CHAPTER V

ZOSHCHENKO'S *SKAZ* AND JOURNALISM

The starting point for our search to understand the workings of Zoshchenko's *skaz* lies in ascertaining whether Zoshchenko is employing stylised or parodic *skaz*. This means understanding his consciously held attitude to the style and mentality of his *skaz* narrator. In order to define that relation, we must first determine the characteristics of the style, its most typical forms, and attempt to form a picture of the sort of person who would use such a style and such forms. The most significant of these forms are the journalistic *feuilleton* and the letter of complaint. Before evaluating the precise nature of the relation of these forms and their style to Zoshchenko's stories, we must first describe them.

This chapter comprises four sections: the first three are shorter and introduce my analysis of Zoshchenko's short stories in the larger, fourth section. In the first section, I describe the general context of 1920s Soviet newspaper culture and of the satirical press. In the second section, I examine Zoshchenko's attitudes to both journalism and literature as expressed in his articles and other statements about his art. The third section is a detailed examination of the dominant forms of the satirical press in the 1920s and the ways in which they functioned. Here I also suggest, in general terms, the relevance of these forms for Zoshchenko. The fourth and main section of this chapter is an in-depth investigation into the influence of journalistic forms on Zoshchenko's short stories.

i) The Soviet Press

Newspapers in Revolutionary Russia

On coming to power, the Bolsheviks completely transformed popular culture in Russia. In place of pre-revolutionary Russia's sensationalist popular fiction, religious texts, and commercially driven journalism, they introduced a completely new newspaper culture. Lenin and the party leadership, who were effectively former journalists, demanded that Soviet newspapers perform an important political rôle. After a process of adaptation to the language of the mass of the people in the early 1920s, the mass press became the most accessible form of printed material during the Soviet era and a vital political tool.[1]

1. For a description of the characteristics of this new journalistic culture, see Jeffrey Brooks, 'Public and Private Values in the Soviet Press, 1921–1928', *Slavic Review* , XLVIII, Nº 1

At the same time Russian literature was undergoing a profound crisis of form, and there was a demand that the material for literature be contemporary. Many writers turned to journalistic and pseudo-journalistic forms.[2] Zoshchenko at this time was still experimenting with a number of styles of writing (see above Chapter IV). He tried his hand at journalism too, and soon found that his pro-clivity for recreating other people's styles could be amply indulged in the preva-lent journalistic forms. Meanwhile, the 'Serapion Brotherhood' was fragment-ing: with the closing down of 'Dom iskusstv' in 1923, the Serapions lost their base, and with the death of Lev Lunts in 1924, they lost their unoffical leader. Zoshchenko began to drift away from this more properly literary grouping, and away from more conventionally literary forms. Increasingly, he gave himself over to journalistic forms. He soon became the most successful Soviet writer to have done so.[3]

The Satirical Press

A specific feature of the newspaper culture of this period were satirical journals, which started life as supplements to the major papers. Zoshchenko's first pub-lication in a 'tonkij' or 'thin' journal, the satirical magazine, *Mukhomor*, came in December 1922, within a year of his first publication.[4] The story was "Meta-physics", which differs little from the rest of the stories he published that year. However, in the next issue of that magazine he published a *feuilleton*, "Letters to the Editor" (*SS* I, 449–51). This was a series of fictional letters of complaint signed with pseudonyms. Here for the first time Zoshchenko employs a journal-istic form, the letter of complaint. Fictional personae indignant at unmerited misfortunes make aggrieved appeals for sympathy.

(Spring 1989), pp. 16–35 (p. 16). Brooks has also conducted the definitive analysis of the popular culture that it supplanted – see his *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Culture, 1861–1917* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton U.P., 1985).

2. It is a commonplace to say that literature was inseparable from or at least closer to life in the immediate post-revolutionary period. See E.B. Skorospelova, *Ideino-stilevye techeniia v russkoi sovetskoi proze pervoi poloviny 20-kh godov* (Moscow, Izd. Moskovskogo gosu-darstvennogo universiteta, 1979), p. 8. See also V.P. Skobelev, *Massa i lichnost' v rus-skoi sovetskoi proze 20-kh godov (K probleme narodnogo kharaktera)* (Voronezh, Izd. Voronezhskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta, 1975), p. 21. Maguire summarises this tendency well: 'At a time when the claims of life seemed so urgent and exciting, the note-book, the diary, the travel memoir, and interpretive journalism became respected genres wherein art and life seemed most ready to intermingle' – Robert Maguire, *Red Virgin Soil: Soviet Literature in the 1920s* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton U.P., 1968), p. 69.

3. He was also the most famous Soviet writer of the period outright, a fact stated by almost every commentator. In his introduction to the 1986 collected works, Tomashevsky des-cribes the star status Zoshchenko enjoyed: he was literally pursued by the public (*SS* I, 5).

4. The thin journal is a lowbrow popular magazine. Highbrow literature has traditionally been published in thick journals such as *Sovremennik* and *Krasnaia nov'*. *Mukhmor* was a Petrograd satirical journal published between 1922 and 1923.

It was through his work on the satirical press that Zoshchenko developed his distinctive style. His already proven flair for reproducing styles was now applied to the letter of complaint and *feuilleton* forms. His language became more succinct and distinctly urban. The choice of this language and these forms is part of a deliberate programme to democratise literature and make it more access-ible. Before analysing these forms and Zoshchenko's use of them I propose to examine Zoshchenko's views on his own work, and his comments about journal-istic and documentary forms especially.

ii) Zoshchenko's Views on Literature and Journalism

Zoshchenko's statements about literature were written from the late 1920s onwards in response to intense criticism of his work.[5] They were a retrospective defence of the way in which he had been writing since 1923. The principal accusations which he reacts to in them are that he has been corrupting the Russian language for trivial humorous purposes and that his preference for the short story form proves that he is an ephemeral humorist.[6] Throughout these articles, in defending the language and the forms that he had been employing since the early 1920s, Zoshchenko also sets out his view on the sort of literature the Soviet Union needs. Likewise, he argues that the way in which he has been writing is a correct response to those needs.

So notable a critic as Kreps dismisses these statements outright, arguing that they should be disregarded altogether because they were written under conditions of censorship. Whilst this is true, and we must be careful when reading them to bear censorship restrictions in mind, it is surely still possible to make sense of their contradictions. Moreover, these statements suggest weaknesses in Kreps's account of Zoshchenko simply as a parodist, and it may well be that he

5. The criticisms intensified in 1927, with M. Ol'shevets's article in *Izvestiia*. This is reprinted in *Litso i maska Mikhaila Zoshchenko*, ed. by Iurii Tomashevskii, pp. 148–52. Tomashevsky has noted that this defensive tone continued until the work written after the First Congress of Soviet writers in 1934, when criticism of his work became more muted, and his own articles became less defensive and more tended to argue a broader case. See Iurii Tomashevskii, '"Literatura dolzhna byt' narodnoi": iz tvorcheskogo naslediia M.M. Zoshchenko', *Literaturnoe obozrenie*, Nº 9 (1984), pp. 100–08. This article includes the text of a number of Zoshchenko's articles. See also Iurii Tomashevskii, '"Ia vzial podriad na etot zakaz...": M.M. Zoshchenko o literature i ee iazyke', *Russkaia rech'*, Nº 5 (1987), pp. 55–64.

6. V. Veshnev typifies this accusation: 'Colloquial speech is self-sufficient in Zoshchenko, and it is precisely on this which he spends most of his inventiveness (…) All the same there remains something artificial about it and this exposes him. It exposes the tendencious nature of his choice of characters and subject matter. His comic speech does not flow natur-ally from the characters' personalities and the subject matter, but on the contrary, they are selected to suit the devices of his linguistic fabrications (…) All this is painstakingly selected for laughs, for the sake of laughter. *Litso i maska Mikhaila Zoshchenko*, ed. by Iurii Tomashevskii, pp. 152–57 (p. 155).

disregards them because they do not fit his account of Zoshchenko's *skaz*. I propose that we can read these contradictory statements of Zoshchenko's intent in adopting the mask of a *skaz* narrator as trustworthy: it is precisely their contradictory character that is to be trusted, since it points to contradictions present in the stories themselves, and in the very nature of *skaz*. Taken as a whole, Zoshchenko's later programmatical views and defences of his art, from 1927 to 1937, shed light on his earlier fictional practice and articulate a consistent vision of form and style. The kernel of Zoshchenko's argument is that the contemporary reader needs accessible literature written in a concise style and short forms. He claims that his work is an attempt to respond to this demand, rather than simply to follow literary tradition. Zoshchenko at a couple of points even suggests that it is not just literary traditions that must be broken with, but even literature as such. He advocates documentary writing or journalistic forms such as the *feuilleton* and the very short short story, as the forms most suited to the post-revolutionary literary readership.

In his first article on this subject, "About Myself, About Critics and About My Work" (1927),[7] Zoshchenko begins by considering accusations that his work is trivial, and that he is not a proper writer:

> But since the majority of my stuff is in a form that is not respected: the magazine *feuilleton* and the very short story, my fate has usually been decided beforehand (*RC*, 585)

He rejects such accusations, and argues that what society needs is a literature that does not ape the models of the Russian classics, but uses precisely those lesser forms that he was being criticised for employing:

> But as for lesser literature, I'm not complaining. We don't know what the significance of lesser literature in our society is, yet.
>
> In literature there exists the so-called 'demands of society'. I suggest that at present these demands have been incorrectly formulated.
>
> There is an opinion that a red Lev Tolstoy is what is demanded.
>
> (…) [but] our whole life, our public and the environment in which writers now live certainly don't demand a red Lev Tolstoy. And if we are going to talk about demand then there is a demand for works in the unrespected lesser form which, at least in the old days, was associated with the very worst literary traditions.
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> I have taken on this demand.
>
> I reckon that I have not been wrong.
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> I'm not about to climb up onto the heights of greater literature. There's enough writers in greater literature as it is (*RC*, 585)

Zoshchenko advocates the use of forms that before the Revolution had been

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7. In *Mikhail Zoshchenko: Stat'i i materialy*, ed. by Iurii Tynianov & B. Kazanskii (Leningrad, Academia, 1928), pp. 7–11; also reprinted in *Uvazhaemye grazhdane*, pp. 584–86. All references are to this latter reprint.

associated with 'the worst literary traditions' as a way of democratising literature and making it accessible to new readers. He is presumably referring to the fact that the forms he adopted were pioneered in the satirical press, and were considered to be of low literary value.

This vision of a dichotomy between a greater, respectable, traditional literature and a lesser, unrespectable literature runs throughout these articles. The related notion that his choice of forms was determined by the need to break with the main-stream of the pre-revolutionary literary tradition is further developed in a subsequent article, "How I Work" (1930).[8] Here Zoshchenko discusses his early, longer stories, i.e. his work before his début in the satirical press, and condemns their form as inappropriate and traditional:

> Subsequently it seemed to me that the form of the large short story, based upon the old tradition, is a Chekhovian form and was less suited, less adaptable to the contemporary reader, who, I thought, it was better to give a short form, precise and clear, so that in a hundred or fifty lines the whole plot was set out, without any chattering. So then I went over to the short form, to very small short stories (*RC*, 590).

Zoshchenko also argues in "How I Work" that the present-day writer must write accessibly so as to interest the masses in literature. To do this 'you have to write clearly, briefly and with the greatest possible simplicity' (*RC*, 589). The need for Soviet literature to write in a new way is also emphasised in "Autobiography" (1932). Here Zoshchenko again reviews his literary career, emphasising that the way that he writes was determined by the demands of the post-revolutionary situation: 'Immediately I came up against a very difficult task: to write for a new country, for new, as yet unknown readers' (*RC*, 591).

Zoshchenko repeatedly upbraids those who write in the old language of the intelligentsia and continue the traditions of the old literature, 'as if nothing had happened in the country' (1929; *RC*, 371).[9] They are condemned as 'red Lev Tolstoys', writers whose sentences are as artificial as those of Russian literature before Pushkin. The Formalist critic ,Viktor Shklovsky, is, by contrast, held up as a model for making his sentences short and readable. Zoshchenko claims to have done the same: 'I write in a very concise way. My sentence is short. Open to the poor. Maybe that's why I have a lot of readers' (1930; *RC*, 586).

Zoshchenko presents his form, style and language as a democratisation of literature in line with the demands of the Revolution and the new readership that it produced. He repeatedly refers to his large readership as evidence that he has succeeded.

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8. *Literaturnaia ucheba*, Nº 3 (1930), pp. 107–114; repr. *Uvazhaemye grazhdane*, pp. 586–90. All references are to the reprint.
9. Mikhail Zoshchenko, *Pis'ma k pisateliu* (Leningrad, IPL, 1929); repr. *Uvazhaemye grazhdane*, pp. 345–430 (p. 371).

Though Zoshchenko was not a member of any literary grouping after increasingly drifting away from the Serapions from late 1923, these defences of his art appear to echo the views of the *Novyi lef* Constructivists, who were also formulating their views on literature from 1927.

The Constructivists were the most extreme of those voices demanding a fusion of life and art.[10] Such currents had been around since the very start of the Revolution.[11] An example of Constructivist practice was the filmmaker, Dziga Vertov, who believed art to be inherently counter-revolutionary, and pioneered a new style of documentary film journalism.[12]

In particular the Constructivists condemned the notion that Soviet literature needed a 'red Tolstoy', as part of a mistaken understanding of the cultural needs of the new society. They argued that the new society could simply not make any use of the art forms of the past. It did not need contemplative, passive, art and literature, but new journalistic forms such as the active reworking of facts.[13] This perspective, particularly in its disdain for tradition, is remarkably close to Zoshchenko's views on art expressed in this period, right down to the admiration for Shklovsky, who was a contributor to *Novyi Lef* and a pioneer of non-fictional forms.[14] Moreover, we have already seen evidence of Zoshchenko's admiration for Maiakovsky, the most prominent figure in Constructivism (above, Chapter IV).

Yet Zoshchenko remained his own man, and some of this resemblance is quite possibly the result of similar reactions to the cultural climate of the 1920s, rather than an indication of any direct influence. Certainly the Constructivists make no mention of Zoshchenko in their articles, and Viktor Shklovsky was a figure whose influence and appeal surpassed that of Constructivism.

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10. An example of this view can be found in Vladimir Maiakovskii & Osip Brik, 'Nasha slovesnaia rabota', *Lef*, Nº 11 (1923), pp. 40–41. Another example of this attitude to art is the mass spectacle in which there is no divide between the actors and the audience, indeed certain theoreticians of the time, e.g. Kerzhentsev of the Proletkul't, argued that any such divide was harmful. See Robert Russell, *Russian Drama of the Revolutionary Period* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1988), pp. 28–31.

11 Nikolai Chuzhak argues that *Lef* did not think up *literatura fakta* but formulated something that the age demanded – see his 'Pisatel'skaia pamiatka', in *Literatura fakta*, ed. by N. Chuzhak (Moscow, Federatsiia, 1929); repr. (Munich, Wilhelm Fink, 1972), pp. 9–28 (p. 11).

12. The tension in Vertov's work between the shot and its interpretation through editing is analogous to the tension between the documentary fact and interpretation of it in Zoshchenko's work. For a general discussion of Vertov as a cine-journalist, and an exploration of this tension in his work, see Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, 2nd edn. rev. (Oxford, Oxford U.P., 1993), p. 58.

13. S. Tret'iakov, 'Novyi Lev Tolstoi', in *Literatura fakta*, ed. by N. Chuzhak, pp. 29–33.

14. For example, his 1923 *Sentimental Tales*. This was cited by Chuzhak as a model.

Nevertheless, Zoshchenko's work contains a substantial documentary component that has never been evaluated adequately.[15] This orientation in his work runs from the early 1920s unbroken to *Before Sunrise*. The initial impetus behind the documentary and journalistic bias of his work was the attempt to attract readers who had not previously been interested in literature, and therefore had no connection to the existing literary tradition through the turn to forms that were themselves outside the mainstream of the literary tradition. For Zoshchenko, the most significant of these was the pseudo-documentary journalistic form of the *feuilleton.* The *feuilleton* genre is highly dependent on the use of factual material, in particular readers' letters.[16]

As well as employing the *feuilleton* proper, Zoshchenko's short stories also mirror the structure of the *feuilleton*. In particular, they frequently rely on factual material: Zoshchenko reckoned that 30 to 40% of his stories were based on incidents that he had read about in the papers ("How I Work"; *RC*, 589).

The motive behind the journalistic orientation of his work was to attract readers who showed no interest in literature, but who appreciated journalism. In *Letters to a Writer* (1929), one of the letters ("A *Rabkor*'s Letter"; *RC*, 427) praises the collection of *feuilleton*s in the writer's recent collection, *Who Are You Laughing At?* This *rabkor* prefers facts to authors' 'fabrications', and asks Zoshchenko to get 'Zemlia i fabrika' publishing house to print more collections of *feuilleton*s.[17] There is more than a slight suggestion that Zoshchenko himself has great sympathy with the point of view of this *rabkor*. Furthermore, this kind of reader was precisely who Zoshchenko had in mind when employing the *feuilleton* and *feuilleton*-influenced short story forms:

> I slightly changed, and lightened the syntax and simplified the composition of the short story. This has permitted me to be understood by those readers who were not interested in literature (1933; *Youth Restored*, *SS* III, 158).

Similarly, in "How I Work", reiterating his demand that literature should be written so that the people understand it, Zoshchenko writes: 'We must get masses interested in literature' (*RC*, 589). Attracting extra-literary readers in fact meant employing not only extra-literary language, but also extra-literary

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15. Carleton has initiated this work. However, he argues that the presence in one text of documentary and parodic elements undermines all referential potential in language and renders the given text meaningless. This seems an unconvincing account of the interaction between the documentary and parodic principles in Zoshchenko's short stories and *feuilleton*s – Carleton, 'Problems of Text and Reception: Mixail Zos"c"enko'. See the discussion of Carleton's views above, Chapter I.

16. In his memoirs, Chukovsky stresses Zoshchenko's use of these letters in the 1920s: 'Zoshchenko drew the material for his *feuilleton*s from the huge mass of letters that were sent to him from one end of the state to another' – Chukovskii, 'Iz vospominanii', p. 67.

17. A *rabkor* was a worker correspondent (*rabohij korrepondent*), also known as a *rabsel;kor* , a worker or rural correspondent. See later for a more detailed explanantion of the term.

forms. With his simple language and journalistic forms, Zoshchenko did both of these things.

The question of documentary literature is not discussed at great length in Zoshchenko's articles. However, in a 1930 letter to Gorky, Zoshchenko argues that not only 'high' literature, but fictional works as such are irrelevant:

> I have always worked in the least prestigious of the lesser magazines and always tried to stay away from 'Great Literature'. Now, for example, I am working in a factory on a sectional wall newspaper and in a factory printing press. I volunteered for this work myself so as to see the whole of life and to be of some kind of use, since, as far as I can see, fictional literature is not very important and there is little demand for it.[18]

Zoshchenko continued to keep his critical distance from the purely literary form of literary tradition. Even as late as 1937, in an article entitled "The Basic Questions of Our Profession",[19] Zoshchenko argues that Soviet literature is a literature of fact. Here he raises his objections to fictional literature, and claims that all successful Soviet novels have introduced new extra-literary elements: e.g. history, chronicle, memoir or science. They are not novels of the purely literary type. Vsevolod Ivanov, Aleksei Tolstoy and Sholokhov all 'freshened up the form with interesting facts':

> I don't know what the subsequent fate of the Soviet novel will be, but so far in the novel a line of fact, history and the fictionalised document has become clearly visible (…) successful Soviet novels contain those elements of the factual which renew the old form (…)
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> It seems to me that it is precisely in this area of the factual (I am talking broadly: history, science, memoir) that new genres may be discovered. As for those genres which we already know: they are insufficient and literature is hardly likely to end its development with them.
>
> It is here that we need more courage, risks and experiments. There may be some extremely interesting discoveries made here.
>
> I personally have done some experiments in this field, the field of the factual.
>
> My latest works *Letters to a Writer*, *Youth Restored*, and *The Sky-Blue Book*: they are attempts to discover a new genre.
>
> But these experiments were not conducted for the sake of genre itself, but because of a subject matter that I could not present in obsolete forms (*1935-37*, pp. 378–79)

This statement is in part misleading in that he is drawing parallels with other writers, who have 'artistically reworked' or 'fictionalised' history, documents and facts. This formulation stresses the similarities between him and more

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18. Letter to Gor'kii, 30 September, 1930, *Gor'kii i sovetskie pisateli: neizdannaia perepiska*, p. 162.
19. Mikhail Zoshchenko, *Passkazy, povesti, fel'etony, teatr, kritika, 1935–37* (Leningrad, Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1937), pp. 374–80. Hereafter cited as *1935–37*.

main-stream Soviet writers, and is so broad as to include the historical novel. In stress-ing these resemblances, Zoshchenko is disguising some profound differences: his reworking of facts at times really is journalism and is never far removed from it, whereas historical novels are explicitly fictional.

Nevertheless, this article does point to a contradiction in Zoshchenko's work: even at its most journalistic, it is not free from the author's hand; it is still a 'reworking of facts'. Zoshchenko stresses this in the 1932 "Autobiography" when he says that he has exaggerated the language of his works. Not to have done so, he argues, would have resulted in photography, not art.

The insistence that his work is art and not 'photography' stands in contradiction with much of what Zoshchenko says elsewhere about literature. This contradiction reveals a tension that runs throughout Zoshchenko's work: Zoshchenko's stories of the 1920s, for all their use of the *feuilleton* form, are also works of literature. They are both journalism and literature. The *feuilleton* form itself oscillates between the newspaper article and the short story. In the hands of the most able practitioners of the form such as Il'f and Petrov, Kataev, as well as Zoshchenko, the *feuilleton* form became close to and even indistinguishable from the short story.[20] These writers' use of the *feuilleton* form enabled the short story to be rejuvenated.

Yet Zoshchenko claims to be employing the *feuilleton* form for its factual and extra-literary character:

> In these *feuilletons* there is not a drop of fabrication. Everything here is the naked truth. I have definitely not added anything myself. Letters from *rabkory*, official documents and notices in the papers served as my material.
>
> It seems to me that now especially there are many people who have a pretty disdainful attitude to fabrication and writers' fantasies. What they want is real, genuine facts. They want to see real life and not the garnished life that our comrade writers serve up.
>
> These *feuilletons* of mine have a precious quality: there is no writer in them. Or rather, there's no writer's nonsense in them ("From the Author", *SS* I, 448).[21]

This appears to be a straightforward statement of Zoshchenko's commitment to documentary journalism. However, even after so apparently categorical a statement, he hesitates and admits that he has changed some names, before repeating his claim that the *feuilleton*s are all 'the naked truth'. This is clearly not

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20. This lack of distinction is something referred to by a number of commentators: See Leonid Ershov, *Satiricheskie zhanry russkoi sovetskoi literatury (ot epigrammy do romana)* (Len-ingrad, Nauka, 1977), p. 120; Ershov, *Iz istorii sovetskoi satiry*, p. 51. Also see Richard L. Chapple, *Soviet Satire of the Twenties* (Gainsville, University of Florida, 1980), p. 13.

21. Iurii Tomashevskii reprinted preface from the *feuilleton* section of the second volume of Mikhail Zoshchenko, *Sobranie sochinenii* (1929–32). There are very few surviving copies of this volume and I have been unable to track one down.

so: the *feuilleton*s contain much that appears to have been liberally fictionalised.[22]

This indecision is typical of Zoshchenko, and is a revealing instance of his ambivalent intentions in reproducing journalistic forms: Zoshchenko is making a serious attempt to attract new readers by democratising literature and bringing it closer to life by using journalistic fact based forms. At the same time he is using parody to ridicule such forms and those who would write in such a manner. Documentary material is important, but it is reworked and exists in tension with literary licence. This results in an ambivalent attitude to the literature of fact. This relation to documentary literature, as we shall see, is not the only contradictory position that Zoshchenko adopted. Irresolvable contradictions seem to have lain at the heart of Zoshchenko's creative enterprise. In his work, the ten-sions between documentary journalism and art, between fact and interpretation, are transformed and deepened into the expression of an existential conflict. In order to examine this strategy in detail we must enumerate those journalistic forms that Zoshchenko was to employ, stylise and parody in his short stories.

iii) 1920s Soviet Journalism: Form, Style and Outlook

The *Feuilleton*

The dominant form of satirical journalism of the 1920s was the *feuilleton*. A *feuilleton* is a journalistic genre originating in France around 1800 and first used in Russia in *Vestnik Evropy* in 1820. In the Soviet Union a century later it became one of the most common forms of satire. The generic characteristics this form acquired in the Soviet Union need to be outlined in order to trace the specific stylistic and thematic influences of the satirical press on Zoshchenko.

In his history of the *feuilleton* in Russia and the Soviet Union, Leonid Ershov shows how, after the Revolution, this form became highly politicised.[23] From 1918 to 1921 the 'small *feuilleton*' predominated. This genre developed from the critical notice (*zametka*) or sketch (*oherk*) in *Pravda* and *Izvestiia*. These were often based on facts gleaned from letters to the paper, in particular from *rabkory* (worker correspondents). In this period information prevailed over humour and what little humour there was tended to ridicule the Soviet Union's enemies crudely. However, in the years 1922–23, a new form, 'the large *feuilleton*' came into being. Here the quantity of information was reduced and the elements of humour and the dramatisation of the situation became far more significant. Though art was subordinate to information, and broadly

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22. See, for example, "Letters to the Editor" which I discuss in the fourth section of this chapter.
23. Ershov, *Satiricheskie zhanry russkoi sovetskoi literatury* , pp. 95–163.

served to bring the situation alive, there was still scope for the creative writer. A pioneer of this form of the *feuilleton* was Mikhail Kol'tsov (1898–1942). Significantly, it was in this period that Zoshchenko made his literary début. He was quick to seize upon and exploit the possibilities offered by this new form. In doing so he expanded its scope immeasurably.

Let us examine the aspects of the *feuilleton* that Zoshchenko was to employ:

- **Fact**

Unlike a correspondent proper, the *feuilleton* writer selects one fact for the focus of the article. Leonid Ershov has stressed the *feuilleton*'s factual basis:

> the flowering of the *feuilleton* in the USSR in the 1920s is testimony to the intensification of the documentary, factual principle in literature.
>
> (…) such genres as the sketch and the *feuilleton* have done a great deal for the bringing together of art and life.[24]

The factual material upon which the *feuilleton* was based was very often the letters to the paper, particularly from worker and rural correspondents (*sel;-kory*):

> Many important subjects for *feuilletons* are suggested by the letters to the editor. Letters from *rabkory* and *sel;kory* not only suggest topics, but also furnish material for *feuilleton*s (…) In some newspapers, letters to the editor have served as sources for four fifths of all *feuilleton*s.[25]

The proximity of these two genres is such that the rubrics in which the letters of complaint are published can be seen as examples of the *feuilleton*, in that the letters are introduced and commented upon by a columnist. This effectively makes them *feuilleton*s.[26]

- **Generalisation**

Having selected his fact the journalist had to ensure that it was understood in a certain context. He did this by reworking it artistically:

> In many instances the *feuilletonist* makes up dialogue, or illustrates scenes, which did not actually happen. All this is necessary in order to stress the meaning of the incident being ridiculed.[27]

The purpose of such literary reworking is to relate the incident at the basis of the *feuilleton* to larger social and political questions. In this way, the *feuilleton*

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24. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
25. [no author], *Zhanry sovetskoi gazety* (Moscow, Vysshaia shkola, 1972), p. 370.
26. The manner of this commentary also changes. In early copies of *Krasnyi voron* the columnist is represented as a red raven that 'pecks' those who have offended the letter writers by ridiculing them in a short poem. Later this changes into prose. However, particularly later in *Begemot*, the attitude changes and the columnist often laughs not with the letter writer against a common foe, but at the letter writer. The magazine evolved from useful political satire to satire on useful political satire for a more ambiguous ironic effect.
27. *Zhanry sovetskoi gazety*, p. 370.

performed an explanatory function that distinguished the Soviet press from other forms of journalism.[28] However, this begs the question as to how far something can be artistically reworked before it ceases to be an example of journalism and becomes a work of literature. A tension between literature and journalism was inherent in the *feuilleton* form. Zoshchenko transplanted it into the *skaz* form, and transformed it into the expression of a philosophical problem.

The *rabkor* and the Letter of Complaint

> They are feeble and comical. But at the same time they are serious.
> (*Before Sunrise*)

The facts reworked into the *feuilleton*s were typically gleaned from letters written to the newspapers. A feature of the Soviet journalistic culture of the time was to encourage readers to participate in the press by writing to the papers about their own lives and conditions:

> For the workers to have their own newspaper, the workers must themselves write about their needs and problems, they must themselves become the newspaper's main contributors.[29]

The aim of this activity was to criticise shortcomings in Soviet society with an view to improving them. The *rabsel'kory* or worker and peasant correspondents were central to this. As Jeffrey Brooks has argued, professional Soviet journalists had no incentive to criticise the régime's shortcomings, since they were themselves paid by the same State responsible for those shortcomings:

> Critical commentary was reserved for unofficial local reporters, such as the worker and peasant correspondents, who were paid a few rubles for each accepted contribution. These occasional commentators lacked the autonomy, education and economic security to become an independent voice in Soviet society.[30]

These people wrote more or less systematically to a given newspaper and organised wall newspapers criticising shortcomings in their workplaces or conditions in the places where they lived with the aim of increasing production and improving the quality of life.[31] The movement was officially encouraged, in

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28. Jeffrey Brooks, 'The Press and its Message: Images of America in the 1920s and 1930s', in *Russia in the Era of NEP: Explorations in Soviet Society and Culture*, ed. by Sheila Fitzpatrick *et al.* (Bloomington, Indiana U.P., 1991), pp. 231–52.
29. Leading article in *Rabochii*, (1 March 1922), repr. in *O partiinoi i sovetskoi pechati: sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow, Pravda, 1954), pp. 245–46.
30. Brooks, 'The Press and its Message', p. 231.
31. The organised way in which they wrote was one of their most distinctive characteristics. See Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization 1917–1929*, (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1985), p. 233. Though, of course, during the 1920s the spectrum of their permitted opinion shrank. Also see *Bol'shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia* (Moscow, Ogiz, 1926–31), s.v. 'rabkor'. This description is written in accordance with the prescriptions of Socialist Realism and also

particular from 1923, when *Pravda* organised a conference of *rabkory*.[32] During the NEP period, the Soviet government saw this as a vital means of improving production so as to industrialise the country. The satirical press was very much a part of this. In *Krasnyi voron*, the forerunner to *Begemot*, sections such as 'Otryvki iz rabohix pisem' (Selections from Workers' Letters) and 'Q]ik dlq 'alob' (The Complaint Box) encouraged readers to perform the role of *rabkory*, and write in to complain about priests, *nepmeny* (entrepreneurs who flourished under NEP) and *upravdomy* (building managers) and other perceived perpetrators of injustice at the behest of the columns:

> Comrades, Write to the 'Complaint Box' section of *Krasnyi voron*. Together we shall fight red tape, inefficiency, flippancy, bribery, sabotage and the downsides of NEP.[33]

The readers responded enthusiastically and Zoshchenko was quick to recognise and seize upon the possibilities of this material. He used it as factual material and plots for his straightforwardly journalistic *feuilleton*s and for his short stories. He also drew on the material, in a less direct manner, by recreating their style, form, plots and the mentality of the letter-writers. An excellent example of such a reproduction of the style of letters of complaint and of their factual plots is Zoshchenko's most famous story, "A Bathhouse", which was actually based on a number of letters of complaint. Zoshchenko refers to the process of writing "A Bathhouse" in *Before Sunrise*:

> On my pillow lie letters to the editor of *Krasnaia gazeta*. They are complaints about difficulties in the bathhouses. I was given these letters so I could write a *feuilleton*.
>
> I look through these letters. They're feeble, comical. But at the same time they're serious. I should say so! They concern a human affair of no little importance: the bathhouse.[34] (*Before Sunrise*, *SS* III, 506).

The letter of complaint was a perfect form in which to combine the trivial and the important, since it was 'a theater in which the new Soviet public values

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strikes a terrifying note: the worker correspondent was to unmask enemies of the people. In other words these letters were the embryonic literary form of the informer. Also see *SSSR v period vosstanovleniia narodnogo khoziaistva (1921–1925 gody): istoricheskie ocherki* (Moscow, Politicheskaia literatura, 1955), p. 541.

32. The numbers of *rabsel;kory* rose prodigiously in this period; from 100,000 in 1924, it had risen to 216,000 by 1925 – *Partiinaia i sovetskaia pechat' v bor'be za postroenie sotsializma i kommunizma: uchebnoe posobie*, 2nd edn. rev. (Moscow, Mysl', 1966), p. 79.

33. 'Iashchik dlia zhalob', *Krasnyi voron*, Nº 1 (1923). *Begemot* intensified this activity before ultimately moving towards less tendentious portrayals of everyday life in the USSR. For a detailed but one-sided description of these changes, see S. Stykalin and I. Kremenskaia, *Sovetskaia satiricheskaia pechat' 1917–1963* (Moscow, Politlit, 1963).

34. *Krasnyi voron* was initially a supplement to *Krasnaia gazeta*. It became a separate publication, but was still published by *Krasnaia gazeta*.

were superimposed on the actualities of daily life'.[35] But since Soviet public values did not always, or rather seldom matched up with the actualities of daily life the effect was typically that of a disparity. The given experience of daily life remained at odds with the interpretation of it.[36]

Further distortions resulted when Bolshevik politics and political vocabulary were simplifed in the pursuit of a wider audience. This was true particularly of newspapers such as *Rabochaia gazeta* and *Rabochaia Moskva*:

> The staff journalists simplified and abbreviated their presentation of Soviet values in the active sphere because of the subject matter and the character of the discussions. The semi-educated local correspondents and letter writers brought this public culture down to a still lower level when they tried to apply abstract values to specific issues. The transition was necessarily an imperfect one, since local correspondents were unable to replicate the public culture expressed by the staff journalists.[37]

Rabsel'kory in particular had a tendency to concentrate on one particular aspect rather than the whole picture. This was something which Gorky highlighted:

> the gloomy pessimism [of these *rabkory*] can be explained by the fact that they narrow focus upon the good and the bad within the confines of their own factory, and either do not know or forget about the whole of the collective work being undertaken in the Union of Soviets by the working class.[38]

This is an aspect of the *rabkory* that Fedor Raskol'nikov, writing in the proletarian literary journal *Na postu*, also highlights. He contrasts the narrowness of vision of the *rabkory* with the broad sweep of the proletarian writer:

> the range of interests of the proletarian writer is broader than that of the *rabkor*: the *rabkor* reflects everyday life, ways of doing things, economic conditions, the order or disorder of his own factory, whereas what the proletarian writer reflects is not just the life of a factory, even not just the life of the working class as a whole, but what he reflects is life, the psychology and the outlook of the most disparate classes, of the most disparate layers of society, but of course, from his proletarian point of view.[39]

It would seem then that the relation between the abstract level of interpretation, of ideology, and that of the concrete and immediate experience, was a

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35. Brooks, 'Public and Private Values in the Soviet Press, 1921–1928', p. 21.
36. Similarly, Vladimir Brovkin shows how the upper echelons of the party were informed through GPU reports of strikes, of the catastrophic state of enterprises etc.: 'What they read qualified in the public sphere as malicious counter-revolutionary vilification of socialism' – see his *Russia After Lenin: Politics, Culture and Society, 1921–1929* (London, Routledge, 1998), p. 60.
37. Brooks, 'Public and Private Values in the Soviet Press, 1921–1928', p. 25.
38. Maksim Gor'kii, 'Eshche rabsel'koram', in his *Sobranie sochinenii v tridtsati tomakh* (Moscow, Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1953), Vol. XXIV, p. 313.
39. Fedor F. Raskol'nikov [Il'in], 'Rabkory i proletarskaia literatura', *Na postu*, Nº 1 (6) (June 1925), pp. 105–12; repr. (Munich, Wilhelm Fink, 1971), pp. 105–12 (p. 109).

problem for the *rabkor*. Zoshchenko, as we have seen in the previous chapter, began to explore this question from his earliest surviving story, long before he started writing for the satirical press. In the letter of complaint, and in the figure of the *rabkor*, he found the perfect vehicle for the exploration of this tension.[40]

Moreover, the letters of the *rabkory* were, of course, personalised narratives. In this they served as a blueprint for the narrator-participant *skaz* form that Zoshchenko was to make his own: the *rabkor*, like Zoshchenko's narrator does not use the impersonal narrative, and as a consequence cannot hide his self-interest behind a veneer of objectivity. As a result, the *rabkor* was potentially still more fruitful as a means of articulating Zoshchenko's other related peren-nial theme, the ubiquity of human material self-interest. The *rabkor* was typically somewhat upwardly mobile.[41] He often demanded the sacking of a specialist. All well and good, but he often also suggested that he himself be appointed in his place. Very often a motive of self-interest was discernible behind the slogans about the good of the Soviet fatherland.[42] The complaints themselves at times appear more sinister than public-spirited, and can perform the rôle of anonymous denunciations to the police.

Rabkor as *Meshchanin*

In Soviet terms a worker who did not conform to the idealisation of the working class, and who was concerned with his immediate self-interest and private pleasures rather than the good of the society, of the collective, of his class, was a *meshchanin*. This is not a social type, but a moral type: someone unable to rise above the everyday (*byt*), to concentrate upon the future, the goal, the essential (*bytie*).[43]

In this it is similar (but opposite) to the Soviet definition of the proletarian. A proletarian was not just a member of a class, but also had to have proletarian class-consciousness. In other words, proletarian was a prescriptive not a descriptive term.[44] Historians know this idealised worker of Soviet ideology better than they know the other worker whose world was one where drinking, brawling and cursing were prevalent. But that clean image is a distortion, such dissolute behaviour was in fact quite common: though drunkenness was seen as

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40. In Boym's terms, Zoshchenko's stories were all written by graphomaniacs: would-be writers caught up in the trviality of the everyday – Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard U.P., 1994), p. 193.
41. Brooks, 'Public and Private Values in the Soviet Press, 1921–1928', p. 23.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
43. Boym defines *byt* as 'everyday routine and stagnation' and *bytie* as 'spiritual being'. She also provides a history of the term – Boym, *Common Places*, p. 29.
44. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'The Problem of Class Identity in NEP Society', in *Russia in the Era of NEP*, pp. 12–33.

counter-revolutionary, the overwhelming majority of workers drank.[45] This other worker's behaviour is, in Soviet terms, *meshchanstvo*.

The interesting thing was that the non-politically conscious worker-*me]anin* also regarded the Revolution as his victory, and was enthused with a new assertiveness and confidence. As Philips has argued, 'By the mid-1920s Russian workers had mastered revolutionary discourse and used it to further their own ends'.[46] This meant the justification of the pursuit of self-interest in the most banal spheres of existence, through the use of abstract political slogans, even as far as demanding the political right to go to the theatre or cinema when reelingly drunk.[47] Similarly, workers paid lip-service to such abstractions ironically, while contravening their strictures: they might propose a toast to anti-alcohol campaigns or the cultural Revolution.[48]

The gap between the abstract slogan and the underlying motive of self-interest is something that Zoshchenko was able to observe in life, in the letters of complaint and the letters of the *rabkory*. It fitted his own view of the world, and he was able to find in the *feuilleton* form a particularly powerful means for the exploration of this tension. It should be stressed, however, that it is the tension between these two spheres that interests Zoshchenko. The balance of the Zoshchenko short story depends on us having as much sympathy for the striving towards ambitious interpretive abstraction as we have understanding of the underlying self-interest.

Another way in which Zoshchenko explored this tension was through the narrator's language.

The Language of the *Rabkor*

As well as providing factual material for the basis of his plots, and naturally fitting his vision of an irreconcilable conflict between the concrete sphere of existence and the abstract realm of ideologically informed interpretation, the letter of complaint also provided Zoshchenko with a rich vein of popular idiom with which to fill his note-book. In his memoirs, Chukovsky describes similar letters sent to Zoshchenko as

> clumsy, dense, more often than not wildly illiterate epistles to Gavrilych [one of his pseudonyms] which were full of shrieks and complaints from unlawfully offended people.[49]

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45. For a discussion of the Russian working class's drinking habits in this period, see Laura L. Philips, 'Message in a Bottle: Working Class Culture and the Struggle for Revolution-ary Legitimacy, 1900–1929', *Russian Review*, LVI, Nº 1 (1997), pp. 25–43.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
47. *Ibid.*, pp. 34–35.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
49. Chukovskii, 'Iz vospominanii', p. 68.

Zoshchenko was sincerely attracted to the new language and attempted to use it in his stories. Though written, this was the language of the recently literate and was far closer to the way in which people spoke than to the literary language. As such it brought to the stories the immediacy and energy of live speech, and can still be called *skaz*. At the same time it brought its defects. In particular, the problem that beset his stories was that the language was seen solely as a means of parody. Indeed, there is an inherent danger in using a language which is not the standard literary language, particularly the language of the people, in that it is likely to be seen as comic, as a parody. This is in part because of the traditional way in which the language of the people has been employed in literature.[50]

In order to avoid this unintended comic effect, when incorporating letters, magazines and journals of the time rewrote them.[51] The same happens in modern day teenage magazines for example: letters in which the readers express themselves incompetently are rewritten so as not to detract from their emotional impact.[52]

Writers such as Mikhail Bulgakov and Zoshchenko himself were employed to rewrite these letters.[53] The effect of this rewriting was that the language of literature, and even of journalism, did not resemble the language being spoken by the common people. Thus Zoshchenko, in *Letters to a Writer* (1929), was able to defend himself from the charge that he was corrupting the Russian language for cheap laughs by claiming to be reproducing the language, 'in which the street now thinks and speaks' (*RC*, 371). He claims to have done this, just as he claimed to have adopted journalistic forms, with the purpose of democratising literature:

> I did this (in my small short stories) not out of curiosity and not so as to imitate

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50. This tradition dates as far back as Aristotle, whose *Poetics* originally contained a chapter on comedy which started from the premise, 'Comedy (...) is the imitation of inferior people' – Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. lxii. Lowly status and base behaviour were associated. Despite the revolution, art seems to have been unable to free itself from these hierarchical associations.
51. Gorham explores the unintended comic effects of the letters of the *rabkory* – Gorham, 'Tongue-Tied Writers'.
52. This was pointed out to me by a former columnist at the teenage magazine, *It's Bliss*.
53. Tomashevsky describes Zoshchenko's wide-ranging journalistic activities on the satirical press: 'Zoshchenko wrote an immense quantity of the most varied "trivia". Looking through these (and other) satirical journals now, examining them (…) time and again you stumble upon his footprints: a few lines, and it's unmistakable – it's him, Zoshchenko. An advert for subscriptions to *Begemot*, to *Pushka* – it's his handwriting. An open letter by some workers – there's his hand. The editor's reply to a *sel;kor* – his style. And God knows how many letters he reworked, how many captions to cartoons he composed, how many headings he thought up! Try and find all that…' – Iurii Tomashevskii, 'Zoshchenko – zhurnalist', *Voprosy literatury*, Nº 7 (1984) , pp. 253–68 (p. 253).

> life in our country more precisely. I did this so as to fill in, albeit temporarily, the collossal gap which had opened up between literature and life.
>
> And I say temporarily, because I really do write like that: temporarily and parodically (*RC*, 371).

Zoshchenko sees the letters that he receives as confirmation that he was right as to how the street thinks and writes.

Zoshchenko, then, in his short stories and *feuilleton*s, reintroduces the actual language that the workers might have used if an average one became a writer, or attempted to become one. Having done this, he was beset by the problem the practice of editing and rewriting was introduced to overcome: only the ridiculous aspect of his narrator's language was perceived. His work was seen as parodic.

Insofar as we can perceive it through the process of rewriting and editing, the language of the *rabkory* seems to have been a strange hybrid. Raskol'nikov en-courages *rabkory* to use a more rugged idiom than is standard literary practice:

> The last thing that *rabkory* should do, when they start out in literature, is to write in the language of the intelligentsia. They should write as they are accustomed to speaking. They should write in the language which the working masses gave them.[54]

The tone of entreaty is in part because, as Michael Gorham has shown in his study of the phenomenon of the *rabkory*, they tended to abandon their natural idiom in the attempt to master the language of journalistic cliché. This was a result of the strange position in which they found themselves: they were expected to act both as the organic voice of the people and as the politically active representatives of the Soviet state. The effect of mixing these languages was a bizarre hybrid, because the idiom of colloquial speech and that of political jargon did not complement each other. Instead, both became deformed. Rather than conveying any message, the language of the *rabkory* often drew attention to the contorted construction of his discourse. Gorham sees Zoshchenko's "Ape Lang-uage" (1925) as typical of this hybrid language.

However, Gorham only sees the parodic aspect of this language: writer and reader can laugh at the narrator. In fact, Zoshchenko transforms this language into a linguistic analogue of the profound conflict of abstract interpretive system and particular experience. The highly concrete linguistic medium resists and disrupts the ideology it attempts to bear. The effect is not so much a laugh at the expense of the narrator, but despair at the impasse of the human condition.

In this section we have examined aspects of 1920s journalism relevant to

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54. Raskol'nikov, 'Rabkory i proletarskaia literatura', p. 111.

Zoshchenko's work. In particular, we have described two journalistic forms in detail: the *feuilleton* and the letter of complaint. We have also discussed the figure of the *rabkor*, in part because he is tied up with the letter of complaint phenomenon, but also because his language and mentality prefigure the language and mentality of Zoshchenko's character-narrators. Having established the jour-nalistic context we can now show how Zoshchenko's work relates to it.

iv) The Influence of Journalistic Forms on Zoshchenko

Before introducing examples of Zoshchenko's use of journalistic forms, let us briefly summarise the emphatically journalistic elements in Zoshchenko's art, and contrast them with the properly fictional short story form:

- **Factual Basis**

The *feuilleton* is based on a true incident or fact, or what purports to be one, and demands that the reader believe that the figures in it are real and not fictional.[55] This need not be the case with the short story. Zoshchenko habitually based not only his *feuilletons*, but also his short stories, on such factual sources.

- **Immediate Topicality**

Immediate topicality is a further characteristic common to both the form of a Zoshchenko short story and that of a *feuilleton*. As Ershov has indicated, it is not normally a feature of the short story.[56] In Zoshchenko's short stories though, the events are very commonly related to events of the day, after the manner of a *feuilleton*.[57]

- **Generalisation**

The 'large *feuilleton*' generalises and puts a single fact or incident in the context of a socially significant wider theme.[58] This also functions as a way of ensuring that the reader interprets these events in the 'correct' manner.[59]

The combination of the generalised theme and the particular incident is a matter of artistic technique, which distinguishes the *feuilleton* from simple reporting, i.e. from journalism that presents itself as the simple transmission of facts. Ershov argues that this is what enabled the *feuilleton* to become a self-

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55. Ershov, *Satiricheskie zhanry russkoi sovetskoi literatury*, p. 159; *Idem*, *Sovetskaia satiricheskaia proza*, p. 137.
56. *Idem*, *Satiricheskie zhanry russkoi sovetskoi literatury*, p. 149.
57. In particular, the first published versions of the stories in the satirical press follow the example of *feuilletons* by reacting to the issue of the day. Some of the contemporaneity of the references was filtered out in subsequent republications.
58. Ershov criticises Olesha's verse *feuilleton*s in *Gudok* for failing to relate the isolated incident to the general theme – Ershov, *Satiricheskie zhanry russkoi sovetskoi literatury*, p. 135.
59. See, for example, *Zhanry sovetskoi gazety*, pp. 353–70. Ershov, *Satiricheskie zhanry russkoi sovetskoi literatury*, p. 148.

sufficient genre, no longer dependent on the press, but published separately in collections.[60]

Zoshchenko transforms this scheme, by relating the fact to a general theme which is irrelevant. The fake generalisation is often really the expression of the narrator's own interests.[61] Zoshchenko's narrator, unlike that of a normal *feuilleton*, often expresses his opinions and makes generalisations incompetently, prompting us to supply a new interpretation of the event.

- **The Letter of Complaint Writer or *rabkor***

Zoshchenko uses, stylises and parodies the letter of complaint writer and the figure of the *rabkor*. At times this figure becomes inseparable from that of the *skaz* character-narrator employed in stories that show little or no journalistic influence.

Parody of the Letter of Complaint

- **"Letters to the Editor" (1922)**

With "Letters to the Editor" (*SS* I, 449–51), Zoshchenko first attempted to reproduce the letter of complaint form. As his first reproduction of journalistic forms, they are worth analysing, though they are not representative of his use of journalistic forms. In "Letters to the Editor" Zoshchenko's intentions are overwhelmingly parodic. While simple parody was not typical of his later use of journalistic forms, it was generally the purpose of his use of *skaz* in this early period of his work, as I have shown above (in Chapter IV).

One indication of the parodic intention in these letters is that despite Zoshchenko's claims to the contrary, there seems here to be no genuine factual basis for these letters. Consequently, I propose to examine them as fictional parodies of the letter of complaint.[62] There are a number of good reasons for seeing these letters as Zoshchenko's fictional creations. First of all, the names of the letter writers are typical of Zoshchenko. The first letter, "The Joys of NEP" is by Semen Kaplunov, the same initials as 'Semen Kurochkin', a favourite pseudonym of Zoshchenko at this time. The second letter is signed "Office-Worker Iv. Lermontov", which follows the pattern of using the surname of a great writer parodically combined with a rustic sounding first name, that Zoshchenko repeated in "An Open Letter" (1924; *RC*, 227–29), where one of the signatories is Vasia Pushkin.

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60. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
61. Starkov has commented that the unsuccessful generalisations made by Zoshchenko's narrators resemble this feature of the *feuilleton*. – see Starkov, *Iumor Zoshchenko*, pp. 57–58.
62. As we have seen, Zoshchenko claimed that these and all his *feuilleton*s are genuine: 'Ot avtora' (*SS* I, 448).

The complaints touch on common grievances: for example, complaints about public transport were common, not only in Zoshchenko's work. The first letter, "The Joys of NEP" complains that the bourgeois passengers have been elbowing and pushing. The letter writer has even had his foot stepped on. However, the theme of having one's foot stepped on is a theme particular to Zoshchenko.[63] Moreover, the claim that the people causing the trouble are bourgeois is reminiscent of the complaints made on behalf of Vasia Rastopyrkin in another of Zoshchenko's short stories, "Petit-Bourgeois Leanings" (1926; *SS* I, 360–62). The use of 'mankirovat;', a foreign loan word, is not typical of Zoshchenko's narrators except when referring to foreigners or foreign countries. However, it does suggest a tendency to bluff and to be too clever for their own good which is typical of his narrators. The most significant aspect of this and the other letters is the excessive attention that they pay to trivial aspects of life. The letter writers seethe with righteous indignation over complete trifles.

The second letter, "For the Attention of the Militsia", is a complaint by office worker Iv[an] Lermontov, who was travelling on a steamboat when he was spat at from a bridge. The offending phlegm landed unnoticed on a 'former' lady's hat. Lermontov, the letter writer, demanded that the Finnish captain stop the boat so that he could catch the 'expectorating hooligan', but the Finn refused.

This letter begins with a generalisation after the manner of a *feuilleton* and Lermontov uses a general category to refer to a single steamboat: 'legkoe paroxodstvo' (some light steam shipping) rather than the more appropriate term for a steamboat, 'paroxod'. As with Zoshchenko's later uses of this device, there is a disparity between the incident and the generalisation. However, where in later uses of the *feuilleton* form the incident often disproves the generalisation based upon it, here the satiric charge is simply that this is such a trivial matter, and not a generalised phenomenon at all. The narrator is clearly a fool, and an old world fool with antiquated manners at that. As such he is the butt of the humour, as is the rule with 'former' people in Zoshchenko's work of this period.

Here the simply absurd element of the situation is also important. Ivan Lermontov demands that the captain stop the boat. This is in itself ridiculous, since boats cannot simply be stopped as he demands. Moreover, he seems to be the only person who takes any notice of the incident. Even the woman who was hit by the spit does not notice. The letter ends with the demand that steamboat passengers be protected from spitting, itself an absurd demand that would be

63. Popkin sees the theme of having one's foot stepped on as particularly significant in Zoshchenko – Cathy Popkin, '"Ne govoria uzhe o nogakh": "Nizhnie konechnosti" v slovare Zoshchenko', *Literaturnoe obozrenie*, № 1 (248) (1991), p. 28.

extremely hard to realise.

This same pattern of the demand for an absurd measure to be taken is repeated in "A Voice Crying Out" (the third letter). Here a complaint about the price of coffins ends with a demand that a department be set up where every employee (*slu'a]ij*) can buy themselves a coffin.

The same pattern of complaints based upon incidents that occurred to the letter writers but are not revealing of any general phenomenon repeats itself throughout these letters. In "Theatrical Life" (the fifth letter), the letter writer suggests that theatre seating arrangements be ordered according to each given spectator's height. This demand is a result of his being seated behind a tall woman at a recent visit to the theatre. This letter as well as "Baron" (the fourth letter) and "Panama" (the sixth letter) are full of the class resentment of professionals such as actors, doctors and engineers. All of the letter writers are 'former' people, and like the peasants and priests in the stories of this period, they are simply to be laughed at; there is no mixture of sympathies.

The narrators of these three letters use language that is close to that of Zoshchenko's later stories, particularly the narrator of "Panama", who refers to the engineer as 'dog nose'. This is in contrast to the narrators of "For the Attention of the Militia", "A Voice Crying Out" and "Voice of a Passer-By" (the seventh letter) who express themselves in the more formal and bureaucratic language typical of their professions.

These letters all parody the absurdly specific and trivial nature of complaints by basing them upon an incident that the narrator experienced, but that is not at all typical or relevant to society as a whole. Sometimes they are motivated by a reference to the general situation that is unconvincing. In such complaints Zoshchenko is evidently exploring the strange phenomenon of the use of the complaint form by people who believe that their own interests are completely identical with those of the society. This obvious paradox in a society in which collective interests were meant to prevail over personal ones apparently attracted him. Here the class background of the letter writers discredits their complaints and their personal experience. In his later stories, the letter writers' class does not discredit their complaints and readers are left to adjudicate between the claims of personal experience and those of ideological abstraction. The imbalance between the personal experience of an incident and the generalisation is accentuated by the writers' constant appeals for the readers' sympathy. This appeal for sympathy by the narrator is an element very proper to the letter form's directness. Although here other factors mean that we disregard the appeals, this is another element of the letter of complaint form that Zoshchenko was to incorporate in his short stories through the use of a *skaz* narrator.

Though "Letters to the Editor" prefigure Zoshchenko's later use of

journalistic forms in significant ways, they also stand in stark contrast to the ambivalence of the later work in the unmitigatedly satirical tone of their parody. Nevertheless, it is significant that these letters were only Zoshchenko's second submission to the satirical press. He ended the 1920s with the publication of *Letters to a Writer*, a collection of letters that he edited. This dependence on the documentary form, and on letters, underpins his work throughout the 1920s.

Letters as Factual Sources for Zoshchenko's *Feuilleton*-Stories

The *feuilleton*, as we have seen, is based on factual sources, usually a letter to the magazine or newspaper. The same is true of Zoshchenko's short stories. It would be almost impossible to recover all of those sources, reckoned to lie behind over a third of his stories. Nevertheless, it would be helpful to compare the sources with the final versions of the stories in order to see quite how and how far Zoshchenko reworked them. I propose to look at the documentary sources of a few stories, including those for one of Zoshchenko's most famous works, "A Bathhouse".[64]

- **"A Bathhouse" (1925)**

"A Bathhouse", which was first published in the satirical magazine *Begemot* in 1925, is a good example of Zoshchenko's adaptation of the *feuilleton* form to that of the short story.[65] It is also a good and revealing example of Zoshchenko's use of readers' correspondence: important elements of the story are taken from letters published in the satirical press from 1923 to 1925. "A Bathhouse" also typifies Zoshchenko's ambivalent attitude to the *feuilleton* form. He relies on certain of its typical features of generalisation, immediacy and a factual basis. But at the same time he plays with and even ridicules these features. The story's ambivalent tone is an excellent example of the mixture of sincerity demanding the reader's sympathy expressed in a parodic language. In order to help the reader follow this close reading of "A Bathhouse", I have decided to reproduce the original magazine-published version of the story:

A Bathhouse

They say comrades that the bathhouses in America are really excellent.

A citizen just walks in, chucks his clothes in a special box and goes off to have his bath. He won't even worry about it getting stolen or lost, and doesn't even take a cloakroom ticket.

Well some more anxious American might say to the attendant:

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64. I have concentrated my search on *Krasnyi voron/Begemot* and *Drezina*.

65. *Begemot*, Nº 10 (March 1925). I shall be referring to this original version of the story. It differs slightly from the version in the 1986 collected works (*SS* I, 278–79), which uses the version from *Uvazhaemye grazhdane* (1926). The main difference is the omission of the final sentence. I consider the original magazine published variants to be as good as and sometimes better than the variants selected by Tomashevsky for the 1986 collected works. See my discussion of Zoshchenko's later revisions of his work later in this chapter.

‘Good bye buddy,’ he’d say, ‘keep an eye on my stuff.’

And that’d be that.

Then this American would get washed and come back, and he’d be given clean clothes: washed and ironed. His foot-cloths would probably be whiter than snow. Drawers patched and darned. That’s the life!

Our bathhouses are fine too. But worse. You can get washed in them though.

The only thing is there’s a problem with the cloakroom tickets. Last Saturday, I went to the bathhouse (I was hardly going to go to America, was I), and they gave me two tickets. One for my clothes, and the other for my coat and hat.

But where’s a naked man going to keep tickets? I’ll tell you where, nowhere. He hasn’t got any pockets. It’s all stomach and legs. These tickets are nothing but trouble. You can’t tie them to your beard.

So well, I tied one to each foot so as not to lose them straight-away. And went off to the baths.

Now the tickets were flapping against my legs. It was no fun walking. But I had to walk. Because I needed a tub. What kind of bath can you get without a tub? Nothing but trouble.

I looked for a tub. I saw one citizen washing in three tubs. Standing in one, getting his head into a lather in the second, and keeping hold of the third with his hand so that no one swiped it.

I started pulling the third tub, trying, you know, to get it for myself, but the citizen wouldn’t let go of it.

‘What do you think you’re doing,’ he said, ‘stealing other people’s tubs? We’ll see how you like it when I whack you in the eye with this tub.’

I said:

‘This isn’t the tsarist régime. You can’t just go round whacking people with tubs. What egoism,’ I said. ‘Other people have got to get washed too. This isn’t a theatre, you know,’ I said.

He turned his backside to me and kept on washing.

There’s no point standing here breathing down his neck, I thought. Now he’s deliberately going to take three days washing.’

I walked further.

After an hour, I saw some bloke absent-mindedly take his hand off his tub. Whether he was looking for the soap or just lost in thought, I’m not sure. I just took the tub for myself.

Now I had a tub but nowhere to sit. And how can you wash standing up? That’s not washing. It’s nothing but trouble.

Allright then so I stood there, standing holding my tub with one hand, and started washing.

And all around me, would you believe it, it was like a self-service laundry. One person was washing his trousers, another was scrubbing his drawers, and a third was slapping something else. I’d no sooner get washed, and I’d be dirty again. The bastards were spraying me. And with the noise they made with their laundry, you didn’t feel like washing. You couldn’t hear where you were rubbing the soap. Nothing but trouble.

'Well,' I thought, 'damn the whole bloody lot of them. I'll finish washing at home.'

So I went to the changing rooms. Where they give back your clothes. I saw that they'd given me my things, but the trousers weren't mine.'

'Citizens,' I said, 'mine had a hole here. But these have one over there.'

But the attendant said:

'We're not here,' he said, 'to worry about holes. This isn't a theatre,' he said.

Allright then. I put on these trousers, and went to get my coat. They wouldn't give back my coat, they wanted the ticket. But I'd left the ticket on my foot. I had to get undressed. I took off my trousers and looked for the ticket, but it wasn't there. the string was there, but the paper wasn't. The paper had washed off.

I gave the attendant the string, but he didn't want it.

'We can't,' he said, 'give out clothes on the strength of string. Otherwise,' he said, 'we'd have every citizen preparing pieces of string. We'd never have enough coats. Wait around,' he said, 'until the customers have gone, and we'll give you whatever's left over.'

I said:

'Comrade, brother, what if there's only rubbish left? This isn't a theatre,' I said. 'Give it back on the strength of its distinguishing features. One pocket,' I said, 'is torn, the other's gone. As for buttons, then,' I said, 'the top one's there, but I'm not anticipating any bottom ones.'

After all that he gave it back. And he didn't take the string.

I put my coat on and went outside. I suddenly remembered: I'd forgotten my soap.

I went back again. They wouldn't let me in my coat.

'Take your coat off,' they said.

I said:

'Citizens, I can't take my coat off for a third time. This isn't a theatre,' I said. 'At least give me the cost of the soap.'

They wouldn't.

They wouldn't and there was no point insisting. I left without my soap.

Of course, the reader used to formalities might be curious: what bathhouse was this? Where is it? What's the address?

What bathhouse? A normal one. Where they charge ten kopecks.

But I won't say what street it's on. I can't afford to. Because then when I next go there, they'll bash my brains out with a tub, and that would be the end of a politically conscious, thoughtful citizen.

1925

As we can see in the extract from *Before Sunrise* reproduced above (on page 118), the story began as a *feuilleton*. Elsewhere Zoshchenko refers to "A Bathhouse" as a story: it has always been classified as a short story and is termed such in every edition of Zoshchenko's works.[66] Its initial designation as a

66. For example, Zoshchenko refers to "A Bathhouse" as a story in "How I Work" (*RC,* 588).

feuilleton is revealing as to the immense overlap of these forms in Zoshchenko's work.[67] The sources for the story can be found, albeit with an appended commentary, on the complaint pages of *Krasnyi voron.* In a letter to *Krasnyi voron* in March 1923, there is a complaint about a public bathhouse in which it is impossible to get washed:

> A Stable not a Bathhouse
>
> In the bathhouses on Vasilevskii ostrov (№ 16, 9th Line), there's a barbers in the changing rooms, and it isn't even partitioned off. There isn't much space, so people who have just got washed, after being in those changing rooms, might even have to go and take another bath…[68]

Similar incidents involving bathhouses in which it is impossible to get washed are repeated twice more on the reader's pages subsequent to the publication of "A Bathhouse" in March 1925 – in *Begemot*, № 11 (1925) and № 49 (1925). This becomes something of an urban myth. In the actual story "A Bathhouse" (*SS*, I, 278–79), the narrator repeats a rumour he has heard about the spotless cleanliness of American bathhouses.[69] Soviet ones are also all right, he says: 'Our bathhouses are fine too. But worse. You can get washed in them though' (p. 278). The rest of the story shows that this is in fact not the case, at least not for the narrator in that apparently typical bathhouse. Ultimately the title of the story becomes ironic, since a bathhouse in which it is impossible to wash is not really a bathhouse at all.[70] This is directly parallelled in this *feuilleton*, where it is called a stable.

In "A Bathhouse", the narrator is unable to wash because other people are washing clothes and splashing him with their dirty water, so he decides to go home and wash. This element of the story appears to be even more directly derived from a letter of complaint. In *Krasnyi voron* (№ 3, 1924), someone complains about people washing clothes in the bathhouse. Here, there is a contrast with the columnist's response to the letter in the first source. In that case, the columnist's comments were full of sympathy, though humour was also derived from the sheer ridiculousness of the situation of a bathhouse in which it is impossible to get clean. However, in the second source the columnist treats the incident in a completely humorous manner, laughing at the reader for

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67. Mikhail Dolinskii notes that Zoshchenko 'counted the same text as a *feuilleton* and a short story at different times' – see his 'Golosa iz proshlogo', in *RC*, 5–30 (p. 11). Accordingly he makes no distinction between the two genres in that edition of Zoshchenko's work. Editions of Il'f and Petrov's work encounter the same difficulties.

68. *Krasnyi voron*, № 11 (March 1923).

69. In the early 1920s in the USSR, America was the symbol for modernity and was used to promote any innovation. See Brooks, 'The Press and its Message', p. 239.

70. Although, as we shall see, if the narrator discounts the value of his personal experience, then the generalisation holds true, and the story is not ironic.

writing to the paper and not sorting the matter out for himself: 'You're probably scared you'll get scalded, and so you're sending us. Stuff you!' The columnist concludes that the person who wrote the letter was too scared of being scalded to go and complain to the people washing their clothes and that is why he wrote to *Krasnyi voron*, rather than immediately sorting the matter out for himself. This theme is also developed in the story, where after being threatened by someone hogging three basins, the narrator does not even think of complaining to the people wash-ing their clothes. In the version of "A Bathhouse" first published in *Begemot* in 1925, the narrator refuses to name the exact location of the bathhouse, for fear that he will be assaulted the next time he visits it. This appears to be an oblique reference to the widespread violence against *rabkory*. Typically, they were threatened with violence by those they criticised. In 1922 a *rabkor* called Spiri-donov was murdered; in 1924 eight *rabkory* were killed. All of these deaths were attributed to retribution by 'class enemies'. Gorham notes that persecution was so widespread that the *rabsel;kor* trade paper had a rubric devoted to this subject.[71]

The contrasting responses of the journalist commenting on the article to the letters are another way in which they seem to prefigure "A Bathhouse" the story. In this instance they anticipate the mixed reaction that "A Bathhouse" the story arouses in readers: we laugh at the narrator for his fantasies about American bathhouses, his attempts to defend Soviet bathhouses, his lack of courage, his clichés, and the sheer ridiculousness of the situation, but feel sympathy for his humiliation at the hands of the attendants and the other patrons.

Another major element of the story, the problem with cloakroom tickets, appears to derive from a previous letter of complaint to *Krasnyi voron* in 1924:

> The Bathhouse Problem
>
> There's a comrade who's really upset about bathhouses. People get tickets for their clothes when they hand them in for safe-keeping. That's where the real problem lies. Judge for yourselves, comrades.
>
> 'The tickets come attached to a piece of string, but the string has become wet and rotted away, so that it is impossible to tie the ticket to any part of your body. And if you take a ticket with a long string and hang it round your neck, you risk catching something … And if you don't take a ticket but try to remember, that's allowed, but at the same time there's a special breed of thieves who look for clothes with no ticket number, and try to get them.'
>
> In a word damned if you do, damned if you don't: whatever you do you're stuffed! Take a ticket and you catch something, don't take a ticket and the thieves get you. It's not a bathhouse it's a trap! What can you do?.. Although, if you don't dwell on the bathhouse problem too much, then it's not that terrible is it? Maybe it's

71. Gorham, 'Tongue-Tied Writers', p. 428.

> not terrible at all but a storm in a tea-cup. In fact it's a piddling little matter! We only mentioned it because we were bored, and that's that![72]

Here the fear that someone else might get the patron's clothes and the impossibility of attaching the ticket to oneself are elements that the story reworks. Moreover, here once more the bathhouse is said to be something other than a bathhouse: 'It's a trap, not a bathhouse.' In the commentary to the letter the con-trasting attitudes of the first two sources are combined, so that the story shows sympathy before lightheartedly condemning the incident as trivial, a device that Zoshchenko was to employ in a number of later stories.

Thus we see that Zoshchenko almost certainly worked by lifting factual accounts from various different letters sent to, in this instance, *Krasnyi voron*, and incorporating them into a story. However, the short story "A Bathhouse" is not based on a single letter. The various elements of the three sources are further transformed by making a narrator experience these difficulties at first hand and narrate them as a *skaz* narrator-participant. Where the columnist commenting on the letters, particularly with the last two letters, treats the difficulties experienced by the reader as a subject for humour, regarding them as trivial or ridiculous, Zoshchenko makes the narrator of the story the actual person experiencing these difficulties. This is a dramatisation of the situation in line with the nature of a *feuilleton*. However, through his use of a particular type of *skaz* narrator, Zoshchenko achieves an unusual degree of ambivalence not typical of the *feuilleton*.

In "A Bathhouse", the use of a *skaz* narrator-participant renders the experience of humiliation suffered by the character more immediate. There is no objective narrator to interpose between the character who experiences the suffering and the narration of that suffering. The narrator's experiences become the central focus of the story, and their vivid evocation makes the appeal to our sympathy all the more direct. Greater directness is also achieved in the language itself. As we have seen in the discussion of *skaz*, narration in a language more typical of the character than of the standard narrator is one of the defining characteristics of *skaz*. Here Zoshchenko employs such narration. The syntax also conforms to his prescriptions for the literary language in its brevity and use of ellipsis. For example, 'This isn't the tsarist régime. You can't just go round

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72. *Krasnyi voron*, Nº 18 (1924). In this period what had been "The Complaint Box" briefly appeared without a title before the magazine changed its name to *Begemot*, and adopted a new form for the same sort of column: "Begemot Receives" ("Na prieme u Begemota"). It is possible that Zoshchenko, as a columnist on the magazine, wrote the response in the reader's column. If he did write any of the items that I discuss here, I do not consider that this would devalue what I am doing, since I am stressing the continuity between Zoshchenko and the satirical press. Zoshchenko's best short stories are developed from this basis.

whacking people with tubs' suppresses logical links such as 'htoby mo'no bylo' ('so that'), to create a more direct and expressive language. The short sentences, often of no more than one word, also typify Zoshchenko's attempt to compress the language and enliven syntax. This is a clever use of the *skaz* form as sympathetic stylisation.

At the same time this unmediated appeal to our sympathies is undermined. The events narrated comment upon the narrator's opinions. For example, after waiting for an hour he steals someone else's basin. Though he condemns someone else for their egoism in using three basins, while he has none, he is not at all above inflicting the same suffering on someone else. Moreover, the very language that produces *skaz* and its direct appeal also undermines that appeal through the use of cliché, verbal tic, tautology, slang and grammatical error. These exaggeratedly substandard usages tend to render the narrator's language parodic and increase our distance from him, as does the humour of the situation. The contradictory and ambivalent attitudes that were present in the treatment of the theme in the sources from the reader's letters page are made still more intract-able in the story.

As we have seen, Zoshchenko himself referred to "A Bathhouse" as both a story and a *feuilleton*. The final version cleverly parodies the *feuilleton* form. The narrator begins and ends the story with an attempt to link his experiences to a wider context. This attempt to generalise from the specific incident is a generic characteristic of the *feuilleton*. The story's narrator relates the incident to some gossip he has heard about the high standards of bathhouses in America. This piece of gossip seems to mix up the description of a bathhouse with those of a laundry, a dry cleaner's and a clothes repairs service. This fantastic exagger-ation, born of the awful state of Soviet bathhouses, suggests the narrator's inabil-ity to place his experiences within an appropriate context. He fails to generalise convincingly from the particular in the way that a good *feuilleton* should. The narrator then compares Soviet bathhouses unfavourably with those in America, but in their defence claims that you can wash in them. Even this most modest of generalisations is unstable and is invalidated by the experiences that are narrated in the story. The narrator finds it impossible to wash. He is prevented from doing so by people washing their clothes.[73]

However, the claim is that it is possible to get washed in Soviet bathhouses. On the narrator's own experience of a typical bathhouse, this would seem not to be the case, despite his considerable efforts. Yet the story does show some other

73. It should be noted that Russian uses a separate verbal root for washing clothes, *stirat;* and for washing oneself, *myt;sq*. When the narrator claims that you can wash in a Soviet bathhouse he is definitely not referring to the fact that people wash their clothes, even though he does describe those washing their clothes with the verb 'myt;'. This is one of the story's substandard usages.

people washing, and thus produces some evidence that it is possible to get washed. The generalisation is invalidated by the narrator's own experience, but not by what he sees of other people's experience. Yet individual experience is itself an unstable sphere: even the narrator's use of the tautological construction 'pojdet sebe myt;sq' suggests this by repeating the reference to the self.

As readers we are left to decide whether to trust the narrator's experience, or his generalisation that it is possible to wash in Soviet bathhouses. Neither quite tells the whole truth. What truth there is can be understood as a tension between the conflicting accounts of the incident. This is an example of how Zoshchenko turns generalisation and concrete factual experience, the basis of the *feuilleton*, into a philosophical conflict between the claims of concrete existence and those of abstract ideology.

The story has the journalistic immediacy of a *feuilleton*. The incident supposedly occurred 'last Saturday'. Zoshchenko here parodies this characteristic by making the narrator's immediacy, his proximity in time, and his acquaintance with the bathhouse all factors tending to mar the account rather than improve it. This narrator might more properly have placed his experiences in an approp-riate context if he was not writing so soon after the events and if he researched the actual conditions of American bathhouses. Nevertheless, the immediacy of the first person narrative still has a certain direct appeal which is difficult to disregard, for all the narrator's inconsistencies and errors.

Similarly, the ending parodies the *feuilleton*'s characteristic of being based on a particular incident directly experienced by the correspondent. As Ershov has indicated, the Soviet *feuilleton* typically revealed the exact identity of the people implicated and the exact address of any enterprises or institutions involved in the incident.[74] The motive behind this was to hold those concerned up to ridicule with the aim of reforming them, in accordance with the didactic aims of Soviet satire. The original 1925 *Begemot* version of the ending of "A Bathhouse" parodies that formula by anticipating the reader's demand for the exact address of the bathhouse in the last six lines of the story (as it is reproduced above). Here, instead of giving the address, the narrator simply claims that it is a normal bathhouse. The reason for this is revealed in the last sentence. He does not give the exact address for fear of reprisal. Ultimately then, the narrator is unable to do what the *feuilleton* should do, i.e. reveal the identity of the objects of criticism, because he is in too immediate a relation with them. He avoids doing this by giving a vague generalisation. Zoshchenko here plays off the various elements of the *feuilleton* against each other. The narrator's immediacy, far from guaranteeing relevance, leads to a distortion of the importance of the incident and to the narrator's refusal to name the object of the criticism. Gener-

74. Ershov, *Satiricheskie zhanry russkoi sovetskoi litertury*, p. 149.

alisation here, rather than furnishing the incident with an appropriate context, serves as a way of muting the effect of the satire.

In keeping with the critical position that sees Zoshchenko as satirising his nar-rator, Starkov argues that the discrepancy between the narrator's generalisations and the information we glean from his account is Zoshchenko's way of discred-iting and parodying the narrator. He calls this the 'irony of the plot' (*s['etnaq ironiq*).[75] Certainly, untrustworthy narration creates a distance indicating that the narrator and Zoshchenko's own position are not identical. However, as we have seen, this distance is not maintained evenly, and Zoshchenko's intention is not solely to parody his narrator. Rather, the elements of the *feuilleton* form are deployed in the earnest pursuit of new, easily consumed literary forms and at the same time for the purposes of parody. The language of Zoshchenko's narrator accomplishes the author's goal of bringing the literary language closer to the language of conversation and also parodies such language. The use of the *skaz* form renders the narrator's experiences more immediate, but it also suggests that this immediacy distorts the importance of those experiences. These ambig-uities are unresolved. Zoshchenko's own position cannot be derived simply by inverting the narrator's own appraisal of events. The irony is not binary, but a far less predictable interplay of parody and stylisation, of sympathy and hostility.

- **"Ape Language" (1925)**

Zoshchenko did not always combine so many elements from different letters into the one story. Sometimes the stories appear to have been developed from an incident described in a single reader's letter. Such a relation between letter and final product is more typical in *feuilletons*. "Ape Language" is an example of a story that appears to be based on a single incident (*SS* I, 264–66). The story tells of a meeting at which the narrator overhears two men talking incomprehensible gibberish composed of foreign loan words. The theme was treated in a reader's letter published in the "Begemot receives" column earlier that year, in which the correspondent complained about foreign loan words being used indiscriminately in meetings:

> Linguistic Purity
>
> At the weekly district meetings of the library worker of the Voldar district the in-structors in their lectures use so many foreign words, that the majority of provincial workers just sit there looking stupid and some are even taking encyclopedic dictionaries to bed with them …
>
> *Begemot's resolution*: I hereby inform the instructors as to the absurdity of quasi-intellectual eloquence in congregations of regionally-dispersed co-productionists.

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75. Starkov, *Iumor Zoshchenko*, pp. 57–61: also see *idem*, *Mikhail Zoshchenko: sud'ba khudozhnika*, pp. 62–65.

Got it? Good.[76]

Although it might be argued that this is a generalised phenomenon, the coincidence of themes is extremely, indeed uncannily, close. Moreover, the story and the letter even employ the same expression for 'to look stupid (*xlopat; uwami*). Like "A Bathhouse", "Ape Language" heightens the dramatic effect of the incident by telling the story from the point of view of someone involved in the incident, in this case one of the people who do not understand the foreign words. One extra comic touch that the story adds to the original reader's letter is that the two men using all the foreign loan words themselves do not understand them, but pretend that they do. Their pretence goes so far as to argue in words that they clearly do not understand:

> 'Well I suppose you don't approve of these plenary sessions comrade... But I feel closer to them. You see everything in them is so sort of minimal and straight to the point … Although, I admit, recently I've felt pretty permanent towards these meetings. I don't know, it's all industrial, a complete waste of time.'
>
> 'Not always,' the first retorted. 'If, of course, you see it from a point of view. If you get up there, as they say, on the point of view and from there, from the point of view, well then it's concretely industrial.'
>
> 'Concretely actual,' the first man corrected him sternly (*SS* I, 265).

They even get annoyed with each other as if there was a point of principle at stake in the argument. They are of course the main objects of satire in this story. However, here the narrator is also satirised, as is the *feuilleton* form that he attempts to use. In attempting to place the incident within a general context, as the narrator of a *feuilleton* should, he shows himself to be as guilty as the people he has overheard of arguing about that of which he knows nothing. He compares Russian with French, arguing that the problem with Russian is that there are so many foreign words in it:

> Just take French. Everything's fine and understandable. *Qu'est-ce que c'est, merçi, comme-çi* – they're all, if you look closely, completely French, natural, understandable words (*SS* I, 264).

However, he clearly does not know French: if he did he would realise that the two men are talking pretentious nonsense. Hence he is certainly not in a position to say that everything in that language is easy to understand. Moreover, he does not admit that he gets nothing of what the other characters say, but claims that he 'understood their conversation with difficulty'. There is even a suggestion that he is more annoyed by the fact that he was made to look stupid than concerned by the state of the Russian language.

In a formula that Zoshchenko exploited on a number of occasions, the person criticising is himself exposed as guilty of similar failings, and incapable of up-holding a superior moral standard. Examples of such stories are "The

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76. *Begemot*, Nº 8 (1925).

Bottle" (1927; *SS* I, 390) in which the narrator stands by and observes people's lack of public spiritedness in not cleaning up a broken bottle, though he himself is guilty of the same failing; "A Dogged Sense of Smell" (1924; *SS* I, 181–82), in which a sniffer-dog is brought in to track down a theft and ends up forcing confessions of petty crime from everyone: the victim of the theft, the militia dog-handler and even the narrator;[77] "A Speech About Bribery" (1923; *RC,* 198–99), "The Writer" (1923; *SS* I, 155–57) and "An Honest Citizen" (1923; *SS* I, 161–63), in which those who set out intending to denounce others end up denouncing them-selves. The implication in such stories is that there is no infallible position from which to criticise, since all vantage points are potentially corrupted by self-interest. This is yet another manifestation of Zoshchenko's vision of the com-peting claims of concrete self-interest and abstraction, where abstraction here is the neutral position of the observer making sense of events.

"Ape Language" is another instance where Zoshchenko takes documentary material and produces a short story close to the *feuilleton* form. However, here the introduction of a special type of *skaz* narrator serves to parody the *feuilleton* form and satirise the criticisms of the narrator. This is something that the writer has added: whereas in the reader's letter, those using foreign loan words are the sole objects of satire, in his story, Zoshchenko satirises both those who use that language and the person who does not understand such language.

This additional twist in perspective also sharply differentiates "Ape Language" from "A Bathhouse", in that it undermines all sympathy for the narrator, rather than problematising it as in the earlier story. This is not just satire or parody, but meta-satire: the object is satirised, but so is the satiriser. This dynamic form of satire leaves us feeling uncomfortable: maybe we too are as hypocritical as the narrator. Whereas in "A Bathhouse" we were challenged to decide whether to trust existence or ideology, here we are challenged to ask ourselves on what basis we criticise. Zoshchenko in this use of narrative technique shows himself an heir to the mantle of Gogol, in asking us whether we in fact have the right to laugh at those satirised: are we ourselves (present company of course excluded) not guilty of the same pretentious use of language, and of pretending to under-stand that which is really beyond our grasp?

We may wonder where the author's sympathies lie. Yet even here there is something suspicious about the notion that Zoshchenko's own position can be derived by inverting the views or language of those satirised. In the matter of language, the evidence from Zoshchenko's articles is contradictory. He believed a clear, simple language to be best suited to the needs of the age: 'we must write

77. The narrator confesses his guilt in the magazine-published version of the story: *Smekhach*, Nº 1 (1924). In the version that appears in the 1986 collected works (*SS* I, 181–82), the narrator runs away as the dog turns towards him, implying rather than confessing his guilt.

clearly, concisely and as simply as possible...' (*RC*, 589). However, he also believed that the language of literature should be closer to the way in which people actually speak. The absence of a normative language, and the lack of a clearly defined normative point of view is central to Zoshchenko's vision of satire. If we read Zoshchenko's use of *skaz* as a deviation from an implicitly understood linguistic norm, i.e. if we read it as satire or parody in the sense intended by many theorisations of *skaz* and by influential interpretations of Zoshchenko, such as that of Kreps, then we congratulate ourselves for having the correct point of view and laugh at the narrator for his stupidity. To do this is to simplify it, sanitise it and deaden its blows. Such interpretations resolve Zoshchenko's contradictions and confine Zoshchenko's universal comic genius to the narrow context of the 1920s and to the Soviet Union. To do so is a grave error. Zosh-chenko's satire continues to pose awkward questions of us. It is relevant as long as we are hypocritical and stupid.

- **"The Fur Hat" (1927)**

In 1923, in "The Refridgerator" ("Xolodil;nik"), a column in the journal *Drezina*, an incident is reported that served as the basis for one of Zoshchenko's weaker stories, "The Fur Hat" (*SS* I, 408–09):

> Faster than a Horse-Drawn Tram
>
> Chernyshev, the driver of train 113, was travelling along the Riazan' line. When they came to a wayside station he remembered he'd lost his fur-hat. But he couldn't remember where.
>
> He put the train into reverse. He looked through the woods but couldn't find the hat. He went further. Then he saw the hat lying on a slope by the 'Spasskoe' stop.[78]

In "The Fur Hat" Zoshchenko recounts the same incident of an engine driver losing his hat and putting the train into reverse in order to find it. Here though, he presents it as the sort of thing that used to occur in 1918 and 1919, and makes it an index of how far everything has progressed in the ten years since the Revolution.

This example differs significantly from the two previous ones, where the factual basis serves to enhance the topicality and relevance of the story. Here the original account appeared four years before being incorporated into an article. It was published in *Drezina*, which was printed by the railwaymen's printing house, 'Gudok'. In the reworking of the incident it is narrated by a former rail-way worker. His attempts to show how far things have progressed in ten years serve as the *feuilleton*-style generalisation that starts off the story. However, the incident is not particularly revealing of the typical conditions on the railways in the first few years after the Revolution. It is more of an unusual

78. *Drezina*, Nº 3 (1923).

incident that the narrator relates, not because of its importance as such, but because it happened to him. In this respect, it is a good example of Zoshchenko's narrator's incapac-ity to determine what is of historical importance or general interest and what is simply an amusing or unpleasant incident that occurred to him. The *feuilleton* form, parodied by the introduction of a *skaz* narrator, is the ideal form for this confusion as to the general and particular, the significant and the insignificant: the abstract and the concrete. A similar worm's eye view of history is presented in "A Victim of the Revolution" (1923; *SS* I, 168–70) and "A Historical Story" (1924; *SS* I, 210).

The narrator's distorted understanding of historical progress is parodied, but the irony does not stop there. The image of the train is one with many resonances in the Soviet context, and was often used as a symbol of the Revolution. The story seems to imply a certain nostalgia for the *ad hoc* mentality expressed in the 1919 incident. It may only be a fur hat, but in Zoshchenko's world such items as galoshes, hats and boots take on vital importance and the essential drama of human existence is played out in a bathhouse, a buffet or a kitchen. There is something endearing in the engine driver getting the passengers to help him look for his hat. It suggests that people had a more caring attitude. The last lines of the story tell us that such things cannot happen now, but there is more than a little note of ambiguity in this conclusion:

> But now you can forget about hats, if a passenger's blown off the train they won't stop for more than a minute.
>
> Because time's of the essence. They've got to keep on going (*SS* I, 409).

The fact that trains now will not stop longer than a minute even when a person is blown off is revealing as to the lack of importance of the individual, and of the insignificant status of the particular incident in the new, organised Soviet society. This may not and indeed almost certainly does not correspond to any historical reality: respect for the individual was hardly the defining characteristic of the first years after the Revolution. Part of the irony in the choice of this episode is that it is not typical of the historical epoch. The historical situation is simply a frame in which the writer opposes the abstract notion of purposeful movement and progress, and the infinitesimal individual requirements of the person who has lost a hat. This person and the lost hat become a symbol for the individual and fragmentary. Zoshchenko, even in this apparently simple story, achieves the sort of ambivalence we saw in "A Bathhouse" by making the incident a trivial index of the progress of the Revolution and at the same time an indication that this progress has been achieved at the cost of an attentive attitude to individual needs.

- **"The Crisis" (1925)**

A 1923 letter from a *rabkor* to *Drezina* seems to have served as the genesis of

the story, "The Crisis" (*SS* I, 320–22):

> 'I went into some building with a sign saying "Men",' writes Rabkor 189, 'and I found … a flat. The employee's wife was standing at a stool and rolling *vareniki* [fruit dumplings]. It turned out that the station guard, who also stokes the boiler and is in charge of the gas-lighting has been already living here for more than two months. While in the flat that he is entitled to as part of the job, one of the "sacked" people is taking it easy'.[79]

The story repeats the idea of people living in the most unlikely places, there a bathroom, in the letter, a public toilet. Zoshchenko's story is told by a narrator-participant, which should make the experience of hardship all the more direct. However, this narrator is an optimist whose complaints are presented almost as afterthoughts. Indeed the description of how bad conditions are now appears almost as a qualification to his breathless fantasies about the building of new housing that have been aroused in him by the sight of bricks being transported. Moreover, despite the constant deterioration of his situation, he attempts to carry on and look on the bright side of life. These optimistic reveries function as the generalisation to which the story is the illustration. However, as we have seen with other examples, there is a discrepancy between the two. The extent of the housing crisis as depicted in the story in fact suggests that it will take more than 20 years to solve. All the cheerfulness in the world will not make a bathroom, and still more a bath, habitable. The relation between the incident and the nar-rator's interpretation of it and connecting of it with a general theme is that the latter are optimistic fantasies prompted by the unbearable nature of the present crisis, like the narrator's image of American bathhouses in "A Bathhouse". But at the same time there is something admirable in the obdurate nature of that belief. As with "A Bathhouse", the fine balance and true force of the story depends on our sympathising with the optimistic belief whilst also recognising that the present incident and the logic of human experience in general threaten to under-mine it.

Further Influence of Satirical Forms

- **"American Advertising" (1926)**

A further example of the close relationship between the journalistic forms and Zoshchenko's short stories is "American Adverstising" (*SS* I, 329–30). Here the interrelation is different. This is not a parody of the form, but a satire of the effects of the letter of complaint, as well as of the immense proportions of the housing crisis. In its theme and meta-satirical thrust it has much in common with "The Crisis" and the other meta-satirical stories mentioned in relation to that story.

A specific feature of the *feuilleton*/letter of complaint satirised in "American

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79. *Drezina*, Nº 12 (1923).

Advertising" is its factual basis, in particular the tendency to indicate the precise address of the target of the satire. In Zoshchenko's story the letter of the *rabkor* gives the precise address of the landlord who is charging an exorbitant rent. Rather than working to expose the landlord to shame and ridicule, as good so-cialist satire should, this works like an advertisement and attracts a huge crowd of people willing to pay three times the original rent and more to secure the flat.

This is not an example of Zoshchenko's use of the stylistic devices of journal-istic satirical forms to revivify the short story form. It is, however, a further example of the ambiguous attitude that he adopts to the satirical forms. At times he employs them and on other occasions he satirises them. In "American Adver-tising", more than anywhere else, Zoshchenko shows the letter of complaint to have precisely the opposite effect to that intended.

Immediate Topicality

The journalistic component of Zoshchenko's work in the 1920s is nowhere more evident than in the extreme topicality and often *ad hoc* nature of his stories. This was a feature of the *feuilleton*, a journalistic form in which immediate topicality was paramount, that he incorporated into the short story.

The most widespread and evident aspect of such immediacy is that of situating the story as occurring recently through the use of temporal deixis: linguistic time markers that assume a shared present. These deictic markers are typical of the spoken language, where speaker and listener are in the same place at the same time, but they are also common in newspapers, which also assume a shared time-frame. Zoshchenko uses temporal deixis in almost every story that he wrote: "A Bathhouse", for example, stipulates that the story occurred last Saturday. "The Cross", "The Fight", "The Event" and "Minor Incident", for example, all begin with the words: 'Yesterday …' (*SS* I, 410; 396; 395; 382).

With other stories, immediate topicality is not textual but is clear from their publication context. "Economy Measures" (1926; *SS* I, 342–43) is such a case. It first appeared during the campaign for economy measures. The next issue of *Begemot* after the publication of Zoshchenko's story was devoted to this cam-paign and featured a cartoon on the cover with the eponymous hippopotamus saying that the measures have had no effect on him since he never ate caviar or quail anyway and always walks everywhere.[80] There is also a picture of a three-legged chair as an example of the economy measures. A number of satires in that issue suggest that the measures are likely to lead to more bureaucracy rather than to any genuine savings. In the story, Zoshchenko uses a *skaz* narrator who claims to have made genuine savings by not heating the toilet, a

80. *Begemot*, Nº 23 (1926).

measure sug-gested by the woman whose job it was to drag logs to the toilet stove. The stove's chimney-pipe breaks off as a result of it not being used in the cold weather. Though the narrator puts this down to the fact that it was built in Tsarist times, the reader realises that this is in fact the upshot of the economy measures and the measures end up wasting money.

There are many other stories that contain more obscure references to contemporary figures or events related to the context of the publications in which they were first published. One example of this is the ending of "Chinese Ceremony" (1924; *SS* I, 206–08), which contains a reference to Diadia Iasha, who was a regular contributor to *Krasnyi voron*. Often the subjects of the stories were determined by a themed issue of the magazine in which they came out. Typical of this phenomenon is "A Forgotten Slogan" (*SS* I, 226–28), which was written for the International Women's Day edition of *Krasnyi voron* in 1924 (Nº 9, March 1924). The whole issue is devoted to the question of women. "Point of View" (*SS* I, 275–76) was written a year later for the same occasion. "Theatrical Technician" (*SS* I, 355–56) under its original title of "Complex Mechanism" appeared in a special issue of *Begemot* devoted to the theatre (Nº 43, 1926). Similarly, "Pushkin" (*SS* I, 373–75) which was originally called "Coffin", appeared in an issue of the same magazine devoted solely to the 90th anniversary of Pushkin's death (Nº 7, 1927).

Other stories refer to the time of year at which they were published. Both "Confession" (1924; *SS* I, 237–39) and "An Easter Incident" (1925;*SS* I, 281–83 – under the title "Empty Ritual") appear in an Easter issue of *Krasnyi voron*.[81] "Swindler" (1927; *RC*, 290–91) and "The Last Christmas" (1923; *SS* I, 178–80) both appear in Christmas editions and contain references to Christmas. Sim-ilarly, the opening of "The Barrel" (*SS* I, 338) refers to Spring and appeared in the May 1926 issue of *Begemot.*

The size of the stories was also determined by their place of publication. Stories first published in *Ogonek*, such as "The Thief" (1923; *SS* I, 136–40) and "The Senator" (1923; *SS* I, 132–36) and in *Leningrad*, such as "An Incident in the Provinces" (1924; *SS* I, 248–52), are far longer than those first published in the satirical publications.

Contextual factors such as these are significant in establishing quite how near journalism Zoshchenko's work is. Indeed, we can see from an understanding of the context that he had little control over the length and themes of his stories. In this context narrative technique and the reworking of

81. *Krasnyi voron*, Nº 15 (April 1924). The latter story appeared in *Buzoter* less than a year later. This would suggest that the narrator's confession in the original version of "A Doggy Sense of Smell" – 'I take advances from magazines and print the same story twice' (*Smekhach*, Nº 1 [1924]) – is actually true of Zoshchenko.

ready-made material takes on an even greater importance.

The Writing Out of Topical References

Zoshchenko considered his works ephemeral: their purpose was to respond to contemporary needs, and he used the language of the everyday in order to have an immediate effect. He did not see his stories as works of great literature capable of standing the test of time.[82] Certainly his language and the forms he chose display a deeper imprint of their time than neutral standard literary language and a more deliberately enduring form like the novel could. This in part explains why Zoshchenko had no compunction in altering the stories for publication in collections.

Though Zoshchenko never imagined that his works would last, they did. Though they are constructed from the ephemeral, they succeeded in making the ephemeral lasting. This forced him into the Russian literary tradition that he had attempted to break from and end.

Zoshchenko's rejoining the literary tradition at the end of the 1920s was not simply part of an internal or textual dialectic. There were also external pressures forcing him to gravitate towards more properly literary forms. In particular, from 1927, the satirical press was subjected to increasingly severe control: in 1928 *Begemot* and *Smekhach* were merged and then closed down, and by the end of the decade there were no satirical magazines left in Leningrad. The only satirical magazine still in existence after 1930 was *Krokodil*, which was published in Moscow, where the authorities could keep an eye on it. This restriction of the avenues that he had previously exploited for publication forced Zoshchenko to reevaluate his attitude towards literature. As late as 1929 Zosh-chenko said in response to an offer to publish a proper literary edition of his works: 'I want to be free to enjoy myself and be involved with unsophisticated readers for a couple of years yet'.[83] He had greatly overestimated the length of time he would be allowed to enjoy himself, since later the same year the writer began publishing a six-volume edition of his works. From this point onwards it became necessary to present himself as a more properly literary writer. The position he had previously occupied, between journalism and literature proper, was no longer tenable, especially not for a satirist. As a result it became neces-sary to present his past in a different light: he had to rewrite his earlier stories.[84]

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82. See above, earlier in this chapter.

83. From Chukovsky's diary, 26 March 1929. Quoted in *Uvazhaemye grazhdane*, p. 54.

84. Benedikt Sarnov has examined some of the changes to the language in various editions of Zoshchenko's work. He puts the overwhelming case for disregarding the normal textological principle of seeing the last version published in the author's lifetime as canonical –

In the collected works of 1929–32 he enhanced the effect of his compressed syntax by spacing the sentences out and creating more paragraph sentences. This also made it seem more literary, more deliberate, and less like the semi-literate scrawlings of a demented *rabkor*. Moreover here, and for subsequent editions of his work, he reworked the language and rewrote many of the stories, often filtering out references he may have seen as too specific to the time at which they were written, and therefore too journalistic.

The alterations to "A Bathhouse" discussed above have this effect of filtering out overly journalistic touches. Another example is "Hard Times" (1925; *SS* I, 266–67). This story first appeared with a newspaper cutting as a subheading:

> A citizen entered the Credit Co-operative shop in Egor'evsk with his horse and demanded that it's collar be measured (*Rabochaia Moskva*, Nº 295).[85]

This extract is not attached to the subsequent editions of the story. By removing it from subsequent versions of the work, it is made to look more like a short story than a *feuilleton*.

"A Bad Habit" (1924; *SS* I, 232–33) in its first published form is highly topical. In the rewritten form the emphasis of the story changes substantially. The magazine-published version refers to a decree of that February that makes tips legally equivalent to bribes. In that version of the story there is a long introduction in which the narrator claims that the decree saved his life. Whereas in the later version the narrator simply decides not to 'tip' the medical attendant anymore, in the original version it is the decree that brings salvation from his zealous attentions. The essence of the story is the same: what he calls a tip is in fact a bribe anyway. Nevertheless, in the original version the narrator is more cunning in using pious reverence for the decree as a way of stopping the medical assistant and presenting himself as a law-abiding citizen. This, like all the chan-ges, is an apparently minor thing. But Zoshchenko's is a literature of minutiae.

"An Anonymous Friend" (1923; *SS* I, 146–48)[86] was also rewritten to remove references that were too contemporary. Here the story suffers very little, but the filtering out of these details is still relevant. The couple are said not even to have left the house to see the film *Dr. Mabuse*. This was a film that was very popular at the time in the USSR. Moreover, the amount of money that they lose is cal-culated according to the inflationary currency (*sovznak* or *denznak*) of the period up to 1924, as a trillion rubles in money signs.

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see his '"Razvivaia traditsiiu Prokrusta" (Mikahil Zoshchenko i ego redaktory)', *Voprosy literatury*, Nº 2 (1994), pp. 45–91.

85. *Begemot*, Nº 4 (1925).

86. *Drezina*, Nº 9 (1923).

These amendments are generally in accordance with the spirit of the original works and make them more accessible to a posterity unaware of the minutiae of 1920s life. However, it seems to me that a significant aspect of Zoshchenko's work is its journalistic topicality. In rewriting and altering his works, Zoshchenko made them more literary. His new work of the 1930s likewise became more literary in form and language. This was a response to the closing down of the publications in which he had published throughout the 1920s and to a cultural situation that discouraged his marginally literary language. However, by re-writing his earlier work, he was obscuring the quasi-journalistic roots of his art.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have attempted to define the journalistic style that Zoshchenko was reproducing in his art, his intention in doing this, and to illustrate how his reproduction of that style worked in practice. In particular, we have examined how Zoshchenko reworked letters to the press, how he reproduced the *feuilleton* and the letter of complaint forms, and how he recreated the language and mentality of the letter writers. Our aim in doing this has been to gain a better understanding of Zoshchenko's relation to the style of his narrator, to under-stand his *skaz* better. However, it seems that his intentions are intractably ambiv-alent. There is also an ambivalence as to whether his 1920s stories are literary or journalistic. Zoshchenko was both attracted and repulsed by documentary jour-nalism, just as he was attracted and repulsed by literature. His works are neither wholly fiction nor wholly journalism. They employ journalistic devices, and a language and narrator figure largely derived from journalistic sources both for their own sake, and to ridicule them.

Yet this ambivalence in itself seems so consistent as to imply some kind of world-view. Zoshchenko appears to have been attracted to ambivalent generic forms, ambivalent stylistic devices and an ambivalent narrator figure precisely because they suited the expression of what he saw as an unresolvable conflict. In the next chapter I propose to examine the technique of the stories as a whole, and attempt to infer the wider implications of this ambivalence.