CHAPTER VI

ZOSHCHENKO'S *SKAZ* NARRATION

In the previous chapter we analysed the stylistic input of journalism in Zoshchenko's use of *skaz*. But not every Zoshchenko short story that employs *skaz* bears traces of the direct influence of journalism. The journalistically influenced stories must be related to the broader context of Zoshchenko's use of *skaz* as a whole and to his short stories in general. In this chapter, we shall attempt to do so, and in so doing, strive to ascertain or infer Zoshchenko's underlying purpose in employing the *skaz* narrative technique.

Fallible Narrators and Unstable Statements

As we saw in Chapters II and III, the *skaz* narrative form deviates from impersonal authorial narration, in particular by employing a number of dialectal, regional and colloquial usages unacceptable to such norm narration. In so deviating, it sacrifices the authority of impersonal narration and invites challenges to whatever claims it makes. In other words, *skaz* narration, by its nature, suggests the possibility that the narrator is fallible, and does so far more than standard *Ich-Erzählung*. Zoshchenko exploits this possibility in a number of different ways.

A reader coming to Zoshchenko's stories for the first time is typically struck by their apparent chaos. The narrator appears to have great difficulty in getting to the point and in successfully distinguishing relevant from irrelevant information. Moreover, the narrators and characters make many linguistic errors and include language of sharply discordant registers. The language of Zoshchenko's stories has been amply described and commented upon,[1] and, where it is that of the narrator, there can be doubt that it is *skaz*. However, what interests us about this language is whether it is being employed for the purposes of parody or for stylisation. This is not properly a linguistic question, since, as we saw in Chapter II, it is the nature of both stylised and parodic *skaz* to employ language that de-viates from the norm language of literary narration, and parodic *skaz* cannot be defined according to a linguistic formula. Rather, if we are to

1. For an in-depth analysis of Zoshchenko's vocabulary, see Von Wiren-Garczynski, 'The Russian Language in the Immediate Post-Revolutionary Period'. See also Viktor Vinogradov, 'Iazyk Zoshchenki (zametki o leksike)', in *Mikhail Zoshchenko: stat'i i materialy*, pp. 51–92. For an encyclopaedic account of the comic in Zoshchenko's language, see Kreps, *Tekhnika komicheskogo u Zoshchenko*, pp. 29–106.

describe Zosh-chenko's *skaz* in the light of Bakhtin's definition of it as a bi-polar, double-voiced discourse, we must find the two planes, or the two voices present in a Zoshchenko short story. This is likely to be most clearly illustrated in cases of parodic *skaz*, since in such examples of the technique, the two perspectives tend in different directions, i.e. they are in contradiction with each other.

"Rhetorical Power" (1927; *SS* I, 375–77) is a Zoshchenko story that contains such a contradiction between two points of view, and seems suited to our discussion, because it explicitly explores the question of language. In particular, it comments upon the language of rhetoric and its power to persuade people and influence events. In this story the narrator watches the trial of a burglar. Having been prevented from leaving by the old man next to him, the narrator tries to amuse himself by speculating as to the outcome of the trial. However, the old man tells him that there is nothing to speculate about, since the penal code stipulates a punishment of four years' imprisonment, and that is what the defendant will get. Nevertheless, the narrator is swayed by the prosecuting counsel's speech. Under its influence the narrator describes the defendant as a terrifying subhuman with a low forehead and a protruding jaw. He even wonders whether the death sentence will be passed. The old man dismisses such notions and again points out that the crime is punishable by four years' imprisonment. When the defence team make their case, the narrator changes his opinion entirely, and praises not only the defence counsel, but the power of eloquent language as such:

> What rhetorical power! His whole speech resounded with such inimitable simplicity and sincerity!
>
> Rhetoric is a great gift. What great fortune it is to possess such an ability to win people over with one's words. And to dictate one's wishes (*SS* I, 376)

Touched by the power of this language, the narrator now sees the defendant as a simple person with not such a low forehead, and with a quite normal jaw. Like the narrator, the public is moved, and no one thinks he will get more than a year in gaol, apart from the old man, who repeats the opinion he expressed at the start. The sentence passed bears out what he has been saying all along: the defen-dant is given four years in gaol. Despite this experience, the narrator ends the story by saying that he likes eloquent speeches because they lead to fewer mistakes.

This praise of the power of language is deeply ironic, since the defendant was sentenced to the prescribed term of imprisonment, regardless of the verbal powers of either barrister. Moreover, while the narrator celebrates the power of language to persuade, language in this story is at best an entertaining but meaningless game. At worst it is a dangerously misleading medium capable of whipping up hysteria. Under the influence of the barristers, the narrator and, it

seems, the rest of the public, change their opinion several times. In this respect the capacity of language to convince and compel others is illustrated in this story. However, this has no influence upon the course of the trial. The narrator's celebration of eloquence and claim that it obviates error is itself an error. Language is the unstable province of confusion and misinterpretation. In this story, language is a sphere of illusion which exerts influence over gullible people, but is powerless to alter the deeper processes that govern human destiny.

However, whatever this story tells us about language, it is itself composed entirely of language. Whatever we decide about the narrator is based on what he has himself told us. It would seem then that there are two separate tendencies of the narrator's language in this story: on the one hand, language that faithfully reflects life, that slavishly follows the narrator's experiences of an event, and on the other hand, language that interprets that experience, that draws lessons from it, and relates it to broader concerns. These are the two levels of the story and they contradict each other for an effect of irony. However, this irony is made possible by keeping the description of an experience and the interpretation of it separate. This distinction underpins the Zoshchenko *skaz* narrative, but it is a tenuous one. For all the incompetence of Zoshchenko's *skaz* narrators, they describe the world well enough for the reader to see, for example, a contradiction between what the narrators experience and how they interpret that experience. In "Rhetorical Power" itself, we see that the narrator's description of the defendant changes in response to the various arguments of the prosecution and the defence: making the accused man look at first a brute and then an innocent. Even the narrator's description of the shape of the defendant's skull changes. Descrip-tion is informed by interpretation. Nevertheless, in the structure of this and a great number of Zoshchenko's *skaz* stories, this distinction is maintained through the contrast between the narrator's description of an experience or an incident and his interpretation of it. This is made possible because the narrator is not rigorous enough to realise that there is a discrepancy between the two, and not cunning enough to doctor his description in such a way as to force it to corroborate his interpetation. In some cases, as we shall see, he perceives the discrepancy at the end of the story and renounces his initial assertion or interpretation.

In "Rhetorical Power", the narrator sees his experience at the trial as a general illustration of the power of oratory and the power of language over people and events, and encourages us to agree with him. We have already been attempting to respond to this challenge in the preceding paragraphs, but a few more comments are in order.

In the mouths of Zoshchenko's narrators and characters, language is feeble and untrustworthy. Though it can be used to fool those naïve enough to be taken

in by it, it is itself at the whim of obscure forces. Characters and narrators repeatedly attempt to explain, interpret, make sense of, draw lessons from and make assertions about their experience of an event, but like the narrator in "Rhetorical Power", they fail to do so satisfactorily. Their interpretations are often wrong and constitute an apparent level of the story that we must see beyond in order to appreciate what really occurred, and its true significance. It is opinions about something seen or heard and attempts to suggest the broader societal or universal significance of an event, that are the most hazardous and unstable linguistic operations in Zoshchenko's stories. Time and again the narrators' and the characters' capacity to make sense of their experience of an event, to make claims about life in general on the basis of a particular incident and to fit an experience in to a more ambitious framework informed by ideology or values, is shown to be untrustworthy and highly unstable. Experience and the evaluation of it repeatedly come into conflict, and appear to be divorced. Repeatedly, the interpretation turns out to be an apparent level of reality. Reality refutes interpretations. There is a tension or a discrepancy between them.

This discrepancy is not celebrated, indeed it is often a miserable situation for Zoshchenko's characters and narrators. However, it is often comic too. In "Rhetorical Power", the gap between the narrator's celebration of the power of oratory and its actual influence on the course of events constitute two levels of the story. The event of the story, and the narrator's or character's statement about that event, are the two levels of *skaz*, the two opposing points of view, the two voices incarnating conflicting intentions that Bakhtin first described (see Chapter II). He described them as parodic *skaz*, but they are also an example of what we might call comic incongruity.[2] Zoshchenko's stories repeat this predicament many times over, with numerous subtle variations.

The Discrepancy between Experience and Interpretation

One of Zoshchenko's most famous short stories, "A Classy Lady" (1923; *SS* I, 170–73) is a narrator-participant *skaz* story in which the narrator's interpretation of his own narrative is undermined by what we learn of it. In this story, Grigorii Ivanovich, for whom the mysteries of plumbing represent his sole conversational gambit, starts by saying that he dislikes aristocratic women. He then briefly defines an aristocratic woman as one with fancy stockings, a pug-dog and a gold tooth, and tells us that he once dated such an aristocratic lady. His strange definition of aristocrats already leads us to question his claim: a gold

2. Many accounts of the comic or the ludicrous define it as the incongruous. Schopenhauer is the most disguished example of such theorists – Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (Stuttgart, Cotta-Insel, 1960), Vol. I, §13, pp. 104–08 and Vol. II, pp. 121–35. See also Kreps, *Tekhnika komicheskogo u Zoshchenko*.

tooth is hardly incontrovertible evidence of blue blood. Furthermore, in the course of the story, what we learn about her suggests that the woman was not an aristocrat at all. After all, it is for the measly reward of a theatre ticket and three pastries that this woman endures the advances of the irredeemably tedious Grigorii Ivanovich.

On closer examination of Grigorii Ivanovich's definition and stated dislike of aristocratic women, the reader is able to see that what he claims to dislike about this woman from Flat Seven, is in fact what first attracts him to her. He was attracted to the same 'classiness' that he cites as repellent to him at the beginning of the story. Her gold tooth is what he initially likes about her: he mentions it three times in the story. Nevertheless, when she ends up costing him too much money, he cites the same gold tooth as proof that she is an aristocrat. This is an attempt to condemn her opportunistically as a class enemy according to the pre-vailing ideology, and thereby to imply that they fell out for ideological or polit-ical reasons. The story shows how the meaning of the word 'aristokratka' changes for Grigorii Ivanovich during the course of the story.

"A Classy Lady" is an excellent example of the instability of the *skaz* narrator's opinions. The cause of this about-turn is that she ends up costing him too much money, by eating too many pastries. This is another pattern that Zoshchenko uses a number of times: a potentially romantic plot is disrupted by considerations of money, of personal possessions. Love and romance are repeatedly shown to be unstable and insubstantial. They occupy an analogous position to interpretation and opinions, since like them, love and romance in these stories exist on an apparent level of reality, and are liable to be exposed as such by the more basic need for money and the drive to acquire or retain possessions. This undermining of love is often brought about by a theft. In, for example, "An Anonymous Friend" (1923; *SS* I, 146–48), a couple that never go out receive anonymous letters: the wife's appeals to her sense of melodrama, the husband's to jealousy. They go to the place indicated by the letters at the correct time, find nothing and return home to find that they have been burgled. The apparently romantic plots of melodrama and jealousy boil down to theft. Theft is also used in "The Watch" (1926; *SS* I, 332–33) to show how a man's gallant manners are very flimsy: when Vasilii Mitrofanovich realises his watch has been stolen, he immediately blames his girlfriend. This theme is also explored in non-*skaz* stories, such as "Love" (1924) (*SS* I, 193–95), where Vasia Chesnokov one moment declares his undying love and claims to be willing to sacrifice himself for Mashen'ka, and the next minute the couple are mugged, and he complains to the thief that he is the only one whose coat and boots are being stolen and suggests that the thief take Mashen'ka's fur coat rather than his own.

Professions of love and attempts to be charming or polite are shown to be only superficial and misleading. In stories with such plots, the implication

seems to be that people have a deeper bond with objects than with one another. The interpersonal sphere of opinions, conventions and manners is typically unstable. When brought up against objects, and the striving to acquire them, all such refinements buckle and surrender.

In a number of Zoshchenko's stories, the world of objects is shown to govern interpretations in a very direct way. "The Tsar's Boots" (1927; *SS* I, 377–79) is a clear example, in that the narrator's evaluation of tsarism changes according to the state of his boots. When he first buys them, he considers eighteen rubles a very reasonable price for the Tsar's or 'tsarist' boots. But when they fall apart after four days, he grumbles that if they had been Soviet-made, he could have made a complaint, and maybe even got someone sacked, but since they are 'tsarist' there is nothing he can do about it. Similarly, his friend Katerina Fedorovna Kolenkorova initially calms the narrator down, arguing that in the ten years since the Revolution, any royal boots were bound to suffer the ravages of time. However, when the blouses she bought at the same sale come apart after the first wash, she too curses the tsarist régime.

In other stories it is not characters' opinions as such that change to suit objects, but their relations to each other. In "The Glass" (1925; *SS* I, 305–06), a cracked glass, and an apparently stolen light bulb in "Guests" (1927; *SS* I, 363–65), cause complete reversals in relations between the characters of the story and their evaluations of each other. Friendship and hospitality turn to emnity and hostility. Both are shown to be as fragile as love and romance, or opinions and interpretations, and like them, pale before the importance of objects. In "The Passenger" (1925; *SS* I, 299–301) the narrator asserts that: 'After all a man … is more important than a thing…'. This claim is itself not borne out either by that story, or by a large number of Zoshchenko's stories. People consider their relations with other people less important than their relations with things. On the evidence of a great number of the stories, they are right to do so, since objects have far more power than people.

In each of these cases, human opinions, evaluations and assertions, especially declarations of love or friendship, are forced to change by objects. Objects and the characters' relations to them form a second perspective in the stories which undermines that of the narrator's evaluations, assertions and opinions. Just as in "Rhetorical Power", the narrator's claims are in conflict with and powerless over the world.

Zoshchenko also explores the instability of interpretations and opinions through the theme of self-interest. This is linked to the notion that material objects have more power over people than people do over each other. Consequently, self-interest is often explored through the familiar theme of theft. In "Thieves" (1925; *RC*, 259–60), for example, the *skaz* narrator-participant

begins the story complaining about the prevalence of theft, and mentions that he himself has been a recent victim of crime. As a victim he is in favour of draconian penalties for theft and enthusiastically relates something he has heard about how thieves used to have their hands cut off in Finland and how this had a beneficial effect on morals. When the narrator's suitcase is stolen, he reports the theft and tells the militia to tear the thief's hands off when they catch him. The officers laugh and ask the narrator to return the pencil he has just stolen from them. Having returned it, the narrator rethinks and revises his opinions on the punishment of thieves. The narrator changes his opinion and evaluation in accordance with his own position as victim of theft or thief. Self-interest too is universal, and no opinion or view can withstand its influence.

The theme of self-interest underpinning opinions and interpretations is also explored through stories in which men advocate the liberation of women. In "A Forgotten Slogan" (1924; *SS* I, 226–28), a journalistically influenced letter to the editor, a man advocates the equality of the sexes. We later realise that this is because he does not want to have to pay for women when he takes them out for dinner. Similarly, in "Domestic Bliss" (1924; *SS* I, 262–64), the narrator visits Egorov, an acquaintance who proudly boasts that he has 'liberated' his wife, Motia: they now eat in the canteen so that she need no longer do the cooking and now, he says, has so much free time that she can sew all day if she wants. The narrator asks whether Motia would not rather sit and read the paper like Egorov himself rather than constantly sewing. Egorov is completely astounded and takes offence: 'What do you mean not sew, she's a woman', he exclaims. When the narrator leaves, soon afterwards, he overhears Egorov claiming that the real reason for the narrator's criticism was because he was unhappy at not being fed. Altruism, these stories suggest, is an illusion. Those who claim that their opinions are based on it are invariably using it to cover base motives.

Self-interest is the most substantial motive in the characters' and the narrators' conduct. If they attempt to advance opinions based on anything but such considerations, self-interest will reveal itself as the genuine and the fundamental concern. Once again this results in the displaying of a discrepancy, the laying bare of the two perspectives present in the Zoshchenko *skaz* short story. As with the previous stories, the characters' opinions are shown to be flimsy, and subject to the dictates of deeper, more powerful forces.

However, self-interest and the lure of objects are not the only forces that serve to undermine opinions, interpretations, and explanations. The narrators and other characters come to erroneous conclusions about something they see or experience for a myriad of reasons. In "Raving Mad" (1926; *SS* I, 346–47), for example, the narrator is one of a group of men who kill a completely normal dog because they are scared of rabies and think that it might be rabid. In "An Incident in the Street" (1925; *SS* I, 303–04), the narrator is part of a crowd of

people who see a militiaman with a woman and start to hurl abuse at the woman whom they decide is a criminal. To the crowd, her crime escalates from illicitly distilling vodka to murdering her husband. The lynch-mob atmosphere is only dispelled when it transpires that the militiaman is taking his girlfriend for a stroll.

For the characters in Zoshchenko's stories, and in particular for the narrators, there is a gulf between what they see and experience, and the evaluation or interpretation of that experience. They tend to conclude that two and two are five. There are similar discrepancies in the stories in which a relation of love or friendship is affirmed at the beginning only to be undermined by an event in the story. In such stories, love or friendship may be said to be an interpretation of the relation between the characters, but neither can stand up to the actual nature of life, to the power of objects and to the course of events. The contrast between the two levels of the story, these erroneous interpretations and the exposing of them as such in the course of events produce some of Zoshchenko's greatest comic moments.

Yet this gulf between a character's experience and his interpretation of that experience is not only a comic one. Even in "Raving Mad" and "An Incident in the Street" there are unfortunate consequences, or potentially unfortunate conse-quences, of the narrator's and the crowd's misinterpretation of the situation. These stories seem to link the malleable and unstable nature of human opinion to violent acts and mob rule. Many of the other stories too derive humour from unpleasant aspects of human conduct, such as selfishness, acquisitiveness, and dishonesty. Moreover, the general predicament of the characters in Zoshchen-ko's short stories is one in which not only opinions and interpretations, but even attempts to make sense of existence by trusting one another, through friendship or love, are repeatedly shown to be misleading ways of thinking or acting. How-ever, if Zoshchenko's *skaz* stories are balanced between comedy and tragedy, between parody and stylisation of the narrator, then it is because a number of stories encourage the reader to disregard the discrepancy between the narrator's initial account of events, and what we subsequently glean about them.

Accepting or Overcoming the Discrepancy

In Zoshchenko's stories, as we have seen, there often appears to be a discrepancy between, on the one hand, the narrator's assertions, interpretations or opinions, and on the other, the incident or experience which comprises the main event of the story. Ershov argues that in the typical Zoshchenko short story the title and the narrator's evaluation or assertion are directly contradicted by the event nar-rated. He uses "Happiness" (*SS* I, 211–14) to illustrate his point:

> The simple, naïve narrator assures the reader with the whole tone of his narrative, that what he describes should be evaluated in the same way as he does, but the

> reader either guesses, or knows for certain that such evaluations and characterisations are untrue. This eternal struggle between the *skaz*-narrator's assertion and the reader's negative perception of the events described gives the Zoshchenko short story its peculiar dynamism, and fills it with a subtle and melancholy irony.[3]

Effectively Ershov sees Zoshchenko's irony as antiphrasis. Broadly, this is the spirit in which we have been reading Zoshchenko's use of *skaz* narration in this chapter so far. However, it is possible to read the lack of correspondence between the narrator's assertions or interpretation and the experience narrated in a different way. The reader may decide that the discrepancy is not important, and disregard it. This way of viewing the relation between the narrator's interpretation and his experience permits the reader to see "Happiness" as sincere. We can admire Ivan Fomich because he has managed to find happiness in a world, which, as the narrator and Ivan Fomich both suggest, gives little scope for it. He has managed to transform a trivial incident such as the chance smashing of a window into happiness.[4] To be happy with so little is something to be applauded, and not seen as a satirical comment on the fact that there is so little to be happy about.

The sort of perspective that would permit us to admire Ivan Fomich in "Happiness" would presumably stress humanity's capacity to change. It would see in this infinite adaptability an ability to get used to the worst possible situation, such as to the presence of carbon-monoxide fumes. This, it would argue, is the highest expression of the human. This talent for enduring adversity grants us our few glimpses of happiness. This is the view of humanity expressed in the last sentence of "Cat and People" (*SS* I, 406–08): 'man is not a flea – he can get used to anything'. In this story the narrator fails to persuade the housing office to change his leaky stove. An ironic reading prompts us to ask whether human beings cannot change a political and economic situation where they are being asked to endure the fumes from leaky stoves. But if change does not come, if the leak remains, then the capacity to adapt to the worst is praiseworthy. To aspire towards contentment not just with the everyday, but with an impoverished world, is the sole path to happiness. This is a way of thinking diametrically opposed to the idea of revolution or revolt. Ivan Fomich willingly submits to the domination of objects and chance. He is happy being ruled by windows and the chance breaking thereof.

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3. Ershov, *Sovetskaia satiricheskaia proza 20-kh godov*, p. 163; also see p. 168. He repeats this argument in his *Istoriia russkoi sovetskoi literatury*, 2nd edn. rev. (Moscow, Vysshaia shkola, 1988), p. 110. Ershov sees this irony as a tool of political satire and a way of highlighting the contradictions between the old and the new elements of Soviet society, and the shortcomings of the character. He does not contemplate the possibility that it could be an expression of a world-view with wider scope.
4. The story is thus dependent on an untranslatable double meaning in the word 'shast;e': 'luck' and 'happiness': a stroke of luck has made Ivan Fomich happy.

There is another way in which Zoshchenko's stories treat the discrepancy between evaluation and experience. In a number of Zoshchenko's stories, though the narrator's interpretation appears not to fit, it is possible to make it fit if we disregard the particular experience of the narrator. As we have seen, man is endlessly defeated by objects throughout Zoshchenko's work. However, in these cases he continues to struggle against them, and their reifying influence upon him. He fights using his wits and his imagination. Here interpretation is all that he has left, and unlike in "The Tsar's Boots", he stands by his initial opinion, despite being betrayed by the object. A good example of this is the aptly named "A Fantasy Shirt" (1927; *SS* I, 386–87). Here the narrator buys a new shirt to go to a party and gets it laundered only to find that it has shrunk. He has to put his old one on top of it to distract attention from it. The story ends with him saying that the party went well and no one noticed the shirt. Yet he presumably bought the shirt so that people would notice it. This resolute ability to derive comfort from the worst setback is, in its own way, heroic. It is dependent on the nar-rator's powers of imaginative transformation, on his ability to remain true to his interpretation, even though the object fails to justify his faith in it. This narrator refuses to succumb to the treachery of things and the perfidious indications of experience. This way of thinking is exemplified in "Green Merchandise" (1927; *SS* I, 394–95): 'But you've got to be an optimist and find good sides to every-thing sad'.

"The Cross" (1927; *SS* I, 410–12), is a further example of the struggle between experience and the interpretation of it. Here the narrator praises the efficiency and lack of bureaucracy of a government institution. The story itself is a catalogue of an exhausting experience of bureaucracy and the narrator leaves in a terrible state of nervous exhaustion. Here we are faced with a straight choice between deciding whether there is a lot of bureaucracy in the USSR or whether there is very little. The narrator-participant's experiences are of bureau-cracy, but he does not see this as at all bureaucratic. We have to decide whether to believe the narrator's experiences or his opinions. We might think we are being encouraged to choose experience, but that would be a simplistic reduction of the competing forces of the story. Indeed, the original Russian title of the story, "Zakor[hka" refers to the little mark that the staff put on the narrator's papers, permitting him to pass straight through when he returns to the office. At the same time it means a hitch, or drawback. The word symbolises the choice readers are confronted with: is it a sign of progress, or a failure to progress?

"The Galosh" (1926)[5] also presents us with such a choice. In this story, the narrator's search for a lost galosh means him having to describe it in immense

5. Mikhail Zoshchenko, *Rasskazy* (Moscow, Khudozhestvennaia literatura), 1974, pp. 126–29.

detail to the lost property bureau, and when they identify it from his accurate descriptions, they still will not give it back because he has not got the requisite chit proving that it is his. After even more bureaucratic to-ing and fro-ing, the narrator gets the chit, his efforts are rewarded, and he gets back his lost galosh. The only problem is that in all the fuss he has lost the other galosh in one of the offices he had to go to. Yet the narrator barely mentions the fact that he lost the other galosh, he concentrates instead on the galosh that he has found, seeing it as a proof of the perfect functioning of Soviet institutions. Indeed, the found galosh becomes an inspirational object that he looks at whenever he feels low. Here it is not a question of totally ignoring experience: the narrator's joy and optimism are based on one aspect of his experience, the fact that he found his lost galosh. They just blot out the more significant context, that he lost his remaining galosh, and a single galosh is no use to anybody. This selective blindness on the part of the narrator is extremely significant.

The blithely optimistic rejection of the evidence of experience is a powerful strand running through Zoshchenko's work. We have already seen it in the journalistic works such as "A Bathhouse", where the narrator claimed that you could get washed in Soviet bathhouses, even if in actual fact he was unable to do so. Similarly in "Rostov" (1927; *SS* I, 412–13), the narrator is sitting on a bench reading when he is frightened out of his wits by a stranger wearing only a pair underpants leaping over him. When he realises that this is athletics and not hooliganism, he immediately discounts his experience of fear and praises the beneficial effects of sport. Faced with a choice between trusting his own experience and discounting it as irrelevant by interpreting reality through a comforting slogan, as a rule he chooses the latter.

Either the narrator discounts his experience and disregards the perfidy of objects, choosing instead to trust his uncorroborated interpretation, or he submits to the rule of things with good cheer. Whether he accepts or ignores the discrepancy between experience and interpretation, the narrator puts a benign construction on a disturbing reality.

The personalised narrator is an individual, and the interpretation is sometimes a more flattering account of Soviet society than that suggested by the narrator's experience. In other words the narrator's experience tends to confront received wisdom. But Zoshchenko's narrator is not a rebel or a strong individual, and is simply not made to struggle against the existing order or its flattering account of itself. He is more of a herd animal who would prefer to be wrong with the majority than right alone, a *me]anin*. In the context of the Soviet Union even of the 1920s not only the *me]anin*, but also most people could justifiably be scared of being isolated in opposition to society and the government. However, to take this view is to assume that these opinions and interpretations function as parodic *skaz*, i.e. as irony, and that we should trust the

narrator's personal experience instead. It is to conclude that Zoshchenko was primarily satirising the shortcomings in Soviet society in his narrator and inviting the reader to disregard the original interpretation and insert one more in keeping with the narrator's experiences, in the manner of irony as antiphrasis.

However, we must hesitate before doing so. To do so is to read into this writer a prophetic insight as to the weakness of Soviet Communism. This interpretation smacks too much of hindsight. Instead, I propose that we see the narrator's interpretations as a form of daring optimism in the face of the evidence of experience. These stories are about making sense of one's experience in general, and not just about the discrepancy between official accounts of Soviet life and the narrators' experiences of that life. The optimism of the stories involves discounting the fragmentary nature of individual experience for the sake of a coherence that ultimately finds no corroboration in the empirical world. It functions in a similar way to an irrational act of faith: the *credo quia absurdum* of a Soviet Abraham. Biographical evidence shows us that Zoshchenko persistently saw health and optimism as linked: he seems to have believed that if he was optimistic then he would be healthy.[6] In this light it would seem that the nar-rator, like Zoshchenko himself, was striving, despite evidence to the contrary, to interpret experience optimistically. The scepticism fostered on one level of his narrative, the relentless doubt engendered by the use of a *skaz* narrator and that narrator's experiences, are counter-balanced by his implacable optimism and indefatigable cheerfulness. This tension can be illustrated by reference to one of Zoshchenko's most typical devices.

Discrepancy as Euphemism or as Optimism?

The tension between interpretation and experience expresses itself even on the level of one of Zoshchenko's smallest stylistic devices. There is a repeated pattern in Zoshchenko's short stories where the narrator makes an assertion and then attempts to qualify it. The qualification undermines and sometimes even serves to invalidate the original assertion and we are left trying to decide whether we want to believe the original assertion or the qualifications of it. Was the original statement an optimistic assessment or a euphemistic attempt to hide the facts?

An excellent example of this comes in "Quality Merchandise" (1927; *SS* I, 365–67), where the narrator describes some of the items left behind by the German as 'nearly two pairs of long-johns. And a sweater that was nearly not torn'. To picture something which is not quite one pair of long johns, let alone not quite two, demands some considerable imaginative effort. Ultimately it would seem that we are dealing with some rags that though once long johns, cannot

6. Chukovsky in his 'Iz vospominanii' corroborates Zoschenko's own testament to mental illness (pp. 83–88); Zoshchenko, *Pered voskhodom solntsa* (*SS* III, 447–693).

quite be called that anymore, so advanced is their state of disintegration. Only an act of fervent optimism, infinitely greater than that needed to turn a half-empty glass into a half-full one, only a supernaturally cheerful Panglossian capacity could transform these rags into 'nearly two pairs of long johns'. The story as a whole shows how foreign goods are transformed into a magic class of especially powerful objects when placed in the context of the squalor and optimism of Zoshchenko's world. This optimism itself, of course, is that we saw summarised in "Green Merchandise", a tenacious capacity to look on the bright side spawned by the squalor of the time, and an inability to conceive of a transformation that would make such optimism and such underwear unnecessary.

Such stylistic devices often resume the plot of the story in a kind of *mise-en-abîme*. An example of that comes in "Rostov" where the narrator states that it is a quiet town. One of the things that he likes about it is that there is no hooliganism there whatsoever. He then goes further still and claims that a young woman can happily walk around the town at night alone. This claim is immediately qualified, and the narrator concedes that a woman might not be able to walk around alone. Ultimately the only fact the narrator can adduce in support of the notion that Rostov is a quiet town is that the inhabitants do not swear excessively at passers-by and they allow you to pass without jostling you unduly. This opening is a miniature version of the plot as a whole, where the narrator at first confuses athletics for hooliganism. In this passage, as in the story as a whole, we understand that the narrator is willing to disregard his own personal experience in order to interpret Rostov as a peaceful town, and the Soviet Union as a place in which everything is constantly improving.

Another example of a story constructed in a similar way is "Does a Man Need Much?" (1927; *SS* I, 381–82). It has a similar opening in which assertion is largely undermined by qualification:

> And (…) the housing crisis has started to just ease off a little bit. We never saw more than seventeen people in a single room.
>
> And it was only in one town that we saw twenty-three persons in a room.

The same facts could easily have been used to argue that the housing crisis was as bad as ever, yet the narrator's capacity for interpreting in the light of his optimism transfigures such facts.

These optimistic transformations may be contrasted with stories where the initial statement is simply euphemism. With euphemism the underlying reality shines through the narrator's attempt to conceal it, and unlike in the above examples, there is no balance between the two possible interpretations. Instead, the interpretation is shown to be utterly wrong. This usually works in the binary manner of irony as antiphrasis, where we come to understand the opposite of

what was originally stated. A good example of this is "Lemonade" (1926; *SS* I, 362–63). This story starts with the sentence 'I don't drink of course'. The narrator immediately qualifies this by admitting that there are certain social circumstances where drinking is unavoidable. He then tries to limit this undermining of the first assertion by claiming that he never drinks more than two bottles (of vodka) at a time, (i.e. a litre). However, he has to qualify this by the admission that he once drank a 'quarter' (approximately three litres)! By this point we realise that, despite the opening sentence, this man consumes an astounding quantity of alcohol and is effectively an alcoholic.

Another example of such euphemism can be found in "Guests" (1927; *SS* I, 363–65):

> But nothing particularly incriminating was found, apart from a few sandwiches and half a bottle of madeira, two little shot glasses and a decanter.

Here, as in euphemism in general, the motive for concealment is more one of reticence or duplicity, often from reasons of self-interest or from an implicit fear of upsetting someone, than from optimism.

With these figures of Zoshchenko's style we are faced with discerning the euphemism from the act of optimism. In other words, we must distinguish irony from the attempt to disregard or overcome it. This tension between comic discrepancy and the attempt to overcome it through resignation or optimism is extremely important in Zoshchenko's work. In the journalistic work, Zoshchenko develops the inherent components of the *feuilleton*, the fact and the generalisation, and explores the possibility that they might contradict each other. Faced with a fact that contradicts the generalisation made on the basis of it, we must decide whether to trust the fact or the generalisation. To believe the generalisation, one must have an optimism that disregards experience, such as that of the narrator of "A Bathhouse". If we do so, then the story is stylised *skaz*, in which there is no second, ironic level. If we disregard the generalisation on the basis of what we learn of the incident in the course of the narrative, then the story is parodic *skaz*. In his *skaz* stories as a whole, including his journalistic work, Zoshchenko presents us with many examples of such discrepancies. In doing so he presents us with a choice: that between the inherent possibilities of *skaz*: parody and stylisation. The presence of both parody and stylisation is a consistent feature of Zoshchenko's use of *skaz*, and is intimately bound up with the writer's attitude to his narrator, to the language that he uses but also to the opinions he expresses. As we saw in Chapter I, critical opinion is deeply divided on the question of this relation between the author and his narrator.[7] The roots of this controversy lie in a deeply ambivalent attitude on the part of Zoshchenko

7. Broadly, Scatton, Sarnov and Zholkovsky stress the similarities, whereas Starkov, Kreps, and Chudakova stress the dissimilarities.

himself to his narrator.

Zoshchenko's Attitude to his Narrator: Articles and Statements

As we have seen, *skaz* is a form that can be used either in order to stylise sympathetically or parody unsympathetically a given language, form or mentality. In the previous chapter we saw how Zoshchenko was attracted towards access-ible journalistic forms for the purposes of revivifying the literary idiom. On the other hand, he is also quite clearly parodying the very journalism he claims to be employing. His work as a whole combines these two possibilities. The contra-diction that lies at the heart of Zoshchenko's intentions in his stories as a whole can be seen clearly if we look at what he thought he was doing by adopting the mask of a *skaz* narrator. Zoshchenko's articles consistently link the question of his language with that of the character who uses it. These considerations are almost inextricable from the question of Zoshchenko's language, since the language characterises the narrator who uses it. Here, as we did in the previous chapter with regard to Zoshchenko's attitude to journalism, we shall take the various statements from 1927 onwards as a body of work offering a coherent if contradictory point of view. By doing so we can analyse Zoshchenko's state-ments about and commentaries on his own work, along with the evidence of those who knew him, as a way of defining his attitude to his own narrator and to that narrator's use of language.

One of Zoshchenko's best known statements about his art, "About Myself, About Critics, and About My Work" (1927), typifies the writer's deep contradictions. In this article Zoshchenko claims to be a proletarian writer and then alters this to say that he is parodying the sort of proletarian writer who would exist in present conditions:

> The thing is that I'm a proletarian writer. Or rather, in my stuff I'm parodying the imaginary but genuine proletarian writer who would exist in the present-day environment. Of course, such a writer cannot exist, at least not yet. But when he does exist, his public and his environment will have improved in every respect.
>
> I'm just parodying. I'm a temporary substitute for the proletarian writer. That's why the themes of my stories are so full of a naïve philosophy that is at just the right level for my readers (*RC*, 586).

Zoshchenko seems to suggest that he is attempting to create a new, proletarian literature, part of a positive project for which he seems to have been genuinely enthusiastic. But since that literature and the proletarian writer cannot yet exist he is parodying them. Yet the object of what is here termed parody clearly is not just a language or a form. It is also the mentality of the proletarian writer, and his 'naïve philosophy'. Thus Zoshchenko uses parody here to refer to the reproduction of someone's attitudes for the purposes of ridicule. This is what I argue is more properly the province of irony (see Chapter II). Consequently, Zoshchenko's narrator is a coherent figure, a type given unity not only

by his consistent use of language but also by his consistent way of thinking.

Zoshchenko's use of the concept of parody has a further peculiarity: he associates it with the temporary. Moreover, this is not an isolated instance: he employs it again in *Letters to a Writer* (1929; *RC*, 371). This usage implies that 'parody' or irony is temporary and ephemeral and can at best prepare the way for a genuine way of writing and a genuine writer. This passage seems to suggest that all meaningful existence lies in the future, and that the present is a degrading sphere. Thus Zoshchenko explores and ridicules the mentality of a proletarian writer, a creature more properly belonging to a perfect future society who is in fact mired in present-day *byt*, and, we might add, ruled by narrow concerns. He is 'parodied' and treated with irony, since he will be replaced by the real pro-letarian writer. Irony has its eyes on possibility, on the future, on *bytie*, and looks down on the compromises with the everyday that are forced upon the likes of Zoshchenko's proletarian writer. In Zoshchenko's narrator, the proletarian writer is presented as a *me]anin*.

However, this petty mentality is at the same time the very one that Zoshchenko claims he gives his writer in order to make him accessible to the present day reader. One part of the attempt to reach an untapped, newly literate audience consisted in the use, as we have seen, of journalistic forms. Another aspect of it was through the 'philosophy' of the stories, the 'naïve' mentality of the narrator: his pettiness, his concern with and susceptibility to apparently minor things is what many hundreds of thousands of readers recognised and responded to. Such concerns are not simply ridiculed. This other dimension of Zoshchenko's stories ensured that parody of the narrator was not permitted to prevail unchallenged.

By unpicking the above passage we find that the aims of sincere democratisa-tion and an attitude of ironic distance are inseparably intertwined in Zoshchen-ko's attitude to his narrator figure. The coexistence of these contradictory attitudes is the wellspring of Zoshchenko's ambivalence, and makes him such a difficult writer to understand: his attitude is both sympathetic and at the same time one of ridicule; one of both sympathy and irony. His use of *skaz* is a refusal, or possibly an inability, to resolve this indecision.

Similar contradictions can be found throughout Zoshchenko's statements about his character-narrator and his language. In the same 1927 article, "About Myself, About Critics, and About My Work", Zoshchenko answers the charge that he is willing to do anything to the Russian language just to get a laugh, by arguing that he needs this language to create a new 'type', previously unknown to Russian literature:

> If I sometimes distort language, then it is because I need to convey a type, a type which in the old days hardly figured in Russian literature (*RC*, 585).

Who is this new character? He has been the subject of much discussion, particularly in Soviet literary criticism, in which most critics, as we saw in Chapter I, consider Zoshchenko's character-narrator to be a *me]anin* whom he despises and satirises.[8] Though, as we have seen, this is part of the picture, it is not the whole picture: few critics have developed Zoshchenko's statement that his new character is a proletarian writer, albeit a temporary one.[9] There is however a great deal of support for this point of view in Zoshchenko's statements on literature. In *Letters to a Writer*, Zoshchenko describes some of those who write to him:

> The Proletarian Revolution has promoted a whole, huge layer of new 'indescribable' people. Before the Revolution these people lived like human vegetables. But now, whether it's a good thing or not, they can write and even compose poems. And that is to the immense and solemn merit of our epoch.
>
> This is what I have never doubted (*RC*, 357).

These 'indescribable' people resemble the type from the previous quotation who had never appeared in pre-revolutionary literature. They now write and their ways of writing and thinking serve as prototypes for Zoshchenko's narrators. As such, Zoshchenko feels the same contradictory way towards them: he expresses immense sympathy for these newly literate people and at the same time casts doubt as to the quality of what they write. This mirrors the divided sym-pathies that we saw above in his attitude to the figure of the proletarian writer.

This attitude is repeated in his relation to his readers. In *Letters to a Writer*, Zoshchenko notes that the kind of readers who write to him are not typical since they have literary pretensions; he also writes that they are the sort of people that 'we writers are trying to represent in our so-called works of "art"' (*RC*, 345). In other words they serve Zoshchenko as examples of the sort of proletarian writer that exists in present circumstances. In the same passage he claims that it is not his intention to make fun of the illiteracy of his readers. Yet later he considered that this is exactly what he had done in *Letters to a Writer*, albeit inadvertently.[10] Zoshchenko has mixed emotions about the readers' letters assembled here. They are semi-literate and worse, but they are also in part sympathetic:

> Here in this book the reader will find genuine tragedy, exceptional intelligence, naïve good-nature, pathetic babble, stupidity, petit-bougeois attitudes, dishonesty

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8. Typical examples are: Starkov, *Mikhail Zoshchenko: sud'ba khudozhnika*; Moldavskii, *Mikhail Zoshchenko: ocherk tvorchestva*

9. Sarnov stands almost alone in treating Zoshchenko as a genuine aesthetic revolutionary. Unfortunately, he fails to pay sufficient attention to Zoshchenko's parodic intent – Sarnov, *Prishestvie kapitana Lebiadkina (Sluchai Zoshchenko)*, *passim*.

10. In a letter to Gorky in 1930, Zoshchenko questions the way in which he had responded to the readers in *Letters to a Writer*, claiming that he had been insincere – *Gor'kii i sovetskie pisateli: neizdannaia perepiska*, p. 163.

> and terrifying illiteracy (*RC*, 345).

The letters create an ambivalent effect because the worthy and sympathetic coexists with the unworthy and unsympathetic aspects of these people. The same is true of many of Zoshchenko's own narrator-protagonists.

The ambivalence of Zoshchenko's stories can be traced back to the writer's own complex and contradictory feelings about his characters and their language. This is the prime source of the ambivalence that runs throughout Zoshchenko's work of the 1920s. But how does the notion of an ambivalent attitude to the narrator square with the tension we have been broadly describing as that between interpretation and experience? They are two related aspects of the epistemological uncertainty that lies at the heart of the Zoshchenko short story. It is not so much a question of deciding for or against the narrator, but of deciding which to trust: the narrator's description of his experience or his interpretation of it. As we have seen, this is a tension inherent in the *feuilleton*'s fact/generalisation dis-tinction, and one that Zoshchenko was to exploit beyond the bounds of what was habitual in that form. Nevertheless, this is not solely a question of language and genre, i.e. of parody, but also one of point of view and hence of irony. Since the reader must decide whether the text supplies a coherent or convincing inter-pretation of the concrete experience also portrayed there.

Yet, as I have attempted to show, Zoshchenko's stories are not ironic if we agree with his narrators' interpretations of their experience. Even if we see a discrepancy, that discrepancy is often as tragic as it is comic. Zoshchenko went to some lengths to ensure that readers perceived a choice as to how to interpret the stories. Contemporaries commented how seriously Zoshchenko read his own stories and how he especially rated straight-faced performances of his work, such as Iakhontov's. It seems to me that this reveals a desire to make the reader feel the serious appeal for sympathy in them and not simply burst into unreflect-ing laughter at the narrator's expense.[11] The great comic writer wanted to ensure that readers were free to see the serious side, even if fleetingly, and to attempt to fit reality to the narrator's scale of values, even if unsuccessfully. Indeed, in "How I Work" (1930), he even went so far as to insist that the serious side of his work was its most important aspect, and that he never intended to make people laugh:

> People call them [the short stories] humorous. In fact, that's not quite right. They are not humorous. By humorous we mean stories which are written so as to make people laugh. But I wrote not so as to make people laugh; it occurred despite me, it is a peculiarity of my work (*RC*, 590).

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11. See T. Ivanova, 'O Zoshchenko', in *Vospominaniia o Mikhaile Zoshchenko*, pp. 178–89; I. Metter, 'Svidetel'stvo sovremennika', in *Ibid.*, pp. 242–59; N. Krymova, 'Iakhontov chitaet Maiakovskogo i Zoshchenko', *Neva*, Nº 6 (1977), pp. 195–210.

Similarly, in "Autobiography" (1932), Zoshchenko blames the humorous effect on the critics:

> I had to work on my language a lot. I had to change the whole syntax so as to make the work of literature simple and accessible to the new readers. My books' big print runs is proof that I was right. So the language which I used and which at first seemed funny and deliberately corrupted to the critics, was in fact exceptionally simple and natural (*RC*, 592).

These claims seem extreme, and it is hard to believe that Zoshchenko intended none of the humour of his stories, but they make more sense when we relate it to his 1944 article, "The Comic in Chekhov's Work".[12] Here he argues that there are two sorts of laughter: humorous laughter that affirms and is trivial, and satirical laughter that is critical of society.[13] Chekhov, he argues, was defined by critics of his time as simply funny in a neutral way in order to dampen the satirical force of his stories, in order to let the targets of his satire off the hook. In the two previous quotations Zoshchenko stresses that his own intention in writing his short stories was not to produce humorous stories and not to make people laugh. Implicitly, his intention was to make them see their faults and the faults of the society in which they live. In these two works of the early 1930s, he perceives the two intentions as mutually exclusive. Moreover, in contrast to the later article on Chekhov, he sees only one kind of laughter: the trivial, humorous sort. However, the essential argument is unchanged: apparently comic works, be they his or those of Chekhov, are far more serious than is usually thought. Humour is no laughing matter.

Here Zoshchenko rejoins the greatest of satirical or comic writers, such as Swift, who could not understand how the people whose vices he had wanted to expose laughed and were neither ashamed nor reformed: 'The chief end I propose to my self in all my labours is to vex the world rather than to divert it'.[14] This is true also of Gogol, who was particularly concerned that the public misunderstood his works. He even explored this question in the mayor's speech from *The Government Inspector*: 'What are you laughing at? You're laughing at

12. Mikhail Zoshchenko, 'O komicheskom v proizvedeniiakh Chekhova', *Voprosy literatury*, Nº 2 (1967), pp. 152–55 (p. 152).
13. This devaluation of humour as universal, classless, ideology-free and therefore irrelevant, is a common Soviet definition. In it, satire is awarded pride of place as a tool of social critique and a weapon of class warfare, whereas irony is seen as nihilistically ambiguous. See, for example, Ershov, *Sovetskaia satiricheskaia proza 20-kh godov*, p. 166. This is an extreme variant of a more common distinction between types of satire. See, for exam-ple, Ronald Paulson: 'One is a wild, not quite stable comedy; the other a moral condem-nation' – see his *The Fictions of Satire* (Baltimore, MD, John Hopkins Press, 1967), p. 3.
14. Quoted in Arthur Pollard, *Satire* (London, Methuen, 1970), p. 73.

yourselves!'[15] This was appositely echoed in the title of a 1928 selection of Zosh-chenko's stories: *Who Are you Laughing at?*

In this 1944 article, Zoshchenko uses a discussion of Chekhov to write about problems in the reception of his own comic art. Nevertheless, there are also significant and instructive contrasts between the two writers. Unlike Chekhov, Zoshchenko never claimed that he had attempted to suspend judgement because he believed this to be the writer's mission or moral duty.[16] Yet the effect of the Soviet writer's contradictory statements about literature is to demand that we use our own powers of judgement rather than trust those of the author. Likewise, the effect of his *skaz* narratives is to remove the possibility of certain knowledge and to demand that we distrust the narrator's conclusions and be willing, if need be, to supply our own instead. A stance such as Chekhov's would have been almost impossible in the USSR of the 1920s, when public professions of loyalty were required from writers. Zoshchenko's contradictory views, proffered when goaded by hostile criticism into defending the way in which he wrote, achieve something similar by refusing to give straight-forward or self-identically definitive answers. This contradictory view of his art that we find in his articles has itself been deemed irrelevant by critics of all political and critical hues in search of a univalent and definitive Zoshchenko. These writings become a powerful tool for exegesis only when seen through an understanding of the dual possibilities of *skaz* and hence of Zoshchenko's thought and art.

Zoshchenko's Development: The End of Ambivalence

Zoshchenko began to realise that his works produced an ambivalent and humorous effect that he himself could not control ("Autobiography" [1932]; *RC*, 592). This was what Zoshchenko eventually termed irony. It seems to me that this irony was an uncertainty, a doubt and an ambivalence which was the product of his contradictory intentions, whereby the reader could not be sure of the meaning of any given statement or any given story. This ambivalence, expressed in the contradictions of his early short stories, creates the openness that is a fun-damental characteristic of his best short stories, most of which were written in the 1920s. It is this which distinguishes them from his later, irony-free, straight-forward work, be it his less celebrated documentary works or *Before Sunrise*.

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15. Gogol', *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, Vol. IV, p. 94. For a discussion of the misunderstanding of his work, see, for example, Jesse Zeldin, *Nikolai Gogol's Quest for Beauty: An Exploration into his Works* (Lawrence, KA, The Regent's Press of Kansas, 1978), p. 68.

16. Chekhov expressed this view most explicitly in a letter to Suvorin of 30 May 1888 – Anton Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v tridtsati tomakh* (Moscow, Nauka, 1973), *Pis'ma*, Vol. II, pp. 280–81.

With the intensification of criticism of him from 1927, in a political climate where ideological conformity and loyalty were demanded of artists and writers, it became increasingly desirable to rid his work of such unintended irony. It came to worry him; he began to see it as an illness, and strove to cure himself of it even at the cost of his art. Chukovsky writes in his memoirs that in the early 1930s, Zoshchenko repeatedly complained about his irony as if it was an illness:

> He said that he was disgusted by his ironic tone, which literary gourmets so liked, and that on the whole he considered irony to be a vice, a dangerous illness of which as a writer he must cure himself. This was because the democratic reader, whom he was addressing with his works, valued above all healthy clarity, inner strength, simplicity, and a good-hearted, joyful understanding of the world.[17]

Chukovsky's account also resembles the way in which Zoshchenko claimed that the humour in his stories was unintentional.[18] People like Chukovsky treasured the ambivalence of Zoshchenko's work, as we do now, while most of the readers whose letters he published in *Letters to a Writer* saw Zoshchenko as something of a moral teacher. Zoshchenko himself cherished such readers and saw ambivalence as a curse to be shaken off in favour of optimistic and cheerful simplicity. Tragically he succeeded. His success also destroyed the delicate balance of his short stories, making them one-sidedly sincere or crudely hostile and inferior in quality to his earlier work. The balance of the ambivalence was upset, and the stories were less and less written in the *skaz* style.

Nevertheless, there are many common elements between the stories of the 1920s and the later works, which permit us to see precursors to Zoshchenko's later development. This is particularly true of the relation between broad, ambitious interpretation and concrete documentary evidence in the narrative. Throughout *Youth Restored* and *The Sky-Blue Book* the narrative fails to corroborate fully the interpretive sweep. In the former there is a tension between the book's broad thesis and its scientific notes on one hand, and the narrative provided to prove this thesis on the other. In *The Sky-Blue Book* the broad historical framework of vice resolved by socialism is, in fact, contradicted by the stories provided to prove that view. In both cases the narration complicates the stated didactic aim. Nevertheless, both works give greater weight and power to an overarching interpretation than is usual in the stories of the 1920s, a fact exemplified in the use of a standardised, reliable form of narration instead of *skaz*. The same pernicious tendency can be observed in Zoshchenko's later short stories.

Interpretation reaches its apogee in Zoshchenko's work with *Before Sunrise*. Here evidence is dovetailed to fit the predetermined interpretive framework. The result is a rigidly determinist vision in which appetites and fears ingrained

17. Chukovskii, 'Iz vospominanii', pp. 77.
18. 'Kak ia rabotaiu', in *Uvazhaemye grazhdane,* p. 590.

in childhood determine subsequent human existence. *Before Sunrise* is a confession of faith in a rational psychology, in optimism as a path to health, but those claims are counterbalanced with none of the qualifications or conflicting evidence we saw in Zoshchenko's early work. In the short stories of the 1920s there was often an irony at the expense of psychological accounts of human existence. This is exemplified by "Nervous People" (1925; *SS* I, 322–24), in which the psychological account of the characters' violent conduct is counterbalanced by suggestions that their behaviour is due to their squalor and selfishness. Such balance and such laughter are banished from Zoshchenko's later psychological account of human behaviour. In place of the old comic power, there is a sober sterility and a scientific laconism. Where the early works were garrulous, fal-lible and contradictory, *Before Sunrise* is economic, authoritative and mono-lithic. Where there was once an ambivalence that left the reader in a state of un-certainty, full of questions, there is now clarity, a definitive answer presenting itself as an end to questions.

The clarity of this work, and its scandalous treatment at the hands of Soviet criticism and the censor, have made it an attractive place for recent critics to start an analysis of Zoshchenko's work. Certainly the project of understanding the whole of Zoshchenko's *oeuvre* is an important one, and recent critics are right to react against the tendency to see Zoshchenko simply as a satirist relevant solely to Soviet life. However, beginning an analysis of Zoshchenko, as Zhol-kovsky and Scatton have done, with an interpretive framework derived from the certainties and univalencies of *Before Sunrise*, is to risk subordinating the rest of Zoshchenko's work to it.[19] Attempts to stress the continuity of Zoshchenko's creative output throughout his life tend to subordinate the genius and complex irony of the short stories to the mediocrity of the other work and unqualified sincerity of *Before Sunrise*. Moreover, they fail to explain convincingly how a comic vision of the world becomes one of humourless piety. Such an analysis is likely to lose sight of the fact that it is the contradictions, the humour, and their source in Zoshchenko's narrative technique that constitute their greatness. With the resolution of these contradictions, the humour disappears.

This is why Zoshchenko's comic short stories of the 1920s are irreconcilably in conflict with the later work in general and *Before Sunrise* in particular: it resolves the conflict at the heart of his earlier work. That his greatest works are short must not serve as a barrier to adequate appreciation of their extraordinary value. Their size is part of their insight into the fragmented nature of experience: we may as well condemn a haiku or an Ungaretti poem for being short.

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19. See Hart Scatton, *Mikhail Zoshchenko: Evolution of a Writer*, Chapter I, pp. 3–10; Zholkovsky, '"What is the Author trying to say With his Artistic Work?"'; *Idem*, *Mikhail Zoshchenko: poetika nedoveriia*.

Their underlying vision of an unresolved tension between the striving to interpret and find coherence, on one hand, and the fragmented nature of experience and life, on the other, can only be perceived in its full strength by separating them from the later work, not subordinating them to it.