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**SPECIFICS OF THE NARRATIVE IN THE NOVEL
BY J.M. COETZEE “THE MASTER OF PETERSBURG”**

Abstract

The article deals with the specifics of the narrative of the novel by J.M. Coetzee *The Master of Petersburg*, which, despite of the large number of critical works on the writer's work, has not yet become the subject of a separate study. Consequently, the main goal of this analysis is to study the specificity of the narrative structure of the novel *The Master of Petersburg*. The narrative is considered as a methodological construct for interpreting the text, and the methodological basis of this paper includes the developments of German theorist W. Schmid as well as the works by R. Alter, O.Yu. Antsyferova, P. Waugh on literary self-reflexivity. The author of this article defines the narrative type (implicit non-diegetic impersonal narrator) and mode (self-reflective) in J.M. Coetzee's novel, the last of which is manifested in “excessive literariness”, revealing the modeling nature of the text. Along with the study of the representation of the language and thoughts of the narrator and/or the main character, the forms of literary self-reflection, which are manifested in the novel *The Master of Petersburg*, are also analyzed. The author of this scientific paper pays special attention to the correlation between reality and pure fiction of the work: the events depicted in the novel, being refracted in the artistic consciousness of the hero-writer, become the basis of the plot for his future novel, perhaps even that one which we are reading. As a result of the analysis, the author concluded that the novel is replete with textual “mechanisms” that do not allow the reader to fall into the “mimetic illusion” and constantly remind that the novel is an author's construct. Self-reflexivity in the novel *The Master of*

Petersburg is presented in an implicit form, and the main forms of literary self-reflection are the theorization of literature, the discussion of works of art, and the exposure of the creative process. The textual “returns” at the end of the novel to the previous parts of the text, fold the novel into itself, also allow us to speak about the presence of self-reflective writing.

Keywords: narrative, self-reflexivity, self-reflection, literariness, J.M. Coetzee.

Анотація

У статті вивчається специфіка наративу роману Дж.М. Кутзее «Митець Петербурга», яка, попри чималу кількість критичних робіт з творчості письменника, ще не ставала предметом окремого розгляду. А отже і основною метою нашого дослідження стало вивчення особливостей наративної структури роману «Митець Петербурга». Наратив розглядається як методологічний конструкт інтерпретації тексту, а методологічним базисом для вивчення наративної структури роману стали напрацювання німецького теоретика В. Шміда, а також праці Р. Алтера, О.Ю. Анциферової, П. Во щодо літературної саморефлексії. Автор статті визначає наративний тип (імпліцитний недієгетичний безособовий оповідач) і модус (саморефлексивний) в романі Дж.М. Кутзее, останній з яких проявляється у «надлишковій літературності», що викриває моделювальну природу тексту. Поряд із вивченням репрезентації мови і роздумів наратора і/або персонажа, також розглядаються форми літературної саморефлексії, що проявляються у романі «Митець Петербурга». Окрему увагу автор статті приділяє розгляду співвідношення реальності і фіктивності твору, у якому зображуються події, які, заломлюючись у художній свідомості письменника, становляться основою сюжету його нового роману, – може, навіть того самого, який ми читаємо. У результаті проведеного аналізу автор приходить до висновків, що роман рясніє такими текстовими «механізмами», які не дають

читачеві впасти в «міметичну ілюзію» й постійно нагадують про те, що перед ним – авторський конструкт. Саморефлексивність у романі «Митець Петербурга» представлена в імпліцитній формі, а основними формами літературної саморефлексії є теоретизування про літературу, обговорення художніх творів, оголення процесу творчості. Текстові «повернення» в кінці роману до попередніх частин, що замикає роман на самому собі, також дозволяють говорити про наявність саморефлексивного письма.

Ключові слова: наратив, саморефлексивність, саморефлексія, літературність, Дж.М. Кутзее.

Introduction

There exist a large number of literary-critical works devoted to the study of the novel *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) which can be conditionally divided into several groups according to the issues covered. The first group incorporates the works describing the problems related to the socio-political discourse of South Africa (Bezzubtsev-Kondakov, 2009, Frank, 2010, Kelly, 2011, Poyner, 2009). The second group consists of works in which critics study the genre specificity of the novel (Keba, 2017, Prygodych, 2004, Strukova, 2016). Almost all the researchers turned to the analysis of the intertextual field of the novel that embodies allusions and reminiscences to the novels by F.M. Dostoevsky. They also studied the critical reception of the Russian writer's work in Western artistic and aesthetic thought. The third group includes studies which consider the system of characters in the novel, in particular the image of the main character – F.M. Dostoevsky (Keba, 2017, Strukova, 2016, Sobolevska, 2011, Khramtsev, 2009). However, despite the considerable number of scientific works devoted to the study of the novel by J.M. Coetzee, there still remain unsolved the topical issues of the narrative structure of the novel, which determines the novelty of the present research. The insufficiency of the study of narrative specifics in *The Master of Petersburg* also determines the necessity to analyze this aspect, which is a relevant

task in the context of the main searches of contemporary literary studies aimed at the study of narrative modes and forms. Therefore, the main aim is to study the specifics of the narrative structure in the novel *The Master of Petersburg* by J.M. Coetzee.

Methodology and methods

Recently, the interest in narratology has sharply increased in literary criticism, in particular, in the study of plotology, perspectiveology, motivology, and types of narrators from both a theoretical (in Literary Theory) and a practical (in the works of various writers) point of view. W. Schmid's *Narratology* can be considered as the most systematized work in this discipline because the German researcher analyzes in detail the already existing works by other theorists of narratology (J. Genette, Tz. Todorov, A. Weinstain, V.E. Khalizev etc.) and singles out two approaches to the category of narrative, namely: the plan of the communicative structure of the text (*narrativity*) and the plan of events (*eventfulness*) (Schmid, 2003: 11-13).

The conceptual basis of narrative categories necessary for the study of the novel *The Master of Petersburg* is based on W. Schmid's work: the *concrete author* is a real historical figure, the creator of the novel; the *abstract author* – “the image of the creator as s/he shows himself in his or her creative acts”, the figure is “created” by the reader when combining all the meanings of the text; the *presumed addressee* – intended or desired recipient by the writer; the *narrator* – who describes events in the novel from the third person, and who is an instance more or less “objective” from an ideological point of view, impersonal, which encompasses author, represented world and addressee (Schmid, 2003: 25-28). The narrator can sometimes be inconspicuous in the text, merging with the abstract author. However, the W. Schmid also notes: “the narrator is always presented as a subject endowed with a certain point of view, which is manifested in the selection of certain

elements from the “events” for the “story” being told” (Schmid, 2003: 37-38).

In modern literature that was affected by the critical socio-cultural situation of the 21st century, the transformation of traditional genres and the formation of new inter-generic or intra-generic forms can be traced, which in its turn had a significant impact on the very method of storytelling. According to O.A. Kovalyov, who studied narrative strategies in F.M. Dostoevsky’s novels: “narrative texts define themselves simultaneously as reality and fiction, which is the result of narrativization, only in one case do we notice artificiality, and otherwise we tend to ignore it” (Kovalyov, 2009: 5). In postmodern texts, in contrast to the novels of the 19th century, the situation with fiction and reality has been acquiring a playful character, and the narrative is characterized by the “exposure of the mode”, when the narrator deliberately emphasizes the artificiality of the creation of a novel. And this mode of narrative is inherent in the works by J.M. Coetzee and in particular in the novel *The Master of Petersburg*. In addition, the texts by J.M. Coetzee draw attention to a certain excess “literariness” and to the creative process of the novel, which indicates a self-reflective mode of writing. Self-reflection, according to O.Yu. Antsyferova, is considered as the process of “literature self-consciousness”, which “can be a work of art’s component, but it can also take the form of separate texts thematically focused on it (on self-reflection – *a note by M.P.*)” (Antsyferova, 2004: 4, 29).

Results and Discussions

There is a certain difficulty in defining the narrative type and mode in *The Master of Petersburg*. From the very first lines of the novel we read a story from the third person’s point of view which tells the reader about an arrival of the main character – Dostoevsky (*then in the following text – the hero-Dostoevsky*) in St. Petersburg. It is important to note that this narrator is not distant

from the events in the text either spatially or temporally, which is confirmed by the use of the present tense: “The driver reins in his horse; his passenger regards the building <...>” (Coetzee, 2004: 1) etc. Time and space coordinates are constantly fixed in the text (“In the afternoon he returns to Svechnoi Street <...>” (Coetzee, 2004: 18), “At eleven o’clock by his watch, without announcing himself, he emerges from his room” (Coetzee, 2004: 24), “At ten o’clock he is at the rendezvous on the Fontanka” (Coetzee, 2004: 114)), which emphasizes the narrator’s power over the “story” and his clear knowledge of the “events”. It should be noted that following W. Schmid, the “events” are considered as the original narrative material, and the “history” – as the result of selecting individual elements. The spatiotemporal positions of the narrator and the hero-Dostoevsky coincide, and the narrator’s point of view and the protagonist’s one sometimes are overlapped. The narrator acts as an impersonal entity who knows everything about the protagonist and who penetrates into the most intimate corners of the hero-artist’s soul and his consciousness. Thus, the type of narrator (according to the table of narrators’ types in “Narratology” by W. Schmid (Schmid, 2003: 45)): an implicit non-diegetic impersonal narrator, limited in knowledge and place of stay, because the narrator is “attached” to the hero-Dostoevsky. It is quite possible that the narrator is the hero-Dostoevsky himself, who writes a novel about himself at the end of the novel: “In his writing he is in the same room, sitting at the table much as he is sitting now” (Coetzee, 2004: 242). However, even if the authorship of the novel is attributed (we do not mean a *concrete author* – J.M. Coetzee, but an *abstract author*, according to W. Schmid) to the main character (hero-Dostoevsky), this is not enough for the formation of the *novel within the novel*, as E.A. Strukova claims: “on the pages of one novel, the reader observes the appearance of another, which is created before his/her eyes – the novel *The Possessed*” (Strukova, 2016: 126). Furthermore, the inclusions of two inserted texts attributed to the hero-Dostoevsky is not enough for such a definition, because the *novel within the novel* must be about the novelist writing the novel, and as a result two lines arise (the first one tells us about the

writer writing the novel, the second one is the plot of the novel written by the hero-writer), which should be connected compositionally by means of coupling, repetitions, and parallels. In the novel by J.M. Coetzee the hypothetical conditions for writing the novel *The Possessed* are unfolded before the reader and the “mechanisms” of the creative process that distort real events (Pavel’s death, a member of Nechaev’s underground organization, the spread of revolutionary ideas, etc.) are exposed in the novel – two inserted texts at the end of the novel are just drafts of the future novel – *The Possessed*.

Quite often, the narrative from the third person’s point of view is interrupted by the internal speech of the hero-Dostoevsky, which is not always graphically reflected in writing: in Anna’s room “<...> wrapped in scarlet velveteen, he finds a picture of a younger Anna Sergeyevna side by side with a man <...> What kind of marriage could it have been for this intense and darkly handsome young woman?” (Coetzee, 2004: 70); falling under a downpour, “he takes shelter in a doorway <...> he catches cold easily. Pavel too, ever since childhood. Did Pavel catch cold while he was living with her” (Coetzee, 2004: 115), etc. Thus, the narrator in the novel is constructed inconsistently, his image fluctuates, which results in changing the level of the “the narrator’s markedness” (Schmid, 2003: 38), whose presence is either clearly felt or weakened, as he completely merges with the hero-Dostoevsky.

Additionally, there are some “inclusions” in *The Master of Petersburg* which might seem as “alien elements” in the text: this is the word “therefore” or its interrogative variant “therefore what?”. The explanation after them is not given, and in the novel itself it is difficult to determine who they belong to: the narrator or the hero-Dostoevsky: “He cannot think, therefore what? <...> Therefore...Therefore what?” (Coetzee, 2004: 236, 237, 237). W. Schmid defines such a narrative violation as free indirect discourse (FID), that is “a segment of the narrator’s discourse that reproduces the words, thoughts, feelings, perceptions or the evaluative position of a character, whereby the reproduction of the

Characters' Text is not marked, neither graphically nor by any kind of explicit indicator" (Schmid, 2003: 220). FID is formed as a result of the adoption of the main features of the direct speech by the indirect speech, that makes distinction between the voice of the narrator and the main character very difficult. According to W. Schmid, FID "is connected with the narrator's desire to bring the language of the character directly, without giving up the signs of his narrative presence" and is used "for the purpose of ironically highlighting the words and the character's position" (Schmid, 2003: 222). Thus, the narrator emphasizes the uncertain attitude of the hero-Dostoevsky, both to the pictures that he constantly dreams of, and to the reality that is more and more like the world of a literary text.

The novel *The Master of Petersburg* is, first of all, a metafiction, since it problematizes the relationship between reality and fictitiousness and draws attention to its artificiality (Waugh, 1985: 2). The work depicts events which, refracted in the writer's artistic consciousness, will become the basis of the plot of his new novel, perhaps even that one we are reading now. The artificiality of *The Master of Petersburg* is also proved by the statements of the characters about their similarity with book characters: the hero-Dostoevsky, reflecting on his own behavior, says: "I am behaving like a character in the book" (Coetzee, 2004: 27), and in the conversation with Nechaev, he claims that "his place in this story is different"; after the closure of Pavel's case, Maximov informs the protagonist: "<...> I have ceased to exist, in the same way that a character in a book can be said to cease to exist as soon as the book is closed" (Coetzee, 2004: 147). In this way, the characters seem to emphasize their status of "fiction", "bookishness", "creation".

In *The Master of Petersburg* this "bookishness" or, in the words of M.A. Khatyamova, "excessive literariness", which exposes the modelling nature of the text, literature-centricity, manifests itself in an implicit form, since the novel does not directly address to the reader as well as there is no commenting on

what is written. Self-reflexive novels are considered to be the texts in which the style, the choice of the narrative entity, the names of the characters, the structure of the story, the inner world of the characters, and their fate are designed to constantly evoke the feeling that the work of art is an author's construct, built on the basis of previous literary traditions and conventions (Alter, 1975: 10-11). The main character of *The Master of Petersburg* is F.M. Dostoevsky, who writes a novel as well as his consciousness, which instantly transforms reality into an artistic narrative which penetrates into the mental process of a creative personality, are those elements of the novel that regularly draw attention to its artificiality and inspire the reader with the idea that in front of him is only an author's construct based on the texts of an outstanding Russian writer. The entire novel by J.M. Coetzee is an "understanding of the artistic practice by another author", namely F.M. Dostoevsky; the text presents a discussion of the novels by Russian writer and the creative process, which can be considered as the literary self-reflection's forms (Antsyferova, 2004: 49).

The novel by J.M. Coetzee is open to the reader and filled up with elements that provoke reader's vigorous intellectual activity. The hero-Dostoevsky explains to the investigator how to read a literary text in a correct way, as if his statement is also addressed to the reader: "<...> reading is being the arm and being the axe and being the skull; reading is giving yourself up, not holding yourself at distance and jeering" (Coetzee, 2004: 47). Similarly, in the novel, the hero-artist briefly mentions that in order to "breathe new life" into the novel, it is necessary to "add vivid strokes", details. Writing and reading are significant components of literature, and the discussion of these components in the novel can be considered as "theorizing about literature" that is another form of literary self-reflection according to O. Antsyferova (Antsyferova, 2004: 49).

At the very end of the novel *The Master of Petersburg* seems to "close" on itself/turn inward: the last texts written by the

hero-Dostoevsky turned out to be an “amalgamation” of the entire novel. The text of “The Girl” retells the chapter of “Matryona”, in which the hero-writer talks about Lebyadkins’ siblings (Coetzee, 2004: 72-74). In another text – “The Apartment” – a student changes into a white suit, similar to how the hero-Dostoevsky puts on Pavel’s white suit (Coetzee, 2004: 19); this young man walks around the room, opening all the chests of drawers, where there is a medallion with portraits of the hostess and her late husband, as the hero-Dostoevsky did in previous chapters (Coetzee, 2004: 70); in the end the scene of the physical intimacy between the student and the girl is described, and it reminds the scene at the beginning of the novel when the landlady’s daughter spies on the intimacy between the hero-Dostoevsky and Anna Sergeyevna (Coetzee, 2004: 233). On the one hand, thus in the novel J.M. Coetzee depicts how the reality transformed by creative consciousness becomes the fruit of creativity, on the other hand – if the hero-Dostoevsky is an *abstract author* (Schmid, 2003: 12) of the entire novel, then there is an “pressure” of the text on the narrator, who is forced to write according to the rules of the text, focusing on it (the text) constantly. It turns out that as if the entire text of the novel is its own source: the hero-Dostoevsky only decided to write down the pictures of the visions which had haunted him, but involuntarily he obeyed the text, describing what had already been written. It resembles a movement in a circle, where it is difficult to decide what is the beginning and what is the end, what precedes: either everything written to these two inserted texts promotes to write down these texts, or these texts are the drafts of the whole novel we are reading. Thus, the whole novel is a self-reflexive writing that constantly appeals to itself.

Conclusions

Hence, *The Master of Petersburg* problematizes the relationship between reality and fiction, and the artistic world of the novel draws attention to its artificiality. The modeling nature of the text that is a manifestation of self-reflexivity is emphasized. In

J.M. Coetzee's novel the consciousness of the hero-Dostoevsky is a kind of prism through which everything that happens around is refracted and becomes a source for writing a novel. This consciousness determines the specificity of the course of novel time that is psychologized, finds subjective perceptibility and duration.

The novel's textual "mechanisms" prevent the reader from falling into a "mimetic illusion" and constantly remind the reader that there is the author's construct in front of him/her. Self-reflexivity in the novel *The Master of Petersburg* is presented in an implicit form, and the main forms of literary self-reflection are theorizing about literature, discussing works of art, and exposing the creative process. The textual "returns" at the end of the novel to its previous parts, which "close" the novel on itself, also allow us to talk about the self-reflexive writing. Since self-reflexivity is a distinctive feature of many postmodern novels, this article opens new perspectives for studying the novels by J.M. Coetzee as well as by other contemporary authors.

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