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*THE ROOTS OF NEP SATIRE: THE CASE OF TEFFI AND ZOSHCHENKO**

The prevailing rhetoric of the post-revolutionary period, positing as it did a sharp rupture with the old world, served to obscure the ties that bound writers of the NEP to their forebears, especially to those deemed ideologically and/or aesthetically unacceptable to the new order. This certainly holds true for satirists. During the 1920's a whole generation of talented young writers – including but not limited to Zoshchenko, Il'f and Petrov, Bulgakov, Olesha, Kataev – turned to satire. Yet in the theoretical-critical literature of the time, and for many years thereafter, there is almost total denial of a connection between early Soviet satire and that of the years immediately preceding the revolution.¹ This refusal to acknowledge the tie is all the more striking because during the decade or so before the Bolshevik uprising, it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that comedy was king, both in print and on the stage. There was, for example, the immense popularity of the journals *Satirikon* and later *Novyi Satirikon* (New Satyricon)²; the celebrity enjoyed by such newspaper feuilletonists as Vlas Doroshevich and Nadezhda Teffi; the burgeoning of so-called theaters of miniatures, whose number was so great by 1915 that one article announced “The Invasion of Theaters of Miniatures.”³

At least one reason for such neglect of pre-Soviet satire is that most of its best known practitioners – the *Satirikon* writers Arkadii Averchenko, Nadezhda Teffi, and Sasha Chernyi; the theatrical figures Nikolai Evreinov and Nikita Baliev, founders, respectively, of the St. Petersburg *Krivoie Zerkalo* (The Crooked Mirror) and the Moscow *Letuchaia mysh'* (The Bat) – ended up in emigration. Viktor Shklovskii, to be sure, in his essay on the feuilletonist Zorich, mentions the influence of the “king of the feuilletonists,” Vlas Doroshevich, who conveniently died in the Soviet Union in 1926⁴ – and Doroshevich was indeed an immense influence on the development of Russian prose style, both before and after the revolution. In a

* An earlier version of this article was presented at the AAASS Conference in Denver, CO in 2000.

1. As late as 1966 the eminent scholar of Soviet satire, L. F. Ershov, asserted that Soviet writers “set aside the tradition” of the previous decades – a position he was to modify in his later books. See *Sovetskaiia satiricheskaia proza* (Moscow-Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1966), p. 38. It was left to L. Evstigneeva (Spiridonova), in her book on the *Satirikon* poets published a couple of years later, to state rather diffidently that the “technology of laughter” worked out by the *Satirikontsy* “was in part accepted into the arsenal” of such Soviet satirists as Il'f, Petrov, and Zoshchenko (*Zhurnal Satirikon i poety-satirikontsy* [Moscow: Nauka, 1968], p. 453).

2. *Satirikon* was founded in 1908. In 1913 its major contributors left the journal and started *Novyi Satirikon*, which continued publication until after the October Revolution.

3. K. S-v, “Nashestvie teatrov miniatiur,” *Teatr i iskusstvo*, no. 19 (1915), p. 324.

4. Shklovskii, “Zorich,” *Zhurnalist*, nos. 6-7 (June-July 1925), p. 16.

seminal article Marietta Chudakova, quoting Doroshevich's daughter, describes how in the 1890s the writer made a "brilliant discovery: he invented the short line. Totally neglecting the rules of grammar, he cut a sentence in half. A period turned up in place of a comma, the verb ran away from the noun to the following paragraph."⁵ In the following decades journalists and humorists readily adopted Doroshevich's "discovery" and developed a literary form – commonly called the miniature – marked by maximum compression, with the elimination of all embellishments, literary and psychological. The very broad influence of the style of Doroshevich and his followers on Russian prose is suggested in a letter Teffi wrote to Vera Bunina in 1924, in which she lamented that "all of us, raised on the Dorosheviches . . . [write sentences that are] short, abrupt -- a dog's bark."⁶

The satirists of the NEP period grew up within this "miniature" culture and it is very likely that they were influenced not only (and perhaps not primarily) by Doroshevich, but also by the younger generation of satirists and humorists who achieved renown in the decade before the revolution.⁷ Indeed, there are numerous indications of this. The sister of Mikhail Bulgakov, Nadezhda Afanas'evna Zemskaja, told an interviewer that her brother was certainly influenced by the *Satirikon* and "had a high opinion of the talented *Satirikon* writers, A. Averchenko and T. [sic.] Teffi."⁸ In 1919-20, Mikhail Zoshchenko, while participating in a literary criticism workshop conducted by Kornei Chukovskii, wrote an essay on Teffi, to which I shall return. In the first draft of the essay he comments generally about the humor of his time: "*About contemporary humor*. Everything is short. 3 seconds long. Everything is intense. It's impossible to be bored."⁹ Even Evgenii Zamiatin – a fervent proponent of the new and revolutionary in literary form -- uses an image in his prescription for the writing of the future that is strikingly similar to the one that opens Teffi's sketch, "Ominiatiurennye." Teffi there contrasts the effect of reading a conventional novel and a miniature: "The novel is interesting, talented, but after miniatures everything in it seems so drawn out, long, and tedious, as if after an express train you were to ride along the same road in a coach. The telegraph poles have just been flashing by like the pickets of a paling [*palki chastokola*], but now you drag from one [pole] to another at a slow trot, jogging along." She adds: "In the miniature every word, every movement is weighed. Only the most essential is left."¹⁰

In "On Synthetism" Zamiatin invokes her images:

5. Chudakova, "Zametki o iazyke sovremennoi prozy," *Novyi mir*, no. 1 (1972), p. 215.

6. "Perepiska Teffi s I. A. i V. N. Buninyami. 1920-1939," ed. Richard Davies and Edythe Haber, *Di-aspóra, Noveye materialy*, no. 1 (Paris-St. Petersburg: Atheneum-Feniks, 2001), p. 371.

7. Teffi's fame was so great that brands of perfume and candy were named after her. (See Mikhail Tsetlin, "N. A. Teffi," *Novyi zhurnal*, no. 6 [1943], p. 384). Averchenko's was on an equal level.

8. Quoted by T. A. Ermakova, "Dramaturgiia M. A. Bulgakova," *Dissertatsiia na soiskanie uchenoi stepeni kandidata*, Moskovskii Pedagogicheskii Institut Filologicheskikh Nauk im. N. K. Krupskoi (1971), p. 22.

9. Quoted by V. V. Zoshchenko, the writer's widow, in her introduction to M. M. Zoshchenko, "N. Teffi," *Ezhegodnik Rukopisnogo otdela Pushkinskogo doma na 1972 god*. Akademiia nauk SSSR Institut russkoi literatury (Pushkinskii Dom) (Leningrad: Nauka Leningradskoe otdelenie, 1972), p. 138.

10. *Dym bez ognia* (St. Petersburg: Novyi Satirikon, 1914), p. 351.

Yesterday and today are a stagecoach and an automobile.

Yesterday you traveled along the steppe road by unhurried stagecoach. A slow wanderer – a village church – is floating toward you. Unhurriedly, you open a window; you narrow your eyes against the steeple gleaming in the sun, the whiteness of the walls; . . .

And today – by car – past the same church. A moment – it rises, flashes, disappears. And all that remains is a streak of lightning in the air, topped with a cross; . . . Not a single secondary detail, not a single superfluous line, not a word that can be crossed out.¹¹

The question of the overall influence of satirists and humorists of the last pre-revolutionary decade on writers of the NEP period is a large one, beyond the scope of this article. I would like to concentrate on the narrower and fairly well-documented case of Nadezhda Teffi and Mikhail Zoshchenko. The best place to begin is with Zoshchenko's very interesting essay on Teffi, mentioned above. Others before me have noted the essay's importance in Zoshchenko's subsequent development. The writer's widow, Vera Vladimirovna, for example, in her introduction to the first publication of the article in 1972, calls it "a key to an understanding of Zoshchenko as a humorist and satirist" and adds: "In Teffi's creative work the attention of the future writer was attracted precisely by what would later become fundamental in his own creative work"¹²

The outline of the future Zoshchenko is indeed discernible in his essay. Clearly one reason why he was drawn to Teffi in particular, rather than, say, to Averchenko, was the strong note of sadness intermingled with the comical in her works. He remarks, in fact, that the plots of Teffi's stories are typically not even funny: "And try to retell any, even her funniest story, and truly, it will not turn out funny at all. It will be absurd and perhaps tragic as well."¹³ The secret of her humor, he adds, lies in her words, her *skaz*. As he wrote in an early draft of the essay: "It is not the people, not the story in its essence that is funny, what is wonderfully funny are the words, Teffi's *skaz*, her *speech*, such a living truth [*"takaia zhiznennaia istinnost"*]."¹⁴ This "secret of [her] laughing words," as Zoshchenko calls it in his final draft,¹⁵ is something he at once tried to emulate. Vera Zoshchenko notes that

11. Yevgeny Zamyatin, *A Soviet Heretic*, ed. and trans. Mirra Ginsburg (Chicago-London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 88. In "On Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and Other Matters," Zamyatin uses a similar image:

. . . literature will remain the literature of yesterday even if you drive "revolutionary life" along the well-traveled highway – and even if you drive it in a dashing troika with bells. What we need today are automobiles, airplanes, flickering, flight, dots, dashes, seconds.

The old, slow, creaking descriptions are a thing of the past; today the rule is brevity – but every word must be supercharged, high-voltage. We must compress into a single second what was held before in a sixty-second minute. (*Ibid.*, p. 111)

12. "N. Teffi," p. 138

13. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

he copied out words of Teffi's that especially interested him: "zagvozdali" (apparently a neologism combining *zagvozdili* = *they hammered into* [someone's head] and *zagvazdali* = *they dirtied, soiled*), "progolandrit'sia," (*golandrit'sia* = *to be polished*) "vsugon" (*in pursuit*).¹⁶ And it is surely no coincidence that, while Zoshchenko, as his wife writes elsewhere, had formerly collected "'beautiful, refined' phrases," such as "the smile is shining like the sun, and the sun laughs to the world," in 1920 – that is, soon after writing his Teffi article – these are suddenly replaced by totally new, unexpected words: "kryt' nechem" (*not have a leg to stand on*), "shamat" (*gobble up*), "shpana" (*rabble*), "golodovat" (*to starve*), and others.¹⁷ Zoshchenko sums up the "essence of [Teffi's] stories" in the concluding sentence of his essay: ". . . their basis is sad, and sometimes even tragic, the surface, however, is genuinely funny."¹⁸

If the influence on Zoshchenko of this combination has already been suggested by Vera Zoshchenko, another important point of contact – their character depiction – has not yet, to my knowledge, been examined. Here one finds an odd paradox in Zoshchenko's comments on Teffi, a paradox, moreover, that, judging from his letters and notes from this period, he was trying to resolve within himself. On the one hand, he emphasizes the gentleness (*miagkost'*) of Teffi's humor and her love for her characters. In his first draft, he writes: "Teffi loves them, she treats her nannies, benighted old women, all kinds of peasant women so lovingly, affectionately."¹⁹ And in the final draft he writes of her "intimate *skaz*, her gentle humor in funny, awkward words, and the positive tenderness toward these benighted peasant women, nannies, cooks. . . ."²⁰ In the very next paragraph, however, Zoshchenko describes Teffi's characters in terms that are anything but tender: "In all of her books people do not resemble people. The Feklas, Fedosias, Gashas – these are some kind of grotesque (*urodlivye*) caricatures, humanoids (*chelovekoobraznye*) – as she herself so aptly called them." Zoshchenko goes on to describe what he calls her "double caricature" ("*dvoinoi sharzh*"):

The grotesque [*urodstvo*] is magnified 1000 times.
Banality [*poshlost'*] is magnified 1000 times.

He concludes:

I emphasize here: banality and stupidity. This is primarily what the writer is operating with.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 139. For the approximate word meanings here and elsewhere I have consulted Vladimir Dal', *Tolkovyi slovar' zhivogo russkogo iazyka*, 4 vols. (Moscow-St. Petersburg Izd. M. O. Vol'fa, 1860-80; repr. Moscow: Russkii iazyk, 1978-80) and D. N. Ushakov, ed. *Tolkovyi slovar' russkogo iazyka*, 4 vols. (Moscow: OGIz, 1934-40); repr. 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Slavica, 1974).

17. Vera Zoshchenko, "Tak nachinal M. Zoshchenko," in *Vospominaniia o Mikhaile Zoshchenko*, ed. Iu. V. Tomashevskii (St. Petersburg: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1995), p. 27.

18. "N. Teffi, p. 142

19. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

Stupidity, hopeless, amazing – is the constant element in all her heroes without exception.

What a totally dark, dreary kingdom of fools. (“*Kakoe samoe temnoe, besprosvetnoe tsarstvo gluptsov*”).²¹

The question that naturally arises is how Teffi can possibly love characters she portrays as stupid and banal denizens of a “dark kingdom.” Zoshchenko finds the answer in their “laughing words,” which make each of Teffi’s fools an “astonishing fool,” a “conversing fool” (“*durak s razgovorom*”).²² This amazing speech, to be sure, hardly brightens the “dark kingdom.” It is, indeed, a fundamental source of the absurd and even the tragic in Teffi’s work, since it leads to total mutual incomprehension. As Zoshchenko remarks: “And the most amazing thing results, upon which all the clashes of people are based: on incomprehension.”

Thus Zoshchenko perceives an odd balance in Teffi between an essentially negative view of humanity and genuine love and tenderness toward that same humanity. That this paradoxical vision of people does indeed underlie her humor finds support in a comparison of the epigraph to her first volume of humorous stories, published in 1910, and the subtitle and introduction to the second, which appeared a year later. In the epigraph to the earlier book, Teffi quotes from Spinoza’s *Ethics*: “For laughter is a joy and therefore is in itself a blessing.”²³ This statement, as Dmitrii Nikolaev notes, is preceded in Spinoza by the sentence: “Between derision (which I name an evil . . .) and laughter I recognize a great distinction.”²⁴ Thus Teffi’s adoption of the Spinoza quote promises a rejection of derision, the evocation of positive, joyous laughter. The subtitle of the second volume, however, *Humanoids* (*Chelovekoobraznye*), suggests anything but sympathetic Spinozan laughter. In the introduction Teffi distinguishes between genuine humans, who are created by God and who pass on to their offspring a “living, burning soul – the breath of God,”²⁵ and humanoids, who appeared through the process of evolution. After many centuries of labor, she declares, the latter succeeded in evolving from the lowly worm to the “first perfected reptile” (“*pervyi usovershenstvovavshii gad*”), which took “the form of a humanoid creature” (“*sushchestva chelovekoobraznogo*”). They then began to live among real people.²⁶

Teffi’s comic characters, for the most part, come from the category of humanoids rather than humans, so that one needs to ask again: from where come the love and tenderness? A possible answer lies in the introduction to her second book, where she divides her humanoids into a “higher” and “lower order.”²⁷ The former

21. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

22. *Ibid.*

23. N. A. Teffi, *Iumoristicheskie rasskazy. Kniga pervaiia*. In *Iumoristicheskie rasskazy* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literature, 1990), p. 19.

24. “Kommentarii,” *Iumoristicheskie rasskazy*, p. 391.

25. “Chelovekoobraznye. Predislovie,” *Iumoristicheskie rasskazy, Kniga vtoraiia*, in *Ium. Rasskazy*, p. 149.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

27. *Ibid.*

category has adapted so well that its members “can pass for intelligent and talented people.” Although incapable of creating, they mingle among genuinely talented people in order to experience the “joy of the ground beetle who thinks of the angel: ‘We are flying! . . .’”²⁸ To this higher order belong Teffi’s pompous fools and other self-satisfied mediocrities who appear frequently in her works and for whom she has little sympathy. It is, rather, the lower order humanoids, such as the cooks, nannies, and peasant women whom Zoshchenko enumerates – that is, those who have not succeeded in adapting and, as they stumble through life, arouse pity as well as laughter – upon whom Teffi, for the most part, lavishes her affection and endows with her “laughing words.”

Zoshchenko seems to have been especially struck by Teffi’s distinction between humans and humanoids. One reason, no doubt, is that while he was working on the Teffi essay he was much under the influence of Nietzsche. Vera Zoshchenko writes that “the winter of 1918 passed ‘under the sign of Nietzsche’ (and later, in March 1920, he wrote me: ‘. . . I send you my two best loved books – of course, Blok and, of course, Nietzsche’).”²⁹ Chudakova, in her excellent book on Zoshchenko, tells us that he had even written a philosophical essay in the Nietzschean style in 1918.³⁰ Therefore he readily accepted Teffi’s division of people into human and humanoid, as a variant of Nietzsche’s distinction between superman and simply man. Indeed, in his notes of 1917-21, Zoshchenko adopts Teffi’s terminology, or something very close. Thus, in one place he writes: “Russian man and perhaps all humanoids [*chelovekoobraznye*] like exceedingly to be insulted rather than [to be] the insulter. This is in the nature of Russian man.”³¹ Later he writes:

People are divided into “man-like” (“*chelovekopodobnykh*”) and “Man” (“*Chelovek*” [with a capital ch]).

The former are the majority and therefore in life they are normal. Man is abnormal. In everything.³²

If Zoshchenko’s reading of Nietzsche thus informs his appreciation of Teffi, another writing project he undertook in Chukovskii’s workshop in 1919 – a book on Russian literature of the beginning of the century³³ – points to what he considered

28. *Ibid.*, p. 151.

29. “Tak i nachinal,” p. 15. It is likely that Teffi was familiar with Nietzsche when she formulated her distinction between humans and humanoids. Compare her assertion that the latter arose from the worm with Nietzsche’s words about ordinary man: “You have made your way from worm to man and much in you is still worm.” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1959), p. 124.

30. M. O. Chudakova, *Poetika Mikhaila Zoshchenko* (Moscow: Nauka, 1979), pp. 8-9. This essay, entitled “Bogi pozvoliaiat” (“The Gods Permit”), is reproduced in “Lichnost’ M. Zoshchenko po vospominaniiam ego zheny (1916-1929),” pub. G. V. Filippov, in *Mikhail Zoshchenko: Materialy k tvorcheskoi biografii*. Book 1, ed. N. A. Groznova (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 1997), p. 59.

31. “Iz zapisei 1917-1921 gg.,” in *Litso i maska Mikhaila Zoshchenko*, ed. Iu. V. Tomashevskii (Moscow: Olimp.PPP, 1994), p. 110.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

33. See A. I. Pavlovskii’s introduction to “Stat’ia M. M. Zoshchenko o B. K. Zaitseve,” in *Materialy*,

the negative effect of Nietzscheanism on many other contemporary writers. The recently published draft of the chapter, “The Tragedy of Individualism: Boris Zaitsev,” begins with an epigraph from Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “If you are not a bird – do not rest over the abyss.”³⁴ He then bemoans the sad fate of those among Zaitsev’s characters who strive for the Nietzschean heights: “We were, after all, bequeathed the beautiful idea of a strong and free man. We were bequeathed the idea of the superman, and instead of him some kind of shadows, weak-willed, lifeless, in love with death.”³⁵ Such “lifeless people,” Zoshchenko points out, do not inhabit the works of Zaitsev alone; they are characteristic of contemporary literature as a whole: “. . . almost all our contemporary literature is about them, about the weak-willed, lifeless, or invented. Gippius, Blok, Al. Tolstoi, Remizov, Tsenskii – all of them tell us about lifeless, spectral, somnolent [*sonnye*] people.”³⁶ The only exception Zoshchenko finds is Mikhail Artsybashev’s reprobate hero, Sanin: “How strangely and how painfully has the idea of a free and strong man, created by individualism, been refracted in the heart of the Russian writer. The idea, born of individualism, has turned out to be extremely pained. The free and strong man, for whom ‘everything is permitted,’ the future man-God – has turned into the most total scoundrel and egoist.”³⁷

Zoshchenko concludes: “Artsybashev and Zaitsev – two Russian intellectuals [*intelligenta*] with two extreme, sick ideas of man free from any morality. And one created the ‘base Sanin,’ the other – [a person] in love with death.”³⁸ Clearly neither of those was acceptable to Zoshchenko, but he was, according to his widow, hopeful that the new era would give rise to a more positive alternative. Although in 1919 he considered that “everything is destroyed,” she writes, he looked expectantly to the “new proletarian art,” to Maiakovskii’s poetry, and believed “a genius is coming” and would build “everything anew.”³⁹ He obviously felt himself incapable of becoming that genius, of living up to the model of the Nietzschean superman. As early as January 1918, in a letter to his future wife, he applies to himself words from Gor’kii’s “Song about the Falcon” that are reminiscent of the epigraph he later took from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. He, unlike the heroic falcon in Gor’kii’s prose poem, was incapable of soaring to the heights. But, significantly, he could laugh:

Waving my powerless arms, I wanted to fly, but remember – “The Song about the Falcon?”

“He who is born to crawl cannot fly. Having forgotten about that, he fell to the earth, but was not hurt, but . . . burst out laughing.”

So it is with me, so it is with me. . .

Book 1, p. 37.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 41. In Kaufmann’s translation of Nietzsche: “And he who is not a bird should not build his nest over the abysses” (p. 217).

35. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*

39. “Tak nachinal,” pp. 23, 24.

And now a great deal seems funny to me, and still more – sad. Still more – dead.⁴⁰

If Zoshchenko did not find the power within himself to soar like Gor’kii’s Nietzschean falcon – and, by implication, could not as an artist create the proletarian “superman” the new era required – he could still emulate Teffi, who had succeeded so well in expressing the blend of the funny and sad he himself now felt. In her heroes, moreover, he found the life missing in the “lifeless people” inhabiting the works of other contemporary writers: “. . . two or three of the most characteristic traits . . . give life and movement to her heroes. Without a doubt the cook Lusha lives. Mavra without a doubt is natural.”⁴¹ In choosing the comic rather than the heroic, finally, Zoshchenko need not even have abandoned Nietzsche, who extols laughter throughout *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.⁴²

Zoshchenko, of course, adapted what he found in Teffi to his own unique talent, as well as to the needs of post-revolutionary Russia. This process can be seen in a comparison of a story by each of them. I will first examine Teffi’s “Aptechka” (“The Medicine Kit”) from the 1915 volume *Nezhivoi zver’* (*The Lifeless Beast*) – the story Zoshchenko himself chose in his essay as an example of her unique blend of tragedy and comedy. He writes:

The woman landowner asks Fedosia: “Why is it that Fekla is so thin?”

“She doesn’t eat anything, that’s why she’s thin.”

“Well, how can that be that she doesn’t eat anything,” the mistress [*barynia*] says indignantly, “send her to me tomorrow morning.”

For several days in a row the mistress gives Fekla medicine for her appetite. Fekla does not gain weight. The mistress is disturbed, she seeks out various medicines in her medicine kit, and only at the end of the story does it turn out that Fekla doesn’t eat because there isn’t anything to eat.

Zoshchenko comments: “Such is her humorous story.”⁴³

In “Aptechka” the landowner, Stepanida Pavlovna, is a good example of a higher order humanoid. Recently widowed and the lone noblewoman surrounded by the peasantry, she at first tries to enlighten the cook, Fedosia, by reading her a chapter from *Anna Karenina*. The following is Fedosia’s response:

“And there were people like that too when I was still living in Luga, a merchant’s wife was slaughtered and they cut out the tongue of her worker.”

40. Mikhail Zoshchenko, “Iz pisem (1917-1921 gg.),” in *Litso i maska*, p. 25.

41. “N.A. Teffi,” p. 142.

42. Enjoinders to engage in both joyous and destructive laughter abound. One example of the former: “This crown of him who laughs, this rose-wreath crown: to you, my brothers, I throw this crown. Laughter I have pronounced holy; you higher men, *learn* to laugh!” (407-08). Of the latter: “You that have seen man/ As god and sheep: / *Tearing to pieces* the god in man/ No less than the sheep in man,/ And *laughing* while tearing – / *This, this* is your bliss!” (412).

43. “N. A. Teffi,” p. 140.

Stepanida Pavlovna could not grasp the significance of this conclusion. But she no longer bothered herself about [raising] Fedosia's level.⁴⁴

Fedosia, as this reaction to *Anna Karenina* demonstrates, belongs among the lower order of humanoids, but her character is enlivened by her use of Teffi's "laughing words." Indeed the mistress is infected by her servant's language as "she herself began to say [the substandard] 'nonecha' (= *nyne* – now), 'davecha' (= *nedavno* – recently) 'rybina' (one fish) 'okromia' (= *krome* – except) and 'progolandrit'sia'"⁴⁵ (the last one of the words that appear on Zoshchenko's list).

After this failure to enlighten Fedosia, Stepanida Pavlovna turns to another means of helping the common people by buying a medicine kit. Here, as Zoshchenko's summary of the story indicates, she demonstrates her total misunderstanding of the conditions under which the peasantry lives. This incomprehension (which Zoshchenko finds characteristic of Teffi's heroes in general) is everywhere in "Aptechka." If it is merely amusing in the peasant women, however (e.g., Fedosia's interpretation of *Anna Karenina*), the failure to understand on the part of their mistress does real harm, since it is she who wields the power. This is evident at the story's end, when, even after discovering the true reason for Fekla's failure to gain weight – that she is close to starvation – Stepanida Pavlovna clings to her beautiful illusion – that she is serving humanity with her medicine kit. She therefore blames Fekla for her own failure, calling her an "ungrateful fool" ("*dura neblagodarnaia*").⁴⁶ She then banishes Fekla from the estate, causing harm to the poor peasant woman whom she intended to help.

It is revealing to compare Teffi's story to "Aristokratka" ("The Lady Aristocrat"), one of Zoshchenko's best known works and one of the earliest in his mature style, published in 1923. "Aristokratka," like "Aptechka," tells of a lone upper class woman – the "aristocrat" of the title – surrounded by members of the lower class (or the former lower class), the workers inhabiting a NEP period apartment house. Here again, as in the Teffi story, an attempted rapprochement between the classes ends disastrously.

These similarities only point up crucial differences between the works. The first and the most obvious is in the narration. In "Aptechka," as in most of her stories, Teffi employs an impersonal third-person narrator, the authorial surrogate, who adopts a superior perspective on the goings on. She treats all the participants, whether mistress or peasants, with a combination of sympathy and irony, but – although the noblewoman is portrayed with the greatest irony – events are related exclusively from her point of view, the peasants with their *skaz* seen only from the outside.

Zoshchenko, in keeping with the post-revolutionary social realities, and true to the nature of his own talent, reverses Teffi's perspective. Instead of a superior third-

44. N. A. Teffi, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2: *Nezhivoi zver'*, ed. D. D. Nikolaev & E. M. Trubilova (Moscow: Lakom, 1997), p. 101.

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

person narrator he adopts the first-person narration of his working class hero. And, in place of Teffi's implied middle-to-upper class reader, Zoshchenko's narrator is addressing his working class brothers ["*bratsy moi*"].⁴⁷ To be sure, Zoshchenko retains the irony that he saw in Teffi's attitude to her humanoids; his hero's automatism and lack of understanding equal those in her characters. Thus, his hero's sole topic of conversation is plumbing. Even when at the opera all he can find to say is: "I wonder if the plumbing works here?"⁴⁸ And the narrative voice – the *skaz* itself, with its linguistic deformations – is the major source of Zoshchenko's condescending humor. At the same time he achieves the goal of creating sympathy for this lower order humanoid through the use of these "laughing words." Indeed, he goes even further than Teffi, because the speaker's colorful, improbable language -- so much more expressive than the standard "correct" language – is now the style of the entire story and therefore serves as a kind of "folk creation."

This reversal in narrative perspective reflects the change in the power balance in Zoshchenko's story, which in turn echoes the transformation of post-revolutionary social relations. For here it is the narrator, a working man, who initiates the contact with the "aristocrat." He first approaches her at a house meeting, then visits her apartment as an "official" ("*litso ofitsial'noe*").⁴⁹ Later, as an "escort in a position of power" ("kavaler u vlasti"), in the aristocrat's words, he is able to obtain tickets to the opera. But if Zoshchenko's hero enjoys higher official status, he nevertheless remains psychologically in thrall to the charms of the bourgeoisie. He is much taken by the aristocrat's hats, her *fil d'Écosse* (a silk-like cotton) stockings, and especially her glittering gold tooth. The aristocrat thus retains the aura of a superior being. As a higher order humanoid she even tries to elevate this uncouth member of the working class to the level of a suitable gentleman friend. She is, indeed, more successful than Teffi's Stepanida Pavlovna was with Fedosia: she gets her escort to take her arm during their strolls, although it makes him feel "conscience-stricken before the people," and later, at her insistence, he invites her to the opera.

The narrator at the opera is much like Teffi's Fedosia being read *Anna Karenina*. He is bored by the whole thing and leaves the hall. The catastrophe occurs during the intermission. As he and the aristocrat enter the buffet, the bourgeois spirit again takes hold of him, as he, "such a goose, such an unclipped bourgeois" ("burzhuem nerezanyam"),⁵⁰ invites her to eat a pastry, in spite of his lack of cash. Even when she takes a second cake he says nothing, because: "Such a bourgeois bashfulness seized me." Only after she picks up a fourth cake does his proletarian essence – and language – reemerge, as he cries out: "Put it . . . back!" ("Lozhi . . . vzad!"), "Put it back, . . . you lousy bitch!" ("Lozhi . . . k chertovoi materi!"). This

47. Mikhail Zoshchenko, *Sochineniia. 1920 gody* (St. Petersburg: Kristall, 2000), p. 233. Translation throughout is mine, but I occasionally borrow from Mikhail Zoshchenko, *Nervous People and Other Satires*, trans. Maria Gordon and Hugh McLean (New York: Pantheon/Random House, 1963).

48. *Sochineniia*, p. 233.

49. *Ibid.*

50. *Ibid.*, p. 234.

leads to the final scandal and his break with the aristocrat. As he concludes: “I don’t like lady aristocrats.”⁵¹

In “Aristokratka,” as in “Aptechka,” the dénouement, leading to the failure of an attempted rapprochement between the classes, centers upon a misunderstanding about food. But here again there is a reversal: if in the Teffi story the peasant Fekla eats too little, the aristocrat, used to gorging herself at the expense of others, eats too much. This reversal, in turn, is indicative of the different purposes of the two stories. Teffi’s narrative has genuinely tragic implications, because it reveals the unbridgeable gulf between the classes – the inability of those better off, represented by Stepanida Pavlovna, to understand and relieve the misery of the destitute peasants. In Zoshchenko’s story, in contrast, the ending – the irony notwithstanding – is fundamentally optimistic. By breaking with the aristocrat, the working class narrator is ridding himself of the last vestiges of bourgeois control, both by rejecting a free-loader who obviously reduces him to penury, and by resisting his own embourgeoisement – one of those “grimaces of NEP” that were such a constant theme of the satire of the 1920s.

Thus the case of Teffi and Zoshchenko illustrates both the continuity of Russian literature across the gulf of revolution and the modifications the new period demanded. More particularly, it illuminates the origins of the alternative path – comedy and satire – taken by Zoshchenko and numerous other talented writers of the NEP period, who found themselves incapable or unwilling to join in the creation of a new proletarian literature with its Nietzschean positive heroes.

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51. *Ibid.*, p. 235.