

# What They Laugh at in *The Town of N*: Laughing Situations in L. Dobychin's Prose

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**Abstract** The literary scholars who study the artistic world of L. Dobychin's novel *The Town of N* noticed that in Dobychin's world people, things, natural phenomena exist discretely, disorganized, in continuous chaotic movement. This Chaos recognizes only one, very conditional, border—the border of the Town of N. Like any space, the Town of N contains comic and tragic elements. The nature of the comic in the novel has remained little examined until now. The article analyzes the laughter situations that are present in the novel. The answer to the question—what are people laughing at in the Town of N?—, on the one hand, allows us to consider the socio-cultural situation in the county towns of the Russian Empire on the example of Dvinsk (nowadays—Daugavpils), on the other hand, to analyze the evolution of the consciousness of the protagonist of the novel. In the novel laughter situations are divided into two large groups—everyday laughter situations associated with the daily life of the Town of N and literary laughter situations associated with the comprehension of literary texts that define the consciousness of the era of the early twentieth century. It is also important to contrast the culture of laughter of children and the culture of laughter of adults. The adolescent crisis of the protagonist manifests itself primarily in a change of life orientations, in the destruction of myths. Laughter becomes a kind of destruction and overcoming of the old system of values, a factor that accompanies the hero from the world of childhood to the world of adults.

**Keywords:** culture of laughter; comic; Dvinsk; Town; childhood; Russian literature

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## Introduction

The novel by Leonid Dobychin *The Town of N*, published in 1935, has become the subject of a comprehensive analysis of literary critics in the last thirty years. The novel was reprinted several times, including historical and literary commentary, was translated into English (Dobychin), and then into many other languages of the world. In 2020, the novel was first fully translated into Latvian (Dobičins). There are a huge number of interpretations of the writer's artistic heritage. Scientific conferences and events devoted to L. Dobychin are held in Daugavpils (Latvia) and other cities of the world. We can talk about the existence of a fairly wide range of interpretations of L. Dobychin's creative work from avant-garde to satire. In the monograph "The Prose of Leonid Dobychin: Marginalities of Russian Modernism" T. Shekhovtsova pays special attention to the semantics of the town, defining the place of action of the novel "*The Town of N* as a town-myth" (Shekhovtsova 120).

The novel is set in the conditional town of N, in which Dvinsk (nowadays Daugavpils) is easily detected—the place where the writer's childhood passed. The realities and loci of Dvinsk and its environs at the beginning of the twentieth century are recognizable in the text, many characters have real prototypes (Belousov). In the novel, Dobychin, with the help of his hero, creates a myth about the town, represented simultaneously in real (temporal) and sacred (timeless) dimensions. The real, everyday world is presented in the novel quite accurately. The chronicle narration of the hero reveals the author's montage vision, his logic. In the artistic world of *The Town of N* there is no exact dating; there is no direct indication of the date when this or that event takes place. However, the dating of events described can be completely reconstructed thanks to the introduction of real historical happenings into the narrative fabric: the Russo-Japanese war, the events of the Russian revolution, Gogol's centenary, etc. In addition, many episodes of *The Town of N* are associated with memorable and festive dates of the Orthodox calendar. The writer presents the hero-narrator with facts from his own biography.

It can be determined that the action of the novel begins on October 24 (according to the New Style—November 6), 1901, the day when the feast day of Mary, the Mother of God, and the Mother of Sorrows is celebrated. The last historical event

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<sup>1</sup> This research was supported by Daugavpils University (Latvia) research development grant no 14-95/2021/18 "Cultural Memory and Identities of Latvia's Future: Crosspoints of Literature, History and Religion III."

mentioned in the novel is the death of Leo Tolstoy—November 7 (according to the *New Style* – November 20), 1910 (chapter 32). The novel ends in the summer of 1911, when the main character, like once Leonid Dobychin himself, graduates from *Realschule* of Dvinsk and leaves the town forever.

### **Methodology**

Literary critics have repeatedly drawn attention to the visual principle and its significance in the worldview of the young hero (V. Bakhtin, S. Shindin, V. Erofeev). The French researcher Annick Morard at one time turned to the problem of the interaction between the visual, verbal and acoustic in the novel especially highlighting Dobychin's technique when the verbal is perceived by the hero as an element of acoustic or visual space. The visual and the acoustic are gradually becoming the two pillars of the writer's creative process (Morard). In this regard, it is rather curious to analyse the category of 'laughter', which combines the acoustic and visual. The nature of the comic in the work of Dobychin was explored by Kim Dzhun Sok.

Culture of laughter is a term that is widely used by researchers of the world of comic and laughter (M. Bakhtin, D. Likhachev, A. Panchenko and many others). Culture of laughter is, first of all, a collective concept; by its nature, it is a pronounced sociocultural phenomenon that performs a communicative function. Through the prism of culture of laughter, a person receives this or that information.

Being a philosophical category, laughter is one of the most important cultural concepts, one of the central concepts of art, and is also a psychological phenomenon, thus, the comprehensive analysis of laughter makes it possible to better understand a particular literary image.

Numerous studies of the category of laughter suggest that laughter is an integral part of society. Through it, culture can present worldview guidelines and cultural values. If we generalize the existing definitions of laughter and highlight its essential characteristics, we can say that laughter is a situational emotional reaction of a person (behavioural, mimic, verbal) to absurdities, illusions, contradictions of life circumstances and their exposure, cleansing society of obsolete ideas (Likhacheva 136-137). Laughter situations in Dobychin's novel are multivariate, but they can be divided into two thematic groups: (1) everyday laughter situations and (2) literary laughter situations, as well as into age-related ones: (1) culture of laughter of adults and (2) culture of laughter of children and adolescents.

Humour in all countries and at all times tried to reveal the elementary and spir-

itless in a person, to show the similarity of an “elementary person” (layman) with a thing and the similarity of a thing with a spiritless person. The narrator (a teenage boy) reads a huge number of books (and these are adult books, “not for his age”), but he does not acquire knowledge from these books about the interconnection of phenomena and does not project them onto the world around him.

The present research is dedicated to identifying the originality of “laughter situations” in the fiction of L. Dobychin. Particular attention is paid to the study of the ways and techniques of representing “laughter situations” in the novel.

### Laughter Situations in the Novel

Let us turn to the frequency of the use of the lexemes “laughter” and “cry”, as well as the lexemes included in these two semantic fields in the novel *The Town of N*. The examples of the lexemes are taken from the original text (in Russian).

Semantic Field “Laughter”	Semantic Field “Cry”
Hihikat’ [giggle]– 15	Rydat’ [sob] – 4
Ulybat’sja [smile] – 15	Plakat’ [cry/weep] – 3
Posmejat’sja [laugh at] – 13	Sljozy [tears] – 2
Smejat’sja [laugh]—11	Vsplaknut’ [have a little cry]– 1
Smeh [laughter/laugh]– 2	
Smeshnoj [funny] – 2	
Posmeivat’sja [chuckle] – 1	
Pohohatyvat’ [have a laugh] – 1	
Hohotat’ [shout with laughter]–1	

The semantic field of “Laughter” in the artistic world of *The Town of N* dominates the semantic field “Cry” (sixty-one lexemes against ten). Some attention should be paid to the small number of lexemes in the semantic field “Cry,” even though death is often in the sight of the hero-narrator. In total, ten deaths are mentioned in the novel, and five times the hero becomes a participant or observer of the funeral processions (the first death is the death of his father preceded by his mum’s dream in which the ghost of the deceased previous tenant of the house appears, the last death is the death of Leo Tolstoy).

Despite such a pronounced dominant of the category of laughter, it should be noted that during the first third of the novel, laughter is practically not represented. In many ways, this can be explained by the fact that the narrator’s perception of

the surrounding world is based not on verbal, but on visual criteria. The hero is too young to fully perceive and understand the conversation of adults. Laughter situations increase as the hero grows up, with his active communication with peers and an assessment of the adult world. In comic situations in Dobychin's novel, which can be divided into previously mentioned two thematic groups (everyday laughter situations and literary laughter situations), the age of the characters becomes extremely important. The novel emphasizes the border between culture of laughter of adults and culture of laughter of children and adolescents.

### **Everyday Laughter Situations**

Undoubtedly, the behaviour of the residents of the town on April 1 is related to the everyday laughter situation in the novel. "On the first of April we were free and set off to visit her. It was cheerful walking through the streets. "You have a worm on your head" people would try to trick one another" (Dobychin 28-29). At the heart of the everyday category of the comic is a contrast that manifests itself in the discrepancy between content and form, essence and manifestation, the expected state of affairs and the real one, which results in laughter. It is April 1 that allows to remove the existing border between the world of adults and the world of children. It is also important to note that this is the only case in the entire text of the novel when Dobychin directly indicates the exact date of the events taking place—April 1 [Chapter 10]. The first of April is not only the day of laughter or the Fool's Day in the European tradition, but, after the calendar reform in Soviet Russia, according to the new style, on April 1, N. Gogol's birthday is celebrated. Gogol's poem *Dead Souls* plays a special role in the hero's life. "Gogol's Town of N for the little storyteller is the embodiment of the ideal, the golden age of human relations. The hero correlates all the phenomena of reality with the realities of the Main Book [*Dead Souls*]. The spiritual town and the material town in which the boy lives are united by a common name and are reflected in each other, as two meanings of Gogol's Mirgorod—the earthly town and the heavenly town, the Town of Peace, a synonym for heavenly Jerusalem" (Vajskopf 215).

Another variant of the everyday laughter situation in the novel is associated with the folkloric genre of anecdote (in English it is usually referred to as joke stories). Distinctive features of anecdote as a genre of culture (anonymity, laconism, lack of canonical text, stereotyped artistic form and content, parody and theatricality) are due to the specifics of the social environment that generates it and ensures its functioning in social time and space. As it is known, anecdote is one of the most fruitful genres of urban folklore. Anecdotes respond to painful, urgent problems of

society, covering almost all spheres of social life and, not least importantly, express the attitude of certain social strata, people's vision of the reality around them, as well as their attitude to it, thus being a kind of mirror of public consciousness.

"The gramophone sang couplets. Everyone liked the joke about the Jewish boy a lot, and they repeated it. "But it's a pity—said one guest—that science invented it so late: otherwise we would now be able to hear the voice of Jesus Christ, delivering sermons" (Dobychin 34). Many episodes in the novel conceal subtexts and symbolic meanings. In this fragment L. Dobychin creates a rather complex compositional structure of the narrative. The initial phrase—"the gramophone sang couplets"—is a kind of exposition. The second phrase becomes a rising action, the reader expects the denouement of which of the jokes about the Jewish boy caused a stir (no laughter) among those present that it was repeated twice. The third phrase seems to be connected not with the second, but with the first one, generating a comic effect—not for the narrator, but for the reader. Thus, provoking the appearance of laughter beginning outside the verbal textual structure. There are quite a few episodes arranged in this way in the novel. At the very beginning of the novel, *maman* and Alexandra Lvovna Lei repeatedly pronounce the phrase that "No, indeed—they were saying—it would be hard to find a place where this feast would be more to the point than in a prison" (Dobychin 3). For the narrator, who still accepts the statements of adults as true, there is nothing comic here, while for the reader the phrase that prison is the best place for a holiday will cause, if not laughter, then at least a smile.

Lack of fixation of laughter in a situation with a twice repeated joke may also indicate that the narrator did not notice the comic in the funny story, but could well perceive the actions pragmatically. It should also be noted that the novel takes place during the Jewish pogroms that swept across the Russian Empire. "A Jewess wearing a fringed shawl approached us. Don't—she said—beat that boy wearing the gray stockings. We laughed. Then we listened to a man in suspenders, who was sitting by a gate, play a horn" (Dobychin 52).

The behaviour of Jews on the eve of the Passover holiday seriously worries the residents of the town of N. "Today—announced Karmanova once, when I was staring out the window with Serge—is going to be "Fright Night"—and she advised us to go to the river and watch the Jews throng there to shake off their sins. Under Chaplinsky's protection we ran to the river. We laughed terribly. Chaplinsky told us that every spring little Christian boys vanish, and taught us how to show a "pig's ear". It was already just beginning to freeze" (Dobychin 37).

The motive of cannibalism is quite common in the folklore of the Slavs and Balts about ethnic neighbours, mainly about Jews (Amosova 38-52). In this frag-

ment the mythology of blood libel—“a terrible night” during which Christian boys disappear, —a typical example of an adult horror story for children, is combined with the playfully abusive nickname of Jews or Mohammedans associated with the prohibition to eat pork, as well as Chaplinsky’s gesture, who taught the heroes of the novel to make pig’s ear (folding the hem of clothes so that one gets an image of a pig’s ear), generate the phenomenon of terrible laughter, in which metaphysical fear of the incomprehensible is combined with a comic beginning.

The everyday laughter principle of Dvinsk is also represented in the works of Vladimir Krymov, who in the book of memoirs *From the Writer’s Storeroom (Iz kladovoj pisatjela)* cites an episode from his childhood illustrating the customs and entertainment of Dvinsk (the Russian province as a whole), giving a description of an open-air attraction (Krymov). It is almost impossible to imagine such a scene in the artistic world of *The Town of N*, although L. Dobychin also writes about the entertainment of the townspeople—visiting an agricultural exhibition, student balls; the urban space is filled with the sounds of town and military bands. The nature of laughter in L. Dobychin’s work is fundamentally different from that of V. Krymov. In the fictional world of the novel, there is no marketplace, farce laughter or laughter caused by cheap practical jokes. More often the laughter in the *The Town of N* is muffled, almost intimate, as if connected with some secret accessible only to a narrow circle of initiates.

Some grand lady sped past us, with a soldier on the coachbox. We glanced at each other and chuckled, and Serge taught me a ditty: Poor Madame Fou. (Dobychin 12)

Along with two Pferdchens Serge had already begun studying at Gausmansha’s to enter the first form in the spring. Serge told me that Gausmansha said “five fives”. After laughing at this, we chatted together pleasantly in my room and didn’t turn on the light. (Dobychin, 43)

I left the requiem solemn. Olov suggested that we go to the market. I had never yet been there, and off we ran. We giggled and, holding on to one another, shoved. (Dobychin, 44)

In one of the episodes, the hero himself becomes the object of ridicule. This happens in a situation when the boy is trying to understand the peculiarities of the relationship between the sexes: after the classes he makes a detour on his way home to “explore” Podolskaya Street (now Stacijas Street). There he meets the bully Osip, who laughs at the sight of the hero. The reason for Osip’s laugh becomes not entire-

ly clear to the narrator. The thing is that at that time brothels were located on this street (there are direct hints about it in the text of the novel). The appearance of a 12-13-year-old boy with an inquisitive and research gaze on this street causes laughter with an older comrade.

### Laughter Literary Situations

Another group of comic situations is associated with the reading circle of both the narrator himself and other characters in the novel. Of course, the reading circle bears a vivid imprint of the era, which makes it possible to judge not only the content of the Dvinsk bookstores, but also the general literary background of the period. It is no coincidence that the first funny situation in *The Town of N* is associated with the name of Nikolai Alexandrovich Leykin. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Nikolai Leykin was already a recognized master of Russian humorous literature, while unusually prolific. To date, literary scholars say that 36 novels and novelettes, 11 plays, about 10 thousand short stories and prose sketches have been written by him. In many ways, thanks to Leykin, the genre of humorous scenes becomes one of the most widespread genres in all types of short prose at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Shilovskih).

The falling asleep protagonist of the novel hears the muffled laughter of adults—"laughing in a whisper"—discussing an amusing episode from Leykin's. His work is not directly named, but the reader easily understands that they are talking about the book *Ours Abroad*, first published in 1890 and withstood 27 editions before the revolution, which testifies to the popularity and good text knowledge of the reading audience of that time. For his novel Dobychin selects only one episode from the vast Leykin's literary heritage—a scene from the adventures of the merchant Nikolai Ivanovich and his wife Glafira in Paris. The negligent travellers went for a walk around the city without bothering to remember either the name of the hotel or the street on which it was located, being sure that the cabman would understand where they needed to be delivered.

On the one hand, this episode emphasizes the existence of two worlds in the novel *The Town of N*—the world of an adult and a child, respectively, one of the markers separating these worlds, from the point of view of adults, is literature, while this division is absent in the mind of the protagonist. On the other hand, L. Dobychin needs Leykin to demonstrate a different approach to humour. Once K. Chukovsky introduced the term "Leykinschina" into circulation to denote crude vulgar humour. The wealthy shopkeepers and merchants in Leykin's narratives invariably carry a limited view of things, a false notion of etiquette. In this regard,



Dobychin demonstrates a fundamentally different approach. Already in one of the first reviews, Georgy Adamovich noted that in the *The Town of N*: "... laughter goes even further than the immediate subject of satire and undermines something more than this social order: poison penetrates into the general sense of life, irony eats away at everything" (Pisatel 185- 186). Dobychin's irony seems to be called upon to fight the world of standardized, normative forms. The writer ridicules and parodies all the manifestations of the cliché, template, standard, observed by him in life and literature.

The irony of Dobychin is manifested in the fact that the lexeme "laugh" occurs twice in the text of the novel, both times it refers to the title of Leonid Andreev's work *The Red Laugh* (Andreev). "From Asia the officers brought lots of all sorts of bric—a—brac. Kondratyev presented us with little knickknacks to hang on the wall. Where once *Zaratustra* had lain on his table, now *The Red Laugh* appeared. "He let us read it" (Dobychin 49).

"Have you read"—she said to me—Chukovsky: "Nat Pinkerton and Contemporary Literature"? This title excited my curiosity. I had read Pinkerton, but as to "contemporary literature," I thought that was something like "The Red Laugh." "I imagined vividly how they must laugh at that in this book. I wanted very much to read it" (Dobychin 96-97).

In the first case, the replacement of the handbook is quite curious, which is another allusion to Gogol's *Dead Souls* and Manilov's world, which is so close to the young hero of Dobychin's novel. One of the material, attributive characteristics of Manilov is "some book, bookmarked on page 14, which he has been constantly reading for two years" (Gogol' 14). Replacing the handbook in *The Town of N* is, to some extent, overcoming the Gogolian influence in the novel. Valery Meshkov, a researcher of Dobychin's heritage, once drew attention to the fact that "At the same time, one can see here a parody of Tynyanov's work itself. *Literary continuity from Gogol to Dostoevsky* occurs in the spiritual "microcosm" of the narrator. Dobychin's innovative technique lies in the ambiguity of the perception of the comic and the sublime, the serious and the funny, as is often the case in life" (Meshkov).

It is also fundamentally that in both episodes Dobychin does not directly name the author of the story *Red Laughter* Leonid Andreev. The story, which begins with the words "... madness and horror" and everything in it is put under the red colour of blood and death, becomes for Dobychin a sign of modern literature, a metaphor for "terrible laughter" that fills the country. It is no coincidence that the phrase *The Red Laugh* was used by Yakov Aronovich Gibiansky for the name of his magazine—an organ of public and political satire, which was published weekly in St. Pe-

tersburg and contained poems, notes, journalism, cartoons. Exactly under the same name in 1906 in Tomsk the only issue of the satirical magazine *The Red Laugh* was published, which was immediately banned by the censor (Zhiljakova).

In the second episode, *The Red Laugh* becomes a sign of contemporary literature, which must be rejected through ridicule. Here the hero is opposed to the teacher of literature Peredonov from F. Sologub's *The Petty Demon*, who, in a dispute with Nadezhda Vasilievna, declares: "I have read all good books before ... <...> I will not read what they are now composing" (Sologub).

As for the techniques that go back to Dostoevsky and were indicated by Tynyanov, Dobychin "persistently introduces literature into his works", his characters also often talk about literary works, the personalities of writers are in one way or another present in everyday life. Most often it looks like a parody device, and at the same time there is an ironic or comic subtext, there is that "second plan" that Tynyanov speaks about in relation to the parody (Meshkov).

The literary text determines the consciousness and behaviour of not only the protagonist, but also some other characters, the fact which also gives rise to comic situations. So Tusenka (her real name—Natalie) Siu, after the main character was introduced to her as "the son of a telegraph operator", suggested that the name of the main character (who has never been named by his first and last names like his mother and father) is a kind of citizen N having the surname Yat. "Serge told me that Tusenka, too, had arrived from the dacha. She—he laughed—thought that your surname was Yat. It turned out there's book *Chekhov*, in which telegraphists are hauled over the coals, and there's such a name there" (Dobychin 35).

Indeed, Chekhov has two works in which the named characters are present—the telegraph operator Ivan Mikhailovich Yat from the play *Wedding* (1890, 1902 with changes) and the telegraph worker Ivan Ivanovich Yat from the story *Wedding with a General* (1884, *Oskolki* magazine).

The transfer of the literary allusion to the real world evokes the laughter of the narrator's friend Serge. This episode, in my opinion, reflects L. Dobychin's attitude to the problem of correlation between reality and literary reality. An attempt to mechanically transfer the truth of life into artistic truth and vice versa to explain the phenomena of reality with literary images, in other words, write "everything as it was" and write about how it was in the authenticity of the only being and at the same time artistically can only cause laughter from those around. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Dobychin comes to the realization that "artistic truth" does not at all negate historical truth, but supplements it in those places where history has nothing to say.

## Conclusions

Creating the artistic world of the novel, L. Dobychin could not ignore the category of the comic. The novel is replete with laughter situations. Understanding a particular laughter situation directly correlates with the age of the main character. The adolescent crisis manifests itself primarily in a change in life orientations, in the destruction of myths. Gradually, the hero changes not only literary preferences, but he also approaches to culture of laughter of adults.

In the appearance of the town, in which the sacred and the profane are combined, there are two types of laughter situations—everyday and literary ones. Everyday laughter situations are close to the folk laughter culture that persists within the boundaries of the county town of the Russian Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Literary laughter situations are designed to show the evolution of the hero's spiritual world. The acquisition of individuality, the awareness of the protagonist of his uniqueness becomes the main event of the *The Town of N*. The study of the category of laughter opens up new opportunities for a holistic and multifaceted understanding of the essence of L. Dobychin's prose, as well as the socio-cultural context.

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