

FOOD, FEAR, FEIGNING, AND FLIGHT IN ZOŠČENKO'S 'FOREIGNERS'

ALEXANDER ZHOLKOVSKY

В любом невротическом симптоме я находил страх или притворство. В любом поведении невротика и даже иной раз в его смерти было бегство [...]

При [...] необыкновенном пристрастии [к еде] Гоголь подчас жаловался на отсутствие аппетита, на несварение желудка [...] Как бы младенческие сцены разыгрываются перед едой [...] борьба за объект устрашения, который могут отнять. И временная победа [...] увеличивает торжество победителя. Однако окончательная победа остается за страхом [...] Оказывается, помимо инфантильного страха, который испытывал Гоголь, ему еще нужно было притворяться, что страха нет и нет бегства.

(Zoščenko 1987, 3: 635, 654-657)¹

1. The story 'Inostrancy' ('Foreigners'), first published in 1928 as 'Vse v porjadke' (1: 420-422, 550), is among Zoščenko's shortest. It starts with a general disquisition about foreigners being different – easy to tell from "our Soviet citizens" thanks to their superb self-control, which is necessitated by the restlessness of their life and emblemized by their ability to keep a monocle from popping out whatever the circumstances. The story proper, related to the first-person narrator by a man with the trade mission in France, is as follows.

At a banquet, a Frenchman swallows a chicken bone. Terrified as he is of the consequences, he dares not rush to the bathroom – because of “petty-bourgeois” conventions. Nor can one, in the presence of millionaires, with Henry Ford, no less, at their head, start digging in his throat. The Frenchman gets a grip on himself, starts blowing kisses to ladies, and in general pretends that everything is under control. Only after he has politely sat through dinner, concealing his stomach pain and even helping himself to more food, does he leave for the hospital. “Whether this here Frenchman croaked or survived, I don’t know... Survived, I guess. Survivor nation [, the French]”, concludes the narrator.

From the “cultural-sociological” perspective, dominant in Zoščenko criticism,² ‘Foreigners’ yields a familiar picture. The officially acceptable denunciation of “bourgeois morals”, as opposed to “ours” (“Konečno, s našeji svobodnoj točki zrenija v étom fakte ničego takogo oskorbitel’nogo netu. Nu proglotil i proglotil”), is only an Aesopian cover for a satire of all things Soviet. This tongue-in-cheek satire targets “objective” conditions, such as the sorry state of medical services (“U nas na étot sčet dovol’no bystro. Skoraja pomošč’. Mariinskaja bol’nica. Smolenskoe kladbišče”), as well as the “unculturedness” of the narrator,³ who imagines the life-style of the world elite in his own likeness (“Odnogo élektričestva gorit, možet, bol’še kak na dvesti svečej; načal, možet, chozjajskuju sobačku pod stolom trepat”) and who pretentiously intersperses his crude speech with French expressions (“*Moveton* i čert znaet čto; *Koman?* V čem delo?”).

The interplay of the narrator’s primitive mentality and the elitist ambience of the narrated event underlies many of the story’s comic effects, for instance, the protagonist’s alleged diving (“vmeste so svoej kost’ju”) under the table for his galoshes, or the narrator’s naively ostentatious remark about the host’s addressing the Frenchman in French. Incidentally, the latter device was to be reused in the 1935 *Golubaja kniga* (*A Skyblue Book*, 3: 161-446), where it is noted that the Persian king Cambyses screams specifically in Persian (3: 233), testifying to the way ‘Foreigners’ foreshadows that book’s semi-literate rendition of world history.

As for the story’s “realities” – restless life, monocle, self-control, choking on a bone, stomach pain, death scare, fear of public embarrassment – in a “culturological” analysis they would either figure as butts of an “anti-vulgarian” satire or would be considered irrelevant and left out completely.⁴ Or, in a more “formalistic” study, they could be seen as mere literary clichés, used to flesh out the comic interplay of the “lowly corporeal” with the “pretentiously high-life”, – in a reading that would seem to be corroborated by the illusive nature of these “realities”. Indeed, the coverage of facts, filtered through the two unreliable consciousnesses, is not quite plausible. To begin with, the risk of choking on, of all things, a chicken bone is not particularly high, except for a clown in a circus or film or a beast in a fable,

but certainly not for a monocled type. No less dubious is the story's next premise: the decision, on the part of a worldly sophisticate, to conceal such an emergency.

The story would thus seem to boil down to an ironic manipulation of stock figures (monocled foreigners, blown kisses) subjected to equally standard gags (bone-swallowing, sticking one's fingers down one's throat), all of this comically showing through the narrator's linguistic ineptitudes (e.g.: "Kak, skážem, vzjato u nich odno vyraženie lica, tak i smotritsja étim vyraženiem lica na vse ostal'nye predmety", i.e., something like: "With them, once, let's say, one facial expression has been set, so it is then looked through this expression upon all other objects").

As a matter of fact, the story's verbal structure is highly elaborate, which is small wonder, given Zoščenko's programmatically poetic approach to prose writing (1994: 109, 112). Brief as it is, the text abounds in symmetrical patterns, e.g.: the repeated parallelism "U nich..." – "U nas..."; the triad of Adjective + Noun phrases describing the sequence ambulance – hospital – cemetery; the repeated mention of the millionaires and Henry Ford himself in a chair.⁵ Less obvious are the repetitions of some fairly common words, which thereby acquire leitmotif status, e.g.: "vzjato u nich odno vyraženie lica" – "vzjal sebja v ruki" – "za brjucho rukoj vzjalsja; morda [...] deržitsja" – "dlja [...] vyderžki monokl' [...] nosjat" – "s chozjajkoj [...] za ručku poderžalsja"; and even the whimsically paronomastic pair "ne smorgnem – smorkat'sja načnet".

The ending is especially remarkable in this respect. The outer frame comes full circle with the narrator's return to global cultural generalizations (having started with "foreigners", he ends with the French "nation": "Nacija dovol'no živučaja") and issues of life and death (from: "buržuaznaja žizn' [...] ne dozvoljaet proživat' estestvennym obrazom" to: "podoch li [...] ili vyžil [...] vyžil [...] živučaja"). Similarly, the closural sentence of the story proper ("Vezi, kričit, kurinaja morda, v priemnyj pokoj") gathers together several key motifs. The word "kurinaja" ("chicken") echoes the provenance of the swallowed bone; the word "morda" ("mug, kisser") reminds of the physiognomical dissertations about the archetypal foreigner ("U nich [...] v morde čto-to založeno drugoe. U nich morda [...] bolee nepodvižno i prezritel'no deržitsja"); the word "pokoj", which means "room, ward", but is homonymous with the word for "rest, quiet", provides a playful run on the foreigners' rather restless ("dovol'no bespokojnaja") life; while "priemnyj", the adjectival part of the set expression for "admissions office/ward", connotes the never quite spelled-out "priem" ("reception") implied by the mentions of "zvanyj obed" and "zvanyj banket" (lit. "invited dinner/banquet").

The "culturological" cum "formalist" approach to the story, briefly sketched out in the above, may be relevant to a degree, but today its prospects seem limited. Even were one to agree that Zoščenko is only interested

in cultural quirks and only plays with the ready-made, this would still leave unanswered, indeed, unasked, the question about his very idiosyncratic choice of stereotypes. Similarly, the words highlighted by the verbal patterning (“žizn”, “morda”, “ruka”, “deržat’sja”, “glotat”, “bespokojnyj”) are not an arbitrary set but rather key items of his vocabulary.

The task of formulating Zoščenko’s thematic invariants is greatly facilitated by the critical insights offered by the writer himself in his 1943 autopsychanalytical book *Pered voschodom solnca* (*Before Sunrise*; 1974, 3: 447-693). In it, Zoščenko identifies and describes in painstaking detail the traumas, anxieties, and pathogenic objects that had haunted him since childhood.⁶ The projection of these data from *Before Sunrise* (and the “serious” commentaries to his 1933 *Vozvraščennaja molodost’* [*Youth Regained*]; 3: 80-160) onto the writer’s comic and “sentimental” texts reveals the common existential underpinnings of his oeuvre. In the satirical plots and characters one then discerns the author’s own complexes and obsessions – demoted, as it were, from the rank of general to that of enlisted man, to use Gogol’s famous line. To be sure, *Before Sunrise* need not be taken as God’s (or Freud’s) truth on the matter, but rather as a literary text to be compared with Zoščenko’s other, openly fictional texts – with the purpose of gaining further understanding of its hidden anxieties and agendas.⁷

Reading ‘Foreigners’ with Zoshchenkovian invariants in mind will help to elucidate its meaning. After all, the story is neither a cautionary tale about frequenting diplomatic banquets, nor a satire of Soviet innocents abroad, nor a pastiche for pastiche’s sake. Zoščenko was always serious. He insisted:

Both the longer tales and the very short stories I wrote with one and the same hand. (1991: 585)

[F]rom those [serious] thoughts and plans that I had I have fashioned [nastrugal] a lot of very short stories. And I write these stories not because it’s easy and fun to write them [...] [but] because they are most accessible [...] for today’s readers. (1963a: 162)

‘Foreigners’ is precisely one such accessible version of Zoščenko’s favorite thoughts – a representative slice of his poetic universe.

2. To summarize, somewhat dogmatically, Zoščenko’s worldview, it comprises a yearning for calm and order, a fear of life’s dangers and uncertainties, and a mistrustful quest for protection. His unreliable “skaz” narrative implements a defensive response to the unreliable world, by presenting everything, including the author’s cherished values, in an uncertain, ambivalent, ironic light. These basic themes and discourse strategies spawn a wealth of variations – the typical Zoshchenkovian motifs. A brief outline of

these more specific invariants, with special emphasis on those relevant to 'Foreigners', will set the stage for a close reading of the story.

The desired state of affairs is "calm", represented by infancy, quiet untroubled life, retreat to a safe haven (e.g. a villa called "Tišina" or "Zatiš'e"), and similar situations (covered also by such terms as peace, quiet, silence, and other synonyms and derivatives of "pokoj" and "tišina"). "Calm" is defined primarily in negative terms – as an absence of its opposite, "restlessness" ("bespokojstvo", "neudači", "neprijatnosti", worries, mishaps, agitation, noise). "Calm" focuses on the subject's perceptions and emotional condition. Its objective counterpart is "order" ("porjadok", "v porjadke", in order, orderly, under control, "strojnyj", shapely, well-proportioned), opposed to "chaos, disorder".

Among order's characteristic variations are: "being even, regular" ("rovnyj", a condition freely attributed by Zoščenko's narrators to the shape of objects, to the appearance, emotional condition, and behavior of people, and even to the general quality and course of life); "nothing extra or redundant" ("ničego lišnego"),⁸ "proper functioning" (often referred to as "interaction of wheels" ["vzaimodejstvie koles'ev"]), – of means of transportation, machines in general, social institutions, and human organism;⁹ "mutual balance", often ironic, where two wrongs, or a wrong and a right, outbalance each other; "everyone in his place"; "one person upholding world order";¹⁰ "belief in reason, logic"; "laws of science, determinism, adaptation".

In view of perennial threats to calm/order, of paramount importance is its "stability". Zoščenko's narrators praise everything that is "firm" ("krepkoe", "pročnoe", "tverdoe", durable, solid, hard, unshakable, "železnoe", ironclad, "zakonomernoe", scientifically legitimate). The opposite condition is being "slack" ("slaboe", "raschljabannoe", "slučajnoe", weak, loose, fickle, accidental, chancy) and thus in need of "firming up" ("ukreplenie", "prikreplenie", "zakreplenie", fortifying, tightening, fastening). Once fortified, "stability" attains the state of "guaranteed immunity": calm/order is ensured by special protective measures (physical, institutional, financial) or, rather, it is believed so by the subject, whose false sense of security is invariably shattered as the plot unfolds. A whimsical variation on the same theme is "miraculous preservation": some precious entity (usually a remnant of the ancien régime) appears to remain incredibly intact against all odds and adversities (to be sure, the miracle turns out short-lived or imaginary). In yet another recurrent variation, even the inexorable laws of science have "legitimate exceptions" due to other laws, so that "order" is agreeably both violated and upheld at the same time (as epitomized by Zoščenko's favorite phrase "kurskaja anomalija").¹¹

Desirable as calm/order may seem, the sad philosophical truth is that life is "unstable", governed by "chance", especially now (i.e., after the

revolution) that God and tradition have been discredited and even science resorts to such shaky principles as probability and relativity.¹² A recurrent structural metaphor for “restlessness/disorder” is “oscillation” in its various manifestations and stages: shakiness, shaking, shaken state, swaying, vacillation, going to and fro (“šatkost”, “rasšatannost”, “šatanie”, “kačanie” and Zoščenko’s idiosyncratically inclusive “motanie”). On the energy plane, “disorder” is represented by “weakness, tiredness” (“slabost”, “rasslablennost”, “utomlenie”) and even “exhaustion, emaciation” (“istoščenie”), in frequent hypochondriac references to the ailments of body and brain. Coupled with the principle of a person’s links to “order” on a grand scale (see above), “exhaustion” yields such familiar Zoshchenkovian images as a “doktorša, utomlennaja vyššim obrazovaním”.¹³

The two opposite poles – calm/order and restlessness/disorder – are constantly ironized and paired in paradoxical ways. A frequent combination is “deathlike calm”, with such variants as “calm achieved by settling for little”, “peaceful-looking corpse”, “grotesque resurrection” and other kinds of “oscillation between life and death”. One of Zoščenko’s favorite archplots features the sequence: imaginary guaranteed immunity – discovery of its shakiness – ensuing restlessness – complete unraveling and disorder – acceptance of deathlike calm (sometimes followed by death proper).

To turn to the Zoshchenkovian “fear/mistrust” of the environment, according to *Before Sunrise*, it results from the childhood traumas associated with several threatening objects: parental hand/arm (“ruka”), mother’s breast, water, thunder.¹⁴ In the author’s later life, as well as his comic texts, “fears” are triggered by the entire range of real or imaginary violations of personal boundaries: physical violence, invasion of private space, undressing (in a bathhouse, hospital, theater, because of robbery etc.), deprivation of property, and public humiliation – acts inflicted by beggars, thieves, robbers, guests, doctors, petty officials, and other negative authority figures.¹⁵ Mistrust of the breast is at the root of the manifold food anxieties: abstention, craving, vacillation, envy of others, depriving them of food, (fear of) poisoning, disowned consumption (e.g., disguised as professional tasting), overeating (sometimes fatal). The perception of food as a most dangerous hazard is probably due to the very mode of its consumption: intake, i.e., the crossing of the ultimate – bodily – boundary. The other major aftereffect of the breast trauma is fear of love/sex, perceived as one of life’s most powerful destabilizing factors.

Coupled perversely with reliance on reason, mistrust generates a variety of “critical” attitudes: “suspicions” (including hypochondriac medical complaints and subversions of doctors’ diagnoses), “preventive measures”, “tests”, “provocations”, “false alarms” and “overreactions”. Many plots are based on subsets of this fully fledged paranoid paradigm.

Mistrust borders on and gives rise to the Zoshchenkavian character's major preoccupation: obtaining "protection" against danger. His defense mechanisms include (in addition to the strategies just outlined): erecting various physical barriers, creating elaborate warning devices, using other technological means (e.g. a foreign flea powder),¹⁶ sporting aristocratic clothes and other status symbols, exhibiting arrogant manners, resorting to behavioral pretenses and literal disguises, and, when all else fails, fleeing. Flight (repeatedly discussed in *Before Sunrise* as a fundamental but self-defeating defense strategy) often involves a "vehicle", which, combined with Zoščenko's partiality for "interaction of wheels", his obsession with disease and dying, and his fear of doctors, often results in farcical play with ambulances and hearses.¹⁷

An important aspect of defense involves "vision". It produces such motifs as "suspicious curiosity", "voyeuristic testing", "determination and ability to see and face danger", as opposed to "blind self-assurance", "looking the other way", attempts at "making oneself invisible" or, in turn, "dazzling and blinding" others, in yet another variation on "pretense". In this context, various visual aids (glasses, pince-nez, monocle, lorgnette) often assume the additional roles of status symbols and concealing masks.

The main focus of defensive efforts must, according to Zoščenko, be on one's own self – in order to cope with one's wrong inner urges: the greed, gluttony, alcoholism, love of free rides, violence, cowardice, and ego trips that possess his comic characters, as well as the fears to which he himself confesses as the author-narrator of *Before Sunrise*. The tools of such self-control are threefold. "Courage", sometimes – as a "legitimate exception" – pushed to the point of "uncommon valor", helps suppress inner phobias and withstand actual external pressure and even the threat of death itself (e.g., in the *Skyblue Book*'s stories of the Roman hero Mucius Scaevola and of the weakling student who defeats the muscular diver).¹⁸ "Reason" and its higher form, "science", enable one to understand, master, and even redesign and rejuvenate the human machine. Finally, "will-power" ensures the ability to stay the difficult course of self-control, as exemplified by such model "foreigners" as Kant and Goethe in the commentaries to *Youth Regained* (3: 96-101, 125).

Yet, even the scientific realm is not immune to the risks of disorder, which penetrates it in the form of: innocent "mistakes", based on ignorance or lack of intelligence; "over-automatization" and other forms of "suppression" of self; morbid acceptance of "symbiosis" with disease and death (as in the case of the doctor who was only freed of his anxieties after having been paralyzed below the waist [3: 140-143]); and false "rationalizations", whereby one pretends, to others and even oneself, to be mounting a reasonable defense against fears, while actually succumbing to them. This element of "pretended rationality" (a scientific version of "masks and disguises"),

informs all of Zoshchenkavian discourse, accounting for its pervasive ambiguity, in particular the deliberate blurring of boundaries between the real author and the various more or less unreliable narrators and other characters tellingly endowed with Zoščenko's own traits.

The failings of reason are, in turn, to be remedied by the meta-rational strategies of damage control (laid out in *Before Sunrise*): finding and correcting the mistakes; replacing suppression and symbiosis with the more organic "resolution and elimination" (to the point of forgetting) of phobias; and, above all, "detecting and unmasking" pretense and self-deceit – in a move that underlies a great many comic and serious plots. But the difference between the "right" and "wrong" means of self-control often appears dubious, providing yet another proof of Zoščenko's profound ambiguity.

3. 'Foreigners' reads almost like an anthology of Zoščenko's invariants. The disquisition on foreign mores immediately introduces the theme of "restlessness" in no uncertain terms ("žizn' dovol'no *bespokojnaja*"; "ne smorgnem, čego by ni slučilos"). Its more specific manifestations in the text include "overdoing", as opposed to the "orderly" principle of "nothing extra" ("Kurjatiny [...] kušal i zaglotal *lišnee* [...] Nu progлотil i progлотil [...]);¹⁹ and "fearful agitation" leading to "swaying" ("[S]mertel'no ispugalsja [...] [U]žasno *poblednel. Zamotalsja* na svoem stule"); not to mention the nose-blowing, digging in the throat, rushing to the bathroom, and other desperate reactions anticipated by the narrator but only partly materialized in the plot.

On the calm/order side, it is not for nothing that the story was originally titled 'Vse v porjadke'. This phrase, lifted from the suffering protagonist's response to the solicitations of his caring host ("Izvinjajus', govorit, ne znaju, kak u vas v gorle, a u menja v gorle vse v porjadke"), is truly, if ironically, emblematic of the entire narrative. First of all, there is the Frenchman's feigned "orderly behavior": blowing kisses to ladies, flashing smiles, stroking the dog under the table, having precisely one more helping (lit. "portion") of food ("Posle na blamanže naleg. Skušal *porciju*"), etc. These manifestations of order are dictated (and the alternative, "natural" actions, representing disorder, are excluded) by the overall discipline of "bourgeois morals" in general and diplomatic receptions in particular ("Im tam buržuaznaja moral' *ne dozvoljaet* proživat' *estestvennym obrazom* [...] A vyjti iz-za stola i pobežat' v udarnom porjadke v ubornuju – tam tože nechorošo, *neprilično* [...] [T]am ètogo *absolutno nel'zja*").

In fact, the entire depiction of the banquet scene is a typical case of "proper functioning" and "everyone in his place" ("Krugom millionery raspoločilis'. Ford na stule sidit. Opjat' že fraki. Damy. Odnogo èlektričestva gorit [...] na dvesti svečej"); the protagonist's performance is supposed to join in the workings of this perfect system. Even the contrapuntal reference to "our" ways ("Skoraja pomošč'. Mariinskaja bol'nica. Smolenskoe klad-

bišče"), much as these contrast with the foreign ones, is also couched in terms of "proper functioning", with a hint at "interaction of wheels" (in the case of the ambulance-turned-hearse).²⁰ Farcical combinations of both codes ("theirs" and "ours"), for instance, the putative diving for galoshes after the reception, further display and undercut the idea of "order".

Danger comes in the form of food: choking on and swallowing a bone, caused by greed/gluttony ("zaglotali *lišnee*; Posle na blamanže *naleg*")²¹ and followed by panic ("smertel'no ispugalsja") and attempted *digging* in the throat ("Načal bylo v gorle kopat'sja"). The food/eating paradigm is fleshed out in much detail: the event is banquet/dinner; the food, chicken ("kurjatina"); the culprit, bone ("kost'ju podavilsja"); the symptoms involve the throat and belly ("charkat"; "za gorlo chvatat'sja"; "za brjucho rukoj vzjalsja – naverno, kol'nulo"); the diagnosis includes suspected poisoning ("možet [...] zaglotali [...] nes'edobnoe?"); the main props are (Ford's) chair and dinner table (mentioned in every possible connection); a possible solution features the bathroom/defecation ("A [...] pobežat' [...] v ubornuju [...] 'Aga, skažut, pobežal do vetru"); the orderly behavior includes more eating and sitting through the end of dinner.

Zoščenko's texts abound in situations of "dangerous eating", including some where eating/swallowing takes one to the brink of death, e.g., in the stories about: the narrator gorging on food under the guise of working as a professional taster; the man who dies after having eaten his way to the "lucky" slice of cake with a coin; and the arrested speculator who has swallowed his gold coins and will not submit to surgery for fear of being robbed by the doctors.²² Pathological gluttony "justified" by an eating competition is at the center of a satirical piece which shares with 'Foreigners' even some verbal details ("Mnogie davjatsja, *motajut* baškami [...] ni čichnut', ni *smorknut'sja* [...] 'Naljažem po vozmožnosti [...]").²³ With a note of apprehensive self-identification, neurotic gluttony alternating with equally neurotic abstinence from food is described in the pages of *Before Sunrise* devoted to Gogol', whom Zoščenko considered his alter ego, and Zoščenko's own troubled eating habits.²⁴ A direct autobiographical parallel to 'Foreigners' involves the author-narrator's envious admiration of the soldier who endured an amputation without an anaesthetic by gorging on sausage, cheese and wine, i.e. used "overeating" as a means of "self-control" and "uncommon valor" ("Vot vam, vaše blagorodie, ètogo ne *vyderžat*", says the soldier).²⁵

In broader terms, the situation in 'Foreigners' comes under the heading of the "guest/host" topos, which in Zoščenko is always fraught with anxiety, however polite the actual exchange. Especially dangerous it becomes when superimposed on the situation of "foreignness", resulting in the archetypal topos of invaders as "uninvited guests". Remarkably, in Zoščenko's stories about the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945, the hostilities sometimes take the form of poisoning, which goes both ways.²⁶ In the story under analysis,

the victim is, of course, neither really poisoned, nor really foreign to the scene, but the general atmosphere of operating under “foreign” rules is there anyway, injected by the narrator’s perspective.

Another source of anxiety, only faintly suggested in the story, but familiar from other Zoščenko texts, is the much mistrusted medical practice, believed to be capable of promptly dispatching the patient to the cemetery. The parallels are many, including the story in which a drunken man is mistakenly deposited in the morgue.²⁷

More than with anything else ‘Foreigners’ is concerned with patterns of defense. The two opening paragraphs are punctuated with repeated occurrences of the “self-control” root DERŽ-, “to hold” (“morda [...] *deržitsja*”; “*dlja polnoj vyderžki*”; “*bez [...] vyderžki*”) and its near-synonyms (“*vzjato odno vyraženie*”; “*monokl’ nosjat*”; “*ěto steklyško ne uronim i ne smorgnem*”). Moreover, in accord with the “philosophical” bent, typical of Zoščenko’s prefatory remarks, the necessity of self-control is directly linked to life’s disorderliness by the explicit reference to “*bespokojnaja žizn*” and the rather inconspicuous phrase “*čego by ni slučilos*”, recurrent in Zoščenko on precisely such occasions. In fact, this phrase is replayed later in the story in the ominous context of “(supposed) poisoning”: “[M]ožet, vy čego-nibud’ dejstvitel’no zaglotali nes’edobnoe? Vy, govorit, v krajnem slučae skažite”; but the consummately disciplined hero, of course, is not telling.

The very first paragraph introduces the foreigners’ hard and arrogant face, which does not so much look at things as is put on display, demonstrating an aggressive-defensive attitude rather than vision. In the second paragraph, the immobility of the facial expression firms up completely (“*dlja polnoj vyderžki*”) into the monocle, which, too, is pointedly used not for seeing but for flaunting an almost prestidigitatory control. A telling parallel is the character in the story about “weak containers” who is said to wear glasses as a sort of screen – “*čtoby drugim ego bylo chuže vidat*”.²⁸ The monocle is also akin to the status symbols (lorgnettes, monocles, riding-crops, etc.) displayed by Zoščenko’s real and quasi-aristocrats, including his own pre-revolutionary self as portrayed in *Before Sunrise* and some third-person stories.²⁹

The last sentence of the second paragraph links self-control with “shame” (“*Bez takoj vyderžki oni mogut užasno osramit’sja*”), in a transition from the frame to the story proper with its specific dangers and defenses – those of social convention. The danger now takes the form of imminent public humiliation, to which Zoščenko’s oversensitive characters are especially vulnerable, as, indeed, was their real-life author, known for his touchiness.³⁰ The issue of “dignity/humiliation” is foreshadowed early on in the frame (“*morda [...] prezritel’no deržitsja*”), recurs at its end as the risk of embarrassment (“*osramit’sja*”), is contrasted with “our” supposed freedom from shame (“*s našej svobodnoj točki zrenija v ětom fakte ničego takogo*

oskorbitel'nogo netu"), and goes on to produce the amusing vignettes of (mostly imaginary) shameful behavior, summed up as *faux pas* ("Moveton i čert ego znaet čto").

At this point, however, defensive self-control does take over ("No srazu vzjal sebja v ruki"). The hero pretends that everything is normal by going through all the "orderly" motions – effectively donning the kind of mask emblemized by the generic foreigner's set face. This is directly referred to by the phrase "nikomu vidu ne pokazal" and enacted in the story's only dialogic scene, which is also a deliberate "test" of the protagonist's resolve by the host. Asked point-blank whether he might be poisoned, he responds in the negative, living up to the reputation of a true foreigner, one who would not let the symbolic monocle pop out of his eye no matter what.

He exhibits this superb control virtually in the face of death, invoked, albeit jocularly, throughout the story ("čego by ni slučilos"; "Smolenskoe kladbišče"; "v krajnem slučae"; "podoč li [...] ili [...] vyžil"). He would seem, therefore, to qualify for the highest category of "uncommon valor". However, in assessing the historical acts of such valor (in *Before Sunrise*), Zoščenko draws a distinction between those performed for a great cause and those dictated by less deserving reasons;³¹ the Frenchman's behavior belongs, of course, with the latter. Moreover, his self-control stems from and exemplifies "pretense" and mortifying "over-automatization", which are among the archetypal "wrong methods" of self-management.

Being "wrong", the rigid control cannot help but snap eventually – and it does, when the Frenchman finally resorts to "flight", in a move that is typical of many of Zoščenko's endings, both in his comic stories and in the autobiographical episodes in *Before Sunrise*. In the latter, flight is also illustrated with anecdotes from the lives of Zoščenko's favorite flawed heroes: Balzac, Tolstoj, and especially Gogol', who was always haunted by anxieties and only felt comfortable once in a carriage and en route (3: 101, 151, 648-651, 655-656). The Frenchman's flight starts as soon as he is out of social purview – on the stairs ("Nu, na lestnice, konečno, podnažal") and promptly engages a vehicle, in a virtual realization of the ambulance/hearse complex, broached earlier in the alternative – "our" – context. The fatal aura of this vehicle is enhanced by the ominous overtones of "priemnyj pokoj", meaning literally "admissions office/ward" (which is threatening enough), but also connoting "pokojnik", "the deceased", and the entire range of death's metaphorical representations as "final peace" (in Judaeo-Christian culture in general and in Zoščenko's poetic world in particular – as "death-like calm"). The frame closes with an uncertainty regarding the Frenchman's fate that is reminiscent of Zoščenko's "alternative" plot versions³² and especially his playful deaths-and-resurrections, e.g. in the already mentioned 'Rasskaz o bespokojnom starike': An old man lapses into lethargic sleep and is presumed dead; a hearse is ordered for him but delayed by red tape. The

old man then comes back to life and reacts violently to the arrival of the hearse, belated in every sense. Several days later he suddenly dies in actuality and is taken away in a hearse that arrives on time for a change. This whimsical violation of its usual disorderly order prompts ambivalent comments from the narrator.

4. 'Inostrancy' belongs to the established Russian literary genre of narratives about foreigners, real or fake, which includes Puškin's 'Dubrovskij', Leskov's 'Železnaja volja', Čechov's 'Doč' Al'biona', and many others. The tenor of such narratives is usually semi-ironic, intimating, roughly, that the Western ways may well be preferable, more civilized and all that, but, alas, hardly appropriate to our peculiar Russian conditions. Zoščenko's interest in this genre, to which he turns quite often,³³ and the specific spin he gives it lie in his ambivalent preoccupation with the issues of order/disorder, danger/protection, and dignity/humiliation. The "foreign" element is a ready-made embodiment of all that is orderly, controlled, cultured, dignified, well-dressed and well-mannered, but by the same token also intimidating and humiliating. Foreignness thus stands both for protection and danger, in a predictable reflection of Zoščenko's general ambivalence vis-à-vis order, culture, and authority. Characteristically, his stories about foreigners in Russia and Russians abroad differ little from his "all-Russian" ones about uncultured village folks visiting the city. A special subgenre features Russians feeling and behaving like Europeans, i.e. putting on important airs, or even impersonating foreigners to obtain privileges (such as a hotel room).³⁴

Given the centrality of "pretense" to Zoščenko's discourse, "feigned foreignness" is more than just an isolated farcical effect – it is a recurrent pattern, and 'Foreigners' constitutes, at a deeper level, a study in just such an impersonation. To begin with, the allegedly foreign protagonist is shown performing the role of a worldly gentleman as part of his defensive operation, with an occasional slippage into "our" ways. This is, of course, naturalized by the entire event being presented not so much as a documented fact but rather a reconstruction by the rather dim-witted narrator (and his source), so that all the participants, including the French-speaking French host, sound like amateur actors playing foreigners. Last but not least, both the narrator and the protagonist are saddled with the anxieties and obsessions that are characteristic of the "serious" narrator of *Before Sunrise* and *Youth Regained*, the implied author of the Zoshchenkovian poetic world, and the real author, whose personality is known from Zoščenko's correspondence and the memoirs of his contemporaries.

In a sense, then, there are no foreigners in this existential story, only various masks and modes of behavior tried on by the author-narrator – however much he would want to hide his oscillating identity behind the ironies of his absurdist discourse. The monocle is not unlike the famous

snuff-box that went so well with Zoščenko's impeccably correct manner of a former officer and gentleman.³⁵ This is not to say, though, that the author-narrator blends with the would-be Frenchman completely.

A distinctive characteristic of Zoščenko's authorial narrators is their keen power of observation, often sharpened by mistrust and highly relevant to the issue of vision – looking reality in the face. For instance, in the already mentioned “weak containers” story, the narrator, having witnessed the rejection of the boxes belonging to the customer “protected” by his glasses, fears that his own container may also be found weak. He promptly has it tightened but then rejected all the same, which eventually leads him to see through the whole kick-back scam. ‘Foreigners’, too, is told by an observant narrator, motivated this time not by mistrust (fitting for satirical plots), but by general intellectual inquisitiveness, more appropriate for the existential essay on life and death that ‘Foreigners’ is.

The narrator's exercise in detection takes place in the story's opening sentence (“Inostranca ja vseгда *sumeju otlčit'* ot našich sovetskich graždan”) and, therefore, can easily pass unnoticed. It is then followed by a close-up inspection of the foreigners' generic face, which, so to speak, stares back without really looking and seeing “ostal'nye predmety”. Paradoxically, by impersonally submitting itself to such examination, this face itself becomes similar to an inanimate object, mask, or deceased body.³⁶ On the level of plot, this strange visual duel foreshadows the interrogation of the equally poker-faced Frenchman by the host.

But, of course, the authorial narrator wields more power than is available to ordinary characters. Firstly, the very impassiveness of the generic foreigner makes him not only safely inscrutable, but also virtually helpless before the narrator's unceremonious peering. Secondly, this peering borders on physical exploration, as the narrator uses in his description the impolite synonym for “face”: “morda”. This word belongs to a speech register implying a breakdown of interpersonal barriers and even connotes rather directly physical violence, owing to collocations like “dat' po morde” (roughly equivalent to giving someone “a smack in the kisser”), quite common in Zoščenko. And finally, the narrator is able, in his omniscient capacity, to penetrate the foreigner's frontal defenses and see into both his thoughts and his innards, which is precisely what he does in telling the story of the Frenchman.

The foreigner's immobility, stiff self-control, and monocle – his death-masks, so to speak, – find their natural place alongside the other intimations of mortality that punctuate the narrative. Zoščenko's worldview and poetic world betray a consistent preoccupation with death, which is hardly surprising in a major writer.³⁷ A telltale parallel to the image of the half-dead monocled foreigner spied upon by the author-narrator with ambivalent fascination (“Éto, nado otdat' spravedlivost', zdorovo”, he enthuses at one

point) appears in the following passage from the section in *Before Sunrise* dealing with the methods of overcoming the fear of death:

We find examples of an excessively calm and even somewhat loving, tender attitude toward death. This strikes me as utterly worthless [...] [T]he retired vice-governor Shevelyov [...] [l]ong before his death [...] personally ordered a coffin with some sort of special peephole. Of course [...] [t]hrough this peephole the deceased [pokojnik] would have been able to see almost nothing. And he himself could not have been seen at all [ego samogo [...] bylo ne vidat']. But Shevelyov corrected the situation in time. He ordered them to enlarge the peephole to the size of his face.

In addition, he bought some sort of "thick porthole glass", which was adapted to the coffin. It turned out very nicely. One could admire the deceased through the glass without lifting the lid of the coffin⁸ [...] And many guests [!], "crawled into it out of curiosity" to see what kind of panorama would open up before them through the glass of the little window [...]

There were probably a few smiles when they buried this gentleman. It must have been amusing to look through the glass and see the serious, pensive face of the deceased, who had said the final word in the business of burying people, in the business of saving them from the fuss of the world.

(1974: 300-301/ 3: 671-672).

'Foreigners' is among Zoščenko's many tragicomic contributions to the same cause. As such, the story may warrant the dedication of its analysis to the memory of one of the most observant foreigners to have ever fussed with "our" literature, with or without a monocle.

NOTES

¹ Further references to this edition are by volume and page only.

² With this umbrella term I mean to cover a wide range of studies focusing on Zoščenko as a critic of a certain low-brow, "vulgarian" discourse, ascribed variously to the culture of the pre-revolutionary lower-middle class ("meščanstvo"), post-revolutionary philistines, the new Soviet man, or the official Soviet propaganda; see Vol'pe 1991 [1941], Čudakova 1979, Ščeglov 1986, Popkin 1993: 53-124, Zholkovsky 1994: 35-56.

³ The concept of “unculturedness” as the main target of Zoščenko’s satire was introduced in Ščeglov 1986.

⁴ Cf. M.O. Čudakova’s programmatic statements (perceptively singled out for disagreement by Cathy Popkin [1993: 67]):

None of the [Sinebrjuhov] stories can be paraphrased coherently [...] The real events occur [...] not on the level of “fabula”, but on the level of narration. (1979: 54)

The real basis of the “fabula” of the stories of the 1920s–1930s with rare exceptions [...] does not tell much to the student of Zoščenko’s poetics [...] (*ibid.*, 140)

⁵ Presumably, Ford has the only chair in the room, like the tenor in the story ‘Monter’ (1: 355-356); see Zholkovsky 1996.

⁶ On *Before Sunrise* see Kern 1974, McLean 1973, 1974, Masing-Delic 1980, Hodge 1989, Hanson 1989, 1990, Scatton 1993: 208-245.

⁷ This approach is developed in Zholkovsky 1995a, 1995b and 1996. For earlier comparisons between *Before Sunrise* and Zoščenko’s other texts, see Von Wiren-Garczynski 1967, Zholkovsky 1991 [1988], Sinjavskij 1988, Hanson 1989. On the unreliability of the narrator of *Before Sunrise*, see May (forthcoming).

⁸ “Nothing extra” is a widespread motif:

Или закручиваешь? Может, хочешь схватить *лишний* предмет ширпотреба? (3: 372)

Конечно, плата, она как-то ограничивает человека в его фантазиях. Она борется с *излишествами*, с проявлением разных темных сторон характеров. (3: 189-190)

Одевался, конечно, этот немец ослепительно. Белье чистое. Штаны ровные. Ничего *лишнего*. Ну прямо гравюра. (1: 365)

Что касается взглядов, то он, знаете, не вождь и не член правительства, и, стало быть, он не намерен забивать свою голову *лишними* взглядами. (3: 37)

И уж, во всяком случае, ваш вид не задержит ее в этом мире *лишние* пять минут. (3: 269)

The dual treatment of the “no extras” principle, now satirical, now approbatory, reflects Zoščenko’s general ambivalence toward the minimalistic “ethic

of nihilism”, represented in particular by Tolstoyan self-abnegation; see Zholkovsky 1994: 44, 53-55.

⁹ See, for instance, ‘Vse važno v étom mire’ (2: 452-454).

¹⁰ E.g.:

Бухгалтер, например, специально как-то там складывает цифры между собой на пользу страждущего человечества, чтобы оно, так сказать, не слишком проворовалось в денежном отношении. (3: 275)

Incidentally, this mock job description (from *A Skyblue Book*) also represents the “everyone in his place” motif.

¹¹ See, for instance, ‘Naučnoe javlenie’ and ‘Naučnaja anomalija’ (1: 409-410; 2: 447-450).

¹² This argument is developed with notable consistency in the “sentimental tale” ‘Strašnaja noč’ (2: 89-105, see pp. 90-97).

¹³ See ‘Operacija’ (1: 397-399).

¹⁴ On these motifs in *Before Sunrise* see Masing-Delic 1980; on the motif of “hand/arm” in Zoščenko’s oeuvre, see Zholkovsky 1995b.

¹⁵ On “guests” etc. see Zholkovsky 1996; on problems with authority, Hanson 1989.

¹⁶ See ‘Kačestvo produkcii’ (1: 365-367).

¹⁷ See, especially, ‘Rasskaz o bespokojnom starike’ in *A Skyblue Book* (3: 384-389).

¹⁸ See 3: 412-414, 428-431. The Mucius Scaevola episode is remarkable for its unexpected parallel with ‘Foreigners’:

Тем более там у них в Риме даже, кажется, “скорой помощи” не было, так что это особенно усиливает мужество этого римского бойца. (3: 414)

In fact, a similar special circumstance is also mentioned in the ‘Rasskaz o studente i vodolaze’:

Только на этот раз не было контрольной комиссии, и водолаз [...] порядочно отутюжил нашего студента. (3: 430)

¹⁹ The “restraining” syntax of the sentence “Nu proglotil i proglotil” (echoing the “no extras” motif) finds an exact replica in another story about a character reaching too high in his “elitist” claims – by boarding a streetcar, paying for himself and his date, and even using leather handles:

Скажи на милость, какие великосветские манеры! [...] Ну, заплатил и заплатил. Так нет, начал, дьявол, для фасона за ко-

жанные штуки хвататься. За верхние держатели. Ну, и дохватался. Были у парня небольшие часы – сперли.
(‘Časy’; 1: 332)

- 20 This is reminiscent of such idealized “pictures of fast-paced work” as the one in the story about the “weak container”:

[Т]акая приятная картина труда и быстрых темпов [...] Будка [...] Весы [...] Весовщик за ними [...] Весовщик быстро говорит цифры, записывает, прикладывает гирьки, клеит ярлыки и дает свои разъяснения [...] (3: 309)

- Incidentally, the eventual subversion of this “proper functioning” (by the discovery of kick-backs) is also couched in “machinistic” terms: “Tut ja načinaju ponimat’ vsju mehaniku”.
- 21 A classic Zoshchenkavian glutton is, of course, the heroine of ‘Aristokratka’ (1: 170-173). Note, incidentally, the narrator-hero’s initial offer of one pastry (“Eželi, govorju, vam ochota skušat’ odno pirožnoe, to ne stesnjajtes’. Ja zaplaču”; 3: 171), which parallels the Frenchman’s eating precisely one portion of “blamanže” in ‘Foreigners’.
- 22 See ‘Kakie u menja byli professii’ (2: 240-247), ‘Vernaja primeta’ (1: 230-232), ‘Rasskaz pro odnogo spekuljanta’ in the *Skyblue Book* (3: 199-201).
- 23 See ‘Komiki’ (1: 483-485).
- 24 On Gogol’ see 3: 652-655, on Zoščenko himself, 3: 610, 613-614, 623.
- 25 See *Before Sunrise*, the episode ‘Nervy’ (3: 474-475).
- 26 In one such story, ‘V gostjach u nemcev’ from the cycle *Soldatskie rasskazy* (1946: 156-157), the retreating Germans are rumored to poison wells, leading the Russians to suspect that the food left on a kitchen table is also poisoned, but the suspicion turns out to be wrong (!). In another story ‘My vas ne zvali’ from the cycle *Nikogda ne zabudete* (1963b: 51-54) a Russian woman-guerilla cooking for the Germans poisons their soup, effectively killing twenty soldiers.
- 27 See ‘Živoj trup (*Istinnoe proisšestvie*)’ (1: 259-261); see also ‘Odnadždy noč’ju’ (2: 461-463), ‘Domašnee sredstvo’ (1: 515-516), and Zoščenko’s most famous indictment of medicine, ‘Istorija bolezni’ (2: 267-271).
- 28 The story, originally entitled ‘Slabaja tara’, appears in *A Skyblue Book* as ‘Melkij slučaj iz ličnoj žizni’ in the section ‘Rasskazy o kovarstve’ (3: 308-312).
- 29 See in particular ‘Dvadcat’ let spustja’ (2: 286-296).
- 30 Zoščenko’s “obidčivost’” is well attested in the memoiristic literature about him; see Scatton 1993: 25ff., Zholkovsky 1996. A close parallel to ‘Foreigners’ is again furnished by ‘Aristokratka’, which, too, combines the motifs of public humiliation and overeating.
- 31 See, for instance, the passages about Minich and Avvakum (3: 417-418).
- 32 On this narrative pattern in Zoščenko see Ščeglov 1986: 73-74.

- 33 See especially 'Kačestvo produkcii' (1: 365-367), 'Zapadnja' (2: 233-237), and 'Istorija s pereodevanijem' in the *Skyblue Book* (3: 325-327).
- 34 See 'Evropec' (1: 244-246) and 'Istorija s pereodevanijem'.
- 35 See Scatton 1993: 22-23.
- 36 A further subtlety is inherent in the actual Russian verb, "smotritsja", used, or rather misused, here: in a different syntactic structure, it could mean "to look in the mirror" and thus combine "looking at and seeing [oneself]" and "not looking at or seeing [other objects]".
- 37 In fact, Zoščenko insisted that in portraying contemporary characters a true writer should also show their archetypal core, in the Jungian sense (Gor 1990: 212).
- 38 Both episodes in *Before Sunrise* that feature the author at the funerals of his parents involve the motif of the coffin's lid as the last barrier between the dead and the living (3: 501, 546-547).

LITERATURE

- Čudakova, M.
1979 *Poëtika Michaila Zoščenko*. Moskva.
- Gor, G.
1990 'Na kanale Griboedova, 9'. *Vspominaja Michaila Zoščenko* (Ed. Ju. Tomaševskij). Leningrad, pp. 197-213.
- Hanson, K.
1989 'Kto vinovat? Guilt and Rebellion in Zoshchenko's Accounts of Childhood'. *Russian Literature and Psychoanalysis* (Ed. D. Rancour-Laferriere). Amsterdam and Philadelphia, pp. 285-302.
1990 'Autobiography and Conversion: Zoshchenko's *Before Sunrise*'. *Autobiographical Statements in Twentieth-Century Russian Literature* (Ed. J. Harris). Princeton, pp. 133-153.
- Hodge, Th.
1989 'Freudian Elements in Zoshchenko's "Pered voskhodom solntsa"'. *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 67, 1, pp. 1-28.
- Kern, G.
1974 'After the Afterword'. In Zoshchenko 1974: 345-366.
- Masing-Delic, I.
1980 'Biology, Reason and Literature in Zoščenko's "Pered voschodom solnca"'. *Russian Literature*, 8, pp. 77-101.
- May, R.
Forthcoming 'Superego as Literary Subtext: Story and Structure in Mikhail Zoshchenko's *Before Sunrise*'. *Slavic Review*.

- McLean, H.
1973 'Zoshchenko's Unfinished Novel: *Before Sunrise*'. *Major Soviet Writers. Essays in Criticism* (Ed. E. Brown). London, pp. 310-320.
1974 'Belated Sunrise: A Review Article'. *Slavic and East European Journal*, 18, 4, pp. 406-410.
- Popkin, C.
1993 *The Pragmatics of Insignificance: Chekhov, Zoshchenko, Gogol*. Stanford.
- Scatton, L.
1993 *Mikhail Zoshchenko. Evolution of a Writer*. Cambridge.
- Ščeglov, Ju.
1986 'Ėnciklopedija nekul'turnosti (Zoščenko: rasskazy dvadcatykh godov i "Golubaja kniga")'. A. Žolkovskij, Ju. Ščeglov, *Mir avtora i struktura teksta*. Tenafly, pp. 53-84.
- Sinjavskij, A.
1994 [1988] 'Mify Michaila Zoščenko'. In: Tomaševskij 1994: 238-253.
- Tomaševskij, Ju. (Ed.)
1994 *Lico i maska Michaila Zoščenko*. Moskva.
- Vol'pe, C.
1991 [1941] 'Kniga o Zoščenko' [1941]. *Iskusstvo nepochožesti* (Ed. F. Nikolaevskaja-Vol'pe). Moskva, pp. 141-316.
- Von Wiren-Garczynski, V.
1967 'Zoshchenko's Psychological Interests'. *Slavic and East European Journal*, 11, 1, pp. 3-22.
- Zholkovsky, A.
1994 *Text Counter Text. Rereadings in Russian Literary History*. Stanford.
- Žolkovskij, A.
1991 [1988] 'Aristokastratka'. NRZB. Moskva, pp. 40-50.
1995a 'K reinterpretacii poëtiki Michaila Zoščenko ("Ėnciklopedija straha" i idejnaja struktura rasskaza "Duševnaja prostota")'. *Izvestija Akademii Nauk. Serija literatury i jazyka*, 54, 5, pp. 50-60.
1995b 'Ruka bližnego i ee mesto v poëtike Zoščenko'. *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 15, pp. 262-286.
1996 'Zoščenko iz XXI veka, ili Poëtika nedoverija'. *Zvezda*, 5.
- Zoščenko, M.
1946 *Izbrannye proizvedenija 1923-1945*. Leningrad.
1963a ['Letter to Gor'kij, 30 September 1930']. *Gor'kij i sovetskie pisateli. Neizdannaja perepiska. Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, Vol. 70. Moskva, pp. 160-162.
1963b *Rasskazy, fel'etony, komedii*. Moskva.
1987 *Sobranie sočinenij v trech tomach*. Leningrad.
1991 'O sebe, o kritikach i o svoej rabote. Predupreždenie'. *Uvažamyje graždane. Parodii. Rasskazy. Fel'etony. Satiričeskie zametki. Pis'-*

-
- 1994 *ma k pisatelju. Odnoktnye komedii* (Ed. M. Dolinskij). Moskva, pp. 584-586.
- Zoshchenko, M.
1974 'Kritičeskie stat'i. Iz tetradej i zapisnych knižek'. In: Tomaševskij 1994: 74-134.
- 1974 *Before Sunrise. A Novella* (Transl. and Afterword G. Kern). Ann Arbor.