular Reason Has No Nickname" and "The Marvellous New Thing, or the Miracle You Never Saw Before, the Wonder You Never Heard of Before". These were free adaptations of folktales, in other words, folkloric stylisation. They have a personalised narrator who addresses the readers at the beginning of the cycle. As the collection progresses this narrator fades from view. The language of these stories is an idealised folk-loric speech. Some years later, Dal' said of this collection:

> It was not the folktales themselves that were important to me but the Russian language which has been so repressed in our country that it could not even show its face without a special reason or pretext. The folktale served as a pretext. I set myself the task of to some extent acquainting my countrymen with the language and dialect of the people, which enjoys such untrammelled freedom and such wide scope in the folktale.[24]

Dal''s *Russian Folktales* are an example of a borderline case between folkloric stylisation and *skaz*. The authors of *The Poetics of Skaz* see Dal''s stories as examples of folkloric stylisation, and certainly the language and imagery of these stories is that of folklore, but, as we have seen, what interested Dal' was the language of the Russian people. He chose the folkloric form, because he could not find any other suitable form.

In the 1840s Dal''s work can be seen as closely related to what was called the Natural School. The aim of the writers that have been loosely associated with this loosely defined school of writing was generally to present man as represent-ative of his social class and environment, and to reproduce his speech according-ly. Dal' produced works such as "The Batman" and "A Petersburg Caretaker", which are examples of the physiological sketch, the Natural School's most char-acteristic form. On the whole though, these are not properly *skaz*, but nearer to Free Indirect Discourse, with the neutral narrator in both

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22. P.I. Mel'nikov, 'Vladimir Ivanovich Dal': kritiko-biograficheskii ocherk', in Dal', *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, Vol. I, pp. xvi–lxxxii (p. xxii).
23. These can be found in Vladimir Dal', *Izbrannye proizvedeniia* (Moscow, Pravda, 1983) and in his *Povesti i rasskazy* (Moscow, Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1983).
24. Vladimir Dal', 'Poltora slova o nyneshnem russkom iazyke', *Moskovitianin*, I (1847), pp. 549–50. Quoted in P.I. Mel'nikov, 'Vladimir Ivanovich Dal': kritiko-biograficheskii ocherk', in Dal', *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, Vol. I, pp. xvi–lxxxii (p. xxxvi).

stories incorporating more and more of the characters' words into his own voice, and explaining the meaning of the more obscure terms that he uses. In this period he also produced stories proper. A good example is "Vakh Sidorov Chaikin". This is the autobio-graphical story of a character who was an orphan brought up by aristocrats and taught to read and write. It is explicitly presented as written, but the language is not that of the standard written language, and the narrator's position affords the reader an insight into the suffering of the Russian people. Though unambiguously written, the language in which this story is narrated is a strange mixture of written and popular conversational codes that makes it *skaz*.

Like that of his earlier works, the language of these sketches and stories is rich and interesting, but tends to work to the detriment of their artistic value. Belinsky in particular doubted that Dal' could handle plots.[25] Indeed, few, even the most sympathetic commentators, such as Mel'nikov and Gogol, are willing to claim that Dal' had a great literary talent. Chernyshevsky in particular was hos-tile to Dal', and objected to his use of *prostorehie* as excessive. For Chernyshevsky, Dal''s language hindered the true purpose of stories about the people, in that they disrupted the transmission of information: 'from his stories you will not learn a single thing about the Russian people'.[26] Soviet critics followed Chernyshevsky's lead and criticised Dal''s verbal exuberance.[27] As a result, Dal' was seldom published or discussed over the Soviet period. Dal''s use of *skaz* was unacceptable to both Chernyshevsky's and Soviet accounts of Realism.

Dal' appears to be the clearest possible example of stylised *skaz* narrative. From the evidence of his *skaz* works themselves, and from the profound and sincere interest in promoting a deeper knowledge of the Russian language to which his literary and academic work attests, it is evident that his intention in writing his *skaz* stories is never to parody the language or its speakers.[28] Few of the other practitioners of *skaz* present so straightforward a case.

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25. Quoted in *The Cambridge History of Russian Literature*, ed. by Charles A. Moser, 2nd edn. rev. (Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., 1992), p. 206. Gofman also sees Dal''s *skaz* as plotless – see his 'Fol'klornyi skaz Dalia', in *Russkaia proza* [1926], ed. by Boris Eikhenbaum & Iurii Tynianov; repr. (The Hague, Mouton, 1963), pp. 232–57 (p. 246).
26. Nikolai Chernyshevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v piatnadtsati tomakh*, ed. by V.Ia. Kirpotin *et al.* (Moscow, Gosudarstvennoe izd. khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1939–53), Vol. VII, pp. 983–84.
27. See Gofman, *Iazyk literatury*, pp. 130–36. There is bitter irony in this criticism from a former champion of Dal''s prose.
28. It should be noted that even Dal''s use of the common language may be seen as humorous. See, for example, Joachim T. Baer, 'The Physiological Sketch', in *To Honor Roman Jakobson: Essays on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday* (The Hague, Mouton, 1967), pp. 1–12.

• Gogol

The discussion of Nikolai Gogol's work must be central to any consideration of *skaz* in the context of Russian literary history. His first uses of *skaz* are the cycle *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikan'ka* (1831). It is in the context of the unstable state of the Russian literary language of the 1830s that Gogol produced a style that combined many disparate elements including native Ukrainian folk-art influences, particularly the Cossack ballads (*dumy)*, and the comic style of Laurence Sterne. This combination of native oral and Western written influences runs throughout Gogol's *skaz* works. In order to define the style of Gogol's *skaz*, I propose to look at the early *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikan'ka* (hereafter *Evenings*) and the later "Overcoat".

There are a number of narrators in *Evenings.* As Rudyi Pan'ko explains in his preface, he has collected and published the various stories, none of which are told by him. Rudyi's prefaces are the most parodic and comic component in the stories. He attempts to perform the rôle of mediator between the world of the storytellers of Dikan'ka and the reading public. He performs this task ineptly, forgetting that he is addressing readers who have never been to Dikan'ka: 'For instance, you know the clerk of Dikan'ka church, Foma Grigor'evich?'[29] In the terms established above, in Chapter II, he is so deeply embedded in the oral mindset, where the audience are present in the same place at the same time as the speaker, that he finds it impossible to adapt to the written form, and a readership unfamiliar with Dikan'ka. Rudyi's style is colloquial and he is clearly intimidated by the educated *panih* (a young Polish gentleman, 'pan') in a pea-green kaftan who tells stories 'fancily and craftily, like in those printed books!'[30] Rudyi's lack of familiarity with the written form is also signalled by his digressions: 'But what am I going on about?'[31] and his forgetting what he wanted to say (or write): 'There you are, I've nearly went and forgot the important bit'.[32] In their mixture of oral and written codes, his prefaces are a good example of *skaz*. The purpose is quite clearly parodic: we are not to understand this narrator's style as one to emulate or admire, and it seems safe to assume that Gogol could have written a competent, serious preface if he had wanted to. Adopting the mask of Rudyi Pan'ko for the preface serves a purely comic end. He is certainly not a folkloric narrator, nor is he a competent literary narrator or ethnographer. Rather, he is a corrupted, fallen folk narrator; one that is inept because he is neither properly folkloric nor

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29. Nikolai Gogol', *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 14 vols. (Moscow–Leningrad, Akademiia Nauk, 1940), Vol. I, p. 104. All references to Gogol are to this edition.
30. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 105.
31. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 107.
32. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 106.

properly literary.[33]

None of the other narrators is so clearly individuated as Rudyi Pan'ko. The other two who are identified are Foma Grigor'evich, the clerk of the Dikan'ka church, and the *panih* in a pea-green kaftan. Their tales also enact a confrontation between oral and written codes, but in a far less obtrusive manner. Foma Grigor'evich, whom we might assume to be literate given his profession, tells three stories: "St John's Eve", "The Lost Letter" and "The Bewitched Place". None of these stories particularly bears the imprint of his personality, although the latter two are both stories about his grandfather, and both are prefaced by conversations where he is asked to tell a story. He tells the stories competently and the focus is more on the supernatural events of the stories than on the narrator's personality. They are stylised *skaz*, since they are clearly even more lexically and syntactically colloquial than the other stories, and told in substandard language, but not so as to parody or discredit the storyteller. The humour is overwhelmingly situational and not at the expense of the narrator's language. The same is true of "St John's Eve", except that here Foma Grigor'evich's story is introduced by another narrator (we assume him to be Rudyi) who tells us that Foma never repeats the same version of a story. Foma tells his story in response to a printed version of it that he objects to, disputing the attribution to him: 'Who told you that these are my words? (…) Did I say that?'[34] It seems that there is something about the printed word that he objects to. This may be its immutable nature, given that he always changes his stories when retelling them.

The introduction to this story also suggests that we have already heard a story from the *panih* with a pea-green kaftan. Since "St John's Eve" is the second story in the collection, this is presumably a reference to "Sorochinskii Fair". This story is told in a highly oratorial or lyrical style. It is alone among the stories for exposing the supernatural as based on a misunderstanding. It seems possible to argue that the narrator, who is clearly an outsider at the 'evenings', and eventually turns out to be a commissioner, takes the distance to the super-natural we would expect from a more educated person.[35] The other story in the collection that contains no elements of the supernatural is "Ivan Fedorovich Shpon'ka and his Aunt". This story is said to have been written

33. What is parodic and what stylised in this cycle is far from a closed question. Samyshkina argues the contrary, that it is not Rudyi, but literary and Petersburg culture that is being ridiculed – Samyshkina, 'K probleme gogolevskogo fol'klorizma'. This critic discerns a highly complex interplay between stylised and parodic *skaz*. Though I do not find this argument convincing, I agree that both parodic and stylised *skaz* are at work in Gogol's cycle.

34. Gogol, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, Vol. I, pp. 137–38. According to Magarshack, this interjection was added by Gogol after the editor of *Otechestvennye zapiski* had removed some of the colloquialisms and ukrainianisms – David Magarshack, *Gogol: A Life* (London, Faber & Faber, 1957), p. 63.

35. Samyshkina argues this: 'K probleme gogolevskogo fol'klorizma', p. 68.

down for Rudyi Pan'ko by Stepan Ivanovich Kurochka. Here the language is far more stand-ardised and even-flowing than in the rest of the stories, and there are far fewer ukrainianisms. As with the other stories, the narrator is not a character in the story. Some of the humour, however, is at the narrator's expense: for example, he thinks that Ivan Fedorovich has achieved a great deal by becoming a lieuten-ant after over 20 years' service. In sum, the interplay between oral and literary codes is a constant theme in *Evenings*, but it is through the mask of Rudyi Pan'ko that this interplay is exploited to particularly comic effect.

Evenings was written at a time when exotic regionalism and gothic horror were made fashionable by Romanticism. Although Gogol wrote these stories in an attempt to profit from a popular vogue, there is a great deal of evidence as to his genuine interest in folklore and ethnography.[36] They present a world in which the supernatural permeates the lives of the characters. It is related without any distance from the plausibility of these claims, since the narrators appear themselves to believe in the existence of the stories' spirits and demons.[37] The absence of parody and resulting lack of distance between the narrator's and author's viewpoints make *Evenings* an example of stylised *skaz*. Moreover, the language, including that of the narrator, is permeated by colloquial and sub-standard language, particularly Ukrainian influences, but this is not done for humorous effect. Overwhelmingly Gogol' is in sympathy with the language and the world-view of the stories. The language seems to have been introduced for its rich expressive power and vivid colour. The mentality of the characters is also one Gogol has sympathy with and reproduces so as to create a nostalgic atmosphere of rural idyll consistent with his conservative nationalism. Except in Rudyi Pan'ko, neither the language nor the mentality is being parodied.

There is no doubt that *Evenings* is an example of *skaz*. The question remains of its relation to Realism. Chernyshevsky does not accord these stories the pride of place that he assigns "Overcoat" and *Dead Souls*. They seem not to have the ingredients he was to extract from those works in order to proclaim them 'Realist'. However, some Soviet critics have been more tenacious than Chernyshevsky. One standard history of Russian literature, though it concedes the 'romantic', 'lyric' and 'subjective' narrative style of the cycle, still manages to

36. Examples of Gogol's interest in folklore and ethnography can be found in his enthusiastic essay on Ukrainian folk songs in *Arabeski* and his notes in his scrapbooks compiled between 1826 and 1831. Referred to in Magarshack, *Gogol: A Life*, p. 39.

37. "Sorochinskii Fair" is the one story in the cycle, where the supernatural is exposed as an illusion.

term them Realist.[38] It does this through the skilful manipulation of terms such as *narodnost;* and satire, both of which Soviet critics associated with Realism. In particular the term *narodnost;* is useful here, since it refers to a national and class collective, which, as we have seen, Soviet critics saw as the subject-matter of the Realist method. Thus it is used so as to permit the inter-pretation of the *skaz* narration as expressing a content of *narodnost;*:

> Basing its narration not on the forms of bookish style, but on oral 'skaz', on living colloquial language, Gogol expressed the national [*narodnyj*] character of the content of his stories to the fullest extent.[39]

Yet *narodnost;* is not Realism. If *narodnost;* were Realism, all works of folklore would be Realist, but they are not described as such even by the most ingenious Soviet critic's most flexible use of the term. We now find ourselves in the territory occupied by Fed' and others in the previous chapter. For such interpretations, the value of *skaz* lies in the fact that it is folkloric and therefore partakes of *narodnost;*, and at the same time relates to simple, everyday themes and plots rather than the legendary and heroic subject matter of much folklore. Though this makes *skaz* doubly acceptable to orthodox Soviet criticism, it still does not make it 'Realist'.

Nevertheless, there is an aspect of *skaz* that is described by such accounts of Gogol as a Realist: in stylising, *skaz* aims at reproducing the language of the people. In other words, it may strive to represent a certain sort of language, and in doing so may be interpreted as rejoining Realism. However, as we have seen, typically Realism is suspicious of verbal exuberance, and does not normally interpret representation to mean to reproducing people's speech too accurately where this entails deviating from the norm language of narration, since this is normally seen as detracting from the representation of more significant 'realities', termed the work's content. Gogol is a special case, and is granted special leeway because his later work was more plausibly termed Realist. Such allowances were not made for Dal'.

Clearly, the interpretation of Gogol presents almost as many problems for a history of *skaz* as it does for histories of Realism. A major reason for this is the vagaries of Russian criticism of the time and the subsequent influence of Chernyshevsky. Finally, Gogol's own evolution and contradictory sensibilities give grounds for a broad spectrum of interpretations. As Vinogradov put it:

> the fact that Gogol's work had absorbed elements of disparate even diametrically opposed literary traditions and tranformed them in a distinctive way meant that

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38. *Istoriia russkoi literatury v trekh tomakh*, ed. by D.D. Blagoi (Moscow–Leningrad, Izd. Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1963), p. 394.

39. *Ibid*., p. 395. Also see G.A. Gukovskii, *Realizm Gogolia* (Moscow–Leningrad,: Gosudarstvennoe izd. khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1959), pp. 40–61.

many different artistic tendencies could find support for their views in it.[40]

"Overcoat" is a still more egregious example of this problem. The story has a special place in the history of *skaz*, as a result of its designation as such by Boris Eikhenbaum, in his groundbreaking article. Eikhenbaum's choice of "Overcoat" was quite possibly determined polemically by the fact that in Russian literature the story is more famous for its supposed championing of the cause of the 'little man', and its privileging of content over form. The critics primarily responsible for this interpretation were Chernyshevsky, and to a lesser extent, Belinsky. Chernyshevsky in particular claimed that the sole purpose of every element of narrative form in the story was to evoke sympathy for Akaky Akakievich.[41] This interpretation established "Overcoat" as a cornerstone of the Russian Realist tradition. The reinterpretation of Gogol began at the end of 19th century. What interested the Symbolists, and subsequently the Formalists, were precisely those elements of Gogol's art that Chernyshevsky ignored: Gogol's extravagant use of language and his deployment of a narrative mask.

However, there are more substantial objections to the definition of "Overcoat" as *skaz*. A number of commentators have pointed out that it is explicitly a written story, and not a spoken one.[42] Moreover, the narrator is neither a clearly defined character nor is his speech particularly that of the people. However, in its repeated digressions, its garrulous colloquial style and inept narration it does have the feel of an oral narrative. Furthermore, like the narrators of *Evenings*, the narrator of "Overcoat" recounts supernatural events without questioning or distancing himself from them. Nevertheless, it is probably more accurate to see *skaz* as one element in "Overcoat", as Robert Maguire has done, rather than to see the story as a *skaz* narrative as such.[43] *Skaz* is one means by which Gogol draws attention to the narrative itself and the narrator at the expense of the story that is being recounted. The *skaz* elements in the story function parodically, to create humour at the expense of the character and of the narrator. The narrator is less rustic than Rudyi Pan'ko, but no less inept and comic. "Overcoat" is parody, but it is not quite parodic *skaz*.

Gogol is typically seen as riven by conflicts between his didactic aims and his comic gift, between his irony and his lyricism. It is unsurprising then that this brief examination of his use of *skaz* finds an analogous dichotomy between the sincere stylisation of the language and mindset of the people and a mocking parody of that mindset and that language in Rudyi Pan'ko. In both cases Gogol's

40. Viktor Vinogradov, *Evoliutsiia russkogo naturalizma: Gogol' i Dostoevskii* (Leningrad, Academia, 1929), p. 296.
41. Chernyshevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, Vol. VII, p. 858.
42. See, for example, Hohne, '*Skaz* and Babel''s "Konarmija"'.
43. Robert A. Maguire, *Exploring Gogol* (Stanford, CA, Stanford U.P., 1994).

prose slows the reader down and draws attention to its own style of narration, rather than to the story being related. In doing so he developed in his stories a powerful mine of formal resources for subsequent Russian writers not content with the mainstream of Realist fiction.

Chernyshevsky's interpretation of Gogol blinded readers to his idiosyncratic style and made him the forerunner of Realist prose fiction. Chernyshevsky encouraged writers to emulate the model of Gogol rather than Pushkin, by giving precedence to subject matter over style.[44] This emphasis was a principal feature of the literary Realism that dominated Russian literature in the coming years, from approximately 1855 to 1880, an era that witnessed the publication of some of the greatest novels of the century.

In a period dominated by this polemical interpretation of Gogol, it is not surprising that when Dostoevsky made his literary début, he did it by rewriting "Overcoat". In fact, Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk* humanises Gogol's tale and better fits the image Belinsky had made of Gogol. *Poor Folk* is a novel in letters in which the characters' use of language serves to characterise them. However, though their language is individuated, neither Makar nor Varvara use a substandard, vernacular Russian. This is the pattern with Dostoevsky. His narratives often employ character-narrators to refract information, but always his pur-poses are psychological and ideological. Though elements of Dostoevsky's work have been interpreted as *skaz*, the language that the character-narrator uses rarely exceeds the bounds of standard Russian.[45] Consequently, the language is never an issue in itself, nor is it an explicit indicator of class.

In the period of the flowering of Russian Realism, however, the writers who sought primarily to employ colloquial forms from beyond the standard Russian language were not the famous novelists. The playwright Aleksandr Ostrovsky (1823–86), and an actor who frequently appeared in his plays, the short story writer Ivan Gorbunov (1831–96), significantly extended the possibilities for the use of the popular language in this period. However, the one outstanding prose writer of this period who employed *skaz* extensively was Nikolai Leskov.

- **Leskov**

Leskov began his literary career in the period immediately after the 1861 emancipation of the serfs. Literary and political life of the time was dominated by debates over the question of the Russian peasantry. The most influential intellec-tual figures of the time in St Petersburg were university-educated aristocrats prone to the idealisation of the peasantry. Leskov was a provincial

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44. See Chernyshevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, Vol. III, p. 18.
45. Zakharov, *Sistema zhanrov Dostoevskogo*, pp. 42–56. See above, Chapter II.

with a more modest formal education than his literary contemporaries, and was not attracted to such abstractions. *Skaz* for Leskov was a form in which he could stress his advantages over other writers in his practical knowledge of the Russian people and their language. It also suited his need to debunk idealised and abstract representations of the peasants. Moreover, in striving to avoid the novel genre, in which he felt out of depth by comparison with more erudite writers, he needed to find alternative forms. Once adapted to his ends, the *skaz* short story became his genre.

Leskov was writing at the height of literary Realism. His use of *skaz* was to adapt it to Realist characterisation. Most of Leskov's *skaz* stories are frame narratives in which a narrator, sometimes identified as the author, and always someone who uses standard literary Russian, meets a character, who is usually a peasant, and always someone from the people. This character tells their story in their own words, which are not the standard Russian language, but include all sorts of substandard usages, dialectisms, archaisms and so on. This character's story forms the inner part of the frame narrative and dominates the work. Leskov argued that he introduced this unusual language in order to make his characters more true to life: 'my peasants [talk] like peasants, upstarts from their ranks and mountebanks talk a deformed jargon (...) All of my heroes and myself, have our voices'.[46]

The Sealed Angel and *The Enchanted Wanderer* are good examples of this form of *skaz*. In *The Sealed Angel* (1873), the story starts with impersonal narration. This sets the scene of travellers taking shelter from a snowstorm and starting up a conversation about guardian angels. This leads to one of the travellers telling a story about having seen a guardian angel. This story is a *skaz* story in which the narrator, an Old Believer and art-connoisseur, is the main participant. The language that he uses is not standard literary Russian but a richer, more archaic language. Clearly, this language is not introduced with a parodic intention, but not solely in order to render the characterisation more effective. It is also employed for its intrinsic beauty. Leskov clearly adored the language of the Russian peasantry for its richly suggestive poetry. In a letter of 1888, he wrote:

> In the Orel and Tula provinces, the peasants speak in an amazingly figurative and pointed way. So, for example, a woman will not say of her husband 'he loves me' but says 'he pities me'. Think about it and you'll see just how complete, tender, true and clear this is. A husband of a pleasant wife does not say that he 'likes' her, but

46. Quoted in A.I. Faresov, *Protiv techenii* (St Petersburg, 1904), p. 275. See also McLean, *Nikolai Leskov: The Man and his Art*, p. 153. Leonid Grossman also sees Leskov's *skaz* as a form of characterisation: 'slovesnaia kharakteristika personazha' – Leonid Grossman, *Nikolai Leskov* (Moscow, Ogiz, 1945), p. 281.

> that ‘she suited his every thought’. Again look at the clarity and complete-ness.[47]

Indeed, McLean argues that the narrator speaks an idealised language and that the effect of the language itself is arresting:

> The archaic, bookish vocabulary and forms make this voice from a cultural past come alive. It is as if the icon itself began to speak. The effect is incantatory, almost hypnotic. It is, to be sure, idealized language, like the person who uses it and the story itself; no nineteenth-century Old-Believer would have spoken so perfectly in character.[48]

We are thus invited to admire the power and charm specific to this language, an emblem of a Russia which is not that of the reader. The narrator is able and trustworthy: he even gives us the option of a naturalistic explanation of the miracle. At the same time the fact that he is the main protagonist in his own story gives it immediacy. Moreover, he knows that his world is unfamiliar to his listeners, and so he interprets it for them, by, for example, explaining the Old Believers’ attitude to icons. In a sense then, he performs the task that Rudyi Pan'ko set himself: that of introducing a world distant from the reading public’s normal experience. The difference is that Leskov’s narrator is not a comic figure and so does this competently.

The Enchanted Wanderer (1873) is a Leskov story where *skaz* is used in a similar way. Again the language serves to individuate the portrait of the narrator-character and to give the story the immediacy of oral narration. As in *The Sealed Angel*, there is something admirable in the narrator’s language: here it is its vigour, the energy of an extraordinary life. This is not a parody. However, the narrator’s language does create some comic effects. An example of this is his description of himself as a ‘connoisseur’ or *kon`ser*, by which he means someone who knows about horses (*koni*). This is a ‘popular etymology’, the mis-use or russification of a foreign term. Whilst here this device serves to create a little joke at the narrator’s expense, without discrediting him, Leskov was later to employ such devices widely in his *skaz* stories for parodic purposes.

An example of this is “The Battle-Axe” (1866). This story is another frame narration. Here the *skaz* narrator, Domna Platonovna, is a procuress and a *me]anka* who attempts to use the language of the upper classes, but fails. An example of this is her reference to someone being pregnant as ‘ona v svoem mar;q'nom interese’ (‘she’s matrimonially inclined’).[49] The linguistic distortions that litter her speech serve, in the first instance, to characterise her as a

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47. Letter to K.A. Grehwe, 5 December 1888. Manuscript department of Lenin library. Quoted in Valentina Gebel, *N.S. Leskov: v tvorcheskoi laboratorii* (Moscow, Sovetskii pisatel', 1945), p. 189.
48. McLean, *Nikolai Leskov: The Man and his Art*, p. 235.
49. N.S. Leskov, *Sobranie sochinenii v odinnadtsati tomakh*, ed. by V.G. Bazhanov (Moscow, Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1956), Vol. I, p. 151.

me]anka pretentiously striving to seem refined. They are one of the means by which Leskov parodies Domna Platonovna's desire to present herself as respect-able despite the unsavoury reality of her activities.

However, there is something else at work here besides the straightforward Realist characterisation through distinctive language. McLean has pointed to another aspect of this use of language in the story:

> Domna Platonovna's speech is thus individualised by specific regional and class features that place her in a geographic and social context, anchor her in a specific linguistic environment. But Leskov goes a step further. Domna Platonovna's idiosyncratic oddities of speech take on an independent aesthetic value, irresistibly attracting attention to themselves. The reader is forced to change the focus of his eye: he no longer merely perceives the characters and the action through the glass of language, but finds himself admiring the patterns and colours of the glass itself.[50]

This 'making stylistic texture an end in itself' was condemned by the Realist critics of the time, whose aim was 'optimum transparency of style'.[51] As a consequence, Leskov's artistic achievement was not appreciated until after his death. Even then there have been many who have seen his language as excessive or gratuitous.[52]

As we have seen, Domna Platonovna's language is parodic, and hence distances the reader from her, alerting him to the unreliability of her account. Once aware that her story is distorted in her telling of it, the reader can separate her interpretation from what actually happened. This creates the two opposing perspectives, or two voices that were earlier said to be characteristic of *skaz*: we can choose whether to sympathise with her or with her victim. However much we find her actions repellent, Domna Platonovna's worm's eye view of the world seems nearer the truth than the romanticised perspective of her victim. Each perspective corrects shortcomings in the other. This gives the story a certain ambivalence that prefigures Zoshchenko's use of the form.

Leskov was further to exploit the potential ambivalence of parodic *skaz* in probably his most famous short story: "The Left-Handed Craftsman" (1881). This work is narrated by an impersonal narrator whose language is extremely untrustworthy. This is signalled in his reporting of speech: the Tsar is made to speak the same colloquial and popular idiom that the narrator speaks, and by the use of popular etymologies. Examples of these are *kleveton* for *feuilleton*, *melkoskop* for microscope and *kavril;* for quadrille. These strange made-up words function in a number of ways. First of all they serve to characterise the narrator as lacking in education, as someone from the people, and as having a

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50. McLean, *Nikolai Leskov: The Man and his Art*, p. 154.
51. *Ibid*.
52. For example, Tomashevskii, *Stilistika i stikhoslozhne: kurs lektsii*, p. 176.

disdainful and badly informed attitude to all things foreign. They are also of intrinsic value as humour, in part because they have a certain truth, and make us see things in a different way: a *feuilleton* may well be an article full of calumnies (*klevety*), and a quadrille could be a dance upon a carpet (*kover*).

Though they characterise the narrator and express a certain truth, the function of these popular etymologies is parodic. They distance the author and reader from the narrator's unreliable language and consequently from his views. Warned by these distortions, the reader can adopt a different attitude to the events of the story from that taken by the narrator. Where the narrator approves of Platov, his violence towards subordinates and his xenophobic, aggressive patriotism, the reader can see a parody at work, and discern a quite different attitude on the part of the author. This reading of the story is encour-aged by the plot, in which the English appreciate the left-handed craftsman's talents more than the Russians do. Reading in this way we see two mutually contradictory perspectives at work in the story, the explicit parodied views of the narrator, and the implicit parodying consciousness of the author. In other words, Leskov employs a garrulous narrator to create what Bakhtin calls 'double-directed discourse'. This of course depends on the narrator describing an experience or imparting information that contradicts his own interpretation of that experience or information. In doing this, "The Left-Handed Craftsman" exploits the inherent duality of *skaz* for satirical ends. An anonymous reviewer of the time picked up on this:

> The entire tale appears to support Mr. Aksakov's theory about the supernatural capacities of our people, who have no need of Western civilization; but at the same time it contains within it a very sharp and malicious satire of that very theory.[53]

Unfortunately, few critics understood the work so subtly. There was a huge misunderstanding when the work was first published with a framing prologue in which Leskov claimed that he copied the story down from the words of an old armourer from Tula, whom he met in Sestroretsk.[54] Critics took Leskov at his word, and mistook the parody for a real oral legend. At the same time he was condemned or praised for the narrator's views, in particular his xenophobic nationalism. McLean has highlighted this contradiction:

> Readers who thought the story a pure transcription of folklore could not acknow-ledge the double perspective, though they still inconsistently ascribed to Leskov views expressed in the story of which they disapproved. Thus the problem of the story's origin became integrally bound up with the question of moral inter-

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53. *Vestnik Evropy*, VII (July 1882). Quoted in Leskov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, Vol. VII, p. 503.

54. This was later removed. It appears in Leskov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, Vol. VII, p. 394. McLean incorporates a translation in his book *Nikolai Leskov: The Man and his Art*, p. 394. Fed' sees Leskov's narrator, Leskov, and the people as indivisible: Nikolai Fed', *Paradoks o polozhitel'nom geroe* (Moscow, Sovremennik, 1986), p. 314.

pretation.[55]

The danger that readers fail to appreciate the 'double perspective' is a problem that seems to dog works of *skaz*, reaching particular intensity in the case of Zoshchenko. However, Leskov is partly responsible for the critical confusion. The work camouflages its message well, since we know that parody is at work, but we cannot be entirely sure how far the parody goes. McLean relies on biographical and extra-textual data for his interpretation of the work as an expression of the author's despair at the state of Russian society, which was presented in an oblique form so as to avoid censorship.[56] McLean accepts that it failed to make its point, and in writing of another *skaz* story by Leskov, "The Night-Owls", he argues that it is a 'serious technical difficulty of the *skaz*' that readers may not interpret the story as the author intended.[57] It would seem that *skaz* is not well-suited to the making of such polemical points, because there is too great a danger that the underlying message will not be perceived. *Skaz*, in other words, makes the already difficult task of discerning the author's intention in a work harder still, yet more important than ever.

In this light, it seems possible to see the choice of parodic *skaz* in "The Left-Handed Craftsman" as motivated by Leskov's deep ambivalence towards his country, an attitude that McLean has characterised as 'a violent oscillation of the emotional pendulum between love and exasperation or despair'.[58] There is something endearing about the language and even many of the attitudes of the narrator: his intolerance of the Tsar's infatuation with all things foreign is not wholly unjustified. Unlike Gogol, the parody here is social, and for a satirical purpose: what absurdity there is is not part of the essential nature of the world, but an absurd way of doing things that could be changed.

Leskov developed *skaz* immensely, producing in "The Left-Handed Craftsman" a highly ambivalent form combining parody and stylisation, the two inherent possibilities of *skaz* narration. It is Leskov's most challenging use of the form. At the same time, the stylised *skaz* of his frame narratives present examples of the rich possibilities of the spoken language of the common Russian people. Whilst Leskov in these stories adapts *skaz* in part to the demands of Realist fiction, at the same time, in the highly colourful language of his narrators, he exceeds the boundaries of what was acceptable in Realist form, by problematising the process of representation. This was not appreciated by critics of the time, but made him extremely attractive to Symbolist writers

55. McLean, *Nikolai Leskov: The Man and his Art*, p. 399.
56. Aleksej B. Ansberg also sees Leskov's use of *skaz* as motivated by the need to avoid censorship: Aleksej B. Ansberg, 'Frame Story and First Person Story in N.S. Leskov', *Scando-Slavica*, III (1957), pp. 49–73 (p. 52).
57. McLean, *Nikolai Leskov: The Man and his Art*, p. 608.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 231.

looking for a native Russian prose tradition free from the strictures of Realism.

Skaz and Modernism

The *skaz* form reached its apogee in the period from 1905 to 1925. This is also the modernist period. There are a number of aspects of the *skaz* form that made it attractive to writers of that era. The most salient of these are its undermining of stable narrative authority and consequent problematisation of the process of representation, the privileged status it accords language over and above narrative itself, and its compatibility with parody and an ironic stance. In these ways the formal properties of *skaz* suited a number of the major concerns of moder-nist writers.

Modernism is invariably described as an art of crisis, an art that responds to a historical and cultural crisis perceived from the late 1890s.[59] Thought in general in this period shared the feeling that something fundamental had changed, and a general sense of instability. Science had offered certainty in the 19th century, but now it too had become a source of radical scepticism. In particular Einstein's theory of relativity argued that no law or observation can be universally reli-able, but depends on the position of the individual observer. This profound sense of upheaval entailed a questioning of the means by which reality was appre-hended and tended towards a rejection of 'the positivistic mode of cognition that relied on the surface reality of empirical facts subject to Realistic represent-ation'.[60] It had wide-ranging effects on the very form of artistic expression. It was:

> the result of and the reaction to a crisis of authority which affected every sphere of activity in Western Europe and America in the late nineteenth century – political, philosophical, scientific and artistic. At the artistic level this was a crisis of confidence in the authority of the author or creator. Where the Romantic poet had been convinced of the truth and value of what he had to say, his modern counterpart could only see the absurdity of such a posture.[61]

This radical questioning of the processes of representation tended to mean a rejection of the idea that the language of narration could be transparent and a problematising of the status of the author and his authority. One of the ways in which *skaz* was useful as a narrative method suited to the new sensibility was that it refracted reality through the point of view of an observer-character, or

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59. According to McFarlane and Bradbury, Modernism assumes 'a notion of the relationship of crisis between art and history' – see their 'The Name and Nature of Modernism', in *Modernism 1890–1930* , ed. by Malcom Bradbury & James McFarlane, 2nd edn. rev. (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1991), pp. 19–55 (p. 29).

60. Irina Paperno, 'Introduction', in *Creating Life: The Aesthetic Utopia of Russian Modernism*, ed. by I. Paperno & J.D. Grossman (Stanford, CA, Stanford U.P., 1994), pp. 1–11 (p. 3).

61. Gabriel Josipovici, 'The Lessons of Modernism', in her *The Lessons of Modernism and Other Essays*, 2nd edn. (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1997), pp. 109–23 (p. 109).

even a character-participant. In so doing it narrated in a more palpable way than had previously been done. Natal'ia Kozhevnikova noted that the history of narrative form in the 19th century was the gradual side-lining of the author's subjectivity and the increasing dominance of the point of view of the character.[62] This tendency became more marked as the century drew to a close. Chekhov is illustrative of this, in that his so-called 'objective' technique, from around 1886, is one of Free Indirect Discourse in which the authorial voice is dominated by the language and perspective of the character.[63] *Skaz* develops to an extreme this tendency for the author to leave perception and ultimately narration to the characters.

Another consequence of this new sensibility was the widespread abandonment of the attempt to mediate reality through a language that aspired towards the condition of transparency. Stern sees Modernism's exaggeratedly self-conscious use of language as one of the ways in which it upsets Realism's balance. He attributes this directly to Modernism's crisis-conscious sense of meaninglessness:

> Finding nothing significant to retrace, literature is now faced with the novel task of having to *create* meanings, as it were *ex nihilo*. It turns away from realism to writings determined by other kinds of balance. The documentary, the literatures of solipsism, of symbolism, and of language consciousness are alternatives in which the elements of world, self, meaning, and language respectively assume dominant, value-creating roles.[64]

One aspect of Modernism's heightened language consciousness was its use of parody.[65] As a two-planed discourse of language about language, parody draws attention to language and further serves to question the notion of a transparent medium in the process of representation. *Skaz* too, as a use of language that draws attention to itself, was also attractive to modernist writers. Szilárd sees the attraction of *skaz*, and the related form of ornamentalism, as part of a general striving in European Modernism to 'transform the novel's prose through the functional prevalence of discourse over the chain of events and over the charac-ters revealed in those events.[66]

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62. Kozhevnikova, *Tipy povestvovaniia v russkoi literature XIX–XX vekov*, p. 75.
63. Aleksandr Chudakov, *Chekhov's Poetics*, trans. by E.J. Cruise & D. Dragt (Ann Arbor, MI, Ardis, 1983), p. 62.
64. Stern, *On Realism*, p. 141.
65. Booth sees an ironically ambiguous authorial position as a characteristic of modern literature – Booth, *A Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 323. Grossman stresses the widespread use of parody in the period immediately after 1905 – Leonid Grossman, 'Parodiia kak zhanr literaturnoi kritiki', in *Russkaia literaturnaia parodiia*, ed. by Boris Begak *et al.* (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1930); repr. (Ann Arbor, MI, Ardis, 1980), pp. 39–48 (p. 44).
66. Léna Szilárd, 'Ornamental'nost'/ Ornamentalizm', *Russian Literature*, XIX (1986), pp. 65–78 (p. 65).

Similarly, Patricia Carden sees ornamentalism as synonymous with Modernism in Russian prose.[67] This claim needs to be tested against a more careful consideration of modernist currents in Russian literature.

Skaz and Symbolism

The initial current of Russian Modernism was Symbolism. In the movement's final stages, in the aftermath of the 1905–07 Revolution, the Russian Symbolists moved away from exclusively lyric forms, and became interested in forms capable of exploring questions of history, Russia and the people. For some this meant a turn from poetry to prose. There was nevertheless an enduring hostility to the Realist novel. The quest for a language-conscious prose form adaptable to the Symbolists' poetic vision unearthed Gogol and Leskov, the tradition of *skaz* that had been obscured and marginalised by Realism.

Z.G. Mints has analysed a shift in Russian Symbolism's attitude towards myth. Prior to the 1905 Revolution, the Symbolists were concerned with myth in Christian or Western demonology, and myth in Western and Russian literature. Moreover, they were interested in the myths themselves as expressions of a metaphysical truth. After the 1905 Revolution they turned their attention to Russian and Slavonic pagan folklore. Their attitude to these myths was quite different. They now sought truth not in the myths themselves, but in the popular, archaic or national world-view reflected in the myths.[68] This interest coincided with a general boom in folklore scholarship from the late 19th century, and increasingly rapid industrialisation that worked to undermine the traditional societies that underpin folklore.

Skaz enabled the Symbolists to explore folklore, the popular mentality, and popular speech, whilst retaining the freedom to experiment that might be sacrificed in more rigorous forms of folkloric stylisation. Aleksei Remizov made the most extensive use of *skaz* in this period, but Andrei Bely was first to employ it.

• Bely

Before turning to *skaz*, Bely attempted to create an innovative prose form closer to music in his Symphonies. These works attempted to disrupt the normal continuity of narrative time and space in order to suggest a reality beyond these dimensions. In 1909 Bely published *The Silver Dove*. This work was part of his response to the Symbolist crisis referred to above. Whereas in his previous work

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67. Patricia Carden, 'Ornamentalism and Modernism', in *Russian Modernism: Culture and the Avant-garde 1900–1930*, ed. by George Gibian and H.W. Tjalsma (Ithaca, NY, Cornell U.P., 1976), pp. 49–64 (p. 49). See above (Chapter II) and also see later in this chapter for the distinction between ornamentalism and *skaz*.

68. Z.G. Mints, 'Russkii simvolizm i revoliutsiia 1905–1907 godov', *Uchenye zapiski Tartuskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*, 813 (1988), pp. 3–21 (p. 9).

Bely had assumed that art would impart a mystical experience that would transform each individual reader, the exploration of the problem of forming a transformative community led Bely towards *skaz* and ultimately towards the novel. The prose model that Bely attempted to adapt to his purposes was that of Gogol, about whom he had written a work of literary criticism earlier that year.

In *The Silver Dove*, *skaz* is one element of the narration and is linked with the the village of Tselebeevo and the religious community of the Doves. Other elements, such as the life of the aristocrats, are narrated in a more neutral, standard Russian. Thus the narrative manner changes in accordance with what is being depicted. The *skaz* part of the narration is not fully personalised, but a disembodied 'we', a kind of voice of the countryside and the village. The language is a highly stylised version of peasant speech, tending towards the ornamen-tal in its inclusion of many literary expressions as well as more colloquial and popular usages. When nature is described in this voice it is often made animate, and the uncritical reporting of rumour is reminiscent of Gogol's "Overcoat".

Such devices are all part of the stylisation of peasant speech used to create a certain atmosphere, a generalised image of the Russian countryside, in which the miraculous is still possible. The *skaz* element of the story has something of Rudyi Pan'ko's introduction: it includes digressions and apparently irrelevant information. Moreover, like Rudyi, it forgets that it is written and invites us to ask the priest's wife if we do not believe that Tselebeevo is a wonderful town.[69] Yet the overall purpose of this style is not comic. Instead it appears to be a sincere stylisation of the oral speech of a peasant: the narrator's language and mentality are not being parodied. However, since the *skaz* narrator is not the only voice in the story, but one of a number, it is clearly not being presented as an authorita-tive way of seeing the world, not invested with ultimate semantic authority. In-stead, we arrive at the truth of what is occurring by piecing together information gleaned from the various voices, none of which is completely trustworthy. Bely seems to be attracted to *skaz* both for the evocation of a certain mentality, and because its untrustworthy narration suggests that the ultimate truth is inaccess-ible. Bely's use of *skaz* undermines narrative authority after the manner of parodic *skaz*, but for purposes more typically associated with sincere stylisation.

Nevertheless, *skaz* was not central to Andrei Bely's literary work: only this one element in one of his prose works can be called *skaz*. The most significant use of *skaz* by a Symbolist was in the work of Bely's contemporary, Aleksei Remizov.

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69. Andrei Belyi, *Sobranie sochinenii: Serebrianyi golub', rasskazy*, ed. by V.M. Piskunov (Moscow, Respublika, 1995), p. 17.

- **Remizov**

Aleksei Remizov's whole fictional work is permeated with the use of a form of *skaz*. This appears to be part of a project to russify the Russian language in an attempt to gain access to a more essential, primitive consciousness marginalised by the rationalised, europeanised, standard written language. His explicitly formulated artistic project and world-view are intimately bound up with his use of *skaz*.

Remizov's *skaz* is most definitely stylised; he is never parodying the language of his narrator, and not suggesting that we compare it with the standard Russian language. Remizov wanted to make the literary language more dynamic, to introduce 'chat' (*vqkan;e*) into it:

> We have to chop up, shake up, switch to the living language – speaking words out loud with our whole voices and replacing the bookish with the colloquial. Otherwise we'll have colourless sentences, not shining words and short thought.[70]

This was an extremely conscious project with Remizov, and he named Dal', Gogol and Leskov the writers who had succeeded in making the Russian literary language talk, and whom he wanted to emulate.

There are no frame narratives in Remizov, nor is the *skaz* narrator in Remizov personalised; indeed, the language is infinitely more complex and more musical than the language of any really existing person's colloquial speech.[71] Indeed, Remizov is difficult to read, even for the educated. Often the voice of the narrator and that of the character intermingle in forms of Free Indirect Speech. Moreover, the narrator habitually sees nature as animate, so that the boundaries between man, nature and thing are also blurred. Language itself seems to be more a fact of nature than a man-made object. Where Realism placed man at the centre of the world through its rational causality, individuated characters and strong psychological motivation, Remizov uses *skaz* to suggest that life has an ungovernably tragic course and man has no more power over it than inanimate objects do. This narrator ultimately appears not to be a human voice, but the voice of life itself. At the same time there seems to be a tension between the rich and beautiful expressive power of his language, and the gloomy vision of the world it articulates:

> As with other writers of the Silver Age, Remizov's primitivism was one of the manifestations of twentieth-century anti-rationalism. By exploring the child's and the primitive's sensibility, Remizov was able to challenge rational cause-and-effect relations and present a view of the world as illogical, inexplicable, and ungovern-

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70. Quoted in Natal'ia Kodrianskaia, *Aleksei Remizov* (Paris, Natalie Codray, 1959), p. 134.

71. This has led certain critics to see Remizov's prose style as ornamental *skaz*. Levin argues that it is not *skaz* at all, since it is not linked to a character, but a new and revolutionary form of narration – Levin '"Neklassicheskie" tipy povestvovaniia'. Szilárd sees it as ornamentalism – Szilárd, 'Ornamental'nost' / Ornamentalizm'.

able. He was also attracted to primitivism because he valued its poetic and imaginative qualities.[72]

Greta Slobin sees in Remizov a belief in the regenerative power of language that counterbalances his tragic view of existence.[73] A number of stories certainly counterpose the language and the world. This tension is thematically explored, for instance in "Tsarevna Mymra" (1908), which dramatises the fall from a rural childhood accessible in dreams into the betrayals and corruption of the urban and adult world. Yet there is scant evidence of language's regenerative power in Remizov's work. Most of Remizov's other works, despite their stylisation of the folkloric world, do not suggest that it is more innocent or pure. The cycle of evil is already present in the traditional, folkloric world of "Zanofa" (1907), where a woman is accused of being a witch and murdered on the strength of rumour. This vision of the world is unrelenting. In works like "The Fire" (1906), "The Cockerel" (1911) and *The Sisters in the Cross* (1910), Remizov suggests that neither social revolution and technical progress, nor the pursuit of love and per-sonal advancement will redeem either the individual or the world from this cycle of evil. His rejection of linear progression in favour of cyclical plots, and the repetition of motif are further expressions of his hostility to the notion that time progresses for the better. Remizov may be called a primitivist, but this is not because he believes the primitive world-view to be more innocent or pure. Rather he believes it to be free from illusions as to the powerless and inherently evil nature of man, summarised by the refrain from *The Sisters in the Cross*: 'Man is a log unto man'.[74]

Remizov's work belongs to a period in which Symbolism, as we have seen, retreated from its more ambitious claims as to the transformative power of art. Symbolists initially sought to challenge and disrupt the reader's expectations of temporal and spatial continuity so as to suggest a higher reality. Remizov disrupts the expectation of Realist narrative form and transparent narrative discourse, but suggests no higher reality. This development of Symbolism was to be further developed by his successors such as Shmelev (1873–1950), and in particular Zamiatin, into what was called 'Neo-Realism'.[75]

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72. Charlotte Rosenthal, 'Primitivism in Remizov's Early Short Works (1900–1903)', in *Aleksej Remizov: Approaches to a Protean Writer*, ed. by Greta N. Slobin (Colombus, OH, Slavica, 1987), pp. 195–205 (p. 203).
73. Greta N. Slobin, *Remizov's Fictions 1900–1921* (DeKalb, Northern Illinois U.P., 1991), p. 119.
74. Aleksei Remizov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, ed. by D. Chizhevskii *et al.*, 4 vols. (St Petersburg, Shipovnik, 1911); repr. (Munich, Wilhelm Fink, 1971), Vol. IV, pp. 13–157 (p. 19).
75. It can be argued that Remizov was himself a Neo-Realist, as Alex Shane has done; certainly he was not a mainstream Symbolist – Alex M. Shane, 'Remizov's *Prud*: From Symbolism to Neo-Realism', *California Slavic Studies*, VI (1971), pp. 71–82.

- **Zamiatin**

In his 1922 essay "On Synthetism", Evgenii Zamiatin described his prose as Neo-Realism, a synthesis of Realism's everyday subject matter with Symbolism's distance from the world.[76] Whereas in Symbolism this distance was the result of a belief in a higher reality, Neo-Realism's distance was characterised by irony. This was a subtractive generalised irony towards the value of apparent reality, motivated primarily by an awareness of the instability of a world subject to abrupt and bewildering technological and social change. Zamiatin found Remizov's *skaz* style readily adaptable to this purpose.

In the initial period of his literary career, from his literary début in 1908 to 1917, Zamiatin's work was dominated by *skaz*. Paradoxically, given his world-view, Zamiatin uses *skaz* in these works, not to represent a world racked by change, but one of stasis and stagnation that resists all change. Typical of this is "A Provincial Tale" (1912). In this work, Zamiatin employs the impersonal but colloquial narration of a member of the provincial town. The voice of this insider, sympathetic to the values of this community, dominates the narration and suggests the closed circle of a corrupt society hostile to dissent and change. The story's episodic structure, a common feature in *skaz*, also de-emphasises action and adds to the atmosphere of stagnation. Zamiatin, like Remizov, exploits the power of *skaz* to portray an unbroken cycle of evil. However, from the philosophical purposes of Remizov he turns it to more socio-political purposes, in which the vicious circle might be broken by an act of revolt or moral courage, but is not. Zamiatin is not interested in the genesis of evil, but in the question of revolt. In this sense, "A Provincial Tale" is the tragedy of an outsider, a potential rebel, who is all too easily reintegrated into the routine and corruption of the community.

As with Remizov, Zamiatin's narrator has a rich vocabulary, access to the characters' inner thoughts which are often rendered in Free Indirect Speech and he occasionally uses literary devices such as images and repetitions. But whereas with Remizov such motifs work to reinforce his unremitting vision of inescap-able evil, the images in Zamiatin at times suggest an authorial comment on this world. A good example is the image of the stone woman at the end of the story, which suggests the complete dehumanisation of Baryba, the main character. This image is revealing as to a further contrast between the two writers: Zamiatin uses this image of primitive art as an emblem of a stasis that can implicitly be broken.

Zamiatin also uses directly parodic *skaz*. The narrator inadvertently exposes the society's attitude to religion whilst apparently taking a sympathetic view of

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76. Evgenii Zamiatin, 'O sintetizme', in his *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, ed. with an introd. and notes by E.B. Skorospelova (Moscow, Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1990), pp. 410–17.

it: 'she was an exemplary parishioner, God-fearing, and paid well'.[77] The narrator's small town distaste at political events occurring elsewhere in Russia and for newspaper reports of them is also satirised in the context of the story:

> just reading the papers it's enough to drive you mad. When you think how long people have been living, fearing God and respecting the Tsar. And now, Lord forgive us, the dogs have broken their chains (…) people round here haven't got time to be getting up to that sort of nonsense.[78]

However, Zamiatin cannot be taken as implying that the neutral, standardised Russian language is more trustworthy than that of his narrator. The represent-atives of the metropolitan world in "A Provincial Tale" are every bit as repug-nant as the provincials. As Alex Shane has argued, despite his negative attitude to the provincial world of "A Provincial Tale", Zamiatin does seem to be attracted to the expressive power of its language: 'the provinces provided him with num-erous colloquial and regional expressions to use in renovating the literary language'.[79] It could be added that the elliptical syntax of the oral narrator is also attractive to him, as can be seen in his later fictional works and essays.[80]

Zamiatin then in this work, and throughout the *skaz* work of this earlier period, creates a strange mixture between the stylisation of the language of this provincial world, the expressive power of which he admires, and the satire of its mentality as vitiated, venal and vegetative. In other words, both sympathetic stylisation and parody are at work in Zamiatin's use of *skaz*, even in the same work.

With each of these three writers who employ ornamental *skaz*, there is a use of *skaz* to suggest the powerlessness of man, and his lack of control over his language. The impersonal, but highly stylised language of the narrator is used to imply that it is not man, but nature talking, and that the human being is at the mercy of an indifferent environment opposed to change, and which is far more likely to change him. Although both Remizov and Zamiatin use ornamental *skaz* to create this all-pervasive linguistic environment, for Remizov, man's helplessness before this environment is an atemporal existential condition, for Zamiatin, his lack of power is the result of the wrong way of organising society. In Chapter IV I shall discuss Zoshchenko's use of the technique of ornamental *skaz*

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77. Evgenii Zamiatin, *Sochineniia*, ed. by Evgeniia Zhiglevich with an introd. by Aleksandr Kashin, 4 vols. (Munich, A. Neimanis, 1970), Vol. I, p. 51.

78 *Ibid.*, Vol. I, pp. 72–73.

79. Alex M. Shane, *The Life and Works of Evgenij Zamjatin* (Berkeley, California U.P., 1968), p. 122. Philip Cavendish stresses this point – see his 'Evgenii Zamiatin and the Literary Stilization of Rus'' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 1997).

80. For example, 'Rasskaz o samom glavnom', in Zamiatin, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, pp. 189–215; and 'O literature, revoliutsii, entropii i o prochem', *Ibid.*, pp. 431–36.

which he inherited from these writers, and in Chapter VII aim to examine the extent to which Zoshchenko is able to use his predominantly narrator-participant *skaz* so as to suggest a predicament in which language rebels against its user with tragi-comic results.

Skaz after October

It is the dominance of *skaz*, and the related form of ornamentalism, in the 1920s that particularly concerns us.[81] As one critic said at the time: 'An attraction to *skaz* is a general characteristic of contemporary prose.'[82] *Skaz* was also first defined and discussed by literary critics in this period, as we have seen. The question we must answer is precisely what aspect of *skaz* attracted writers in the early 1920s and to what purposes they put it. In seeking a response, I shall also examine the major *skaz* theorists' accounts of this dominance, where they have discussed this question.

While, as we have seen in the more general discussion of Modernism, it was not only in Soviet Russia that forms such as *skaz* became attractive at this time, most Soviet critics have seen the widespread use of *skaz* in this period as a particularly Soviet phenomenon, a reflection of the increased power of the workers and peasants. Rybakov, for example, argues that writers from the peasants and soldiers, having been through the war, and knowing not only the people's language but also their way of thinking, turned to *skaz* in order to make known the events of the people's life, the Revolution and the Civil War, in their own language and through their own eyes.[83] The problem with this view is that it assumes *skaz* either to be literary expression of the people by the people, or when the writer was, like Zoshchenko, from an intelligentsia background, to be a self-effacing stylisation. The possibilities of a double-voiced *skaz*, which uses the language of the people, but takes a certain distance to it, are ignored.

Natal'ia Kozhevnikova also argues that writers turned to *skaz* in the 1920s as an attempt to represent the profound social changes that had occurred.[84] Writers chose a narrator who would refract the new situation through both the language and mindset of a given social group. Implicitly the chosen social group would

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81. Kozhevnikova in her *Tipy povestvovaniia v russkoi literature XIX–XX vekov*, sees the difference between *skaz* and ornamentalism in the different purposes for which the writer selects it: *skaz* for a socially other point of view, usually that of a character; ornamentalism, simply for the style. The latter never has a character narrator, since that would be an unacceptable restriction upon the form's stylistic freedom. Kozhevnikova sees Zamiatin and Bely as a combination of both ornamentalism and *skaz*, and Babel' and Zoshchenko as properly *skaz*.

82. A. Lezhnev, *Sovremenniki: literaturno-kriticheskie ocherki* (Moscow, Krug, 1927), p. 65. Quoted in Rybakov, 'K probleme skaza v khudozhestvennoi literature', p. 84.

83. Rybakov, 'K probleme skaza v khudozhestvennoi literature', p. 84.

84. Kozhevnikova, 'O tipakh povestvovaniia v sovetskoi proze', p. 102.

be the peasantry or the workers. This broad picture, though similar to Rybakov's, better fits the historical facts in that it accepts that writers who were not of peasant or proletarian backgrounds consciously chose the form and the view-point of a peasant or a worker.

Belaia attempts to assess the general change in style that occurred in the first years after the Revolution.[85] The break in tradition that many have said to be an essential factor for the flourishing of *skaz*, she sees as due to a distrust of the Russian literary tradition as irrelevant to the new post-revolutionary world. Writers felt there was a sharp divide between bookish discourse and the language of everyday currency. As a consequence, writers like Vsevolod Ivanov, Nikitin and Zoshchenko chose to trust their experience of life rather than the literary tradition. The traditional, many-sided literary representation of the world appeared too passive and contemplative for the representation of the dynamic events of the time. Instead, writers chose forms of a more interpretive character, where the authorial evaluation of events dominates.[86] At the same time they attempted to create the impression of the authenticity of the narrated event by conducting the narration from the point of view and in the language of a participant or a voice that sounded like that of a participant in the events. In writing of Fedin's *Anna Timofeevna*, Belaia stresses that here the authorial (i.e. the imper-sonal narrator's) speech is constructed according to the patterns of the popular and conversational speech of the inhabitants of the town. Previously such language had only been admissible in the speech of characters:

> Soon the form of narrative speech in which behind the discourse its prototype could be felt: the character's discourse, in which the character's discourse ruled, even subordinating authorial speech (the right of which to the 'last word' had until then always been recognised), in which, finally, the character's discourse became the fundamental element of construction, started to be perceived as a new artistic structure.[87]

Reality is here seen from a single point of view rather than by an authoritative and objective narrator who can switch between a number of given points of view. In other words the character gains independence from the author and takes over. Belaia simply describes this phenomenon and does not ponder the analogy it suggests with the events of the Revolution. The shattering of the stable hierarchy of an impersonal, authoritative, authorial voice employing the stand-ard literary language, and an unreliable, partisan character speaking dialect, evokes the razing of hierarchy enacted by the Revolution itself. All

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85. Galina Belaia, 'Problema aktivnosti stilia: k issledovaniiu istoricheskoi produktivnosti stilei 20-kh godov', in *Smena literaturnykh stilei*, ed. by S. Bocharov *et al.* (Moscow: Nauka, 1974), pp. 122–77.
86. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
87. *Ibid.*, p. 130. The other examples Belaia gives of this are the stories of Zoshchenko, and Leonov's *Koviakin's Notebooks*, which she terms 'stylised *skaz'*.

revolutions subvert authority, and leave in their wake an attitude of suspicion of it for some time.[88] The supplanting of the author by a character-narrator may well be linked to the suspicion of authority in all its forms.

Yet the discourse of the character was by its very nature unreliable. The language of the people was not suited to the establishing of a new authority. As Lunacharsky noted, it was inadequate to the expression of the complex political ideas that had now gained currency.[89] Hence *skaz* was gradually marginalised, since it was suited to the undermining of authority. In literature, as in life, a stable hierarchy was reestablished. From the late 1920s onwards, the transparent narrative voice of the novel regained its primacy.

Eikhenbaum takes quite a different view of the reasons for the rise of *skaz* in this period. He examines the rise of *skaz* since 1905 as part of a process of the evolution of literary genres rather than an attempt to represent social upheaval. Eikhenbaum sees the novel as the highest achievement of literary culture and maps the path of the novel from spoken to truly written forms.[90] It reached its apogee in the 1870s, since when it had been disintegrating into its two constituent parts. These two components are the very process of narration on one hand, and plot, character and description on the other. The novel's plots and descriptive power have been usurped by cinema. Lesser forms, including *skaz*, became dominant because they give full rein to storytelling, the distinctively verbal form of narration. The 19th-century tradition of *skaz* in Gogol and Leskov that had been marginalised by the dominance of the novel is seen as coming to the fore in the prose of *skaz* writers such as Remizov, Zamiatin, Zoshchenko, Vse-volod Ivanov, Leonov, Fedin, Nikitin, and Babel'.

Eikhenbaum sees this disintegration of purely written forms, and hence the dominance of *skaz*, as a result of the 'mad' but 'creative' character of the epoch expressing itself in the elemental oral language, in opposition to the 'museum' of written culture: all artists are improvisors, but written culture forces the writer, against his inclinations, to choose one variant and to ossify that choice. Eikhen-baum argues that all narration is inherently oral. The short story, of which he sees *skaz* as a form, retains a far greater residue of the primitive narrative art, where all tales were improvisations, and plots were just an outline to be elabor-ated as the storyteller went along. *Skaz*, he writes, is a

> liberation from traditions associated with the written and printed culture, and the

88. 'Every successful revolution shakes authority and makes social cohesion more difficult'. Bertrand Russell, *Power: A New Social Analysis* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1963), p. 75.

89. A.V. Lunacharskii, *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh* (Moscow, 1963–67), Vol. I, pp. 357–58. Quoted in Belaia, *Zakonomernosti stilevogo razvitiia*, p. 47.

90. Ong too argues that the novel is the apogee of written and print culture, and argues that it dealt a final blow to oral narration and orality as a whole – see his *Orality and Literacy*, pp. 139–55.

> return to the oral, living language, without which narrative prose can exist and develop only temporarily and conditionally.[91]

There is a distinct note of celebration in these articles, a kind of dizzy fascination with the eruption of elemental forces similar to that of Aleksandr Blok. Indeed these reflections as a whole bear a strong imprint of their time. The idea that cinema spelt the end of the novel was an apocalyptic overestimation of the former's power, and more than a little wishful thinking on Eikhenbaum's part. Moreover, whilst Eikhenbaum expected the rise of new written forms, the precursor of which he saw in Zoshchenko's "A Terrible Night",[92] Russian prose was in fact just about to turn back to the novel.

Nevertheless, if we take *skaz* to be a form of narration in which the written language recreates certain elements of what it perceives to be the oral mode of narration, it seems legitimate to ask whether the situation of artists in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution made this aspect of *skaz* attractive.

One aspect of *skaz* that may have been attractive to writers in the early 1920s was its manner of fictionalising its readership. A number of accounts have link-ed the rise of *skaz* to the perception of a break in literary tradition.[93] A literary tradition is at least in part a way of fictionalising the readers of literature.[94] In a situation where writers perceive that tradition to have been broken, there will consequently be an uncertainty as to the identity of the readership, and their expectations. This is a situation peculiar to print cultures, since all written forms are ways of fictionalising readers: the oral narrator can always see his audience and hear and react to any objections to his story. *Skaz* is a way of fictionalising the reader as a listener, and the author as storyteller. It falls back upon the most basic narrative situation of all, because the literary tradition has collapsed, or has been rejected as an expression of a now discredited bourgeois culture.

Oral culture was not only uncorrupted by bourgeois literary culture, but more in keeping in certain respects with the collectivist ethos of the Revolution. Ong points to the fact that in English, 'audience' is a collective noun whereas 'readers' is a plural and 'readership' an abstract concept. *Skaz*, which typically addresses its readers as if they were listeners, invites them to imagine themselves as members of a collective that is listening to a live performance. It pretends that it is not a printed work being consumed, as all written works are, in isolation, but an oral performance at which all are immediately present. It pretends to be dynamic and to be occurring before our eyes and ears. This

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91. Eikhenbaum, 'Leskov i sovremennaia proza', p. 218.
92. *Ibid.*, p. 238.
93. For example, Szilárd, '*Skaz* as a Form of Narration in Russian and Czech Literature', p. 187, and Vinogradov, 'Problema skaza v stilistike', p. 202.
94. Ong, *Interfaces of the Word*, p. 60.

dynamism too creates the illusion of a speaker who has not had time to digest fully the momen-tous events of the Revolution, but is reacting to them almost as they happen.

This can be seen as a part of Modernism, a final phase of it in the Russian context. However, this is all just an illusion. *Skaz* is a written form destined to be consumed in isolation by individual readers, and is as mediated and distant from events as any written form. This discrepancy leads us to suspect irony even where none was intended, i.e. even in examples of self-effacing stylised *skaz*. Some writers were undoubtedly attracted to *skaz* for the ironic potential of the discrepancy between its two levels. It was a form in which they could adopt a verbal mask and pretend to be interested and concerned with the Revolution and the people, while in fact adopting an ironic distance to it. Moreover, the difficulty in telling parody from stylisation in *skaz* made it ideally suited to a bewildered writer not sure how to react, since it could express both enthusiasm and cynicism simultaneously. Victor Erlich argues that it was precisely this 'integrated ambivalence' that attracted writers in the 1920s as a way of distancing their inner turmoil and evading the censors:

> To an early Soviet writer seeking to come to terms imaginatively with unbearably stark and conflict-producing realities, [*skaz*] offered obvious advantages in view of its potential for distancing the subject and muting the authorial effect.[95]

Although, as we have seen, there were a wide variety of reasons why a writer might be attracted to *skaz* in this period, Erlich's point is nonetheless a convincing one. However, *skaz* as a response to a contradictory situation and *skaz* as a means of outwitting the censors are different, since the former suggests an interest in masks for their own sake, and the latter implies a firm purpose achieved through the use of a mask, after the model of the so-called Aesopian language. Nevertheless, in the conditions of censorship and political repression obtaining at the time, a writer was unlikely to admit that their intent had been ironic or parodic, even if it had been. Consequently, *skaz* in this period becomes more ambiguous. Now more than ever before, it is difficult to tell the sincere stylisation from the parody of the language of the people.

Throughout this brief history of *skaz*, we can see that both parody and stylisation have been at work. Bakhtin's account of the term, developed by Titunik, Levin and Natal'ia Kozhevnikova, appears to have been able to describe its uses by the writers discussed here. However, a writer often employs both forms of *skaz*. Indeed, there are often parodic and stylised elements at work in a single example of *skaz*. This history has suggested that, in this regard, these critics' treatment of the term needs to be revised.

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95. Victor Erlich, *Modernism and Revolution: Russian Literature in Transition* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard U.P., 1994), p. 11.

In this short history we have broadly seen that *skaz* is a prose form that has existed in tension with or in opposition to the Realist novel. It should now be possible to make some general statements about the sorts of reasons why a writer chooses *skaz* rather than the novel. It seems that a writer seeking to transmit a message, or a clear ideology, to create extended narratives, and represent the world transparently and economically is unlikely to turn to *skaz* to further those objectives. If he does do this, he may find that *skaz* disrupts his intentions, as McLean argued was the case with Leskov. A writer may choose *skaz* for the purpose of stylisation, to introduce hitherto neglected forms of the Russian language into literature. To a greater or lesser extent, this is true of all of the writers discussed here. Yet deviation from the norm language of literary nar-ration is implicit in the use of *skaz*, and in such cases, parody is never far away. This seems to be why *skaz* is better at debunking certainties than at affirming them. In many cases it suggests mystery, ambivalence and blind-spots in knowledge. It privileges the fragment and typically serves satirical or irrational and mystical ends. Consequently, it has been most extensively exploited by writers with Romantic or with Symbolist affinities. Even Leskov, who does not fit either pigeon-hole, employs *skaz* to tell stories about people with a belief in the supernatural, or for satire.

In each case that we have examined, each of the various writers has put *skaz* to a purpose that was integral to an artistic vision. We must now examine the nature of Zoshchenko's *skaz*: was it stylised or parodic, or a mixture of the two? Why did he choose to use *skaz*? Moreover, we must assess the ways in which he adapted *skaz*, in the form in which he inherited it from the writers I have analysed above, and bent it to his own design.