

When Gaps Matter: Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* vs. Dobychin's *The Town of N*

This paper provides a comprehensive comparative analysis of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Dobychin's *The Town of N*. Both works, situated within the *Bildungsroman* tradition and sharing striking thematic affinities, significantly diverge in their narrative architecture. This study employs Generative Narratology Framework (Timofeev, 2017) to integrate structural analysis with reader-response theory, thus utilizing a synthesis of Lubomír Doležel's ontological possible-worlds theory and Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological approach to "gaps" (*Unbestimmtheitsstellen*). The most compelling similarity between the two novels lies in the physical impairment of the protagonists, creating a radical shift in the reader's role at the same time. In *A Portrait*, Stephen Dedalus's myopia is established immediately; it serves as a lens for his growth as an artist. In contrast, Dobychin's reader discovers the narrator's visual impairment only in the final chapter of the novel. The omissions throughout Dobychin's book are revealed as intentional strategies, forcing a retroactive "filling in" of the narrative, and thus helping the narrative to mature, while Joyce's narrative matures alongside Stephen without the reader's help, highlighting the contrasting ways in which both authors engage their readers in the narrative process.

1. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The methodological framework is based on Lubomír Doležel and Wolfgang Iser's ideas about gaps. It elucidates both the production of the narrative worlds of the examined novels using Doležel's (1998) possible-worlds theory and their interpretation or reconstruction by the readers in accordance with Iser's (1978) phenomenological approach. *Generative Narratology Framework* (Timofeev 2017) connects the two theories by framing narrative as a cognitive process wherein the readers intellectually bridge gaps through inference and meaning construction. It tries to blend Doležel's ontological emphasis with Iser's interpretive focus by considering gaps as both structural elements of narratives and vehicles for cognitive engagement. For the reader to gain access to a possible world, as Doležel explains, the text needs to be authenticated. In this case, the reader enters a possible world and perceives it as a coherent and convincing reality within the text and action. Iser, in his turn, states that the reader does not passively perceive information but actively participates in the "concretization" of the text, that is, in the transformation of potential meanings into real ones. Iser says the reader "animates" the text, making it an aesthetic object by filling in the gaps. This allows the reader to integrate the disparate elements into a cohesive whole. The reader, however, must switch between the different perspectives presented in the text, including those of the narrator, the characters, the plot, and the intended reader. The primary methodological problem, in my view, is the wandering viewpoint, to use W. Iser's term – that is, the necessity to differentiate between our viewpoints as readers and those of the narrator. It is essential that the narrator's viewpoint remains distinct from that of the author. Although the narrator's goals, mental states, and emotions may be overt, defining them as linked to a specific cognitive process could be misleading, as the narrator is merely a construct of the author. To address this, I will employ a

strategy similar to that I have utilized analyzing Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* (Timofeev, 2017). It will help to formulate a hypothetical model of the creative process concerning the monitoring, regulation, and control of narrative advancement, including the reader's gap-filling activity.

2. Historical Context and the Question of Influence

Though published eighteen years apart – Joyce in 1917 and Dobyshin in 1935 – the relationship between these texts is likely one of “synchronicity” rather than direct influence. Dobyshin's lack of English proficiency and the delayed Russian reception of Joyce's major works suggest only a superficial familiarity. While Dobyshin may have encountered *The Sisters* (translated in 1926), the first ten chapters of *Ulysses* appeared in Russian only in 1936 – just as Soviet critics utilized Joyce's “formalism” as a cudgel against Dobyshin during the infamous 1936 meeting of the Leningrad Union of Writers. Dobyshin fled the meeting during its heated moments. It is believed he committed suicide, as he was never seen again. Thus, the parallels between these novels are best understood through what Nabokov ironically termed “telepathic connection” (Nabokov 1990, 90).

3. Comparative Narrative Dynamics and Linguistic Fabric

The textual analysis is based on the 1998 translation by Richard C. Burdon and Natalia Belova. While both novels share a generic root, *The Town of N* is significantly more compressed than *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, both in lexical density and temporal scope. Joyce traces Stephen's trajectory from infancy – marked by the paternal fairy tale – to the threshold of adulthood. Conversely, Dobyshin's narrator emerges at age six or seven and reaches only fifteen by the final chapter. Furthermore, Joyce employs a third-person omniscient perspective, whereas Dobyshin utilizes a restrictive first-person narration. Critical reception has often suggested that Dobyshin's narrator remains static; however, I contend that this view overlooks the fundamental maturation of the “verbal fabric”¹ due to the reader's active role. While *A Portrait* exhibits sharp stylistic shifts – moving from nursery rhymes to extended dialogue and concluding in a diary format – these shifts represent stylistic variation rather than the organic evolution found in *The Town of N*. In the latter, the narrative maturation requires the reader to assess the narrator's shifting independence from parental judgments.

Joyce's novel begins with the phrase, “Once upon a time and a very good time” – the tale that “his father told him” (Joyce 1995, 1). He – Steven, or rather, Baby Tuckoo – is the focalizer. Joyce uses internal focalization, according to Gerard Genette (1980, 68-75), which allows the reader to empathize with the agent of perception. The focalizer in Dobyshin's novel is not the narrator but the reader. The reader is the one who must actively compensate for the narrator's extremely narrowed viewpoint, or rather its absence. The narrative initially presents a world that is “alien”

¹ Wolf Schmid first introduced the term “verbal fabric of the text” in his analysis of the works of Alexander Pushkin and Fyodor Dostoevsky in *Narratologia* published in Russian in 2003. His *Narratology. An Introduction* was published in English in 2010.

but not “alienated”; there is a conspicuous absence of *ostranenie* (defamiliarization). The anonymous six-year-old narrator lacks a distinct ego, acting instead as a conduit for his mother’s viewpoints. The statistical dominance of the collective “we” over the singular “I” evidences this phenomenon. For example:

Guests arrived in the evening, and we told them about the rubber tires. --- Scientific progress --- they marveled. Bearded, like in “The Sacred Story,” they sat down to cards. Father seemed so young among them. “Pass,” they declared. One of them was a “bye,” and Maman entertained him. –Yesterday I made the acquaintance – she said – of Karmanova, the engineer’s missus. She is a very pleasant woman. Not for nothing was it, then, that I was getting ready to go to the Belugins; I was full of bright presentiments. She will be visiting us tomorrow. – And Serge too – said I. (Dobychin 1998, 10)

In case of James Joyce the reader feels themselves into what they perceive and imagine:

“Steven, scarlet with shame, opened a book and bent down upon it, his face close to the page. It was unfair and cruel because the doctor had told him not to read without glasses [...] And Father Arnall had said that he need not study till the new glasses came. Then to be called a schemer before the class and to be pandied [...]”. (Joyce 1994, 15).

Empathy is a direct act here, when Steven feels the pain of humiliation, the reader feels his pain. It is what might be identified as “an affective empathy” in Suzanne Keen’s (2007, 4) terms). While Dobychin’s reader is first to reconstruct the narrative by filling in the gaps to unveil the subject of empathy. The narrative needs to be de-defamiliarized, de-alienated, to pill off the others’ voices and points of view – be it Maman’s perspective, or some literary cliché based on misread Gogol, and Dostoevsky.

Thinking and feeling either belong to “the same package” as in James Joyce’s case, or be different stages of the process of unfolding operations. That is what contrasts the two modes of thinking the reader is to choose to apply either *introspective* mode – “I feel what you, Steven, feel” --, or the *reflexive* mode – “I understand what the narrator might have felt, if could better understand himself” (Timofeev 2017, 79-80). The following episode demonstrates how Dobychin’s reader actively participates in the process:

Wonderfully coifed and curled, she stood straight beside the mirror. [...] Father was already in his frock coat. He sprinkled us with perfume from an atomizer. “How lighthearted,” said Maman, coming up to him and taking him by the arm. – Why is that? We haven’t won two hundred thousand, have we? (Dobychin 1998, 9)

In the original text, two notions are mixed up: “How enlightened is my heart,” and “How lighthearted,” thus establishing a sarcastic juxtaposition between spiritual “enlightenment” and material wealth (the “two hundred thousand”). The boy misses his mother’s sarcasm, taking the phrase literally, and begins to fantasize about the future prospects: “We could buy a britchka and roll off to the Town of N... I’d become friends with Themistoclius and Alcides Manilov” (Dobychin 1998, 9). Dobychin’s reader to actively participate in the “concretization” of the text is to choose between the narrator’s viewpoint and thereafter miss the sarcasm, or “animate” the narrative by assessing the narrator’s childish misreading of Gogol’s irony. The reader is to comprehend two layers of allusion: the satirist Leykin, particularly his work *Ours Abroad*, provides a subtextual irony that frames the narrator’s childish misreading of Gogol’s *Dead Souls*. The reader is to know Gogol well enough to fill in the gap envisaged by Dobychin.

4. The Aesthetic of the Childish and the “Alien”

The text contains numerous foreign-language elements, all presented in Cyrillic script, reflecting the narrator’s limited understanding. For example, “mademoiselle” is rendered as “madmazel.” To a Russian reader familiar with the Golden Age of Russian prose, which often used French orthography, this spelling appears to be a clear sign of immaturity. The literal presentation of signs and plaques, such as items in the display of Pyotr M-ch-t Mitrofanov, further emphasizes this point. The use of “Maman” for mother may suggest irony, exemplifying “a mixture of French with Nizhny Novgorod,” a Russian expression that somewhat mocks the manners and language of the *nouveau riche*.

A central tension in *The Town of N* lies in the narrator’s consistent “misreading” of the literary texts and his fascination with them. The vigilant and informed reader is to fill in the interpretive gap. The narrator’s engagement with Gogol’s *Dead Souls* is particularly revealing; the narrator fails to grasp the authorial irony, taking Chichikov’s mercenary mimicry of friendship for a genuine social ideal. For the young narrator, male camaraderie is an obsessive motif that emotionally takes the place of parental bonds. This theme is underscored by his psychological tendency to conflate real-life acquaintances with literary archetypes, such as his comparison of the “nice-looking” John at the cross to his friend Vasya (Dobychin 1998, 25).

Narrative, in this context, is not a stream of consciousness episode. The inner speech of the narrator is complicated by what might be called a concealed irony on behalf of the author. The success of the reader’s comprehension of the text depends on the reader’s ability to distinguish between established literary traditions of portrayal and the raw perception of what is depicted. The primary analytical threat occurs at the meta-level, where reader’s expectations of “psychologism” or “empathy” may obstruct a clear view of the text’s self-reflection. Using the Generative Narratology Framework, we can discern two layers of reflection: the alignment (or misalignment) of the psychological concepts held by the author and the audience. Additionally, the text demonstrates an awareness of its own textuality. Both phenomena are frequently observed in the works of Joyce and Nabokov.

5. The Metaphor of Vision and Narrative Retrieval

The clouded physical eyesight of both protagonists serves as a crucial metaphor. Stephen’s myopia is apparent to the reader from the outset of the novel, illuminating his perception and artistic evolution in various ways. In contrast, *The Town of N* employs this technique retrospectively. The reader only discovers the narrator’s myopia in the final chapter, which necessitates filling in numerous gaps established by the author throughout the narrative. The insights that Joyce’s reader gains alongside Stephen in his pursuit of identity – such as feelings of isolation, limited perception, the awakening of sensuality, and artistic vision – are available to the reader of Dobychin’s story only in hindsight. This process relies on the reader recognizing the omissions as intentional strategies and being willing to engage with them.

6. The “Noli Me Tangere” Motif and Physical Alienation

The rehearsal of *The Death of Pushkin*, which the narrator once observed, turns into a pivotal multi-layered knot of motifs due to the intersection of the “Noli me tangere” (“touch me not”) Easter postcard and the suffering of Akakiy Akakievich (Gogol’s *Overcoat*). The narrator identifies with figures of suffering – Jesus, Pushkin, and Akakiy Akakievich Bashmachkin, blending their motives – yet fails to grasp the deeper spiritual or social significance of their rejection. As Andrey Arjev notes (1996, 201), the “touch me not” command in Dobyichin’s world alludes to Bashmachkin’s plea: “Leave me alone. Why do you insult me?” (Gogol 1998, 423). These motives underscore the narrator’s emotional loneliness enhanced by his profound fear of physical contact. . As the narrator grows older, his reading list shifts from Gogol to Dostoevsky, marking a transition toward more radical ethical boundaries within an unchanging state of loneliness. In contrast, his mother (Maman) remains a limited focalizer, her reading confined to Leikin’s satire, while the narrator embraces Dostoevskian ideas, viewing the transgression of rules as a necessity for the “growing-up” individual.

7. Maturation Through Reading and the Shift to Autonomy

His maturation is documented in unsent letters to his friend Serge, which serve as his only site of true reflection. These letters reveal the first signs of developing corporeity and a shift toward a Lermontovian “demon-like” solitude: “That winter, nothing interesting happened to me. Disillusioned, embittered, alienated... I now scoffed at friendship” (Dobyichin 1998, 84).

The narrator’s habit of “absorbing” and mixing bizarre or repulsive ideas – reminiscent of a distorted Don Quixote – serves to shock his environment. However, the first true sign of an independent identity appears through a visceral rejection of his mother’s conventionality:

[Maman] began criticizing someone [...] whose father had died [...] all night as if nothing was wrong, having had a good time in Shavskie Droshki. Then I told her that “that’s natural, since it’s disgusting sitting in one room with a corpse.” Suddenly she began sobbing and screaming that now she understood what to expect from me [...] For the entire month afterward, she’d glance at me, wipe her eyes, and sigh. It was silly and exasperated me. (Dobyichin 1998, 81)

Thus, the narrator breaks the symbiotic link with Maman’s perspective, marking a brutal step toward an autonomous, albeit alienated, self. Steven, as we remember, went through a similar experience, though much later. The narrator has reached a new level of cognitive maturity characterized by self-reflection and the practice of critical thinking.

8. Conclusion: The Emergence of the Imago

The narrator’s evolution discovers its “mirror” in Chekhov’s *The Steppe*. Reading of Yegorushka’s transition into an “unknown life,” the narrator experiences a profound sense of authorship.

“His eyes were so full of tears that Egorooshka did not see his uncle and Father Christopher leave the room. When he rushed to the window, they had already left the yard, and the chestnut-colored dog

was running back from the gates with the air of having fulfilled his duty of barking at someone. [...] Egorooshka felt that when those two people went, all that phase of life that he had known up to now was gone forever like smoke. [...] In sheer impotency he returned to the house, greeting with bitter tears the new unknown life that was now beginning for him. [...] What will that life be? (Chekhov 1959, 91).

However, Dobychin provides a sharp formal counterpoint to Chekhov: whereas Yegorushka's vision is clouded by tears, N's vision literally sharpens through the acquisition of corrective lenses:

That very day I visited an eye doctor and put lenses on my nose. Now I saw faces on the street distinctly and read numbers of cabbies' droshkies and signs across the road. On the tree I now saw all the little leaves [...] In the evening, when it got dark, I saw that the stars are very many and that they have beams. I began to think about the fact that until then everything I'd seen I'd seen incorrectly. I'd have been interested in seeing Natalie now and finding what she looked like. But Natalie was far away. She was spending summer this year in Odessa (Dobychin 1998, 102)

The resolution of this "visual gap" serves as a resurrection of the narrative. It is the narrative itself – beginning as a report lacking personal perspective – that ultimately evolves with the reader's assistance into a self-reflective text, leaving the narrator in his anonymity. What the narrator obtains during his reading of *The Steppe* is the first and the most necessary step to go above the reader's empathy to a reflexive authorial self-consciousness. The lack of a name throughout the text is revealed as a functional void, awaiting the development of a true personality outside the text, which is to emerge like an *imago* from a pupal shell.

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