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| Zoshchenko, Mikhail Michailovich (1894-1958) |
| Зощенко, Михаил Михайлович |
| Mikhail Zoshchenko was a Soviet writer of short stories and tales (sometimes autobiographical), as well as a feuilletonist, memoirist, and dramatist. He was a member of the Serapion Brothers writers’ collective. Zoshchenko was best known for his hilarious lampooning of Soviet bureaucracy and the rampant scam artists of the 1920s. In the 1930s, his works were increasingly subjected to censorship and criticism. Evacuated from Leningrad during World War Two, he spent part of the war in Alma Ata (Kazakhstan). In 1946 his career was dramatically curtailed by Party statesman Andrei Zhdanov, who led a public campaign of criticism against Zoshchenko and the poet Anna Akhmatova. Deprived of his membership in the Soviet Writers’ Union, and hence his right to earn a living as an author, Zoshchenko died in 1958. |
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His teenage years were plagued by poverty, academic failure and at least one suicide attempt. He eventually studied law, but never graduated. In 1914, at the outbreak of World War I, he volunteered for the Tsar’s army and was sent to the front; after sustaining an injury, he was decorated and discharged with the rank of captain. In 1919 he volunteered for the Red Army, but was invalided out later that year. He married in 1920 and welcomed his first child in 1921, when he moved to Petrograd. In Petrograd he bonded with the Serapion Brothers, a writers’ group that refused to bend their art to political influence. Much like the Formalist writers and critics they mingled with, they were keen on the renewal of literary processes. Zoshchenko carried on publishing short stories and feuilletons, and soon achieved fame thanks to his original, satirical style.  Zoshchenko’s stories are populated by a multitude of memorable characters that reflect Soviet reality under Lenin’s New Economic Policy (1921-29): primitive, ignorant, jealous, uncouth, touchy figures quick to take offence or even get physical to defend their hard-earned earthly goods. They speak a pastiche of clumsy jargons, neologisms, and acronyms, lumped together with the bureaucratic language that had become a part of the middle and lower classes’ everyday speech; the outcome is often hilarious. They are not vestiges of the past but, rather, the disturbing prototypes of a *homo sovieticus* in the works, swallowed up by an increasingly grotesque reality; his plots, based mostly on plausible situations, end up pushing the limits of verisimilitude. In the 1920s he immediately became a beloved author whose readers recognised the mindset, the moods, and especially the speech of his characters as being closer to the surrounding reality than images pushed in proto-socialist realist novels such as Feodor Gladkov’s *Cement* (1925). Zoshchenko’s books, almost unanimously recognised as masterpieces of humour writing, became best-sellers. The collection *Dear Citizens* was reprinted more than ten times between 1925 and 1928. Yet not all the critics loved him. To counter the growing criticism against his use of *skaz* (a narration based in oral speech, especially slang), in 1929 Zoshchenko took up the documentary genre and published *Letters to a Writer*. Here, he comments on — but never censors — a collection of letters or even simple cards sourced from his correspondence with his readers. It was an explicit attempt to show his earnest bond with the masses and an implicit attempt to offer the common reader a channel of expression that was not mediated by censorship.  In the 1930s, he complemented his short stories with works in which the introspection of his poetics became more apparent. ‘Youth Restored’ (1933) came out in the magazine *Zvezda*, drawing such negative reviews that writer and activist Maxim Gorky himself would ask Glavlit (the Soviet agency in charge of literary censorship) to withdraw it. In 1934 Zoshchenko began serialising *The Sky-Blue Book*, a historical-philosophical treatise on issues such as milestones in history, fame, love, treachery, and money. Not even *History of a Reforged Man* (1934)(Zoshchenko’s account of a visit to the penal colony whose prisoners were building the White Sea-Baltic Canal) could shield *The Sky-Blue Book* from attack. After just two episodes, the magazine *Oktyabr’* was forced to suspend the publication of *Before Sunrise*, a sort of autobiography immediately declared ‘foreign to the interests of the masses.’ The second part was published posthumously, in 1972. Zoshchenko’s introspective analysis, his interest in the subconscious and his ironic style flew in the face of socialist realism, and it was only a matter of time before his work was banned. Gorky’s death in 1936 deprived him of an important supporter. In 1941 he volunteered for the Red Army but, again, he was invalided out. Having been evacuated from Leningrad during the Siege, he was forced to seek refuge in Alma Ata (Kazakhstan). In 1943 he returned to Moscow. In 1946 Zoshchenko and the poet Anna Akhmatova were singled out for public attack by influential Soviet statesman Andrei Zhdanov. This put an end to Zoshchenko’s social and artistic life. After years of physical and moral suffering, he eventually passed away in 1958. His final works are crucial in order to understand facets of socialist realism that have yet to be thoroughly investigated. Major Editions: *Sobranie sochinenii*  vols. 1-6, Leningrad (1929-31)  *Izbrannye proizvedeniia* 1923-1945, Leningrad (1946)  *Sobranie sochinenii*, 3 vols. Edited by Iu. Tomashevskii, Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, (1986-87)  *Maloe sobranie sochinenii*, Sankt-Peterburg: Izd. Gruppa Azbuka-klassika (2010) |
| Further reading: Biography (Smolian and Iurgevna)  (Zoshchenko)  (Tomashevskii) Criticism (Carleton)  (Chudakova)  (Kazanski and Tynianov)  (Milne)  (Papazian)  (Scatton)  (Shcheglov)  (Zholkovsky)  (Zoshchenko, Fond 501) |