



## Introduction



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*Skaz* comes from the Russian word *skazat*, “to tell”, and hence signals the oral, story-telling quality inherent in the form. In a country distinguished for its scholarly discourse and that has produced such celebrated tomes as *War and Peace*, *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Dr. Zhivago*, *skaz* seems like the provincial country cousin who does not know it’s impolite to tell crude jokes at the dinner table. Hidden in its playful form, however, *skaz* performs an important role expanding the range of linguistic and topical possibilities for Russian literature and allowing for a humorous and often irreverent approach to serious subjects.

While most *skaz* stories have a strong oral quality, the celebrated Russian theoretician, Mikhail Bakhtin, is quick to note in *The Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*<sup>1</sup> that the true importance of *skaz* lies in its “double-voiced discourse” and the “dialogic angle” between speakers. Bakhtin explains that *skaz* is unique because the author speaks through a narrator whose discourse is socially and intellectually removed from his own. The author’s voice is heard under, above and through the voice of the storyteller who is not a literary professional but rather uneducated, provincial, unaware, dimwitted, poor, or from a repressed socio-economic, political or intellectual stratum speaking in his own tongue. The narrators in this anthology are Cossacks, serfs, women, hicks and holy fools. The narrator’s voice replaces the author’s to some extent since the events are portrayed and interpreted from the narrator’s point of view. The result is a discourse, Bakhtin contends, which has a “two-fold direction—it is directed both toward the referential object of speech, as in ordinary discourse, and toward *another’s discourse*, toward *someone’s else speech*” (p. 185). This creates, not merely a multiplicity of vernaculars and speech patterns, but a

1 Edited and translated by Caryl Emerson. U. of Minnesota Press, 1984.

“dialogic angle” where the author’s voice and the narrator’s are juxtaposed and in conversation with each other.

The most accepted indicator of *skaz*, then, is not just an oral quality but the existence of a narrative distance between the author and the chronicler of the story: “The author does not display the narrator’s discourse to us (as he does the objectified discourse of a hero) but utilizes it from within for his own purposes, forcing us to be acutely aware of the distance between him and this alien discourse” (pp. 190-191). In this volume, the narrators parlay, prattle and pontificate in ungrammatical, inaccurate and unsophisticated accounts which stand in sharp contrast to the voices of their literary and worldly authors creating “a collision and interruption of various accents within the bounds of a single syntactic whole” (p. 224). The contrast between the narrator’s voice and the author’s produces a dissonance in the text not unlike the effects of Soviet montage introduced to film by Sergei Eisenstein where transitions between shots were deliberately jarring.

Narrative distance is produced in this collection through a variety of methods. Some of the *skazes* are created through format. “The Letter” by Babel and “Letter to a Learned Neighbor” by Chekhov are written in the guise of missives and draw attention to the fact that they are constructed by a fictitious narrator’s hand—one of which imitates Cossack colloquialisms and one which parrots (and mocks) intellectual discourse. Other *skazes* introduce a framed story or story within a story. Leskov’s account is supposedly told by the author himself, as it was told to him by his nanny when he was a young boy. “My Brother Levanid” by Mozhayev narrates the adventures of the narrator’s sibling who was a country vet.

Some *skazes* have a hyperbolic, holy or magical quality which creates a narrative distance between the narrator and author. Zamyatin’s “Chief of *Volost*” and “Hardy Folk” are told in a heightened mode where the stock folk characters take on mythic proportions. Zoshchenko’s exaggerated events in “The Bathhouse” and in a communal kitchen in “Nervous People”

create hilarious tales from an omniscient point of view. Dostoyevsky's and Tolstoy's *skazes*, "The Boy with the Outstretched Hand" and "Kornei Vasilyev", hold the reader at arm's length so he can make his own religious assessment of the narrative, while Remizov's magical "Night on the Eve of Ivan Kupala" is seen via an enchanted fairytale gone wrong.

Many of these *skaz* narrators are also removed from the author by a cultural, socio-economic or theatrical distance. The woman who narrates the story in Dal's "Fugitive" was born in Ukraine, married to a Russian and whisked away to Turkey by a rogue bandit. The point of view of the serf narrator in "The Make-up Artist" and the many villagers in the other stories all stand in opposition to the socio-economic class of the authors and contemporary readers of these texts. Gorbunov in "Traviata" and "Justice of the Peace" makes use of his stage experience to recount theatrical burlesques that announce their exaggerations through the country bumpkins who wax eloquently about the opera and a drunken night on the town that lands them in jail. Likewise, Neverov's, "Marya the Bolshevik" presents the story of a woman who wholeheartedly embraces the Bolshevik cause as if her life were a drama played out on the stage of her village.

To one extent or another, all of the *skazes* in this anthology exploit oral and linguistic literary devices. This is particularly apparent in Bely's "Our Village" and Remizov's "Pilgrimage" where the cadences, images and figurative language describing a quaint village and a grandmother's pilgrimage to a monastery with her grandson are closer to poetry than prose. The monologue in Kuprin's "Last Word" is addressed directly to a jury as the narrator attempts to explain why he murdered a particular intellectual. Likewise, the shopkeeper in Bunin's "A Good Life" tells the story of her many marriages and rise from poverty as if talking to a neighbor over tea.

Many of the stories take advantage of multiple devices listed above. Noteworthy, in this context, is Gogol's "The Lost Epistle" narrated by the grandson of a Cossack who often incorporates

Ukrainian idioms to comment on his grandfather's character. The young Cossack sets out on a mission to deliver a letter to the Tsarina and along the way must outwit the devil and his witches. While the tale cannot be reduced to a fairytale, it reveals multiple levels of narrative distance generated by the framed story, magical elements, heightened characters and plot, and linguistic and cultural elements.

Gogol's story highlights the playfulness of *skaz* tales. While much of Russian literature is based on realism, a literary tone and high culture, *skaz* stands in opposition to these. The narrative space created by *skaz* allows for humor and idiomatic language. The author speaks through a narrator using parody: "one speaker very often literally repeats the statement of the other speaker, investing it with new value and accenting it in his own way—with expressions of doubt, indignation, irony, mockery, ridicule and the like" (p. 194). Hence, *skaz* tends to revel in irony.

More importantly, perhaps, *skaz* privileges a narrator whose point of view is often ignored or unacknowledged. It's not a surprise that many of these authors came from marginalized positions themselves: Gogol and Dahl were Ukrainian; Bunin and Kuprin were born in the provinces; Shishkov and Shukshin spent much of their lives in Siberia; and Chekhov, Gorbunov and Leskov were from poor families. Even Tolstoy, a nobleman, composed out of a strong sympathy toward the peasants. *Skaz* allowed these authors to write about peoples they knew well and commiserated with, using their language to express themselves. Shishkov and Shukshin, for example, were not well educated in comparison to their literary contemporaries. "The Commune" and "The Oddball," though, are nuanced portrayals of the effects of communism on the rural communities, the tragedies of industrialization on the cities and, in particular, for the scores of migrants who moved from the villages to find work.

Neither the authors' sympathy for marginalized peoples nor the *skaz* format itself was always held in high regard by critics and censors, however. Many of the stories in this volume were either criticized for being disrespectful to clergy and leaders

during the Tsarist era or censored for not promoting the official doctrine of the Soviet state. In fact, *skaz* was often written as an outgrowth of the inability of an author to freely express himself: "Where there is not adequate form for the unmediated expression of an author's thoughts, he must resort to refracting them in someone else's discourse. Sometimes the artistic tasks themselves are such that they can be realized only by means of double-voiced discourse" (p. 192). For this reason, *skaz* is much more than a lively way to tell a story; it is an important means for expanding the already rich tradition of Russian literature.

The majority of the stories in this collection have not been translated into English previously, though their authors are well-known. Like poetry, *skaz* is difficult to translate because meaning so often exists outside of the concrete denotation of words in the texture of colloquial idioms, spoken speech rhythms, untranslatable metaphors, misspellings and jokes that appear in these stories. At times, the translators were able to substitute an English idiom for a Russian one, but often were forced to resort to footnote explanations. Regardless, it is our hope that this volume is a welcome addition to the oeuvre of Russian literature available in English and an introduction to the rich and manifold delights of *skaz*.