

CHAPTER IV

THE EVOLUTION OF ZOSHCHENKO'S ART: EARLY WORK

Our analysis of the nature of *skaz* and review of its previous uses has equipped us to understand what is specific in the way Zoshchenko uses it, and should help us to ascertain his purpose in employing the form. At the same time, the analysis of Zoshchenko's work should aid us better to understand the *skaz* form. Zoshchenko is the most extreme example of certain possibilities inherent in *skaz*. Hence to define the specific nature of his work is to understand *skaz* better. In order to delineate the specific nature of Zoshchenko's use of *skaz*, we must first chart the evolution of his distinctive *skaz* form.

Zoshchenko's most significant and original literary works were the short stories and *feuilletons* he wrote after starting to contribute to the satirical press in late 1922. Whilst the mature work is characterised by a certain ambivalence, Zoshchenko's work up to that point was far more straightforward, and predominantly divided into two groups. The first group comprises works set in the countryside, which are predominantly *skaz*, and often employ a narrator-participant. The intent in such work is predominantly satirical, and the *skaz* is overwhelmingly parodic *skaz*. The second group is formed by works with an urban setting, predominantly St Petersburg (then Petrograd). These stories display signs of the expressive racy urban idiom of Zoshchenko's post-1923 work. However, this language is incorporated through an authorial voice, which is not tied to the linguistic register or the perception of any one character. In other words this language is introduced through the use of ornamental *skaz*. In this period then, Zoshchenko keeps his use of *skaz* for parody and satire quite separate from his use of *skaz* for the expressive value of the language, by restricting them to distinctly different forms. His post-1923 work blurs such boundaries by employing *skaz* for the purposes of both parody and stylisation.

Nevertheless, a number of the themes and preoccupations that were to dominate his most successful short stories are already discernible in his early work. Though Zoshchenko's most significant development of the *skaz* form came with his work on the satirical press, some of the later developments are prefigured in this earlier work.

Prior to the publication of *The Tales of Nazar Il'ich, Mister Sinebriukhov* in December 1921, Zoshchenko had already been writing for at least seven years. His earliest surviving story is “Twenty-Kopeck Piece” (1914). Its importance is underlined by the fact that it is the only one of the stories of this period that he returned to later.¹ In this story, an old woman at church thinks she sees a 20-kopeck piece, and in order to get hold of it bows to the ground, as if from pious devotion. What she thought was a coin turns out to be spittle. The narration is impersonal, and we see things initially from a neutral point of view and then from the old woman’s own point of view. The language is completely standard, and nothing in the technique points towards the style of Zoshchenko’s later short stories. However, here we can already discern a pattern that was to be repeated in the later work, whereby self-interest and the concrete are shown to underlie an action that initially appears to be motivated by a more worthy, abstract purpose. The satirical charge of the story lies in the unmasking of hypocrisy. Here religious devotion is portrayed as a mere appearance masking self-interest. In his later work however, this suspicion of anything that claims to be beyond pettiness and self-interest came to be reworked in more subtle ways.

The works and even letters of this period are divergent in style, but increasingly hint at Zoshchenko’s gift for quickly reproducing a style.² This talent was commented upon by Kornei Chukovsky. Chukovsky at this time ran a studio for would-be literary critics under the auspices of the ‘Vsemirnaia literatura’ publishing house. In his memoirs, he describes how Zoshchenko developed this ability into a capacity to stylise or parody a style almost at will.³

This gift for stylisation and parody was soon to find a specific target that was to serve Zoshchenko for the production of his finest work. In the meantime Zoshchenko was attracted to literary criticism and wrote a number of articles in which he presented contemporary Russian literature as polarised. On the one hand, there was the intelligentsia, who were moribund and individualistic. In Zoshchenko’s view Boris Zaitsev (who was to emigrate in 1922) typified them.

1. Vera Zoshchenko, ‘Tak nachinal M. Zoshchenko’, in *Vospominaniia o Mikhailo Zoshchenko*, pp. 5–28 (p. 6–7). “Twenty-Kopeck Piece” was rewritten as “Temptation” (1922) in Mikhail Zoshchenko, *Uvazhaemye grazhdane: parodii, rasskazy, fel'etony, satiricheskie zameтки. Pis'ma k pisateliu, odnoaknye komedii* [Respected Citizens], ed. by Mikhail Dolinskii (Moscow, Knizhnaia palata, 1991), p. 160. References to this collection will hereafter be given in the body of the text as *RC*, except in the course of textological discussion, where it will be referred to as *Respected Citizens*.
2. Vera Zoshchenko, the writer’s wife, comments that Zoshchenko was constantly using his letters to her and others as literary exercises. These were often written in the style of writers that he admired at the time such as Nietzsche and Artsybashev: ‘these weren’t letters as such, more literary works’ – see her ‘Tak nachinal M. Zoshchenko’, in *Vospominaniia o Mikhailo Zoshchenko*, p. 12.
3. See Chukovskii, ‘Iz vospominanii’, p. 39.

On the other hand, there were healthy but destructive collectivist barbarians. They were typified by Vladimir Maiakovsky. Zoshchenko praised Maiakovsky in a number of articles at this time for the innovative energy of his neologistic language. He saw this language as raw and primitivist rather than futurist.⁴ Zoshchenko was clearly attracted to the energy of Maiakovsky's personality as well as to his language. It was to serve as an inspiration for his own experiments in producing a literary idiom rich in expressive energy.

Another model for Zoshchenko's linguistic innovation was Aleksandr Blok. Marietta Chudakova has underlined the importance of the poetry of Blok for Zoshchenko, and particularly "The Twelve" which, she argues, Zoshchenko saw as a turning point in (Russian) literature, and the work which first opened his eyes to the possibilities of *skaz*:

He saw in it a decisive change in the whole system of literature, and its language. Other people's, non-authorial voices, were so decisively introduced into the poem that they suddenly illuminated the possibilities for *skaz* (...)

Not the introduction of colloquial and vulgar speech into the system of the poem on one scale or another, but the *substitution* of the poet's voice, this was what, clearly, made the strongest impression on Zoshchenko in the poem.⁵

It seems to me that whatever the effect of "The Twelve", it was not immediate: the decisive turning point in Zoshchenko's stylistic development came later. However, the effect of "The Twelve" was certainly important in attracting Zoshchenko towards the language of the people and in raising the question of how that language should be represented in literature. Blok's poem uses the language of the people in a completely new way. Previously Russian writers had tended to use the image of the people and their language as a form of the picturesque, and as part of an exploration of national identity. Gogol and Leskov used *skaz* narrators, but there the language of the people is that of the peasantry, and the settings are rural. In Blok's poem the people are violent urban revolutionaries. Their language and world-view occupy the centre stage of the poem, banishing the intelligentsia to its margins and threatening them with destruction. If this example was ultimately important for Zoshchenko, it still took him some years before he was to find a genuinely new form, distinct from the examples of Remizov and Zamiatin, in which to represent these people and that language.

Zoshchenko's Early Published Work

⁴. 'See 'O Vladimire Maiakovskom', and 'Vl. Maiakovskii: poet bezvremen'ia u Maiakovskogo', in Mikhail & Vera Zoshchenko, *Neizdannyi Zoshchenko*, ed. by Vera von Wieren (Ann Arbor, MI, Ardis, n.d.), pp. 57–61, 62–64. Also see 'Stat'ia M.M. Zoshchenko o B.K. Zaitseve', ed. by A.I. Pavlovskii, in *Mikhail Zoshchenko: materialy k tvorcheskoi biografi (kniga pervaia)*, ed. by N.A. Groznova (St Petersburg, Nauka, 1997), pp. 37–48.

⁵. Chudakova, *Poetika Mikhaila Zoshchenko*, pp. 23–24.

For the most part Zoshchenko's early stories were published in literary journals, such as *Krasnaia nov'*, and are much longer than the typical stories of the period from 1923. They are also more overtly literary than Zoshchenko's post-1923 stories and continue to use *skaz* as it had tended to be used by previous writers: either as a way of representing the peasantry or as ornamentalism.

This period was one in which Zoshchenko was part of the 'Serapion Brotherhood' of writers. They were formed on 1 February 1921, and their apogee came in 1922: in May they published an almanac, and in August their manifestos.⁶ This group's main defining characteristic was a concentration on the formal aspect of literature, on how it was written as opposed to what it said. Their concern with technique owed much to the thinking of the Formalist critics: their theoretician, Il'ia Gruzdev, had been a student of Eikhenbaum and Tynianov. *Skaz* was a form that a number of the Serapions employed, for example Fedin, Kaverin and Nikitin. Zoshchenko's initial literary experiments and first attempts in the *skaz* form can be related to this context. However, none employed it so extensively and so innovatively as Zoshchenko, and his use of it was not typical of the group. Rather, they tended to employ ornamental *skaz*, continuing to use the form broadly as Zamiatin had been using it before the revolution.

Though Zoshchenko published "Viktoria Kazimirovna", part of *The Tales of Nazar Il'ich, Mister Sinebriukhov*, in the May 1922 Serapion almanac,⁷ his association with the group soon became extremely distant. Moreover, by 1923, their influence was waning and, despite the ongoing crisis of Soviet literature, Zoshchenko was beginning to find a style he could call his own.⁸

Whilst his first published stories were *The Tales of Nazar Il'ich, Mister Sinebriukhov* (1921; hereafter *Sinebriukhov*)⁹, he had in fact already written other stories that were only published after that work. For example, "Fishy Female" (1923) was composed in November–December 1920, "Love" (1922), "War" (1922), "Granny Wrangel" (1923), and "Lial'ka Fifty" (1922) all date from early 1921 and hence were written before *Sinebriukhov*, which was written in the

⁶. Hongor Oulanoff argues that Zoshchenko was typical of the Serapions, and analyses *Sinebriukhov* as typical of Zoshchenko. I disagree on both counts. As we shall see, these stories were in fact not altogether typical of his work – see *The Serapion Brothers: Theory and Practice* (The Hague, Mouton, 1966). See also *The Serapion Brothers: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Gary Kern and Christopher Collins (Ann Arbor, MI, Ardis, 1975).

⁷. *Serapionovy brat'ia: almanakh pervyi* (St. Petersburg, Alkonost, 1922).

⁸. Starkov has called this period of Zoshchenko's work (1921–22) a period of search for a new form capable of expressing an already understood content – Starkov, *Mikhail Zoshchenko: sud'ba khudozhnika*, p. 26.

⁹. Dates refer to the date of publication, unless stated otherwise. Dates of composition often differ significantly in this early period of Zoshchenko's work, and are referred to in the text where relevant. *Sinebriukhov* was published in December 1921, but dated 1922.

Summer and Autumn of the same year.¹⁰ *Sinebriukhov* stands apart from the rest of these stories, and should be dealt with separately. The other stories composed before 1923, with the exception of "Letters to the Editor", must be treated as a separate part of Zoshchenko's literary output. These stories are those mentioned above along with "Black Magic", "Life is Fun", "Grishka Zhigan", "A Story About a Priest", "Metaphysics", and "The Teacher".

• "Fishy Female" (composed Nov.–Dec. 1920; SS I, 94–99)¹¹

"Fishy Female" is told by someone sympathetic to the priesthood. The narrator is apparently upset at how little priests are respected, about how powerful women have become and how weak men have become. Humans, he says, are now like fish in Darwin's theories: the female is bigger than the male and will eat him. These generalised reflections, it turns out, are based on the fact that a cowardly priest finds his wife having sex with their railway technician lodger. The next morning he condemns the government for its undermining of family life and is arrested as a result.

This story is a *skaz* parody of the language of a peasant. However, the narrator is not a character in the story and this language is combined with the perspective of a narrator who has objective knowledge about everything that has occurred in the village. Though there are digressions that give the narrative a more oral feel, we perceive the narrator as being satirised ultimately because of the inadmissibility of his views and far less through the incompetence of his narration. This is a case of irony far more than one of parody. There are some examples of humorous turns of speech in which the humour derives from the misuse of words: 'around the female class' (SS I, 97), but these are fairly rare in comparison with, for example "A Classy Lady" (1923). The failed attempt to employ the Marxian lexis of the Revolution we find in that story is not characteristic of "Fishy Female": unlike Zoshchenko's later narrators, the narrator of "Fishy Female" does not attempt to adapt the discourse of the Revolution to his own ends. In general, his views are not parodied by the way in which they are expressed. Instead, the naïve, narrowly provincial view of the world, which is presented, is clearly to be read as untrustworthy by the reader of the time. As a result, the reader's relation to the story and its humour is more straightforward than in later stories. The irony here works in a stable binary way. Everything that the narrator says is wrong, because his values, such as his respect for the priest and his views on women, are simply erroneous, according to the

¹⁰. 'Khronologicheskaja kanya zhizni i tvorchestva Mikhaila Zoshchenko', in *Litso i maski Mikhaila Zoshchenko*, ed. by Iurii Tomashevskii (Moscow, Olimp, 1994), pp. 340–64

¹¹. Mikhail Zoshchenko, *Sobranie sochinений в трех томах*, ed. with an introd. and notes by Iurii Tomashevskii (Leningrad, Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1986), Vol. I, pp. 538–39. Referred to hereafter in the text as SS with the volume number given as an upper-case roman numeral.

standards of the time, and we should understand the precise opposite.

In this story the narrator attempts to link the demise of the priest with larger, abstract themes such as the Revolution and Darwinian evolution. In fact the priest's downfall is caused by personal reasons: his wife being unfaithful. There is here a disparity between the narrator's perception of the event and the true nature of it, between the broad sweep of the reasons provided by the narrator and the sordid and mundane nature of the reality we perceive beyond them. This disparity exists throughout the greater part of Zoshchenko's work. After 1923, it was often developed in a far more complex manner. Here it is clearly the narrator's understanding that is at fault, and we perceive the true events clearly, despite his misinterpretation of events.

- **“Black Magic”** (composed Winter 1921–22; SS I, 64–74)

The narrator begins the story by saying that the days of black magic are gone, and links black magic to Russia's ignorance and backwardness. Dmitrii Naumych's wife died from black magic, he says. He then starts by telling the story of Vaniushka, who reasons that men are in short supply, and leaves his wife, hoping to find a rich bride. On his way home from a local woman's house he drowns in the river. When diving to look for Vaniushka's corpse, the same thought, that men are in short supply, occurs to Dmitrii Naumych, and he decides to throw out his own wife and look for a more lucrative match. Abandoned with no means of subsistence, Dmitrii Naumych's wife turns to black magic to win him back. A neighbour advises her to put a live black cat into the bathhouse boiler at mid-night and when it dies keep one of its bones by her at all times. She follows these instructions, but when she opens the boiler to see what has happened, the cat jumps at her, and she dies from fright. Here the narrator says that it may not have been the cat jumping at her, but just some boiling water.

As Dmitrii Naumych is driving past the graveyard that night on the way to town to find a rich bride, he starts to become scared and when a twig scratches him in the face, he screams out. His horse bolts, crashes into a tree and is killed. He comes home, finds his wife dead and realises his mistake.

“Black magic” has a number of basic similarities with “Fishy Female”: it is set in the countryside, and the narrator's language has a folkloric lilt. It is also like “Fishy Female” in that the narrator's story disproves his own generalisation: the woman dies not so much from black magic as from Dmitrii Naumych's greediness and heartlessness. He is unable to see this and misinterprets the story because he is extremely limited in his understanding of the world. However, it differs in certain important respects, and in doing so anticipates Zoshchenko's mature style. Here we have a personalised *skaz* narrator, i.e. one that is also a character, albeit an observer rather than a

participant. In this light his misinterpretation of events is due in part to his sharing, as a man, the same values and interests as Dmitrii Naumych. Moreover, unlike the narrator of "Fishy Female", who is an explicitly dyed-in-the-wool reactionary, the narrator of "Black Magic" pays lip service to the values of the age by saying that he does not believe in black magic (but it will not do any harm if he talks about it) and by attempting to justify the villagers' methods for finding the drowned as scientific. Moreover, the narrator perceives the advantages of 'European enlightenment and culture' to be symbolised by heaters on trams. This is similar to the outlook of the narrator of, for example, "A Bathhouse", who fantasises about American bath-houses. He does not exist in a completely isolated rural world, but has some idea of town life, e.g. trams, and of how city dwellers and foreigners would view his village's belief in black magic. Here we can already see the figure of Zoshchenko's *meJanin*: the little man who reduces everything to the little scale of creature comforts.

We are being asked in this story to look beneath the narrator's deliberate mis-representation of his own views to see what he actually believes. This is nearer to the sort of contradictions in the narrator's voice that appear in later Zoshchenko stories. However, it is a simple matter here to see beyond the narrator's trans-parent attempt to present himself as enlightened. The difference between this story and Zoshchenko's mature style consists in the different way in which the irony functions. Here the target is, as with "Fishy Female", the backward men-tality of rural folk. The positive message of the story is easily reconstructed: attitudes to women must change, belief in the supernatural is harmful, technical progress is good, greed is bad. The backward attitudes of the countryside are very much an officially sanctioned object of satire, and the overwhelmingly ur-ban reader could read this story without feeling any sympathy for the target, and without having to reassess his own behaviour. The satire in Zoshchenko's later period functions in a far more unsettling way. There the narrator makes a direct appeal to our sympathies that is often far harder to discount, but at the same time difficult to accept without reservations. "Black Magic" is, by contrast, typical of the earlier stories: it presents us with no difficulties in deciding what to think about the narrator, and is a straightforward use of parody to ridicule.

- **"Lial'ka Fifty"** (composed Winter–Spring 1921; SS I, 58–63)

"Lial'ka Fifty" tells the story of Maksim who wants to accumulate enough money to enjoy Lial'ka. He gets this money by violently robbing some blackmarketeers. He is in turn mugged and has no money with which to pay Lial'ka.

This story begins with a statement that is immediately tempered by a qualification that completely undermines it:

And what wierdo said that life's hard in Petrograd? Life's wonderful in Petrograd. There's nowhere else you'll get the fun you get in Petrograd. As long as you've got money. But without money (...) It's true you've had it without money.

This is a technique that Zoshchenko was to use extensively. However, subsequently he developed it so as not simply to undermine the narrator's authority playfully as here, but rather to problematise the narrator's capacity to generalise from and make sense of his experience. The style of this initial paragraph is most definitely conversational, and in a substandard but not rustic language. However, the narrator then goes on to tell the story and becomes much more competent. The focus of the story shifts much more to the event that is being narrated. The narrator is not recounting a story that he claims to have eyewitness or immediate and authoritative second-hand knowledge of. There is no limitation of perspective, instead the narrator follows the characters around and has unrestricted access to their unspoken thoughts. The narration itself is at times extremely competent and economic. Moreover, though the language has rustic elements, it is not restricted to a peasant register, and though it employs urban slang, it is not limited to that register either. Instead, the language of the narrator combines those registers with a large vocabulary, including a large proportion of words belonging to the standard literary language. This is *skaz* as Free Indirect Discourse, ornamental *skaz*, with an urban setting redolent of Blok's "The Twelve" or Zamiatin's stories of the Civil War period. Indeed the technique itself has much in common with the elliptical style of Zamiatin in, for example, "Mamai" or "The Cave".

Though later the scale of human corruption is smaller and the stakes are lower, the same utterly vitiated world is presented here as in the later stories: the thief robs the blackmarketeer, is robbed by a passer-by, and has no money to pay the prostitute. However, the mixture of comic and tragic here is different. The humour is solely that of an irony of fate. Apart from in the opening paragraph, there is none of the verbal humour so characteristic of the 1920s stories of Zoshchenko. With the exception of the first paragraph, irony here does not function in the manner of the later personalised *skaz* stories in that we do not have to be so suspicious of everything that the narrator says as potentially incommensurate with the narrative. The narrative is not being conducted by a character, and we are consequently less distrustful of what the narrator says.

Zoshchenko also chooses the ornamental *skaz* form so as to explore the urban idiom and subject matter in a serious manner. Such a form of narration is less liable to be seen as comic. The result is a more straightforwardly serious reaction to the narrator and what he relates. The same is true, for example of "Love" (SS I, 81–90), which is also narrated in ornamental *skaz*. There the impersonal narrator's voice interlards elements of oral speech with the highly

literary. The themes here are less satirical, more an attempt to express the moral chaos of Petrograd at that time. “Love” contains very little humour and might be regarded as an example of Zoshchenko’s formal experimentation in this period.

In “War”, which was composed during the Winter and Spring of 1921, Zoshchenko again uses the ornamental *skaz* form. However, in this story of reluctant and semi-mutinous Red Army soldiers, the narrative voice is far more limited than in “Lial’ka Fifty”, and gravitates towards the vocabulary and consciousness of the soldiers themselves. For most of the story, it is as if the narrator was an unnamed member of the group. It is through the exploration of the military theme that Zoshchenko is able to move away from the purely rural associations of *skaz*. “Life is Fun” and *Sinebriukhov* mark decisive points in this evolution.

- **“Life is Fun”** (composed Winter 1921–22; SS I, 74–81)

“Life is Fun” is Zoshchenko’s first use of *skaz* without the introduction of a rural theme. However, as with the *skaz* stories set in the countryside, he is still using *skaz* for the purely satirical purpose of ridiculing the narrator and his environment. The satire here is directed against the aristocracy and their code of honour.¹²

The narrator reflects upon how times change, and how aristocrats no longer shoot a person who strikes them nor do they commit suicide. To illustrate this, he recounts the story of how a general leaves his wife and falls in love with an actress, but she leaves him, striking him in the process. In response, he does not commit suicide. He later dies of dysentery.

The narrator here has a *skaz* manner, and the introduction is very much in the chatty manner of the later stories. The main difference is that the narrator uses a lot of the pompous language of bureaucracy, and shows immense respect for the aristocracy. The narrator also knows in some detail what happened to the general, but is not explicitly a character. As is common in these earlier stories, the target of the satire, the old ruling class, is clear. Furthermore, it is an officially sanctioned object of ridicule for Soviet writers. Though the narrator has sympathy for the characters, they are all portrayed as cynical swindlers, and the general is clearly a coward. Hence the reader can unequivocally laugh at their misfortunes, and disregard the narrator’s stance. Indeed, the narrator himself ends the story by relating the fact of the general’s death through dysentery. He does not play upon the possible emotive or tragic effect of that event. Rather, it is unmotivated: a narrative *deus ex machina*. As a result it is comic.

- ***Tales of Nazar Il’ich, Mister Sinebriukhov***

(composed Sum.–Aut. 1921; published end of Dec. 1921; SS I 26–58)

¹². Zoshchenko uses *skaz* for a similar purpose in “The Last Sir” (1922), in *RC*, 168–76.

This cycle of stories recounts the eponymous narrator's adventures during the First World War, the Revolution and in the immediate aftermath of those events. Marietta Chudakova is typical of commentators who have seen *Sinebriukhov* as the most significant of Zoshchenko's works of this period.¹³ Such critics praise this cycle of stories particularly for its accomplished use of personalised *skaz* narration, and its mixture of conflicting registers of speech.¹⁴ It is certainly true that the use of personalised narrator-participant *skaz* appears here for the first time in Zoshchenko's work. This permits the narrator to make a direct appeal to our sympathies, and permits his actions and the reactions of others to counteract his own opinion of himself.

However, the irony in *Sinebriukhov* functions like that of the earlier satirical stories, such as "Black Magic" and "Fishy Female". The fact that Sinebriukhov is himself such a fool means that the reader tends to feel, at the most, pity for him rather than sympathy. Consequently, the irony here is straightforward, and functions like dramatic irony, where the audience sees what the characters cannot. Here we immediately see that the other characters want to swindle Sinebriukhov, but his inability to see this allows us to take a distance towards him that is not possible with the narrators of Zoshchenko's later works.

Like most of the other *skaz* narrators in Zoshchenko's work of this period, Sinebriukhov is a peasant, but unlike all the others with the partial exception of "Life is Fun", his language incorporates many other registers of language that he has picked up during his time in the army. The difference with the later narrators is that they are far more urban, and more roguish rather than foolish. Sinebriukhov is far more like the other rural narrators (e.g. of "Fishy Female" or "Black Magic"), he has simply got it *all* wrong, and we can simply disregard his judgements. With the later narrators, we concede some points but conclude that they have got it wrong on others. The urban narrators have more convincing pretensions to knowledge, to an understanding of the world and to being good Soviet citizens. Their generalised statements have a certain attractiveness. These effects come about in large part through the adaptation of the journalistic forms of the time to personalised *skaz* narration such as that used in *Sinebriukhov*.

Nevertheless, *Sinebriukhov* is an extremely well worked example of *skaz*. It

¹³. Chudakova, *Poetika Mikhaila Zoshchenko*. Other examples are Starkov, *Mikhail Zoshchenko: sud'ba khudozhnika*; Moldavskii, *Mikhail Zoshchenko: ocherk tvorchestva*.

¹⁴. Starkov, *Mikhail Zoshchenko: sud'ba khudozhnika*, p. 32. Starkov sees the importance of *Sinebriukhov* in its use of personalised *skaz*, which he calls 'a means by which the character describes himself'. It is certainly true that the narrative serves to characterise the narrator in these stories, but it also serves to make a more direct appeal to the reader's sensibilities than was possible with the impersonalised forms of *skaz* that Zoshchenko experimented with in other works of this period.

strains at the boundaries of the rustic tradition of *skaz*, in that the narrator's language has already been corrupted by the modern world even though he remains a peasant at heart. In this it points forward to the ways in which Zoshchenko was to develop the *skaz* form in the coming years.

Writing in 1932, Zoshchenko claimed his first published stories were a mistake:

My first steps in literature after the Revolution were in the wrong direction. I started to write large short stories in the old form in the old, half-faded language, in which, mind you, even now great literature is sometimes still writing its last.

Only after a year I understood my mistake and began to reconstruct myself on the language and form front.¹⁵

However, for all their difference from his later work, in these stories Zoshchenko clearly established the central themes that were to dominate his work for the next ten years: the revelation of self-interest beneath an apparently disinterested interpretation.

Furthermore, Iurii Tomashevsky sees the stories of this period as a kind of stylistic apprenticeship, in which Zoshchenko gained the experience that enabled him to reinvent the Russian literary language:

Working on 'large short stories' (...) helped him to master the devices of the traditional stylistics of the Russian literary language, without which he would hardly have been able to reshape the habitual language of literature in such a way as to make it accessible to people who had only just become acquainted with culture.¹⁶

In this period, Zoshchenko certainly experiments with a number of forms, and elaborates devices that were to serve him in his later work in the 1920s. In "Lial'ka Fifty", as we have seen, he employs the device of asserting something and adding a qualification that effectively contradicts the original assertion. In *Sinebriukhov*, he uses a similar but different device, whereby a generalised claim is undermined by the story that follows it. Examples of this are Sinebriukhov's boastful claims to be a good storyteller and all-round handyman, which are undermined by what we learn about him from his own narrative. These devices were to be transformed by being employed in the new context of Zoshchenko's work on the satirical press, and made to serve a purpose that was not simply satirical.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that Zoshchenko was broadly correct in his later analysis of his early work. Prior to his involvement with the satirical press,

¹⁵. 'Avtobiografiia Zoshchenko Mikhaila Mikhailovicha' [1932], first published in *RC*, 591–93.

¹⁶. Iurii Tomashevskii, 'Primechaniiia', in *SS* I, 538–39. We shall return to the question of how successful he was in 'restructuring habitual literary language' later.

his stories were very much a continuation of previous literary trends.¹⁷ They can be described through Levin's distinction between *skaz* proper and 'unclassical' forms of narration (i.e. ornamental *skaz*). *Skaz* proper reproduces the language of a social type defined by linguistic deviation from a 'classic' literary norm. Leskov's stories are an example of this. 'Unclassical' forms of narration tend towards the remodelling of the literary language. They retain the narrator and the resources of the literary language, but add to and develop them with the resources of conversational and popular speech. Examples of 'unclassical' forms of narration are Bely and Remizov.¹⁸ Zoshchenko, in much of this early period of his work, continued to write *skaz* that gravitated to one or another of these types of *skaz*, depending on the subject matter: where *skaz* proper is used it is to explore the style of speech and mentality of the peasantry. They are satirised by reference to an implicit literary norm. Where the urban theme is explored it is through the use of the 'unclassical' form of narration (i.e. ornamentalism), and the narrator's language is not the object of ridicule. On the contrary it presents itself as a liberated, post-Symbolist prose style.

Zoshchenko's distinctive prose manner, however, was an attempt to create a completely new Russian literary language dependent on neither the 'unclassical' form of narration nor on *skaz* proper. This was a form that employed a language that was being both parodied and stylised, and a narrator who was not a peasant but a *meJanin* to whom we ultimately feel sympathy as well as antipathy. The catalyst for this transformation was the satirical press. Highly accessible quasi-journalistic forms suited Zoshchenko's attempts to democratise and simplify the literary language as well as facilitating the exploration of the themes of human selfishness and deceit that Zoshchenko had adopted since his earliest attempts at fiction. This new language, when combined with the use of a *skaz* narrator, became inextricable from the ambiguous view of the world that the stories present.

1923: Zoshchenko's Year of Transition

1923 was a transitional year for Zoshchenko. During the course of this year he quickly moved away from the peasant theme and the peasant *skaz* narrator; he also wrote his last ornamental story, "Granny Wrangel" (SS I, 100–07). The influence of the 'Serapion Brotherhood', who were particularly associated with the ornamental form, was waning fast. His new *skaz* and journalistic styles were still in the process of formation. It was at this point in his contributions for the satirical press, at first *Drezina* (the satirical supplement to the newspaper *Gudok*) in particular, that Zoshchenko started to elaborate the size of story, and

¹⁷. See also 'Kak ia rabotaiu', *Literaturnaia ucheba*, № 3 (1930), pp. 107–14; repr. *RC*, 586–90. Also see 'Avtobiografiiia' [1932], *RC*, 591–93.

¹⁸. See Levin, 'Neklassicheskie povestvovaniia', pp. 251–52.

then the language, narrative voice, style and humour of his most characteristic form.

In some of his initial work for the satirical press, Zoshchenko's irony is the irony of fate rather than that of humour. Such a tone was present in the ornamental *skaz* stories discussed above. This loss of humour may be ascribed to a certain difficulty in adjusting from satirical literature to satirical journalism. It is, moreover, significant that *skaz* short stories such as "A Bad Branch-Line" (SS I, 128–29) and "Discipline" (SS I, 126–28) employ *skaz*, but this is no longer parodic *skaz* used to satirise the narrator, as with "Fishy Female", "Black Magic" and *Sinebriukhov*. Instead, it tends towards stylised *skaz*. Shortly, Zoshchenko was to perfect the *skaz* short story in which stylised and parodic *skaz* are combined to create both humour and the irony of fate.

Zoshchenko's short stories from 1923 to the end of the decade can be broken down into a number of categories. It should however be conceded that these classifications are necessarily inexact. It is difficult to determine the precise degree a narrator's language needs to deviate from the neutral authorial norm of the standard literary language and employ the language of the people in order to qualify as *skaz*. Nevertheless, I classify as *skaz* texts in which some deviation is noticeable.

i) The first group is that of short stories that are not *skaz*. These exist in two variants. In the first the narrator is not a character, and hence his knowledge of the characters and events is not limited in any way. Unlike the *skaz* narrator he does not offer his opinion; instead the events themselves offer commentary. Examples are "The Teacher" (SS I, 122–23), "The Power of Talent" (SS I, 145–46), "A New Man" (SS I, 154–55), and "A Writer" (SS I, 155–57).

His rôle is usually minimal and may consist in simply establishing a location for a story narrated mostly in dialogue.¹⁹ This is the case in for example "The Agitator" (SS I, 157–59).

The other variant of the non-*skaz* short story is where the narrator is a character in the story, usually identified as the writer himself. There are far fewer of these: "The Senator" (SS I, 132–36) and "Point of View" (SS I, 275–76) are examples of this type of story.

This form of short story is essentially a continuation of the Chekhovian

¹⁹. There are stories where a neutral, impersonal narrator gives a one- or two-line introduction to a narrator-participant *skaz* story. An example of this is one variant of "A Classy Lady": 'Grigorii Ivanovich sighed loudly, wiped his chin with his sleeve and started to tell me a story: "I, comrades"'. This variant can be found, for example, in Mikhail Zoshchenko, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia v dvukh tomakh* (Leningrad, Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1968), Vol. I, pp. 86–89. I classify such stories as *skaz*, since the neutral narration is only a brief frame.

forms of short story. With both of these types of short story there is a tendency for the humour to be less linguistic, and based more on the strangeness and irony of events. In both cases the narrator's language is too neutral and too close to the standard literary language to be called *skaz*. Moreover, rather than the nar-rator's opinions, it is the main character's opinions, and events that are unstable, e.g. "The Power of Talent", "Love" (1924) (SS I, 193-95).²⁰

There are nine stories that are not narrated in the *skaz* manner, out of the 32 stories included in the 1986 collected works for 1923. This represents just under a third of the stories published in this year. Such stories become proportionally less significant when the three feuilletons from the 1986 edition are included: they are all *skaz*. The 47 other works published in 1923 included in the collection, *Respected Citizens* are mostly journalistic and have at least some conversational elements in the albeit often very short narratives, thus making them *skaz*. In sum then, short stories not narrated in the *skaz* manner make up just over a ninth of Zoshchenko's published works for 1923.

There is a more significant proportion of short stories that are not *skaz* in 1924: of the 39 stories and three *feuilletons* that appear in the 1986 edition, four-teen are not told in the *skaz* manner. Of the 23 stories that appear in *Respected Citizens*, six are not *skaz*. Stories not told in the *skaz* manner make up 20 out of 65, i.e. under a third of Zoshchenko's published stories for this year.

From 1925 to the end of the decade the non-*skaz* short story is completely marginalised. The year 1925 is typical: nine out of the 35 short stories, two out of the 22 feuilletons in the 1986 edition are not written in *skaz*, and one out of the 31 stories and feuilletons that appear in *Respected Citizens* is not in *skaz*. For 1925 then, twelve out of 88 stories are not in *skaz*. This represents approximately one seventh of Zoshchenko's published work for that year. Similarly, in 1926 only two out of the 25 stories included in the 1986 collected works are not told in the *skaz* manner: all of the six *feuilletons* included in that edition are in *skaz*, as are the four *feuilletons* and short stories included in *Respected Citizens*. In other words, six out of 35 short works published that year are not *skaz*. At this point proportions become so insignificant as to become meaningless. Of the 69 short stories and *feuilletons* included in the 1986 collected works for the years 1927, 1928 and 1929, only two cannot be confidently classed as *skaz*. All of the 51 short stories and feuilletons collected in *Respected Citizens* for the same period are written in *skaz*.

In sum then, of the 390 short stories and *feuilletons* published by Zoshchenko in the years from 1923 to 1929, 45 were not written in *skaz*. That is

²⁰. There are two stories by Zoshchenko with the title "Love". Where confusion is possible, I have distinguished them by reference to their respective dates (1922/1924).

to say, approximately one ninth, an insignificant proportion. This may be expressed in the form of a table:

| Year | Total | Non- <i>skaz</i> | % |
|--------------|------------|------------------|--------------|
| 1923 | 82 | 9 | 10.98 |
| 1924 | 65 | 20 | 30.77 |
| 1925 | 88 | 12 | 13.64 |
| 1926 | 35 | 2 | 5.71 |
| 1927–29 | 120 | 2 | 1.67 |
| Total | 390 | 45 | 11.25 |

As we can see from the figures, the impersonal *skaz* form of narration and particularly narrator-participant *skaz* merge with the *feuilleton* form especially from 1925 and the impersonal form of narration disappears for some time. It reappears in the 1930s and becomes more important then, as the *skaz* element of Zoshchenko's work is toned down in favour of more standard and neutral forms.

ii) During 1923 Zoshchenko begins to employ narrator-participant *skaz* increasingly. This is one of his most characteristic forms. As we have seen, *skaz* tends towards characterisation: the *skaz* narrator incorporates certain language and a fallibility that are normally permitted the characters but not the narrator. In narrator-participant *skaz*, the narrator is not just a character, but either the main protagonist of the story or so near to the events of the story so as to be caught up with them and incapable of delivering unbiased judgement on events.²¹ One variant of the narrator-participant *skaz* is where there is a neutral frame that introduces the narrator-participant. Typically the frame is trustworthy and neutral (though this is not the case in "Happiness" [SS I, 211–14] for example). While initially narrator-participant *skaz* stories such as "A Classy Lady" (SS I, 170–73) are distinct from the explicitly written stories employing the letter or memoir forms such as "Bitter Fate" (SS I, 141–43) and "Madonna" (SS I, 115–22), later in 1924, and especially in 1925, the narrator-participant form tends to merge with the more journalistic forms particularly through the

²¹. This narrative device is described and defined at length in Katowitz, 'A Study of the Character and Function of the Narrator-Participant'. Katowitz uses the term only where the narrator is 'the chief influence on the movement of the plot' (p. 5). I use it more loosely for any story where the narrator is a discernible character in his own story. Despite elaborating helpful terminology, Katowitz follows the major trend in the analysis of *skaz* and assumes all of it to be parodic: 'Since this narrator is fully characterised, his commentary is immediately discredited' (p. 17). As I have attempted to show in my analysis of *skaz* and shall attempt to show in my analysis of Zoshchenko, this need not necessarily be the case.

model of the letter of complaint, in which the person complaining draws from their own experience.

The narrator-participant is the extreme possibility of *skaz* as a whole, in which the narrator's language and perspective take on characteristics and limitations usually associated with characters. Though also an extreme possibility within Zoshchenko's own art, this narrative form is nevertheless the most explicit form of a tendency that runs throughout his 1920s short stories. The narrator-participant is a form suited to expressing an incapacity to generalise, since the narrator can make sense of the world only insofar as it relates to him. He can neither tell a story that he has invented nor even one about anyone else. That would demand too great a capacity for abstraction beyond immediate experience. He draws on his own experience and generalises from it, but the generalisation typically is an unconvincing account of his experience. As we shall see, this incapacity to generalise need not be solely a source of humour, but also an admirable limitation.

iii) In 1923, the other *skaz* form that Zoshchenko developed was *skaz* which employs an impersonal narrator. In such *skaz* stories as "The Thief" (SS I, 136–40), and "A Dog of an Incident" (SS I, 140–41), the narrator is not a character, but he is definitely not a standard literary narrator. He fully shares the value system of the character and even assumes that the reader will too.

It should be noted that throughout this period Zoshchenko continued to write his eight longer short stories, known as the *Sentimental Tales*. These broadly belong to this category of impersonal *skaz* narratives. However, the main characters of these stories are members of the old intelligentsia who have fallen on hard, post-revolutionary times, and they are not treated with sympathy by the narrator, as is the case with the shorter stories. Consequently, the element of parody clearly predominates, as with the earlier peasant *skaz* stories. Moreover, in these stories, the more extended form enables Zoshchenko explicitly to explore his deeper 'philosophical' themes, such as 'the sad tale of the collapse of every possible philosophical system' in "People" (1924; SS II, 58–88 [59–60]). In the shorter stories, such questions are not explicit, and only an investigation into their form can uncover them.

These two *skaz* forms of narrator-participant and impersonal *skaz* Zoshchenko increasingly adapted to the purposes of the satirical press, particularly after 1924. This is not to say that all of Zoshchenko's *skaz* short stories show direct evidence of the influence of the journalistic forms of the satirical press. They do not. Nevertheless, that influence was significant, and enabled him to develop a subject matter that was already his own, and to develop *skaz* forms particular to him. After his first contact with the satirical press in 1922, the influence of *skaz* became more and more significant during the course of 1923.

The period from 1923 until the end of the 1920s was the high point of Zoshchenko's career. It was in this period that he wrote his best comic short stories, the works with which he gained his reputation as a writer, and which, despite their small size, still dwarf the rest of his work in significance.
