Approaches to Teaching the Works of Anton Chekhov

Edited by

Michael C. Finke

and

Michael Holquist

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For a complete listing of titles,
see the last pages of this book.

A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION, CITATIONS, AND DATES

Scholars writing in American English about Russian literature and culture must choose, or find a compromise, among several standard transliteration options. The situation can become very complicated when you cite sources from languages other than English or Russian or when you use materials where no consistent transliteration method has been employed. Add to this the fundamental difference between approaching transliterated Russian names and terms with a knowledge of the language and without it: for those who do not know Russian, transliterated terms are often no easier to pronounce than the Cyrillic original.

Also, until the Russian Revolution, the Julian calendar was in use in Russia. It lagged our Gregorian calendar by twelve days in the nineteenth century and by thirteen days in the twentieth.

In order to make sure that none of our readers will be misdirected or confused, we have adopted the following conventions in this volume:

All dates will be Old Style, per the Julian calendar, unless otherwise indicated. This usage follows the standard practice in Russian scholarship.

When Russian text is cited or a Russian term discussed, especially where the sound shape or etymology of the original is relevant, we provide the Cyrillic; transliteration using J. Thomas Shaw's system 2, which in essence is the Library of Congress method minus diacritics; and an English translation. Note that in the transliteration, the Russian soft sign (ь), in the middle or at the end of a word, is transliterated as ', not as ʹ. Although we follow Shaw's system 2, common place-names and names of persons are rendered in ways conventional, familiar, and pronounceable for English-speaking readers. Citations always respect the originals from which they are taken. Therefore there will be inconsistencies in spelling: it is "Chekhov" as a rule, but "Chekov," "Tchekoff," "Tchekhov," "Čehov," and "Čexov" may also occur.

When a Russian work is named in Russian, we provide the title in this format: transliteration (Cyrillic; "translation"). When the title is in italics, both transliteration and Cyrillic are italicized. In parenthetical references, only the transliteration is given.

All references to Chekhov's Russian originals are keyed to the thirty-volume scholarly edition *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem* (*Полное собрание сочинений и писем*; "Complete Collection of Works and Letters"). In the parenthetical references, *Sochineniia* refers to the eighteen volumes of his works, and *Pis'ma* refers to the twelve volumes of his letters.

Citations from Chekhov's letters may be keyed to the scholarly edition or, if from a translated source, to that source. The date (unless there is no date) and addressee of the letter will be provided in every case, so as to facilitate the letter's location by all users of this volume.

Because translators vary in their renderings of Chekhov's titles, we have appended a concordance of titles.

Because Chekhov has been so widely translated over the past century, and because an instructor's choice of translation will vary in accordance with pedagogic purposes—which may also involve comparing translations, as some of our author-teachers advocate—we could not insist that all contributors to this volume employ the same sources.

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Part One

MATERIALS

A daunting array of choices faces instructors teaching Chekhov in English. New renderings of his texts, including the letters and other nonfictional writings, continue to see publication, old and out-of-copyright translations abound in cheap print editions or can be read free on the Internet, and there is an ever-growing list of titles in visual media: filmed theater productions of his plays, adaptations of the plays and stories scripted for film, and amateur performances—especially of the one-act plays—that can be found on such venues as *YouTube*. Biographical approaches to Chekhov vary dramatically, with significant revisions to prior understandings gaining wide acceptance in the past twenty-five years. Meanwhile the unsophisticated researcher is vulnerable to discredited, misinformed, and factually incorrect material that remains on library shelves or, more likely, appears high on the list of Internet search results. Like most great authors, Chekhov has attracted many nonacademic commentators, biographers, and critics who, even when they are insightful, lack the language skills and research training and discipline to make their publications reliable sources. (A recent example of this unreliability is the program notes published with the BBC Video *Anton Chekhov Collection*, which have Chekhov writing *Cherry Orchard* "on the *island* of Yalta" [Program Notes].)

Instructors will want to make deliberate choices and also convey the rationale behind them—this can be a teaching moment. It has become extremely difficult to ensure that all participants in a classroom are working with identical materials or, for that matter, platforms for reading them. A strategic choice must be made: either one insists on the use of one text by all, so that all will be quite literally on the same page in a lesson in close reading, or the instructor exploits differences among the translations in use or between a translation and the original. In my courses there is always a heritage or native speaker or two who prefer to read in the original and who can often help foreground questions of translation in class discussion. (Caution is advised, however: heritage speakers may have limited linguistic skills.)[1]

What follows are selective recommendations rather than a comprehensive overview, and these recommendations are not always followed by the volume's various contributors. The editors could not insist that all the college and university instructors writing about their teaching of Chekhov refer to the same translations of his works. Chekhov has been very widely translated, but no single translator has translated his entire oeuvre. Some titles are quite difficult to find in good translations; others have been repeatedly translated, sometimes very well. The range of works treated here—though still a small percentage of Chekhov's total output—is broad, and the volume's contributions represent quite varying pedagogic missions. Readers should not be surprised to find, expressed in this volume, preferences that do not match the editors' own.

Chekhov's Biography: Outline, Useful Resources, and Notes on Biography as an Object of Study

Anton Chekhov was born on 17 January 1860 in the city of Taganrog, the third son of Pavel and Evgeniia Chekhov. His paternal grandfather had been a serf who bought his family's freedom when Chekhov's father was a teenager and managed a large estate; eventually he set Chekhov's father up as the owner of a small general store in the then prosperous port city of Taganrog, where Chekhov and his older brothers worked long hours as schoolchildren. A petty tyrant who enforced a rote and pedantic religiosity on his children, Chekhov's father went bankrupt and fled to Moscow in order to escape debtors' prison. Soon the rest of the family joined him there, except for Chekhov and one of his two younger brothers, Ivan, who continued their secondary education in Taganrog. Ivan lived with relatives while Chekhov was left to fend for himself as a tutor and boarder in what had been his family home. In spring 1877, he began sending some of his earnings to his parents and siblings, thus initiating a lifelong pattern of assuming responsibility for them.

In 1879, Chekhov enrolled in the faculty of medicine at Moscow University with a town scholarship from Taganrog. January 1880 saw his first known publication: "A Letter from the Don Landowner Stepan Vladimirovich N. to His Learned Neighbor Dr. Fridrikh" ("Письмо донского помещика Степана Владимировича N к ученому соседу д-ру Фридриху"; "Pis'mo donskogo pomeshchika Stepan Vladimirovich N k uchenomu sosedu d-ru Fridrikhu"), under the signature ". . . v" (*Sochineniia* 1: 11–16). Soon he was pseudonymously publishing anecdotes, stylized letters, dialogues, spoofs on popular authors, and cartoon captions, in the journal *Dragonfly* (*Стрекоза*; *Strekoza*) and other journals of the so-called small press.

In 1882, Chekhov was invited to publish in the St. Petersburg humor magazine *Fragments* (*Осколки*; *Oskolki*). Some stories from 1883 are generally recognized as comic masterpieces, such as "Death of a Clerk" ("Смерть чиновника"; "Smert' chinovnika"), "Daughter of Albion" ("Дочь Албиона"; "Doch' Albiona"), "Fat and Thin" ("Толстый и тонкий"; "Tolstyi i tonkii").

In 1885, Chekhov began publishing in *Petersburg Gazette* (*Петербургскаиа газета*; *Peterburgskaia gazeta*), and he soon progressed to even more profitable and culturally weighty venues, in particular with the February 1886 publication of "Requiem" ("Панихида"; "Panikhida") in *New Times* (*Новое время*; *Novoe vremia*). Whereas, with few exceptions, he had previously published only pseudonymously, he used his own name to sign "Requiem," a practice that soon became his norm.

Chekhov's 1887 trip to his home town and the southern landscapes of his childhood provided material for "The Steppe" ("Степь"; "Step'"), his first seri-

ous long narrative, which was published in a prestigious "thick journal" in 1888. In fall 1887, Chekhov began his career as a playwright of note with the quickly written *Ivanov* (*Иванов*), staged in the Korsh Theater in Moscow. The play was subsequently revised and staged in St. Petersburg (1889) with spectacular success. In October 1888 Chekhov was awarded the Pushkin Prize by the Division of Russian Language and Letters of the Imperial Academy of Sciences for his volume of stories *In the Twilight* (*В сумерках*; *V sumerkakh*).

In spring 1889, Chekhov cared for his older brother, Nikolai, who was dying of typhoid fever, tuberculosis, and alcoholism. At the same time, Chekhov was writing his next major play, *Wood Demon* (*Леший*; *Leshii*), which would be revised as *Uncle Vanya* (*Дядя Ваня*; *Diadia Vania*). After Nikolai's death, Chekhov wrote the bleak "Boring Story" ("Скучная история"; "Skuchnaia istoriia") and started contemplating a journey to the far eastern prison island of Sakhalin. He left Moscow for Sakhalin in April 1890 and returned in December; the round trip, which preceded the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway and included truly perilous moments, covered roughly ten thousand miles. The study of the prison colony that he published afterward, *Sakhalin Island* (*Остров Сахалин*; *Ostrov Sakhalin*)—an idiosyncratic mix of travel writing, geography, agronomy, and medical sociology, perhaps best categorized as a work of medical geography (Valencius, "Chekhov's *Sakhalin Island*")—had a major influence on penology in Russia.

In February 1892, Chekhov bought a somewhat dilapidated, 575-acre estate south of Moscow and moved there with his extended family. That summer he served as an unpaid public health physician and took on very tiring duties in combating a cholera epidemic. He loved gardening and had a long-range perspective on improving the lives and the lands around him—he had planted trees at the little hospital in Voskresensk during a short stint there, regularly treated area peasants for free at his home, established and equipped school libraries, and built three schools and a church (see the essay in this volume by Jane Costlow on Chekhov's environmentalist sensibilities).

In fall 1895, Chekhov wrote *The Seagull* (*Чайка*; *Chaika*). The St. Petersburg premiere of that play in October 1896 became one of the most famous fiascos in Russian theatrical history (see the essay in this volume by Olga Levitan). Fortunately, Chekhov did not keep his oath to never again write for the theater. *Seagull* would succeed sensationally when handled by the new Moscow Art Theater of Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko and Konstantin Stanislavsky in late 1898. It was the first of what are commonly considered Chekhov's four mature dramatic masterpieces, followed by *Uncle Vanya* (1898), *The Three Sisters* (*Три сестры*; *Tri sestry* [1901]), and *The Cherry Orchard* (*Вишнёвыи сад*; *Vishnevyi sad* [1904]).

With the controversial story "Peasants" ("Мужики"; "Muzhiki"), Chekhov felt he had exhausted the literary value of his life as a landowner; moreover, just a few days after finishing the story, in March 1897, he suffered a major lung hemorrhage, and his life would have to change. His first bout of blood spitting dated back to 1884, but he had since avoided medical care and denied his illness. Now

he became something of an invalid, traveling for stays in supposedly therapeutic locations and eventually settling in Yalta.

In January 1899, Chekhov signed an unfavorable contract with the publisher Adolf Marks that provided a lump-sum payment in exchange for the rights to all writings, past and future, which were to be published in a full collection of his works. His production of new works, which had slowed because of illness, declined further as he gathered, reread, and edited (or in some cases rejected) for republication everything he had published since the start of his career.

Chekhov's work with the Moscow Art Theater introduced him to Olga Knipper, an actress with whom he became close in 1899 and would marry in 1901. At the beginning of 1900, he was selected as a member of the Imperial Academy of Sciences, Division of Russian Language and Literature, but in 1902 he resigned from the academy to protest the annulment of Maxim Gorky's selection for political reasons. In his last years Chekhov was something of a patron and adviser to Gorky, as well as to other young and aspiring authors.

Chekhov's health continued to deteriorate. Although Chekhov had been wintering in the south and in the warmer months visiting Moscow primarily but also Petersburg and other places, his Moscow specialist advised him to spend the winter of 1903–04 in Moscow. There Chekhov attended the premiere of *Cherry Orchard*, during which the theater organized a celebration of his twenty-five years of literary activity. In February 1904, he left for Yalta; he returned to Moscow in May quite ill and was ordered abroad for his health. He departed Russia in early June, settling in the Black Forest resort town of Badenweiler. Whereas in April he had talked about traveling to the Far East to volunteer as a physician in Russia's conflict with Japan, on the eve of his departure to the West he reportedly stated to a friend that he was leaving Russia to die. In the early morning hours of 2 July 1904, a physician was summoned to his room. When the doctor ordered a glass of champagne for the patient, Chekhov famously uttered, in German, "Ich sterbe . . ." ("I am dying"). His last conscious words were "It's a long time since I drank champagne," and he died at three a.m. The return of his corpse for burial in Moscow involved incongruities often remarked in his biographies, because they are so reminiscent of his humor: his body arrived in a refrigerated railroad car labeled "For Fresh Oysters," and his funeral procession was confused with that of a general being buried at the same time.

It will be the rare undergraduate course that can afford to make space for and expect students to actually read, from cover to cover, one of the interesting and reliable biographies of Chekhov available in English. But instructors may wish to assign sections of a biography that pertain to what is being read, screened, viewed, or staged and biographies might be placed on reserve for reference or ordered as optional. Donald Rayfield's revisionary 1997 *Anton Chekhov: A Life* best immerses us in Chekhov's personal life and is available in an affordable paperback edition, but it is probably too long to be read in most undergraduate courses. Ronald Hingley's shorter *A New Life of Anton Chekhov* (1976) in-

cludes a useful appendix outlining Chekhov's publishing career, but it suffers from lack of access to the full spectrum of materials that became available to Rayfield and, in my view, from opinionated, unreliable assessments of many of Chekhov's works. Ernest Simmons's lengthy but out-of-print *Chekhov: A Biography* (1962) still serves. Very fine insights into Chekhov the person, and the opportunity to work with the epistolary genre that he practiced abundantly and artfully, are available through the selection of his letters translated by Michael Henry Heim and commented on by Simon Karlinsky in *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought* (1973), which is still in print. Last, there are translations of some of the memoirs of Chekhov's friends, family, and colleagues, of which instructors should be cognizant. A few examples that are still in print are *Anton Chekhov and His Times*, compiled by Andrei Turkov, which includes reminiscences and some of Chekhov's letters; Ivan Bunin's unfinished memoir, translated by Thomas Marullo; and the memoir of Chekhov's brother Mikhail, *Vokrug Chekhova* (*Вокруг Чехова*; "Around Chekhov"), translated by Eugene Alper under the title *Anton Chekhov: A Brother's Memoir*. (Others are available in old and long-out-of-print translations.) Courses with a focus on the late Chekhov, and especially those involving the plays performed by the Moscow Art Theater, may be interested enough in the actress who became his wife to look at the letters, as translated and edited by Jean Benedetti (*Dear Writer*), or the biography of her by Harvey Pitcher (*Chekhov's Leading Lady*).

For most users of this volume, the best way of incorporating Chekhov's biography in an undergraduate course may be to have students read an encyclopedia article, such as my own in *Dictionary of Literary Biography* ("Anton Pavlovich Chekhov").[2]

To find visual images of the author and his places, friends, and family, instructor and student alike will naturally turn to the Internet, but there are some high-quality print sources—in particular, the volume of photographs put together by Peter Urban, *Anton Čechov: Sein Leben in Bildern* ("His Life in Pictures"). The Russian *A. P. Chekhov: Dokumenty: Fotografii* (*А. П. Чехов: Документы: Фотографии*; "Anton Chekhov: Documents: Photographs") has an appendix tabulating and identifying the photographs in English.

Caution is always in order when it comes to the study of Chekhov's biography. Chekhov strove to keep himself out of his works, and he advised others to restrain or eliminate subjectivity in what they wrote. He famously professed to having the "malady called autobiographophobia" (*Anton Chekhov's Life* 366 [to Grigorii Rossolimo, 11 Oct. 1899]), and memoirists tell many anecdotes demonstrating his discomfort with his fame. We might do well to introduce for class discussion Janet Malcolm's warning:

> Chekhov's privacy is safe from the biographer's attempt upon it—as, indeed, are all privacies, even those of the most apparently open and even exhibitionistic natures. The letters and journals we leave behind and the impressions we have made on our contemporaries are the mere husk of

> the kernel of our essential life. When we die, the kernel is buried with us. This is the horror and the pity of death and the reason for the inescapable triviality of biography. (35–36)

Undergraduate courses involving Chekhov are unlikely to gather enough of the husk to appreciate even the external shape of the seed.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that Chekhov's life is irrelevant to his work; on the contrary, establishing that relevance is one of the most open and interesting areas of study today, and over the past few decades scholars have been excavating—not without controversy and dispute—what might be called a lyrical or expressivist dimension to his work.[3] While this project requires nuance beyond what can be expected in the undergraduate classroom, it makes no sense to militantly exclude biography from the classroom.

Most of our students expect that what they read will help them make sense of their own lives, and they are invariably interested in the person of the author. Although users of this volume are unlikely to take a systematic approach to Chekhov's biography in their classes, why not use those aspects of the biography that tend to capture the imagination of students and other readers and offer a pathway toward a broader understanding of Chekhov's social and historical context? Instructors will no doubt be pained at times by the reductive and narrowly informed interpretations of Chekhov's works that result from attempting to incorporate such facts; but this may be where the thinking process needs to start. Indeed, generating interest in and some knowledge of this larger picture—or better, these larger pictures—has value in and of itself. In any case, virtually anybody teaching Chekhov will want to offer some sort of narrative about the author's life and career and the place and time of his living and writing.

There have been four dominant ways of periodizing Chekhov's career, with Chekhov scholars often combining them in their approaches. The first, which tends to be most graspable for undergraduate students who are reading a significant body of work, involves indentifying shifting thematic dominants, which are often understood as reflecting key turning points in Chekhov's personal and professional life. A good example of this methodology may be found in Thomas Winner, *Chekhov and His Prose*, which tells an evolutionary story, each stage of it identified by a grouping of literary works with common themes and, to a certain extent, formal features. The second way of periodizing involves following the development of Chekhov's narrative technique, often with rhetoric that frames this process as progressive. The benchmark study of this sort is Aleksander Chudakov's enormously influential *Chekhov's Poetics*, which traces dominant tendencies and patterns of change in Chekhov's handling of narrative point of view and voice (among other features); the study's theoretical idiom may be a bit challenging for most undergraduates. The other two sound rather empirical but can lead to very interesting results. One involves considering where and how much Chekhov published; this is very nicely tabulated in an appendix to Hingley's biography. The last periodizes Chekhov's career on the