

Entering and Leaving Childhood: Threshold Poetics in Sergei Aksakov and Erkin A'zam

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Abstract. The paper compares two narratives that stand at opposite ends of childhood: Sergei Aksakov's *Childhood Years of Bagrov's Grandson* (1858), which tells how a child enters the world of perception, and three novellas by the Uzbek writer Erkin A'zam (*The Street of Little Devils*, *Ice Cream* and *Farewell to the Fairy Tale*), which tell how a child leaves childhood behind. Using the anthropological concept of the threshold (van Gennep, Turner), narratology and the typological method of comparative literature, the paper argues that the two traditions mark the boundary of childhood differently. In Aksakov the threshold is crossed through a widening of perception and the gradual accumulation of impressions; in Erkin A'zam it is crossed through a moral event, the discovery of adult untruth and the need to choose. The contrast illustrates a broader tendency: Russian prose places the meaning of childhood in the growth of consciousness, while Uzbek prose places it in conduct and moral trial.

Keywords: child image; childhood; threshold; rite of passage; Aksakov; Erkin A'zam; Russian prose; Uzbek prose; comparative literature

Introduction

Every narrative of childhood has to decide where childhood begins and where it ends. These boundaries are rarely given by age alone. A text marks them through events that change the child's position in the world: an awakening of memory, an illness, a first journey, a death in the family, a betrayal, a choice. Comparative study of the child image has usually concentrated on the middle of childhood, on the child's everyday world and inner life. The boundaries have received less attention, although they reveal very clearly what a given tradition considers childhood to be.

This paper examines two texts that occupy opposite boundaries. Sergei Aksakov's *Childhood Years of Bagrov's Grandson* (1858) is a narrative of entry. It begins with the child's earliest fragmentary memories and follows him into an ever wider world of places, people, nature and books [1]. Erkin A'zam's three novellas *The Street of Little Devils*, *Ice Cream* and *Farewell to the Fairy Tale* are narratives of exit. Their children stand at the edge of childhood, and the title of the last novella names the movement of the whole cycle [2]. The two writers belong to different centuries, languages and literary systems, and no influence links them. For precisely this reason the pair suits the typological method of comparative literature, which explains similarities and differences between literatures by comparable stages of social and cultural development rather than by borrowing [13].

The paper pursues one question: through what kind of event does each text carry the child across the threshold of childhood? The hypothesis is that Aksakov builds the threshold as a change in perception, while Erkin A'zam builds it as a moral event. This contrast is treated as a concrete case of a broader tendency observed in the author's dissertation research: Russian prose tends to construct childhood within an ontogenetic-psychological paradigm, centred on the growth of consciousness, and Uzbek prose within an axiological-ethical paradigm, centred on responsibility and moral trial. The tendency is understood as a dominant, not as an absolute national property.

Main Part

The threshold as an analytical category

The concept of the threshold comes from anthropology. Van Gennep showed that rites of passage in many cultures follow a three-part pattern: separation from a previous state, a transitional or liminal phase, and incorporation into a new state [11]. Turner developed the middle phase into the notion of liminality, a condition in which the person is "betwixt and between" established positions and is therefore especially open to transformation [10]. Childhood narratives can be read as literary rites of passage, but they do not all place the transformation in the same domain. Here narratology offers a useful distinction. Schmid defines an event as a change of state that is relevant and not fully predictable, and he allows such a change to be either external, affecting the character's situation, or mental, affecting the character's understanding [8]. The question for comparison is therefore not only *when* the child crosses the threshold, but *what changes* at the moment of crossing: the child's perception of the world, or the child's moral position in it.

Bakhtin's typology of the novel of emergence adds a further dimension. He distinguished, among other variants, a biographical type, in which the hero changes with the course of a life, and a didactic-pedagogical type, in which the hero is formed according to an idea of upbringing [3]. A narrative of entry into the world of perception naturally gravitates towards the first type, while a narrative of moral exit from childhood is open to the second.

Aksakov: entering the world through perception

Aksakov's book opens not with a plot but with a series of fragmentary early memories, which the narrator himself presents as uncertain islands rising from the dark of infancy [1]. The first sustained episode is the child's severe illness and his recovery during a journey, nursed by his mother. This is the true threshold of the book. The child crosses from near-death into life, and the crossing is marked by a sudden intensity of sensation: the forest, the grass, the air of the road. From this point the narrative registers a steady widening of the world. The road to the family estate at Bagrovo, the steppe, the river and fishing, the household of the grandparents, the first books and the first fears follow one another without any single decisive turn. Scholars have long noted this quality. Wachtel places Aksakov, together with Tolstoy, at the source of the Russian myth of a harmonious gentry childhood recovered through memory [12]. Durkin reads the Bagrov books in terms of pastoral, stressing the slow rhythm of impressions and the integration of the child into the cycle of nature and the estate [6]. Dianova, in her comparative study of English and Russian childhood prose, devotes a separate chapter to the book and emphasises the gradual formation of the child's inner world through observation [5, pp. 165–209]. In Schmid's terms, the eventfulness of the book is low at the level of action and high at the level of perception [8]. Each new impression alters the child's picture of the world a little, and the narrative is the sum of these alterations.

Even the experiences that could become moral trials are absorbed into this logic. The death of the grandfather, the fears of the dark, the cruelty glimpsed in the life of the serfs: all of these enter the child's consciousness as impressions to be lived through and understood, not as situations that demand a choice. Coe, who identified the autobiographical "Childhood" as a distinct genre, observed that such texts typically value the child's capacity to perceive the world with a freshness the adult has lost [4]. Aksakov's book is a classic example. Childhood here is entered, not left, and its value lies in the fullness of what consciousness takes in.

Erkin A'zam: leaving childhood through a moral event

Erkin A'zam's novellas present the opposite movement. Their children are not discovering the world for the first time. They already know their village or street, their families and their games. What they encounter is a break in this familiar world: the moment when adult words and adult deeds no longer match, when a promise is broken, when injustice appears where trust was expected, or when the child himself fails and feels shame. The title *Farewell to the Fairy Tale* condenses the structure of the whole cycle [2]. The fairy tale is the world in which good and evil are clearly distinguished and promises are kept. The farewell is the moment when the child must act in a world where they are not.

Shofiyev, in his study of Erkin A'zam's prose, shows that irony is the governing principle of the writer's style and devotes a separate section to the child image and the motif of childhood [9, pp. 110–121]. In the childhood novellas, irony works as an ethical instrument. It exposes the distance between what adults say and what they do, and it compels the child, and the reader, to take a position. The decisive event is therefore not a widening of perception but a moral discovery followed by a choice: to accept the adult compromise, to resist it, or to carry the knowledge of it into adulthood.

It is important not to oversimplify. Erkin A'zam's children have rich inner lives, and his narration often follows their perception closely, with attention to detail, mood and landscape. Among the Uzbek texts studied in the author's dissertation, his novellas come closest to the psychological manner of the Russian tradition. Yet even here the inner world serves as the stage on which a moral choice is prepared. The threshold is crossed when the child understands something about right and wrong and must live accordingly.

Comparison

The two texts can be summarised as two models of the threshold. In Aksakov, the separation phase is the illness, the liminal phase is the journey, and incorporation is the child's gradual entry into a widening world; every phase is defined by perception. In Erkin A'zam, separation is the break of trust, the liminal phase is the child's confusion between the fairy-tale world and the adult one, and incorporation is the acceptance of moral responsibility; every phase is defined by a value judgement. The first model corresponds to Bakhtin's biographical variant of the novel of emergence, the second to the didactic-

pedagogical one, although in Erkin A'zam the didacticism is turned inside out by irony: the lesson the child learns is not the one the adults intended [3].

The comparison must also avoid national stereotyping. Imagology warns against turning differences of poetics into claims about national character [7]. The contrast described here concerns how two specific bodies of text organise the boundary of childhood, not how Russians or Uzbeks think. Each tradition contains counter-examples, and the two models should be seen as complementary answers to the question of what makes a child cross into adulthood.

Conclusion

The comparison of Aksakov's *Childhood Years of Bagrov's Grandson* with Erkin A'zam's novellas shows that the boundary of childhood is not a neutral fact of age but an artistic choice that reveals a tradition's concept of childhood. Aksakov builds a narrative of entry in which the decisive changes are mental: the child crosses the threshold by perceiving, remembering and understanding more. Erkin A'zam builds a narrative of exit in which the decisive change is moral: the child crosses the threshold by discovering untruth and taking a position towards it. Read through the anthropology of the threshold and through narratology, the two texts confirm the broader tendency of Russian prose to place the meaning of childhood in consciousness and of Uzbek prose to place it in conduct and moral trial. Further research could extend the threshold approach to other pairs in Russian and Uzbek literature, including narratives of girls' childhood and post-Soviet prose.

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