ANTON CHEKHOV'S SELECTED STORIES

EDITED BY CATHY POPKIN

INTRODUCTION

Cathy Popkin, Jesse and George Siegel Professor in the Humanities, is the editor of the new Norton Critical Edition of Chekhov's *Selected Stories*, published in early 2014. A thick brick of a book, the new Chekhov delivers 735 pages of stories, letters, criticism, chronology, and bibliography, all prefaced by Popkin's "Introduction," from which we print two sections below: "How to Read Chekhov" and "How to Read Chekhov in English." What truly distinguishes this new Chekhov is Popkin's strategy of highlighting the art of translation. The fifty-two stories are the work of twenty-one translators. Twenty-seven translations have been chosen from the rich history of Chekhov in English translation, and the remaining twenty-five were commissioned expressly for this volume. To emphasize the importance of the art of translation, Popkin follows her "Introduction" with comparison passages taken from various translations and short biographies of the translators, with notes on their translation practices, rather than the usual practice of acknowledgments hidden in tiny type on the copyright page. Annotations to the individual stories also highlight key differences among the translators' strategies.

As an example of the newly commissioned works, we offer Katherine Tiernan O'Connor's "A Little Game." O'Connor, best known for her translation of Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, co-translated with Diana Burgin, insists that "contrary to popular belief, Chekhov may be more difficult to translate than Bulgakov."

—*Ronald Meyer*

From the "Introduction" by Cathy Popkin

HOW TO READ CHEKHOV

Any work of literature worth its salt will accommodate, even reward, a variety of approaches and inspire a wide spectrum of interpretations. Even so, the how-to-read question reasserts itself with particular insistence in the face of Chekhov's short stories for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the idiosyncratic form of the stories themselves.

For one thing, they can be disconcertingly short, especially the early pieces published in humor magazines, with strict word counts for quick laughs—and prompt payment. Should these be read as serious literary works? Physical dimensions aside, some of the stories also catch readers off guard because their subject matter can be, well, so trivial. A clerk sneezes; someone disposes of a cockroach—what's so interesting about that?

Then there are Chekhov's formal innovations. If we are accustomed to short stories beginning with an *exposition*, shaped by *rising action*, culminating in an *event*, and concluding with a *dénouement*, we may find ourselves temporarily derailed by Chekhov, who advised aspiring writers to throw away their opening pages, whose action may just as well repeat as escalate, whose events are frequently a matter of dispute, and who has been credited with cultivating the so-called zero ending. Where do these stories take us, and where do we go from there?

His stories are open-ended in another respect as well: more intent on posing questions than on answering them, disinclined to preach or prescribe, Chekhov made no secret of his reluctance to stake out clear positions vis-à-vis the world he depicts with such care. Even when a story's events are dramatic and the outcome decisive, the meaning of what has happened usually is not: judgment is withheld, no moral is implied. It's not the writer's business to make such pronouncements, Chekhov averred. Let the readers act as jurors and figure things out for themselves.

If Chekhov leaves his jury to deliberate without the benefit of an explicit charge, it is only partially because determinations of this sort are not in his job description; they are also beyond his purview.

Why read Chekhov's stories? Because they enlarge our capacity for understanding and awaken our compassion.

Famously speculating about the nature of human knowledge, Chekhov noted more than once that, much as we crave certainty and (especially moral) clarity, life confronts us on far more ambiguous and tentative terms and places us on shakier ground. Between the certainty that God exists, for instance, and the opposite conviction that there is no God, Chekhov envisions a huge expanse, a wide, wide field spanning the distance between those two antithetical and unequivocal positions. It takes wisdom and courage to negotiate the murky middle, to tolerate the infinite complexity and shades of gray in the amorphous space between guilt and innocence, sickness and health, atheism and belief. For readers unnerved by such ambiguity, Chekhov's stories cannot help but force the issue of how they should be read.

Paradoxically, though, despite all these potential stumbling blocks, Chekhov's stories are not at all hard to read; indeed, they make for remarkably enjoyable—even seamless—reading. At first glance, anyway, they seem clear and uncomplicated. And if they are short on pages or scope or details or dénouements, neither do they throw up a lot of obstacles along the way—nothing tendentious or dogmatic, no extraneous verbiage; they look to be perfectly straight-forward (if inconclusive) tales.

The devil, it seems, is in the details, especially the odd ones that crop up with no obvious relevance to the story and that feel particularly incongruous in Chekhov's super-spare prose. Why, for instance, should Chekhov specify that a chair in someone's attic is missing one leg ("Sweetheart")? Or that a girl happened to be carrying a piece of dark blue cloth when her suitor came to propose ("The Teacher of Literature")? Chekhov's earliest critics pointed to extraneous details such as these as evidence of the writer's lack of discernment. Increasingly, though, scholars have come to view such puzzling elements as key—but the key to what?

Some scholars argue that, given Chekhov's characteristic reticence, if something appears in the text, he must have put it there for a reason; we are justified in assuming, in other words, that every element we encounter in his streamlined tales is intentional and therefore purposeful. After all, Chekhov is reported to have remarked (albeit about drama) that if there's a gun hanging on the wall in Act I, it had better go off by the closing curtain, or it ought never to have been hung there in the first place. And if every gun is *meant* to be there, then every gun must be *meaningful*; nothing is included by accident, and nothing superfluous is included. "No detail is without meaning in Chekhov's great masterpieces," maintains Robert L. Jackson. To read Chekhov well is thus to consider every word, even the apparently random ones, to scrutinize the story for patterns and clues, to unearth subtle references, to delve beneath

the deceptive simplicity of the surface for access to the complexity at play in the depths; or even to consider the effects of the language itself, to attend with care to the verbal surface for its sounds and cadences and etymological rhyme, reading the prose essentially as one might read a poem—for what it does, the effect it has, and for what each component—every piece of dark blue fabric—contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole.

Others object to this "totalizing" approach on the grounds that the operative principle in Chekhov's prose is just the opposite—*randomness*—and if something in one of his stories looks unrelated to anything else, that's because it is. Sometimes a gun is just a gun, an incidental piece of the material world signifying nothing beyond its own existence; it's hanging there because it's there, and it would be perverse to hang a meaning on *it*. The function of Chekhov's eccentric detail, in other words, is not to mean but to be—and in this stubbornly "meaning-free" existence to model something about the nature of existence itself. His prose embodies his own radically new worldview, an understanding of life in the world as chaotic, subject to accident and entropy. Chekhov's liberation from the shopworn assumptions of unity and purposefulness is the very quality that makes his art modern and non-dogmatic, argues Alexander Chuda- kov; to transform everything into a symbol or a sign of something else would be to miss the very point.

Whichever view is closer to the truth, both are onto something. And in spite of their antithetical assumptions, they are united in a common preoccupation with how the stories *work*; this, in fact, is the basis of their respective arguments, and it has lent both force and substance to the debate. The works of criticism excerpted in this volume come from both sides of the critical divide as well as everywhere in between, and have been selected expressly for their salient contributions to the ongoing controversy about how to read Chekhov well. The first section, "Approaches," contains essays that address this question explicitly. But arguing about Chekhov's prose in the abstract can only get you so far; Chekhov himself abhorred sweeping generalizations, and his work resists them. Not coincidentally, some of the liveliest scholarship on Chekhov consists of close readings of individual stories. Thus, the second cluster of essays, "Interpretations," has been compiled to demonstrate what such concrete readings might look like—and in some cases a single story looks strikingly different from divergent points of view. Whatever their perspective, all of these inspired readings confirm that interesting things emerge when you pay exquisite attention. The most engaging interpretations are re-readings, considerations that read "against the grain" and suggest not only that things may not be as simple as they seem, but also that Chekhov's stories work in mysterious ways.

If the meaning of a single detail triggers such fruitful disagreement in the context of an individual work, questions about the relationship of the *part* to the *whole* arise with equally interesting results in considerations of how any single story by Chekhov might relate to all his other ones. Indeed, for maximum enjoyment and

Anton Chekhov in 1897

appreciation, readers are urged to read both in detail and in plural, to consider both how these "motley" stories work and how they work together. They certainly awaken our awareness of recurrent motifs, sounds, structures, and allusions; we also sense that we are in the presence of abiding ethical questions. Each story connects in suggestive ways to all the others, and every one of them resonates more vibrantly when viewed in connection with everything else.

Then again, the present volume comes nowhere close to containing "everything else." Furthermore, although it includes a whole spectrum of representative works—from shorter to longer, from first to last, from the frankly comic to the positively lyrical—not even a comprehensive selection is neutral. In choosing the stories and letters that appear here, I have no doubt produced a certain Chekhov, one that I particularly like, since the fifty-two works in this volume represent some combination of acknowledged masterpieces and personal favorites. Happily, Chekhov's stories illuminate one another in any combination, not to mention the light they shed on the complexity of human relations and the wonders of life in the world. Note that Chekhov's keenest insights come in understated forms, and the stories especially reward quiet focus and sustained attention. While his prose goes down easily, do not confuse an easy read with a quick one. These may be small bites, but they are not fast food. Every story is remarkably rich and deserves to be savored.

Enjoyment is very much to the point, as it happens, and figuring out how to read Chekhov goes beyond the rarified concerns of academics who compile anthologies or produce scholarly interpretations. To pursue honest inquiry, to puzzle our way through, to engage constructively with the other, to gain access to somebody else's pain, to recall that we are all part of—not separate from—the whole: this is part of what Chekhov's storytelling strives to do. For those who read Chekhov because they are writers themselves, this sense of relatedness reveals his artistry. For those who read Chekhov for pleasure, this relatedness is surely its source.

Why read Chekhov's stories? Because they enlarge our capacity for understanding and awaken our compassion. Because they call upon us to make connections of all sorts. Because connecting the dots and making sense reminds us of the potential for meaning and beauty. Because trying to work out what gives a story shape and orders its material—the very activity of constructing and construing meaning—enriches our existence. Because figuring out what counts in (life) stories reminds us to think about what is important, however unprepossessing it may appear at first blush. Because precisely in wondering how to read Chekhov productively, we are already living deeply and well.

HOW TO READ CHEKHOV IN ENGLISH

First, with a high degree of confidence. Of the fifty-two stories collected here, twenty were cherry-picked from published translations by Rosamund Bartlett, Peter Constantine, Ann Dunnigan, Constance Garnett, Ronald Hingley, Patrick Miles and Harvey

Pitcher, Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, and Avrahm Yarmolinsky. Each one is, in my judgment, about the best there is. Another twenty-five are brand-new translations, commissioned expressly for this volume from Hugh Aplin, Carol Apollonio, Rosamund Bartlett, Antonina W. Bouis, Robert Chandler, Peter Constantine, Jamey Gambrell, Anna Gunin, Michael Henry Heim, Jerome H. Katsell, Ronald Meyer, Katherine Tiernan O'Connor, Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, plus a few that I've done myself. The remaining seven are Constance Garnett's translations that I have revised substantially.

Second, the stories can be read with or without reference to the notes on translation. The translations stand on their own and require no apparatus. Any commentary that accompanies them is meant for readers who want to know more about the specific form in which Chekhov is being delivered to them in a given translation, or are looking for a bit of insight into the process that produced the English text. For readers with particular interest in translation, the Translators and Their Work section (p. xlix) provides a more detailed introduction to the individual translators and their respective goals and strategies.

The twenty-one translators represented in this collection bring widely divergent priorities, purposes, and presuppositions to their translation work. Their approaches range from, toward one end of the spectrum, the most "text-directed"—those that place the highest premium on remaining as close as possible to the original, framing fidelity in terms of replication of the original *text* (even at the cost of sacrificing smoothness in the target language)—to the most "reader-directed" approaches at the other end—those that aim to bring the text to the greatest possible extent into the target reader's orbit, willing if need be to sacrifice fidelity to text in the interest of reproducing the original reader's *experience* of it. What is more important—retaining the original word, or using one that will get the kind of laugh the original one did? Ideally one would be able to do both; but if not?

Temporal distance presents additional challenges; some translators, worried about anachronism, scrupulously avoid words that have come into use only after the work was written; others view updating the language as an essential part of a translator's job. Some maintain that a translation should retain a measure of strangeness, that readers should not be hoodwinked into forgetting that the text is foreign and that they are reading in translation; others are determined to make the English prose as transparent and natural as possible—sometimes even when the original was neither. Some are attentive to sound, rhythm, and punctuation and attempt to convey the musicality of Chekhov's prose; some, conversely, are insistent that sound translations cannot work and ought not be attempted. Others sense that attempting to replicate anything at all only dooms a translator to failure and that translating calls less for fidelity than for creativity. None of the translations here lie at any of these extremes, but they do occupy just about the whole continuum in between them.

The devil, it seems is in the details, especially the odd ones that crop up with no relevance to the story and that feel particularly incongruous in Chekhov's super-spare prose.

Far from being problematic, these differences are a resource. Some translations stay so close to the original and reproduce its idiosyncrasies so faithfully that they are tailor-made for close readings. These are especially useful for instructors who do know Russian teaching students who may not. And while these also read well, others might contain even livelier prose.

Quite aside from the opportunity these differences create for us to choose translations that suit our varied purposes—differences born of the diverse ways these translators understand the purpose of their task—lurks the thorny question of how the translators understand the purposes of the texts themselves. Translation, like any other form of reading, is an act of interpretation. I cannot think of a better reason, especially in a Norton Critical Edition, that two translators might be better than one.

ANTON CHEKHOV
A LITTLE GAME[1]

Translated by Katherine Tiernan O'Connor

A clear winter noonday . . . The frost is hard, it crackles, and Nadenka, who is holding me by the arm, has a silvery glaze coating the curls on her temples and the down on her upper lip. We are standing on a high hill. Stretching down from our feet to the ground below is a sloping plane that reflects the sun, just like a mirror. Beside us is a small sledge[2] upholstered in bright-red cloth.

"Let's go down, Nadezhda Petrovna!" I beg. "Just once! I promise you we'll remain safe and sound."

But Nadenka is afraid. The distance from her small boots to the bottom of the ice hill seems terrifying to her, like a fathomlessly deep abyss. She freezes and holds her breath when she looks down, when I simply invite her to get into the sledge, for if she takes the risk of flying into the abyss, what will happen! She will die, she'll go out of her mind.

"I beg you!" I say. "You shouldn't be afraid! Don't you see, that's faintheartedness, cowardice!"

Nadenka finally gives in, and I can tell by her face that when she does, she's in fear for her life. I seat her, pale and trembling, in the sledge, put my arm around her and together we plunge down into the abyss.

The sledge flies like a bullet. The shattered air beats in our faces, roars, rips, whistles in our ears, painfully and maliciously stings

us, wanting to tear our heads off. The force of the wind makes it impossible to breathe. It seems as if the devil himself has seized us in his claws and with a roar is dragging us down into hell. Surrounding objects blur into one long, madly rushing streak . . . In just another minute, it seems—we'll perish!

"I love you, Nadia!" I say under my breath.

The sledge starts making less and less noise, the roaring of the wind and the hissing of the runners are no longer so terrifying, we can breathe again, and finally we're at the bottom. Nadenka is half-dead. She's pale, barely breathing . . . I help her get up.

"I won't go down again for anything," she says, looking at me with wide, terror-stricken eyes. "Not for anything in the world! I almost died!"

In a short while she recovers and now looks into my eyes in a questioning way: did I say those four words, or did they just come to her from the rush of the wind? And I stand next to her, smoking and studiously examining my glove.

She takes my arm, and we take a long stroll near the hill. The mystery, apparently, is giving her no peace. Were those words said or not? Yes or no? Yes or no? It is a question of pride, honor, life, happiness, a very important question, the most important in the world. Impatiently, sadly, Nadenka looks at me in a penetrating way, gives disconnected answers, waits to see if I'll say something. Oh, what a play of emotions on that sweet face, what a play! I can see her struggling with herself, needing to say something, to ask me something, but she can't find the words, she feels awkward, terrified, hindered by her joy...

"You know what?" she says, without looking at me.

"What?" I ask.

"Let's . . . go down again."

We go up the steps to the top of the hill. Again I seat the pale, trembling Nadenka in the sledge, again we fly into the terrible abyss, again the wind roars and the runners hiss, and again when the flight of the sledge reaches its noisy peak I say under my breath:

"I love you, Nadenka!"

When the sledge is coming to a stop, Nadenka looks back at the hill we have just come down, peers into my face, listens attentively to my voice, aloof and emotionless, and her whole being, everything about it, even her muff and her hood, expresses extreme bewilderment. And written on her face is:

"What's going on? Who uttered *those* words? Did he, or did it only seem that way?"

This uncertainty unnerves her, makes her lose patience. The poor girl doesn't respond to my questions, frowns, is on the verge of tears.

"Isn't it time for us to go home?" I ask.

"But I . . . I like doing this," she says, turning red. "Can't we go down another time?"

She "likes" doing this, but meanwhile, as she gets into the sledge, she is, as she was the previous times as well, pale, breathless with fear, trembling.

We go down for the third time, and I see her looking at my face, studying my lips. But I press a handkerchief to my lips, I cough, and when we are midway down the hill, I manage to get out:

"I love you, Nadia!"

And the mystery remains a mystery! Nadenka is silent, thinking about something . . . I take her home from the ice park, she tries to walk more softly, slows her steps, waiting all the while to see if I'll say those words to her. And I see how her soul is suffering, how it is an effort for her not to say:

"It can't be that it was the wind speaking! And I don't want it to have been!"

The next morning I receive a note: "If you're going to the ice park today, then come get me. N." And from that day on, I begin each day by going to the park with Nadenka and then saying the very same words every time we fly down in the sledge:

"I love you, Nadia!"

Soon these words become a habit for Nadenka, like wine or morphine. She cannot live without them. True, she's just as afraid as she always was to fly down the hill, but now the fear and the danger lend a special fascination to the words of love, words which, as before, constitute a mystery and torment her soul. The same two suspects remain: the wind and I . . . Whichever of the two of us is making her a declaration of love she does not know, but it is likely at this point that she no longer cares; it matters not which cup you drink from, so long as you become intoxicated.

Once at noon I went alone to the ice park; mingling with the crowd, I see Nadenka approaching the hill, her eyes searching for me . . . Then she timidly goes up the steps . . . She's terrified to go alone, oh, how terrified! She's as pale as the snow, trembling, she walks as if she's going to her execution, but walk she does, without turning around, with determination. Obviously, she had decided, finally, to carry out a test: will she hear those astonishing sweet words when I'm not there? I see her, pale, her mouth agape with horror, as she sits down in the sledge, closes her eyes, and then after saying farewell forever to the earth, she starts to take off . . . "Hissss . . ." go the runners. I don't know if Nadenka hears those words . . . I see only that when she gets up from the sledge she's exhausted, weak. And it is clear from her face that she doesn't know herself whether she heard something or not. Her terror, while she was hurtling downward, made it impossible for her to hear, to distinguish sounds, to understand . . .

But now it's March and spring is here . . . The sun is becoming gentler. Our ice hill darkens, loses its luster, and finally melts. We stop going sledding. Poor Nadenka no longer has anywhere where she can hear those words, and no one to say them, since no wind can be heard, and I am getting ready to go to Petersburg—for a long time, probably forever.

Once, a day or two before my departure, I am sitting at dusk in the small garden that is separated from the yard where Nadenka lives by a tall nail-studded fence … It's still fairly cold, there is still snow underneath the manure,[3] the trees are dead, but the scent

of spring is in the air, and the rooks, settling in for the night, are cawing loudly. I go over to the fence and peer through a crack in it for a long time. I see Nadenka come out on the porch and cast a sad, yearning glance up at the sky . . . The spring wind blows directly into her pale, despondent face . . . It reminds her of that wind that roared at us those times on the hill, when she heard those four words, and her face becomes sad, very sad, a tear falls down her cheek . . . And the poor girl stretches out both her arms, as if imploring this wind to bring her those words one more time. And I, having waited for the wind, say under my breath:

"I love you, Nadya!"

My God, what is happening to Nadenka! She lets out a cry, smiles a huge smile and stretches her arms out to the wind, joyous, happy, so very beautiful.

And I go off to pack . . .

This happened a long time ago. Nadenka is married now; she was married off, or got married herself—it makes no difference—to the secretary of the Board of the Nobility,[4] and she already has three children. The time when we used to go sledding together and the wind brought her the words "I love you, Nadenka," has not been forgotten; it is now the happiest, most moving and beautiful memory of her life . . .

But now that I'm older, it's a complete mystery to me why I said those words, why I played such a game . . . □

1886 (revised 1899)

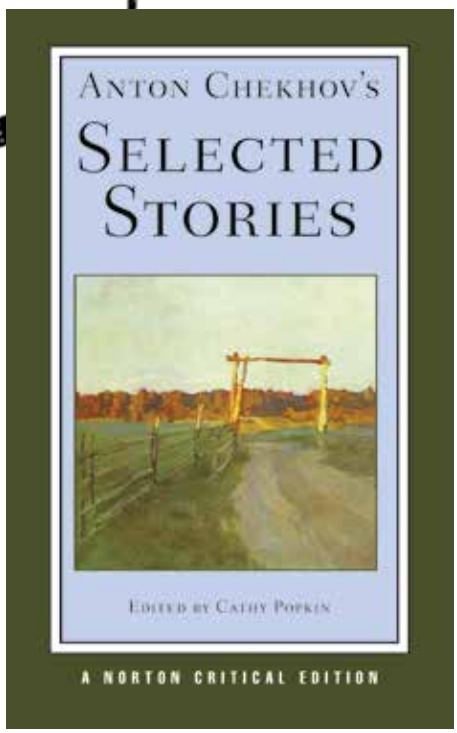
[1] By maintaining the narrator's persistent use of present tense, O'Connor reproduces the sensation that readers are experiencing everything—including flying downhill at terrifying speed—right as it is happening, together with the narrator and Nadenka.

The title, *Shutochka*, is usually translated literally as "A Little Joke." O'Connor renders it as "A Little Game" instead, feeling strongly that "Joke" implies something far too one-sided to correspond to what is actually being "played" in the story. The new title, along with O'Connor's lexical choices emphasizing that each of the characters has a "mystery" to confront, reorients us, allowing us to consider who is playing at what—and with whom.

[2] **Sledge**: a conveyance that slides on runners. Commonly refers to a horse-drawn sleigh of the sort that replaces carriages on wheels during the winter snows. The sledge in this story, however, is small and toboggan-like, with upholstered seats, mounted on runners and used for downhill sledding.

[3] In garden plots, **manure** was spread on top of the snow so that when the snow melted the fertilizer would be absorbed by the soil.

[4] Elected body that appointed trustees for the estates of nobles legally prohibited from controlling their property—minor heirs, debtors, the insane.



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