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On Some Pitfalls and Paradoxes of Comparative Literary Analysis (the Case Study of Anton Chekhov)

Abstract
The article is preoccupied by the problem of comparative analysis in the case of a writer as elusive as Chekhov, who does not formulate an open ideological message and generally withdraws his authorial voice. It raises the questions of what constitutes true kinship and similarity and highlights the vital importance of discerning above all the aesthetic aspect of the work, its poetics and artistic truth which take precedence over any structural or ideological considerations. To this end, various misconceptions and cases of false kinship are discussed, followed by examples of true continuity. In these examples, a close affinity is demonstrated through proximity of both ethics and aesthetics of the writers in question, and close textual comparisons are conducted. The next category discussed in the article addresses a paradox of simultaneously occurring rejection (or dislike) at one level, and real artistic closeness at another. We conclude by some general remarks on the nature of comparative analysis and offer another demonstration of stylistic proximity between two great writers, whose stylistics turns out to be so close that it is hard to tell them apart. We suggest that such parallels are not accidental, as form is inseparable from content, just as ethics is inseparable from aesthetics, and it is ultimately the artistic truth of the works under comparison that should always be kept strongly in focus.

comparative literature; Chekhov; ethics; aesthetics

A short prelude: between literature and philosophy

The discipline of Comparative Literature is broad and multifaceted. By definition, it is preoccupied by uncovering similarities between literary works derived from different cultures and languages. It can, however, be also extended to the study of works in the same language, but separated by cultural barriers (for instance, those caused by substantial chronological distance). In the latter sense, we are dealing with continuities and breaks within the literary tradition of the same nation, that is to say, comparative literature then transgresses into a study of literary (dis)continuity.

A consequence of such considerable breadth of scope is an equally broad range of what we imply by similarities that are being sought between otherwise disjoint literary works and traditions. If this search is restricted to the level of ideas — for instance, purely philosophical ones — then such parallels seem easier to trace, and are often reduced to the question of influence. The latter, however, is regarded generally harder to prove, as ultimately everything is inter-connected: "No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main" (Donne 1624). Nevertheless, the cases of 'disconnected' cultural parallels — when similar ideas occur in very different quarters without any immediate, direct link between them — do happen, and are always fascinating, as they indicate a possibility of some anthropological universalities (or at least a susceptibility to the same cultural currents in different contexts).

For example, as the Russian-Jewish philosopher Lev Shestov explains in his lectures on the history of Greek philosophy, the idea of mortality as a divine punishment for disobedience of being, occurred independently amongst the Jews and the Greeks. In the Old Testament it is Original Sin — man's daring, against God's will, to get out of the bosom on which he was destined to live; in the teaching of Anaximander it is treacherously breaking away from the womb of the unified, eternal entity into existence. Shestov emphasises that no borrowing whatsoever was possible between ancient Greeks and Jews, and thus both nations, stunned by the horror of death, posed the same question and gave the same answer (Shestov 2001: 66–67).

But in literature such parallels are much more difficult to establish in the sense that they are seldom regarded clear-cut and unambiguously proven. As a result, they are more likely to cause controversy. This is not surprising because literary discourse, by contrast to purely

philosophical or ideological one, is equipped with the less tangible (or more subjective) matter of artistic style, literary form, and particular aesthetics, which prove elusive when it comes to formal categorisations. Therefore, expectedly, those literary scholars and critics who reduce literature to ideology, often miss the point when they find merely a common philosophical denominator across diverse literary material which is otherwise disjoint.

In Russian literary culture of the Silver Age (that is the Russian literary-philosophical renaissance of the early 20th century), such examples are abundant. Ivanov-Razumnik, thinker, writer, and critic, is one of many, who "squeezes his writers like lemons for an attitude to life and throws away the fruit. He does not care to distinguish good and bad writing; he barely touches on his subjects' handling of the word, their aesthetic traditions, or the purpose of art. For him, literature is only a more striking form of philosophical tract" (Rayfield 1971: vi). Similarly, for the aforementioned Lev Shestov, who started out as a literary critic, "great literature [...] is a waxwork museum of ideas", and as a critic he "wastes no time on style or form or literary device" (Bayley 1970: 6).

Interestingly, when such uncouth approach is applied to writers who are didactic, with a distinctly audible authorial voice, it may yield non-trivial results, revealing deeper truths about those writers and their works (Berdiaev 1996: 465–491).[1] Thus, Shestov discovered (or willfully assigned?) an identical 'religious experience' (Paperny 2005) which opens up one's eyes to the horrors and tragedy of existence — leading via catharsis to faith as a new dimension of thought — in virtually all the writers and thinkers he wrote about. This included such literary and philosophical giants as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky in Russia and Friedrich Nietzsche in Germany, whom Shestov linked closely together in his comparative analysis of their writings.

Yet, when dealing with writers as enigmatic and elusive as Chekhov, whose prose is poetic and authorial voice essentially withdrawn, such 'ideologically driven' methodology is in real danger of being distortive. Indeed, as Kornei Chukovsky wrote about Shestov's article on Chekhov, "I read it with indignation. I can't stand reasoners who want to solve questions about art outside of aesthetics, without understanding anything in art" (Rzhevskii 1976, cit. in Baranova-Shestova 1983: 98).[2] For Chukovsky, Chekhov's craft, woven of gentle poetics and acute lyricism, is about indirect artistic statement, which Shestov's method is unable to discern, because it largely ignores aesthetics.

This begs the question: how do we trace and prove any influence or affinity, when comparing works by writers as elusive as Chekhov (whose world is pure subtext rather than text) to the writings by other authors?

In the sequel, we will look into this problem, using the case study of Chekhov, as it appears not only instructive, but also paved with paradoxes.

A false affinity

A famous example of foreign striving to resemble Chekhov and, more generally, cases of literary apprenticeship growing from admiration toward the Russian author, date back to the Bloomsbury Circle at the time of fin-de-siecle. Katherine Mansfield recognized Chekhov's

[1] As Berdiaev noted, "Shestov managed to discover the terrible and new activity hidden under the works of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, to tell the truth about the experiences of these great writers who torment us".

[2] Quotation from Chukovskii's letter is given in Rzhevskii 1976, cited in Baranova-Shestova 1983: 98.

unique literary qualities from very early on and joined the growing number of enthusiastic English Russophiles. Throughout Mansfield's life, Chekhov remained for her a master, teacher, and personal companion. She borrowed from him a lot in terms of technique and, what for some is notorious, in terms of plot. Largely it was not until a deadly crisis struck, in the form of incurable tuberculises, that she started drawing more on Chekhov's philosophy, to help her cope with, and grow out of, the contradictions which her soul was always steeped in.

Yet, what Mansfield's attempts predominantly demonstrate is a case of concealed distortion (typical, as it happens, for that *fin de siècle* generation, in Russia too). Indeed, it was then that the new cultural-philosophical and literary-stylistic paradigm emerged in opposition to the old, classical one. The Post-Impressionist Exhibition in London of 1910 caused an uproar and shock (Woods 2001: 85) and showed a new — revolutionary — way in Art, the starting point of which was to dismantle and crush the old values. This is what Mansfield and her husband John Middleton Murry attempted to do in their journal *Rhythm*, with its slogan of realistic brutality that must precede the newly acquired humanity in art (Woods 2001: 90). Even more importantly, this artistic revolution promoted an understanding of art as an almost religious service, and, for Mansfield, her writing increasingly meant a mission. As Joanna Woods writes, Mansfield "saw herself and Murry as belonging to an Order of Artists" (Woods 2001: 189). In 1918, Mansfield wrote to Murry, "I have such a profound respect and reverence for our work and for the universe — for all that is being discovered, for all who really seek the truth that I want to belong to them alone" (Woods 2001: 189), and this stance she maintained until the end. Such a position in relation to art stands in sharp opposition to that of Chekhov, who even started his writing career not out of any quest for sainthood, but merely in order to provide for his family.

As Anatolii Naiman writes in relation to the Russian Silver age (the emergence of New Art of the early 20th century): "The new art-cum-religious-rite could »come to terms« with nineteenth-century art-cum-analysis, art-cum-ideas, art-cum-sermon, if only because all of these are »more than mere art«. But it was impossible to come to terms with Chekhov, who treated art as nothing more than a craft. The language was the same, the tonality different" (Naiman 1989: 48). Describing (in 1919) in her notebook her desire to be a better writer and the passion of it, Mansfield wrote, "It takes the place of religion — it is my religion — of people — I create my people — of »life« — it is Life. The temptation is to kneel before it, to adore, to prostrate myself, to stay too long in a state of ecstasy before the idea of it. I must be more busy about my master's business" (Woods 2001: 172). Chekhov's stance on art was, on the contrary, based on extinguishing any personal pathos, on using, as it were, a descending metaphor.

This is, perhaps, one of the fundamental conceptual obstacles on Mansfield's way in her striving to become an English Chekhov. A subtle elucidation of this is given by Sally Dalton-Brown: "In Chekhov's prose there are textual pauses, silences, gaps into which the reader can insert his own commentary, or simply listen to the echo of tragedy. [...] Chekhov has no need to comment" (Dalton-Brown 2006: 78). She then compares the endings of (thematically similar) Chekhov's 'Van'ka' and Mansfield's 'Sixpence' (from *Something Childish*), where Mansfield feels compelled to give an authorial commentary. "The continuation of the guilty father's voice, with a tonal edge of authorial comment", Dalton-Brown writes, "interferes with the tragedy of the confused, hurt child. Mansfield's need to draw

attention to the ways in which adults betray children by their careless actions suggests that, unlike Chekhov, she appears to have found it difficult to listen in silence for the voice of the lost children, to step completely away from the guilty chatter of society, to pause, to contemplate — and perhaps understand" (Dalton-Brown 2006: 78).

Indeed, Mansfield's (and, for that matter, Murry's too) aestheticized version of reality and their sometimes-explicit lofty romantic pathos (especially in the case of Murry, with his often-excessive verbosity) could not be further from Chekhov with his perfectly measured style and unassuming manner, with his deliberate understatement and self-restraint.

According to Joseph Brodsky, "a good poem, in a sense, is like a photograph that puts its objects' metaphysical features into sharp focus. Accordingly, a good poet is one who does this sort of thing in a camera-like fashion: quite unwittingly, almost in spite of himself" (Brodsky 1988: xvi). Chekhov, with his poetic prose, clearly satisfies this definition. His famous example of depicting a moonlit night, demonstrates exactly the above stance, that very ability of a good poet which Brodsky highlighted. "You have to choose small details", Chekhov wrote to his brother, "[...] grouping them in such a way that if you close your eyes after reading it you can picture the whole thing. For example, you'll get a picture of a moonlit night if you write that on the mill dam a piece of broken bottle flashed like a bright star and the black shadow of a dog or a wolf rolled by like a ball" (Chekhov 1974–1983: 242).[3] Katherine Mansfield, on the other hand, often seems to lack the inner ability to capture those impressionist touches and subtle nuances with their concealed symbolism, which are most meaningful metaphysically. As a result, she managed to adapt some external features, but not the internal power of Chekhov's stories, thus making a literary parallel between herself and her Russian artistic idol quite far-fetched.

A similar inverted analogy can be drawn between Chekhov and Byron. Indeed, according to Fazil Iskander:

> Byron is a singer of courage, but always when spectators are present and for the spectators. Chekhov is a writer of delicately and deeply concealed inner courage. Byron is externally heroic, but internally simple and monotonous. Chekhov is externally simple, but internally diverse and heroic in a hidden way. (Iskander 1999: 130)

In this sense, a widely accepted analogy between Chekhovian and Ibsenian drama appears similarly misleading. It was as late as 1930s, when Nemirovich-Danchenko spoke of the misinterpretation by his theatre of a subtle, delicate and elusive style of Chekhovian plays: "There was simply a misunderstanding of Chekhov, of his subtle writing, of the tender silhouettes of his style [...] Chekhov perfected his realism to the level of symbol, and it was for a long time impossible for theatre to grasp that delicate texture of his oeuvre; maybe theatre attempted to grab him with too crude hands" (Nemirovich-Danchenko 1952: 107). By contrast, the much more didactic Ibsen proved easier to adapt to the stage, but the difference was acutely felt. As James Wood writes in this connection, "mild, slippery Chekhov once told Stanislavsky, with soft surprise as if it were something too obvious to say: »But listen, Ibsen is no playwright!... Ibsen just doesn't know life. In life it simply isn't like that«" (Wood 1999: 74). Wood then clarifies this Chekhovian stance by providing his

[3] A.P. Chekhov, from the letter to Alexander Chekhov, May 10, 1886 (see Chekhov 1974–1983: 242).

own comparison of the two authors: "Ibsen's people are too comprehensible. We comprehend them as we comprehend fictional entities. He is always tying the moral shoelaces of his characters, making everything neat, presentable, knowable. The secrets of his characters are knowable secrets, not the true privacies of Chekhov's people. They are the bourgeois secrets: a former lover, a broken contract, a blackmailer, a debt, an unwanted relative. But Chekhov's idea of "life" is a bashful, milky complication, not a solving of things" (Wood 1999: 75). Describing his experience of watching a Broadway production of *A Doll's House*, Wood gives a tangible account of Ibsen's difference from Chekhov — the artificial from the real: "here was Ibsen ordering life into three trim acts, and a cooled audience obediently laughing and tutting at the right moments, and thinking about drinks at the interval — the one moment of Chekhovian life being that, in the lobby, the barman could be heard putting out glasses, tuning up his little cocktail orchestra. The clinking was disturbing Ibsen's simpler tune" (Wood 1999: 74).

The above examples demonstrate the need (little amenable to rationalisation) to discern superficial closeness, that does not extend to the heart of Chekhov's oeuvre, from a real affinity.

Cases of continuity and concealed kinship

At the same time, there happen to be Chekhovian disciples in 20th century Russian literature, who, with all the differences introduced by chronology and artistic individuality of these writers, seem to have inherited some vital elements of Chekhov's ethics and aesthetics. As I argued elsewhere (Tabachnikova 2006: 319–354), what penetrated modernity and left clear footprints on the works of contemporary Russian writers is much more than mere compositional structures, and touches upon the very soul of Chekhov's works. Their writings thus merit comparison with Chekhov's on much more substantial grounds than in the examples above.

One of the most obvious Chekhovian descendants of this kind was Sergei Dovlatov, who famously said that notwithstanding the undoubtful genius of the great novelists from the front row of Russian classical literature, it is only Chekhov who evokes a desire to resemble him (Dovlatov 2004: 168), and indeed Dovlatov remained true to this ambition. Thus, Dovlatov's lyrical hero (although mostly autobiographical unlike Chekhov's) is the author's own perception of the unattainable human ideal borrowed from the generalized image of Chekhov's characters. Both writers are free from any feeling of exceptionalism. Indeed, what Joseph Brodsky said about Dovlatov is equally true about Chekhov: "It is as if he does not demand attention for himself, does not maintain his conclusions or his observations on human nature, he does not force himself on the reader" (Brodsky 1995: 359). Both authors share a deep compassion for individual existence and offer a portrayal of the latter in all its vulnerable absurdity. Both encounter the tragic underpinnings of life head on, with extreme inner courage. It is the courage to overcome fear by the literary process itself, to create harmony out of the terrifying chaos of existence. Furthermore, both Chekhov and Dovlatov consider their literary role in being mere reporters of how people live; yet, with their focus on wasted years and unrealized potentials, they end up telling of how people are incapable of living their lives. Both share the ethos of equality and understatement. Aesthetically, Dovlatov "was aspiring to the laconic, lapidary style inherent in poetic speech: to extreme conciseness of expression" (Brodsky 1995: 358), while Chekhov, with

his famous formula that 'brevity is a sister of talent', was known for "the condensation of whole scenes into one symbolic detail" (Rayfield 1999: xv). In my detailed analysis of their similarities and differences (Tabachnikova 2006), I concluded that ultimately "Dovlatov continued Chekhov's unassuming literary mission and in his writings Chekhov's legacy indeed lives on" (Tabachnikova 2006: 353).

Another great admirer of Chekhov in the 20th century Russia was Vasilii Grossman, who had "a striking vision of the writer" as "a tragic protagonist of Russian history and, simultaneously, a one-man political institution and social movement", despite the fact that Chekhov "famously avoided any involvement in politics" (Lapushin 2023: 225). Through the mouth of his hero Grossman expressed an interesting view that "Chekhov took on his shoulders the failed Russian democracy. Chekhov's path is the path of Russian freedom" (Grossman 1959). However, what is important for our purposes, is that the interpretation of Chekhov by Grossman in *Life and Fate* does not end with this conceptual stance, but goes to the heart of Chekhov's poetics, simultaneously restoring some vital links in the Russian treatment of the category of love as moral philosophy.

Indeed, Chekhov, as a bridge between the old and the new, between the age of the Scriptures with their immutable moral categories, and the era of relativism, when "God is dead", was a witness to the agonies of a modern man trapped in this changing paradigm. Chekhov famously wrote about his generations' lack of ideals, by contrast to the pillars of classical Russian literature, whose writings were "saturated with the consciousness of its goal", so that "you feel life as it should be in addition to life as it is, and you are captivated by it" (Karlinsky 1997: 243).[4] Chekhov talked about emptiness in the souls of his contemporaries (Karlinsky 1997: 243),[5] and, in particular, depicted in his oeuvre a heretical (in its extreme sobriety) premise of finiteness, and hence non-uniqueness of love (Tabachnikova 2015).[6] Grossman, on the other hand, more than half a century later, while aesthetically following in Chekhov's footsteps, in ethical terms returned to the classical Russian tradition, maximalist and idealist in its perception of love.

To illustrate this point, let us look at just one example of close textual comparison between the two works — Chekhov's *The Lady with the Dog* and *Grossman's Life and Fate* [in the citations below, the highlighting is mine — O.T.].

In Chekhov's story we read,

> All the time the audience were coming in and taking their seats Gurov looked at them eagerly. Anna Sergeyevna, too, came in. She sat down in the third row, and when Gurov looked at her his heart contracted, and he understood clearly that there was in the whole world no creature so near, so precious, and so important to him; she, t h i s l i t t l e w o m a n, in no way remarkable, lost in a provincial crowd, with a vulgar lorgnette in her hand, f i l l e d h i s w h o l e l i f e n o w, w a s h i s s o r r o w a n d h i s j o y, t h e o n e h a p p i n e s s t h a t h e n o w d e s i r e d f o r h i m s e l f. (Chekhov 1899)

4 Chekhov's letter to Aleksei Suvorin of 25 November 1892.

5 From the same letter by Chekhov to Suvorin.

6 See a discussion on this in (Tabachnikova 2015), Chapter 4: "Russian Eros: love in the context of moral philosophy".

Grossman, on the other hand, writes:

> She got up from the bench and walked away without looking back. He sat there, thinking that for the first time in his life he had seen happiness, light [...]. This woman whose fingers he had just kissed could have replaced everything he had ever wanted, everything he had ever dreamed of — science, fame, the joy of recognition... (Grossman 1995: 708)

The description of the feelings in the two works is almost identical, but what lays behind these feelings in the moral sphere?

Chekhov says:

> Anna Sergeevna and he loved each other like people very close and akin, like husband and wife, like tender friends; it seemed to them that fate itself had meant them for one another, and they could not understand why he had a wife and she a husband; and it was as though they were a pair of birds of passage, caught and forced to live in different cages. They forgave each other for what they were ashamed of in their past, they forgave everything in the present, and felt that this love of theirs had changed them both. [...]
>
> Then they spent a long while taking counsel together, talked of how to avoid the necessity for secrecy, for deception, for living in different towns and not seeing each other for long at a time. How could they be free from this intolerable bondage? "How? How?" he asked, clutching his head. "How?"
>
> And it seemed as though in a little while the solution would be found, and then a new and splendid life would begin; and it was clear to both of them that they had still a long, long road before them, and that the most complicated and difficult part of it was only just beginning'. (Chekhov 1899)

Let us also recall the following lines from the same page of *The Lady with the Dog*, with a clear presence of an idea of the end:

> It was evident to him that this love of theirs would not be over soon [...]. Anna Sergeyevna grew more and more attached to him. She adored him, and it was unthinkable to say to her that it was bound to have an end some day; besides, she would not have believed it! (Chekhov 1899)

At the same time, Grossman writes:

> What was happening depended only on them, but it seemed like a fate they were powerless to oppose. What lay between them was true and natural, they were no more responsible for it than a man is responsible for the light of day — and yet this truth inevitably engendered insincerity, deceit and cruelty towards those dearest to them. It was in their power to avoid deceit and cruelty; all they had to do was renounce this clear and natural light. One thing was plain: he had lost his piece of mind forever. Whatever happened, he would never know peace. Whether he hid his love for the woman beside him or whether it became his destiny, he would not know peace. Whether he was with her, feeling guilty, or whether he was apart from her, aching for her, he would have no peace. (Grossman 1995: 707)

As we can see, the similarity between the two texts is next to literal, not only in the description of love, but also in the fatefulness of it. At the same time, the vital links, removed by

Chekhov from Russian classical literary tradition, are reinstalled by Grossman, who brings moral questions explicitly back. He restores the eternity (or non-finiteness) and therefore a uniqueness of love, and forcefully makes Platonic reality underpin physical reality in a tangible way, essentially to sanctify the earthly life by the heavenly, in the tradition of Russian philosophical thought.

Paradoxes of closeness and rejection

These instances of concealed kinship and continuity, as displayed by Dovlatov's and Grossman's writings with respect to Chekhov's, oppose the proclaimed, yet deceptive and largely misleading similarities, analysed above, between the works by Chekhov and his English epigons, as well as other writers often placed next to Chekhov. However, the most paradoxical cases are comparisons between Chekhov and those "anti-Chekhovians" whose works resemble Chekhov's in a number of ways, despite these writers' openly voiced dislike of Chekhov.

In Russia, the best known of these is probably Anna Akhmatova, whose disdain for Chekhov is widely known and well documented. Yet, it is difficult to find an example of prose as close to Akhmatova's poetry as Chekhov's — in its poetics of understatement and self-restraint, sober and ironic perception of the world and subtle artistic methods. Scholars remained puzzled by Akhmatova's Chekhophobia for they kept finding numerous common characteristics of the two. Indeed, "these two artists played similar roles in renewal of the artistic consciousness at the turn of the nineteenth century" (Gasheva 2006: 46). Chekhov in his polemics with classical realism rejected a novel as a form and equally rejected an event and an exceptional hero, and moved from lyrical prose to epic theatre (Gasheva 2006: 46). Similarly, Akhmatova, starting within Acmeism, engaged in polemics with Symbolism and returned poetry from heavens back to earth. She rejected mysticism and abstractness and moved from "pure" lyrics to an epic theatre in poetry (Gasheva 2006: 46). Most importantly, there is a kinship of Akhmatova's and Chekhov's artistic worlds. It is above all in the tendency of both to elevate a mundane detail into a lofty poetic symbol, to put into one psychological field very distant concepts, as Akhmatova did, which are akin to Chekhov's affinity to the random and absurd (Davtian 1996: 137–138).

Keis Verheil, attempting to capture the nucleus of Akhmatova's poetry characterised it as silence, despite the fact that the main idea of Russian culture is the primacy of logos over reality: "Silence in the sense of concentration, expectancy [...] — not an absence of meaning, but a presence of an intense attention to any non-verbal external and internal existence" (Verheil 1992: 15). He mentioned the early critical opinions on Akhmatova which remained central for understanding all her work: "tangibility, concreteness, conciseness, understatement" (Verheil 1992: 15). It is, of course, exactly these characteristics that can be repeated as key ones for Chekhov's oeuvre as well. Lev Losev, discussing the proximity between Akhmatova's and Chekhov's artistic method traced Akhmatova's poetic roots to Chekhov's prose, and named him as her direct artistic predecessor (Losev 2002: 210–215). In this vein, Anatolii Naiman, citing Akhmatova's early letters, talks about Chekhov's literary world as providing a continuous quotation from an adolescent provincial girl — a future poet Anna Akhmatova.

> It was an exceptional situation for Akhmatova to be in (if Akhmatova can already be seen in the adolescent Gorenko): this is the world, style, and voice of Chekhov's heroines, introduced into the system of her means of expression not "by the complexity and riches of the Russian nineteenth-century novel", not "with a backward look at psychological prose", as Mandelshtam later wrote of her, but by everyday life. (Naiman 1989: 42)

Naiman summarises that "this was not Akhmatova quoting Chekhov but Chekhov quoting some girl called Gorenko", and thus concludes, that "in any subsequent assimilation of Chekhov, even the very slightest, had it come about, there would have been »something incestuous«, as she once remarked apropos of something similar" (Naiman 1989: 42).

Yet, despite such close and diverse inner proximity between Akhmatova and Chekhov, she claimed that "Chekhov is counter-indicated for poetry" (Naiman 1989: 40). Various conjectures have been offered by scholars as to the reasons of this dislike, and I have also contributed to the discussion (see Tabachnikova 2009: 235–255). These reasons include Harold Bloom's theory of "neurosis of influence" (whereby every major poet rejects the source of influence, that is to say his or her direct predecessor) (Losev 2002: 215); or a revolutionary quest for heroism inherent in the times (while Chekhov was regarded as anti-heroic) (Mirsky 1927: 292);[7] or an attitude to art and artists (which brings us back to the difference between Mansfield's owe with respect to an Order of artists, essentially akin to Akhmatova's perception, and Chekhov's opposite — "descending" — stance). Furthermore, creating a monumental self-myth, preparing his place in a literary canon for posterity were not among Chekhov's concerns, and his demythologising attitude grated on a number of writers.

It was not just Akhmatova, who expressed her disdain for Chekhov. It was also her great contemporaries Tsvetaeva and Mandelshtam, who, as Andrei Stepanov writes, "really didn't want to see Chekhov's verbal harmony, or subtle psychologism, or the personification of nature, or hidden symbolism, or all-penetrating dramatism, or fireworks of metaphors, or a magic lake, or the sound of a broken string — anything that displays Chekhov's kinship with poetry" (Stepanov 2004).

But, of these anti-Chekhovian poets, it is only Akhmatova, whose poetics shows a real affinity with Chekhov's, although she persistently (and paradoxically for many) refused to recognise it. In a somewhat similar paradoxical way, of the English writers of that era, it was D.H. Lawrence — not at all a fan of Chekhov (whom he called "a second-hand writer and a Willy wet-leg") (Moore 1962b: 1109) — who, in his bold, out-of-the-box thinking, sharp wit, and original poetic vision, was, in some peculiar sense, closer to Chekhov than many of the enthusiastic admirers such as aforementioned Mansfield (or her husband Murry). Also, for all his rejection of Chekhov and insensitivity to Chekhovian irony, Lawrence was nevertheless among those who were able to appreciate the innovation of Chekhov's plays. "The plays are exceedingly interesting. I hope you read them. Tchekhov is a new thing in drama," he wrote in a private letter in 1912 (Moore 1962a: 108).

These two examples, Russian (Akhmatova) and English (D.H. Lawrence), demonstrate that paradoxical instances of an open dislike at one level, and yet similarities concealed at a deeper level can cross the boundaries of the linguistic and cultural background.

[7] For example, D.S. Mirsky, back in 1927, assigned to Chekhov an "unusually complete rejection of what we may call the heroic values" (see Mirsky 1927: 292).

Concluding remarks. The importance of artistic truth

What else does the case study of Chekhov briefly sketched above in the context of other writers, both his fans and his antagonists, both in Russia and abroad, teach us in terms of comparative literature? It suggests that when applying comparative methods, we should look above all not at the structural, or morphological, or thematic, or ideological similarities alone to prove resemblance and uncover parallels, as these, taken separately, might be misleading. But even when taken in their entirety, it is perhaps aesthetic (or, if you like, stylistic or artistic) similarities which should have the upper hand, as they reveal affinity at a deeper level. This is essentially because form in poetry, or for that matter in poetic (or simply masterful) prose, "is *noble*" (Bonnefoy 1979: 374); it is inseparable from content. "It is vessel in which the meaning is cast. They need each other and sanctify each other reciprocally — it is an association of soul and body. Break the vessel and liquid will leak out" (Bonnefoy 1979: 374).

Moreover, for Joseph Brodsky, "[...] aesthetics is the mother of ethics. [...] The categories of »good« and »bad« are, first and foremost, aesthetic ones, at least etymologically preceding the categories of »good« and »evil«" (Brodsky 1997: 49–50). Fazil Iskander, however, decisively objected to this vision, and argued, through the mouth of his hero, that Brodsky's claim that "a baby starts perceiving the world first of all aesthetically" is "the opposite of the truth. A baby starts smiling first of all to his mother and stretches his hands to her as being a source of good. It is entirely obvious. And it is only later that the source of good starts to be perceived by the baby as a source of beauty. [...] A later split in human consciousness of ethics and aesthetics is a sign of man's tragic fall" (Iskander 1999: 143). However, it appears that aesthetic or stylistic similarities can serve as necessary (although not necessarily sufficient) conditions in comparative analysis.

Sometimes, if we are lucky, we can find such similarities bordering on being almost literal (as in the comparison of Grossman's and Chekhov's excerpts above). They thus provide a strong starting point and a rich ground for further comparative investigation. Another striking example of such kind can be seen in a comparison of Andrei Platonov, famous for his unique style, and Nikolai Leskov, especially in his story 'The Lefty' which is written as *skaz*.[8] Indeed, if we look at the following sequence of quotations, we will not necessarily be able to identify the authors correctly every time.[9]

> There the rules of all sorts for life, science and food supply are different, and everybody there has all the absolute circumstances open to him, and because of that he has a completely different meaning... [...*совсем на всё другие правила жизни, науки и продовольствия, и каждый человек у них себе все абсолютные обстоятельства перед собою имеет, и через то в нем совсем другой смысл*...] (Leskov 1981)

[8] For a more detailed analysis see (Tabachnikova 2015), Chapter 7: "Rebellious tradition: Russian literary laughter, between poetry and pain".

[9] At the international conference at the Volgograd State Pedagogical University, in 2018, I conducted an experiment within my keynote lecture, inviting the audience of professional literary scholars to distinguish between Platonov's and Leskov's quotations. They took the task condescendingly at first, but, in fact, were only able (to their own surprise) to identify correctly only about 50% of the quotations!

> In labour every person outdoes himself — makes creations better and longer-lasting than his daily meaning... [...*в труде каждый человек превышает себя — делает изделия лучше и долговечней своего житейского значения*...] (Platonov 1988: 56)

> [...] machines have served to even out inequalities in talents and gifts, and genius does not strive to battle against industriousness and accuracy [...*машины сравняли неравенство талантов и дарований, и гений не рвется в борьбе против прилежания и аккуратности*...] (Leskov 1981)

> Encouraging an increase in profit, machines do not encourage artistic daring, which sometimes used to exceed its boundaries, inspiring the people's imagination... [...*Благоприятствуя возвышению заработка, машины не благоприятствуют артистической удали, которая иногда превосходила меру, вдохновляя народную фантазию*...] (Leskov 1981)

> The animal and the tree did not evoke compassion towards their lives, because no man took part in their creation — there was no conscious strike or precision of craftsmanship in them... [...*Зверь и дерево не возбуждали в них сочувствия своей жизни, потому что никакой человек не принимал участия в их изготовлении, — в них не было ни одного сознательного удара и точности мастерства*...] (Platonov 1988: 55)

> It will leap in any surroundings and veer in all directions... [...*она будет скакать в каком угодно пространстве и в стороны вероятии делать*...] (Leskov 1981)

> Man is the beginning for any mechanism, whereas birds are the end in themselves... [...*Человек — начало для всякого механизма, а птицы — сами себе конец*...] (Platonov 1988: 55)

What seems to follow is that, despite the aforementioned tragic split between ethics and aesthetics, our aesthetic choice is inseparable from the ethical one, it already conceals the latter within itself. This means, in turn, that it is, above all, artistic truth of the literary works under comparison that should never fall out of our comparative focus.

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