

Analysis and Anecdote: Two Models of the Child's Voice in Russian and
Uzbek Prose

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Abstract. Most classical narratives of childhood are told in the first person by an adult who remembers being a child. The relation between the remembering voice and the remembered child is therefore a key to the child image. This paper compares two models of that relation in Russian and Uzbek prose. The first, represented by Lev Tolstoy's *Childhood* and Sergei Aksakov's *Childhood Years of Bagrov's Grandson*, is called here the *memory-analysis* model: the adult narrator analyses the child's feelings and perceptions, and the narrative voice is reflective and self-observing. The second, represented by G'afur G'ulom's *The Mischievous Boy*, is called the *anecdote* (Uzbek *hangoma*) model: the narrator tells his childhood as a chain of humorous oral stories addressed to listeners, and the child appears through deeds and speech rather than through analysed feelings. Drawing on narratology, on the theory of skaz and on the typological method of comparative literature, the paper argues that the two models correspond to two concepts of childhood: one centred on the growth of consciousness, the other on conduct judged by a listening community.

Keywords: child image; narrative voice; first-person narration; skaz; hangoma; psychological prose; Tolstoy; Aksakov; G'afur G'ulom; comparative literature

Introduction

The classical childhood narrative is almost always told in retrospect. An adult takes up the pen and tells the story of the child he once was. This creates a double perspective in which two selves coexist in one voice: the experiencing child and the narrating adult. Narratology describes this situation as a relation between the text of the character and the text of the narrator, which may merge, alternate or stand in tension [10]. How a writer manages this relation decides much of what the reader learns about the child: whether we see the child's feelings from inside, whether the adult comments on them, whether the child appears as a subject of analysis or as the hero of a story.

This paper compares two ways of managing the relation in Russian and Uzbek prose. Lev Tolstoy's *Childhood* (1852) [11] and Sergei Aksakov's *Childhood Years of Bagrov's Grandson* (1858) [1] represent what is called here the *memory-analysis* model. G'afur G'ulom's *The Mischievous Boy* (*Shum bola*, 1936; final version 1960s) [6] represents what is called the *anecdote*, or *hangoma*, model, after the Uzbek word for a humorous oral story told among listeners. The comparison is typological: it does not trace influence, but asks how two literatures develop the shared situation of retrospective first-person narration in different ways [13].

The hypothesis is that the difference in narrative voice is not merely stylistic. It reflects a difference in the concept of childhood. The memory-analysis model serves a concept in which the meaning of childhood lies in the formation of consciousness, while the anecdote model serves a concept in which the meaning of childhood lies in conduct observed and judged by a community. The two concepts are understood as dominant tendencies of the two literatures, not as fixed national properties.

Main Part

Theoretical frame

Three strands of theory inform the analysis. The first is Cohn's account of how fiction presents consciousness. She distinguished psycho-narration, in which the narrator reports and analyses a character's mental life, from quoted and narrated monologue, in which the character's thoughts appear more directly [3]. In retrospective first-person narration, psycho-narration takes a special form: the adult narrator analyses the feelings of his own younger self. The second strand is the Russian theory of *skaz*, narration that imitates oral speech. Eikhenbaum showed how the oral manner of a narrator can become the organising principle of a text [4], and Bakhtin added that *skaz* is oriented not only towards oral speech but towards the voice of another social world and towards a listener [2]. The third strand is Ginzburg's study of psychological prose, which traces how Russian literature, Tolstoy above all, learned to analyse feeling as a process [7].

These frames suggest two questions for comparison. Does the narrative voice analyse the child's inner life, or does it perform the child's story for an audience? And who is the implied listener: a reader invited to reflect, or a circle of listeners invited to laugh and judge?

The memory-analysis model: Tolstoy and Aksakov

Tolstoy's *Childhood* is the classic example of the first model. The narrator constantly moves between the child's experience and the adult's analysis of it. In the opening chapter, Nikolenka is woken by his tutor Karl Ivanych, who kills a fly above his bed; within a few lines the boy's annoyance turns into shame and tenderness, and he weeps, explaining his tears by an invented dream [11]. The episode is narrated with great precision about the movement of feeling, and the adult voice comments on the child's small self-deception. At the end of the book, at his mother's coffin, the boy observes his own grief and condemns himself for the vanity mixed into it [11]. Here psychonarration reaches its height: the narrator analyses not only what the child felt, but how the child watched himself feeling. Ginzburg placed Tolstoy at the point where Russian prose began to treat inner life as an object of analysis [7], and *Childhood* applies that analysis to a ten-year-old.

Aksakov's voice is quieter but belongs to the same model. His narrator reconstructs the earliest impressions of childhood with conscious attention to the limits of memory, distinguishing what he remembers from what he was later told [1]. The narrative is built from carefully observed sensations: the road, the steppe, the river, the faces of the household. The adult voice orders and interprets these impressions, and the reader is invited to follow the formation of a sensitive consciousness. Wachtel identified Tolstoy and Aksakov as the founders of a Russian myth of childhood in which the remembered past becomes the source of the self [12]. In both writers, the implied reader is someone who reflects together with the narrator. The child is a subject whose inner life is opened up for understanding.

The anecdote model: G'afur G'ulom

G'afur G'ulom's *The Mischievous Boy* is also told in the first person by an adult remembering his boyhood, but the voice is entirely different. The narrator tells his story as a chain of adventures, each with its own comic climax, in a manner close to the oral *hangoma*, the humorous story told among friends in the teahouse or the courtyard. The language is saturated with vivid everyday comparisons drawn from oral speech. When the boys are frightened, their hearts tremble "like poplar leaves struck by disease"; when his friend follows him in a hurry, Omon runs after him "like a fox chased by a dog" [6]. Such similes do not analyse feeling. They make it visible and comic, translating fear or haste into an image that a listening audience can recognise and laugh at.

In Bakhtin's terms, this is skaz in the full sense: a voice oriented towards a listener and towards a shared social world [2]. The implied audience is not a solitary reader reflecting on the formation of a self, but a community that knows the bazaars, masters, misers and holy men the narrator describes, and that will judge the boy's deeds. The child's inner life is not absent, but it appears through action and speech rather than through analysis. Fort describes the novella as a childhood picaresque that combines folk humour, the grotesque and the memoir form [5], and a chapter of it is now available in English in the anthology *Tulips in Bloom* [9]. The picaresque structure fits the anecdote model perfectly. Each episode is complete in itself, as a told story is complete, and its meaning lies in what the boy did and how it ended.

The narrating adult in G'ulom does not condemn his younger self for vanity, as Tolstoy's narrator does. He enjoys the boy's tricks and invites the listener to enjoy them. The moral judgement is still present, but it falls on the adults the boy outwits: the miser, the cheat, the hypocrite. The child is evaluated by his conduct among others, and the community of listeners shares in the evaluation.

Comparison

The two models can be contrasted on three levels. At the level of the narrator, the memory-analysis model uses a reflective adult who examines his younger self, while the anecdote model uses a storyteller who performs his younger self. At the level of language, the first relies on psycho-narration and analytical vocabulary, the second on oral comparisons, hyperbole and dialogue. At the level of the implied audience, the first addresses a reader who reflects, the second a community that listens and judges.

These differences correspond to two concepts of childhood. In the Russian texts the child is valuable as a developing consciousness, and the narrative voice is designed to reveal that consciousness. In the Uzbek text the child is valuable as a moral agent among others, and the narrative voice is designed to display his conduct before a community. As imagology reminds us, such a contrast describes the poetics of particular texts and should not be turned into a claim about national character [8]. Both literatures contain counter-examples. The contrast is nevertheless consistent with the broader tendency for Russian prose to build childhood in an ontogenetic-psychological paradigm and Uzbek prose in an axiological-ethical one.

Conclusion

Retrospective first-person narration is common to Russian and Uzbek childhood prose, but the two traditions develop it in different directions. In Tolstoy and Aksakov, the adult narrator analyses the child's inner life, and the voice of memory becomes an instrument of self-understanding. In G'afur G'ulom, the adult narrator performs his childhood as a chain of humorous oral stories, and the child appears through deeds judged by a listening community. The memory-analysis model and the anecdote model are therefore not only two styles but two ways of defining what matters in a child: the growth of consciousness, or conduct among others. Further research could test the two models on other works, including Oybek's memoir of childhood, which combines a reflective memory frame with episodes of moral trial, and on the transformation of the anecdote model in later Uzbek prose.

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