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## The emigrant prose of S.D. Dovlatov in the context of American 'new journalism' of the 1980s

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**Abstract.** The focus of research attention is concentrated on the features of the American 'new journalism' of the 1960s–80s, and the influence of its narrative and stylistic techniques on the prose and journalism of S.D. Dovlatov during the emigrant period of his work. The problem is to study the collections *Compromise* and *Speech for No Reason... or Editor's Columns* in the context of the 'new journalism' in the USA, identifying the specific methods and techniques of this phenomenon used by Dovlatov. The authors of the article, based on Dovlatov's immersion in the context of new American journalism and the proximity of its creative views to the principles put forward by T. Wolfe and his environment, consistently trace the influence of 'new journalism' on poetics of the emigrant collections. One of the key features of the new American journalism was desire to present reliable information using artistic techniques, thereby not only changing reader's perception of the materials, but making them even more capable of eliciting a strong emotional response. As a result of the analysis of Dovlatov's selected collections, some techniques and features of the 'new journalism' were discovered: the real basis of the plot; narration on behalf of a character associated with the personality of the author; dialogue; composite installation; details; internal monologue and specific punctuation. The use of these tools allowed Dovlatov not only to create the effect of the reliability of what is happening, but also to demonstrate the author's position, entering into an indirect dialogue with the reader.

**Keywords:** new journalism, journalism, prose, emigration, Dovlatov

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## Проза эмигрантского периода жизни С.Д. Довлатова в контексте американской «новой журналистики» 1980-х гг.

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**Аннотация.** Фокус исследовательского внимания сосредоточен на особенностях американского «нового журнализма» 1960–80-х гг. и влиянии его нарративных и стилистических приемов на прозу и публицистику С.Д. Довлатова в эмигрантский период его творчества. Целью является изучение сборников «Компромисс» и «Речь без повода... или Колонки редактора» в контексте «нового журнализма» США, раскрытие конкретных методов и приемов этого явления, используемых Довлатовым. Авторы статьи, основываясь в качестве исходного тезиса на погруженность Довлатова в контекст новой американской журналистики и близость его творческих взглядов к принципам, выдвигаемым Т. Вулфом и его окружением, последовательно прослеживают влияние «нового журнализма» на поэтику эмигрантских сборников. Одной из ключевых черт новой американской журналистики стало стремление преподнести достоверную информацию с использованием художественных приемов, тем самым не только изменив читательское восприятие материалов, но сделав их способными в еще большей мере вызвать сильный эмоциональный отклик. В результате анализа выбранных сборников Довлатова были обнаружены следующие приемы и особенности «нового журнализма»: реальная основа сюжета; повествование от лица персонажа, ассоциирующегося с личностью автора; диалог; композиционный монтаж; детали; внутренний монолог и специфическая пунктуация. Использование этих средств позволило Довлатову не только создать эффект достоверности происходящего, но и продемонстрировать ярко выраженную авторскую позицию, вступая в опосредованный диалог с читателем.

**Ключевые слова:** новый журнализм, журналистика, публицистика, проза, эмиграция, Довлатов

**Вклад авторов.** *Е.Ю. Поселенова* – разработка идеи исследования, сбор исследовательских данных, анализ данных, написание и редактирование рукописи. *В.С. Монш* – сбор и обработка данных, анализ материала, написание рукописи.

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## Introduction

In the late 1970s, S.D. Dovlatov emigrated to the United States, where ‘new journalism’ was actively developing at the time. ‘New journalism’ is an emerging phenomenon in English literature, appeared during the 1960s to 1980s at the intersection of literature and journalism. Its main representatives include T. Wolfe, T. Capote, N. Mailer, G. Talese, R. Goldstein, R. Reed and J.G. Dunne. The collection *Compromise* and the works included in the posthumously published *Speech for No Reason... or Editor’s Columns* were created by S.D. Dovlatov, who was already immersed in the system of new American journalism. For him, ‘new journalism’ became an alternative to traditional Soviet journalism, and its principles resonated with the writer.

Today, ‘new journalism’ is well-studied in both Western and Russian scholarship. Dovlatov’s journalistic activities have also been examined from various angles. Researchers have looked at both his pre-emigration professional period (Dobrozakova, 2016, p. 211–213; Kuzovov, 2013, p. 56–61) and his work in specific publications after emigration (Baibatyrova, 2015, p. 57–65; Lastochkina, 2010, p. 52–60). When studying Dovlatov’s journalistic practice, researchers often refer to his literary prose, with particular focus on the collection *Compromise*. The collection has been analyzed for the interdiscursive nature of Dovlatov’s work: the intersection of literary and journalistic discourse (Bogdanova, Vlasova, 2020, p. 417–424), and the journalistic elements in the writer’s prose (Lastochkina, 2017). However, the connections between poetics of the writer’s émigré prose and ‘new journalism’ outlined in these studies have not been fully explored, indicating a need for a more detailed investigation and identification of specific methods and techniques of ‘new journalism’ employed by S.D. Dovlatov in his émigré prose.

### The principles of ‘new journalism’

The first example of ‘new journalism’ is considered to be G. Talese’s piece *Joe Louis: The King as a Middle-Aged Man* (1962). As T. Wolfe notes, “the tone and mood were more suited to a short story, with emotionally charged scenes – or emotionally charged by the standards of journalism at the time” (Wolfe, 2008, p. 22). The distinction of ‘new journalism’ from literature lays in its focus on current topics and issues, as well as its unwavering commitment to factual information. According to Wolfe, “the idea was to provide a complete and objective description, plus what readers previously had to seek in novels and stories” (Ibid., p. 39), delivering accurate information “in a ‘romantic’ key” (Ibid., p. 41).

The American ‘new journalism’ of the 1960s to 1980s resists a single definition. It is often described as a journalistic technique employing characteristic methods of the realist novel, four of which were outlined by

Wolfe (Ibid., p. 56): “scene-by-scene construction” (sharp shifts in narrative episodes, without lengthy transitions between them, akin to editing); inclusion of realistic dialogues to engage the reader (which can quickly and fully present a character); narrative from the perspective of a specific character (this viewpoint helps readers immerse themselves in the events as if seeing them through their own eyes, potentially using indirect speech); detailed description of elements that aid in understanding the characters’ environment, social status, and mindset. However, there are no rigid rules in ‘new journalism’, and these principles are not exhaustive. J. Hollowell adds “complex composition” and “internal monologue” to the main techniques outlined by Wolfe (Hollowell, 1977).

With the appearance of ‘new journalism’, authors began to ‘live’ events alongside their subjects. It became crucial to see events with one’s own eyes, observe gestures and facial expressions, and hear dialogues. For ‘new journalism’, the depth of factual material became paramount. Partly for this reason, significant space in ‘new journalism’ was occupied by material from the lives of the authors themselves.

### **The work of S.D. Dovlatov in the context of ‘new journalism’**

In 1980, as an alternative to the newspaper *Novoye Russkoye Slovo*, *Novy Amerikanets* was launched, eventually becoming the voice of the ‘third wave’ of emigration. While working on the collection *Compromise*, Dovlatov became the editor of the new newspaper and maintained a lively, conversational style of writing on its pages, reflecting the free-spirited nature of its readership, until 1982. Starting with the Issue 14, the *Editor’s Columns* began appearing on the front page. These columns were informal addresses to the readers, helping to create a sense of reader involvement in the life of the newspaper. This feature continued in the weekly *Novy Svet*, which succeeded *Novy Amerikanets* after its closure. Later, the column materials were published as a separate edition.

By this time, Dovlatov was already immersed in American culture. Having achieved significant success among readers, he was published in the weekly magazine *The New Yorker*. It was in this publication, in the early 1960s, that some of the most impressive examples of ‘new journalism’, according to T. Wolfe (Wolfe, 2008, p. 81), appeared. In T. Khoroshilova’s article for *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, P.L. Vayl notes: “Sergey Dovlatov is an unconventional writer: he never invented stories. He wrote based on facts, straddling the line between journalism and literature”<sup>1</sup>. This approach to writing forms the basis of ‘new journalism’, as it requires the author’s honest opinion, with the author themselves being a participant in the events they describe.

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<sup>1</sup> Dovlatov’s wife and daughter collected his columns in the book “Speech without a reason...”. *Rossiyskaya Gezeta*. September 8, 2006. (In Russ.) <https://rg.ru/2006/09/08/dovlatov.html>

## Compromise and Speech for No Reason... or Editor's Columns

The stories in the collection *Compromise* were drawn from Dovlatov's own journalistic experience from 1972 to 1975, which he gained while working for Estonian Russian-language newspapers such as *Sovetskaya Estoniya*, *Molodyozh Estonii* and *Vecherny Tallin*. The use of stories from real journalistic practice indicates an emphasis on the factual nature of the events and a conventional commitment to the reality of the subsequent narrative.

The collection *Speech for No Reason... or Editor's Columns* includes the novella *The Invisible Newspaper*, ironic sketches *Solo on an Underwood* and *Editor's Columns*. It was published posthumously in 2006 by E. and K. Dovlatovs, P. Vayl, A. Genis, N. Alover, the "Makhaon" publishing house, and the International Sergey Dovlatov Foundation. In the preface to the collection, P. Vayl reiterates the "Dovlatovian authenticity", which, as previously noted, is a key element of 'new journalism' and is achieved through various techniques.

**Narrative from the perspective of a specific character.** Both collections give a sense of the author's presence in the text. In *Compromise*, the protagonist, from whose perspective the story is told, shares the author's name – Serge (Sergey) Dovlatov. In *Compromise Three*, the author explicitly acknowledges his presence in the text: "One of the characters is me" (Dovlatov, 2014, p. 15). This technique, which creates the impression that the author is both creator and part of the narrative, enhances the text's authenticity. Readers trust the author and perceive the events through his eyes.

In the novella *The Invisible Newspaper*, as in the collection *Compromise*, the protagonist is a namesake of the author. In the chapter "Bogolyubov stomps his feet", the protagonist signs an open letter: "Respectfully yours, Sergey Dovlatov" (Dovlatov, 2006, p. 90), and in the chapter "From America with love", the signature reads "Loving and respecting you, Sergey Dovlatov" (Ibid., p. 114). The texts published in the *Editor's columns* section for *Novy Amerikanets*, exhibit the highest degree of authorial presence due to its genre-defining characteristics.

**Montage.** The use of montage allows the author to swiftly transition between narrative episodes, creating a dynamic flow. For example, in the introduction, after a dialogue with Loginov, the reader does not see the details of the protagonist's journey to the editorial office and Kashirin's office but immediately witnesses a new dialogue. Dovlatov employs abrupt shifts in narrative episodes, ignoring conventional transitions between them. He omits mundane details such as traveling across the city to the editorial office, as the focus needs to be on the specific action in the new location.

Montage is used not only for transitioning between narrative episodes but also for switching between the plotline and the protagonist's internal mono-

logue, and vice versa. In *Compromise Three*, after reflecting on the lives of carefree girls, the narrative quickly shifts to such a character. In *Compromise Eight*, the internal monologue abruptly intrudes into the text, distracting from the main narrative episode. After such a digression, the author uses a transition phrase: “But let’s return to the scene at the counter” (Dovlatov, 2014, p. 84). This demonstrates that episodes can not only shift abruptly but also interrupt each other, with a subsequent return to the narrative line.

Montaging segments the works into several compositional parts. For instance, *Compromise Five* is divided into two narrative blocks using this technique. The first block covers the protagonist’s dialogue with editor Turonok and receiving an assignment, while the second one details the protagonist’s search for a character for a future publication and the challenges faced in gathering information. The division between parts is visually marked by indentation.

Montage also characterizes the novella *The Invisible Newspaper*. In the preface, the author uses this technique to return to the beginning of the text, interrupting the recollections. The episodes are stitched together using the same sentence: “For the fifth year, I have been walking upside down” (Dovlatov, 2006, p. 42). For transition between narrative episodes, Dovlatov employs brief sketches like *Solo on an Underwood*, inserting them at the end of one episode before the start of another.

**Dialogues.** Some novellas are entirely constructed around dialogues, while in others, dialogues play a significant role in advancing the narrative. The use of dialogues allows the author to present characters’ traits as accurately as possible, without excessive descriptions. The lines are mostly oriented towards natural conversational speech, filled with brief clarifying questions (“What do you mean?”, “Who?”, “At what time?”), and even colloquial expressions like “Well?”. Dovlatov preserves the ‘unevenness’ of human speech, including the use of vulgar language. The subject of conversation and speech manner contribute to character development. For instance, in response to Loginov’s description of Kashirin as an experienced journalist and “rather soft” person, Dovlatov replies, “Shit, I say, is soft, too” (Dovlatov, 2014, p. 7). Such a remark demonstrates the protagonist’s sarcasm, straightforwardness, and even a certain roughness, which persist throughout all the *Compromises*.

The dialogical form is frequently used in the novella *The Invisible Newspaper*. For example, the dialogue between Baskin and the emcee Belenky about working at the snake farm in the chapter “We make a decision” shows the use of jargon, offensive, and outdated words. Some chapters centre on dialogues (“Meeting”, “The day before”). In rendering dialogue, Dovlatov sometimes uses constructions like “I asked him: ...” and “He replied: ...”. These introductory phrases create a characteristic conversational narrative model of “I said to him – he said to me – and I said to him – and he said to me” in emotional storytelling. Through the characters’ dialogues, Dovlatov

builds another layer of dialogue with the reader. In the *Editor's Columns*, brief dialogues are more common, serving as a prompt for reflection or argumentation of a situation. To maintain realism in dialogues, the author retains the use of both Russian and English words within a single sentence, as seen in: "I think it's kidding, joke, шутка. Sorry" (Dovlatov, 2006, p. 375).

**Details.** The works in the collection are rich with details that characterize a person's appearance, their surroundings, etc., enhancing the effect of creating a realistic image and serving as a means of the author's evaluation of the described. For instance, in *Compromise Two*, Dovlatov provides a detailed description of the racetrack: "A somewhat dirty field, slanted grandstands... An excited, noisy crowd circulates from the bar to the railings. The racetrack is the only place where cheap port wine is sold by the glass" (Dovlatov, 2014, p. 11). In this passage, the author includes the detail of selling cheap port wine "by the glass", which allows the reader to infer that the racetrack's regulars are likely to be heavy drinkers.

In the novella *The Invisible Newspaper*, detailed description plays a crucial role in creating the image of those surrounding the narrator. In the chapter "Meeting", a significant detail in describing the character R. Fiezoli is his clothing: "The gangster was dressed quite modestly. His corduroy pants were shiny. The sweater with the inscription 'Remember Valencia!' clung to his round stomach" (Dovlatov, 2006, p. 65). Through these details, the reader can see the discrepancy between Rizzo's appearance and his status as a gangster. Similarly, in the editor's column *There Will Be Re-Elections in the Fall...*, Dovlatov notes the mayor Koch's clothing: "I noticed his standard brown pants and worn-out shoes" (Ibid., p. 414). This detail creates a more lifelike and seemingly 'humanized' image of the mayor.

In *The Invisible Newspaper*, Dovlatov also highlights things that struck him about America: cordless phones, "edible women's pants" (Ibid., p. 87), and friendly police officers. Reflecting on his life journey, the author uses details to evaluate the cities where he has lived. Commenting on Leningrad, he notes: "Nobility here is as common as a pale complexion, debts, or perpetual self-irony" (Ibid., p. 56). In describing Tallinn, Dovlatov points out its Gothic towers. In New York, he focuses on the absence of monuments, concluding that "the present, the past, and the future are all tied together" (Ibid., p. 57).

**Internal monologue.** To convey the protagonist's thought processes and inner experiences, the author employs internal monologue. In *Compromise*, the protagonist expresses frustration about payment for written content, reflects on the binary perception of positive and negative, contemplates the absence of carefree days in his life, and meditates on journalistic work. Occasionally, the narrator interrupts his own musings: "I have no right to be jealous. Wife, alimony... It's a long story. The composition will collapse..." (Dovlatov, 2014, p. 191). This technique resembles stream-of-consciousness.

The use of internal monologue is central to the texts in the collection *Speech for No Reason... or Editor's Columns*, where the author's thoughts become fundamental. Dovlatov employs internal monologue to add authenticity to the narratives, infusing them with personal emotions and reflections. Most of the materials address the life of third-wave émigrés, exploring its difficulties and survival aspects as perceived by the author. In the novella *The Invisible Newspaper*, the protagonist reflects on his loneliness in America in the chapter "Fire": "I walked through the hum and cries. I was part of the crowd yet still felt like an outsider. Or maybe everyone here felt something similar?" (Dovlatov, 2006, p. 124).

**Unusual punctuation.** This technique is predominantly featured in the collection *Compromise*. It includes frequent examples of punctuation used in atypical ways or as a substitute for non-verbal elements of dialogue. For instance, in *Compromise One*, instead of a detailed description of the protagonist's emotional state, the author uses a question mark "?", which serves as a standalone response from the main character. The use of punctuation in this case aims to bypass descriptive details typical of literary fiction, focusing instead on emotions and allowing the reader to infer the non-verbal elements of dialogue.

## Conclusion

The necessary subjectivity for 'new journalism' is achieved in *Compromise* and *Speech for No Reason... or Editor's Columns* through the personal evaluations and impressions of Dovlatov, which are not merely embodied in the texts but serve as their core meaning. To accomplish this, the author employs techniques and features of 'new journalism' in the examined collections: narrative from the perspective of a specific character, dialogues, montage, details, internal monologue, and unconventional punctuation. In his émigré period works, Dovlatov reflects his view on socially significant phenomena close to him: in *Compromise*, on the essence of journalistic activity and Soviet journalism; and in *Speech for No Reason... or Editor's Columns*, on the life of the third wave of Russian emigration in the U.S. The narrative from the perspective of a character, who by the author's design is associatively linked to himself, does not narrow the understanding of these phenomena but helps to explore them more deeply and in greater detail. In this way, the use of new journalism techniques enhances the journalistic tone of his works and makes them appealing to a thoughtful, critically oriented readership, aligning with the essence of 'new journalism'.

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