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## **Anthropological Utopia in M. M. Zoshchenko's Novel «The Returned Youth»**

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*The article is devoted to the problem of creation of a «new» human in the novel by M.M. Zoshchenko «The Returned Youth». The writer's anthropological experiment is based on the mythological and biological models, and, at the same time, it is an attempt to reshape his own personal life. New anthropology by Zoshchenko leads to the change of the narrative strategies, and anthropological literature as a whole turns out to be a utopian experiment.*

*Keywords: anthropology, Zoshchenko, rejuvenation, disease, life creativity (жизнетворчество).*

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### **Point**

The October revolution of 1917 as an «anthropological innovation project» (Berg, 2000, p.32) featured the necessity of creating a new psychiatric type in literature. Creative work of Mikhail Zoshchenko as a satirist seemed to meet the requirements of the new «practical» life creativity. The writer, producing a fable style of writing, expected to be understood by the «popular Soviet reader», a young proletarian class. Zoshchenko found out the deformities and internal inefficiencies of this class, which he characterized as the bourgeois remnants of the past. He pointed out that it was difficult to get rid of the slave psychology and morality at the short period of time. However, by the early 30-th the writer is increasingly questioned about the positive hero. The anthropological innovation didn't lead to the expected results and forced the

writer to answer the question: why there is no «new» hero in his prose?

Doubting the found narrative manner, using both «someone else's speech» and the distant presence of the author, the writer (to some extent influenced by the abusive criticism) started a deep reflection, based on his own creativity and exploration of the spirituality of a his own personality. The science fiction trilogy by M. Zoshchenko is devoted to the exploration of the new anthropology – to create a perfect man of the era in the frames of a «literary experiment», a man who is not subjected to either stream time or accidental coincidence of adverse effects (e.g. sudden death). Ideally, this should have been neomythological (cultural) hero of the time, created first of all, under the influence of the ideals of the ancient world: be healthy in body and spirit (the principle of kalokagathia), to extend his/her live by using

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rejuvenation methods (the elixir of eternal life) and even reach some sort of bodily and mental metamorphosis (Ovid's spirit). Teogony becomes a principle of the «new» anthropology character, but this is not the heroic guise, but rather a savage child – «human, born again» (Berg, 2000).

### Example

The requirement to create a new type of hero was supported by the extensive scientific research. The early 30-s became the fateful time – the time of the scientific interest and the scientific foundation for mythological (ideological) adding. In particular, advances in the spheres of genetics and hematology, to which Zoshchenko was so close, reinforced his internal intention to «construct» a new man, whose body was like a perfect machine. A number of prominent institutions and individuals were engaged in the realization of the ideas of the «man-construct»: e.g. biological experiments by N. Koltsov, who headed the Institute of the Experimental Biology with the aim of rejuvenation, overcoming anthropological frontiers and, ultimately, human immortality; the new blood transfusion experiments between the elderly and the young people in A. Bogdanov's institute; Urogravidanotherapy Research Institute (gravidan – urine of the pregnant women), where Alex Castles, the husband of the famous sculptor Vera Mukhina, tried to solve the problem of rejuvenation.

The desire to become the part of the Soviet «bioengineering» lies not only in the social order, but also in the desire to start the improvement from himself – the fight with his own body (heart disease) and spirit (neurotic), which the writer does not hide from the reader. Zoshchenko begins his literary anthropology with the bodily component, unwillingly realizing the demiurge functions of the author-creator. The text of the «The Returned Youth» (1933) is arranged in such

a way that the process of creating a character is shown in the form of the Biblical «modeling» of the first man, the process of creating a «mortal receptacle» – a form for a new life. Beginning with the 15th chapter (before this text serves as the introduction theme of the «retinal youth»), all the thoroughly described details create a deep, drawn up composition of the main character, built in accordance with the main idea – to return mankind to happiness through the rejuvenation of the organism.

Initially, the specified age characteristics of the character are mentioned: «53 years old». The age-based options in conversation about the youth are the primary. Zoshchenko chooses the meaningful age – the time of becoming old and the dawn of life: «man... exposed himself to the last hits of life» (Zoshchenko, 1994, p. 25). It is noteworthy that the story which claims to be a scientific research, is accurate and thorough in figures and evidenced by the author's comment, which often provide the statistical calculations on different occasions. Consequently, the year of birth of the character – 1880 – coincides with the year of birth of A. Block, A. Belyi and Sasha Chyorny. Then, the writer indicates character's education and profession – an astronomer. Glamorous profession deliberately goes against the future practical objective of the character – to restore the lost youth by all means. The astronomy becomes close to the literature, because it is based on fiction, «fantasy», and what is subjected to an astronomer is real for a writer. Literature, in such a way, becomes occupied by the «verified harmony algebra», the scientific way to find the truth. In addition, the astronomical passages in the text demonstrate a clear commentary position of the author: Zoshchenko (according to scientific knowledge) is sure in the relativity of time and space – they can be «moved» and intended to go by their own will, effort or some fantastic plan – and a person

can manage the processes of aging and death of the mankind.

Originally, Zoshchenko meets the hero accidentally through the musical sounds that become the prototype of an ill soul that has not found its body: «he played the sad ballads by Tchaikovsky and Chopin's Preludes and Etudes» (p. 26). The appearance of the hero is depicted further – «withering, decrepitude, irritated, fishy look, the sad face, the flabby belly and the tired muscles» (p. 26). Finally, increasing lyrical narratives, a layer of copyright exemption is inserted («Apple Blossom»), telling that the author «wants to retain his youth and his young age until a hundred years» (p. 27). The writer thus puts himself in a space of his own experiment, swears at the end of the story to live up to a minimum of 70 years.

Thus, the *body* that Zoshchenko creates in his character (his own), distancing the life process of inhalation, since the name to identify the fate and the path of the hero, «is hidden» from the reader for a long time. Finally, the name appears – Vasily Petrovich Volosatov. As pointed out by Zoshchenko, this is the name which you have to adjust to. Future game with the reader follows the recognizable classical samples of the literature of the 19th century: the author's passage about the etymology and semantics of the names like in «Overcoat» by Gogol; «chatting» in the spirit of Pushkin's novel «Eugene Onegin»; Chekhov's vulgarity in the home. The nickname of the character – Vasilyok (according to the author, given by his wife in the romantic minutes of their conversation) – enhances the disharmony in relation to the name. Vasilyok Volosatov begins to resemble the fictional heroes of the early characters of Zoshchenko's satirical articles and the persons of the Russian literary avant-garde (Vasilisk Gnedov, Ryurik Ivnev), stressing the «exuberant» literacy of the combinable writer's type.

«His appearance and morality», «his family, relatives and acquaintances», «his neighbors» (the Karetnikovs – a husband, a wife and their daughter Tulya), «money, love, old age, doubts» – all these form a «curriculum vitae» of the Soviet model, when people were asked about everything in details. The ironic attitude of the author to this bureaucratic mechanism, is seen only through the phrase «on a whole» and through the details – the portrait of Tulya which reproduces almost verbatim (in prose) the portrait of Pushkin's Olga Larina: «it was, in fact, «shallow» young lady... Round moonlike face. Slightly bulging black eyes. Sensual mouth. Wide hips and magnificent bust. Round shoulders and slender legs. Here was the craze and pursue it favours» (p. 38). Reminiscence of «the stupid moon in the stupid sky» and Volosatov's affection to it characterizes the hero as the future Lensky, projection connected for Zoshchenko with the study of the romanticism as the young and healthy development of the culture. This assessment was inherent by many romantic poets and writers of the transitional era dating from the early 1930-s, e.g. O. Mandelstam (Gasparov, 1993).

In addition, the establishment of a literary character is equal to the process of the creation of a substance from different parts of the world: *vegetable* – cornflower; *animal* – hairiness, rising to monkey and, obviously, the idea of Darwin's evolution, when a person stands at the top of the evolutionary ladder; *astral* – reflections of the Professor about life on the other planets; *literature* – a collective image of people of a «new epoch», accumulating turning points of not only modern time but also of the last century. Except for the elements of the organic and cultural background, *chemical* component is also important: the process of aging is wrongly explained by the

endocrine glands malfunction («secrets» as it is symbolically named by the author, meaning that it is impossible to comprehend their work fully) and leads to the phrase: «I feel the thrill of future messages: «Scientist X created a living being chemically» (p. 136). Faustov's experiment to create a homunculus interests the author of «The Returned Youth». In the comments the author often mentioned Goethe, who took care of his health himself and made himself the homunculus. Goethe's character changed places with the author – it also happens with Mikhail Zoshchenko.

*Personal health* is given in the novel as a kind of creativity – you can shape it, create it and return it if it is lost. Describing in his comments the lives of the writers who retired early, Zoshchenko denies the principle of randomness, stating: one can not die because of health. Inner sickness (physical or mental) attracts the death as the magnet. Zoshchenko was convinced that death can be managed both by your health and your fate. This belief, made by the writer in the early 30-s, did not leave him until the end of his life. So, in a letter written to K.I. Chukovsky, written a few months before his death, jealous of the youth and energy of the addressee, he notes: «I have a recipe as well. Old age should be ignored. And then the body will obediently do manifest. Perhaps, not only old age but also death depends on your own courage. Perhaps (for the sake of the sporting interest) I'll try this recipe» (Sarnov, Chukovskaia, 1988, p. 82). According to the memoirs of Y. Nagibin, sixty-year-old Zoshchenko claimed that he had «sprained» the span his life by his will and conscious, and lived the time didn't not destined for him (Nagibin, 2004).

Health and good fortune are connected with each other: health and happiness, and vice versa. The character of Kashkin in «The Returned Youth» characterizes not only a

healthy (happy) person; he has it because of frustrating «brutal fortress of the nerves». He lives in the house of his mistress, he doesn't shy of her husband and lives at his expense. He also offers Tulya to arrange her life for a small fee – money of her future husband. Health in Zoshchenko's anthropology becomes akin to villainy, because corporal begins to dominate over moral and spiritual initiation. So, trying to return the health and well-being of his young life, Volosatov becomes more cruel and indifferent to other people, leaves his wife and daughter without explanation, does not even come to the funeral of his son because he doesn't want to postpone the trip to Sochi with his young wife. «Rejuvenated» Volosatov is beginning to resemble a typical hero of Zoshchenko's stories – the average Soviet citizen, balancing between accidental meanness and random virtue. The author of the story describes the monkey, which was hit at the Zoo and it doesn't mind insults, as a sign of a healthy mentality, leading to a healthy body. «Monkey» mentality somehow becomes an ideal model for the organism to heal itself, but it has the significant disadvantage – it is led not by wisdom and the will but by instincts and sensibility.

Zoshchenko's model of a «new» person with good physical health has one disadvantage – it lacks moral qualities and human decency. As indicated by Y. Shcheglov, «in combination of a romantic hero, a savage and a child, the character loosely breaks the elementary norms of the civilized behaviour, what results in strange and shocking situations, but does not affect anyone personally and nobody pays special attention to it» (Shcheglov, 1994, p. 223). The fact, that the author doesn't comment on this problem seems as his personal position, while the other characters being actively penetrated in the text indicate the *beginning of the times* when all cultural norms are thrown away – good and evil, tumble and

commonness. For example, Zoshchenko does not comment on the credo of «healthy improved» Goethe: «Injustice is better than mess», although this credo is contrary to the author's own internal guidelines.

New («animalistic») man involves the corporeal aspect of the breed, forgetting the spiritual, and this imbalance is featured by the author. Zoshchenko ends the story on such a disharmony – at the very sensual moment, which makes us to forget about everything and *think no longer* – it means to achieve true health. Zoshchenko believes that ratio of sensuality (sexual energy) and the ability to literature creativity are connected with each other: «A lot of energy that love requires, certainly reduces creativity» (p. 155). Thus, creativity (including artistic works) is possible when the author is not quite healthy. The last argument of the author, thoroughly disproving the therapeutic function of art, breaks down the system.

The «animal» healthy start of a human body is compared with a mechanically controlled machine. Health care brings together two extreme poles of Zoshchenko's anthropology – primitive-primate and automatic. In «The Returned Youth» the writer compares organic structure of a human with a complex machine that is operated from one centre – the brain. The writer introduces mechanized images and comparisons, stating that a person can operate at different speeds – fast and slow. The purpose is a «motor» and «petrol» for the life of an organism and body can live by inertial forces, like a machine.

Health becomes not only creative and life-creative, but also socially significant, because healthy people had benefited society. On the pages of the novel Zoshchenko underlines it by antithesis of the «proletarian health» and «intelligent health». Stating that a healthy body must follow the definite goal Zoshchenko stresses that there is no problem in having a new «hero»: it's a lofty

goal – «the struggle for socialism, for the better life...», the problem is how to control and manage their own bodies even after death.

In the context of the dissipation of the revolutionary energy and power, which was perceived as an aggressive force, a new person «born» in 1917, was in the transitional age – an adolescent, and being young again, speaking figuratively, was still too early. However, in our opinion, in 1930th Mikhail Zoshchenko, subconsciously understood the psychohistorical innovation trend: if the revolution as an energetic explosion had (temporarily) updated the corporal health of the nation and even renewed the health of the nation, then the evolution of the revolution became the history of illness. Zoshchenko's novel, with its «reconciling» construction of the new Soviet anthropology, on the one hand, gave new ideas; but on the other hand, it went on to make adjustments in the human evolution and social laws, adapting them to the new conditions of existence that was called the *eugenics* – the science to improve the human nature. Why was it necessary to improve things that were the best? This was the work of God, when medicine was no longer required. The only thing people needed is the elixir of immortality.

Arrival of the «new man» was the arrival of the new faith and therefore not only took away despair, but also paved the way for the resurgence. Model of the resurrection was partially played in the scene of Zoshchenko's stroke, and then the recovery of Volosatov. The recovered Volosatov was supposed to be the symbol of the recovery of the author himself and his illusions to epitomize the era. However, the temporary inability of the character to speak meant the following: Volosatov's stroke was the beginning of the «clinical death» of Zoshchenko's narrator – this was the beginning of the end for Nazar Sinebruhov, Michel Senyagin and Kolenkorov.

According to the researchers, the main weapon of the writer against the gloom was the word, which caused irony, laughter and life-giving militant sarcasm (Chudakova, Sarnov). In the trilogy (the decade of life), a word that caused laughter, was changed to the word that made people think. The healing by the laughter gradually became the healing from the laughter.

Illness as a phenomenon has, unlike health, *history*; it is potentially literary and narrating: you can discuss the disease for a long time and in different ways, but usually you never talk about health. As the writer of the socialist realism, Zoshchenko parted with his illusions with great difficulty, as the writer-philosopher, he was not mistaken in the diagnosis (about the epoch and himself). The word aimed to make the mind work had become his principal after the «Blue book» (1935), losing, due to the laughter, its life-giving force – «ambrozive» – and unwittingly causing a moral campaign in the writer's prose. And if Gogol's path in «The Returned Youth» was given in order to illustrate «how you should not to live», in the story «Before Sunrise» (1943) Zoshchenko embodied the destiny of Gogol – leaving literature for the realm of edifying.

## Result

Thus, Zoshchenko's «new» man was born by the opposition of the evolutionary logic of the nature: from a healthy body he moved to the sick spirit, and couldn't become a salvation and retribution for a writer (the removal of masks in the antique theatre could cause the anger of the gods). This «new» man – a fictional character of the «advanced» human, created and brought by the writer appeared in Zoshchenko's life – it was A. Zhdanov. The situation of exchanging the places of a writer and a creator was vividly marked by V. Aksenov, who pointed out that the perfect short circuit «Zoshchenko-Zhdanov» shows the conflict of the time: «Going through the bloody sweating room of the 1930-s, Zhdanov became Zoshchenko's bath attendant and Bulgakov's «sharik». People of Columbus type were named “freaks”. Solid, stable, normal Zhdanov hated his discoverer, a monster, a hangover of a society, the garbage of the silver age» (Aksenov, 2004, p.101). So, the cosmogony myth of a father-the-killer was realized as the moving force of «the returned youth» and the idea of improvement of the human nature was ultimately utopian.

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## **Антропологическая утопия в повести М.М. Зощенко “Возвращенная молодость”**

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*Статья посвящена проблеме создания «нового» человека в повести М.М.Зощенко «Возвращенная молодость». Антропологический эксперимент, предпринятый писателем, базируется на мифологической и биологической моделях, одновременно являясь попыткой житнетворческого переустройства собственной личности. Новая антропология у Зощенко приводит к смене нарративной стратегии, а антропологический литературный эксперимент в целом оказывается утопическим.*

*Ключевые слова: антропология, Зощенко, омоложение, болезнь, житнетворчество.*

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