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Editor's Note

In addition to two reviews of recent books and a Chekhov bibliography for the last two and a half years, this issue offers two essays. The first takes a new look at the events surrounding Chekhov's death and funeral. It is by Galina S. Rylkova, an Associate Professor of Russian Studies at the University of Florida whose book, *The Archaeology of Anxiety: The Russian Silver Age and Its Legacy*, will be published at the beginning of 2008 by the University of Pittsburgh Press. The second essay explores the depiction of depression in *Ivanov* and the direction provided by Chekhov's narrative approach for therapists treating this illness more than a century later. The writer of this longer essay is Bradley Lewis, an Assistant Professor at New York University's Gallatin School of Individualized Study, with affiliated appointments in the School of Medicine's Department of Psychiatry and the Department of Social and Cultural Analysis. He is the author of *Moving Beyond Prozac, DSM, and the New Psychiatry: The Birth of Postpsychiatry* and associate editor for the *Journal of Medical Humanities*.

As this issue was going to press, I received news of the death of one of Russia's great Chekhov scholars and critics, Èmma Artem'evna Polotskaia. I should like to commemorate her life and work in the next issue.

Finally, I want to ask the subscribers to *The Bulletin* if they would object to receiving future issues online. Printing and mailing expenses climb higher and higher, so that it costs too much to order a full print-run and to send issues to everyone on the mailing list. And to include images and photos is outrageously expensive. To those without computers, if they will reveal themselves, xeroxed copies can be made available, and our readers in Russia, who have never been asked to pay for *The Bulletin*, will continue to receive xeroxed copies. Unless I hear loud screams of protest or more decorous objections, I shall beam future issues to your e-mail addresses. If you have changed your coordinates recently or are planning to alter them in the near future or have never notified me of them, please inform me by email, <ralph.lindheim@utoronto.ca>, or write to me at: Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures / University of Toronto / 121 St. Joseph St. / Toronto, Ontario M5S 1J4.

Galina S. Rylkova

Oyster Fever: Chekhov and Turgenev

Unlike other cultural celebrities who happened to die in desired and desirable cities like Venice (Wagner) or Paris (Oscar Wilde), Anton Chekhov died in a less than spectacular German resort for convalescing tubercular patients. As Chekhov's letters reveal, his last trip

was tedious and painfully meaningless on all accounts. Whatever Chekhov might have thought about the conclusion of his life, his funeral was far from boring. Olga Knipper's immediate reaction was to bury her husband in Germany. But her plans were quickly dashed. At the request of the family, friends, and various cultural figures, Chekhov's body was transported back to Russia and buried in Moscow on July 9 at the cemetery of the New Virgin Convent. Curiously, on July 5, the newspaper *Moskovskie vedomosti* reported the outbreak of a typhoid epidemic that spread from Constantinople and the Marbled Sea to England and France. The French scientists blamed the disease solely on oysters that, according to them, had absorbed contaminated water during the rainy season. Not surprisingly, the English oyster-eaters were the first victims of this epidemic.¹ By a perverse coincidence, the just mentioned article was published side by side with another article, "Chekhov and Moscow," whose author grieved over Chekhov's "sudden death" and informed his readers about the funeral arrangements.² By a further ironic twist, due, most likely, to a declining demand for fresh oysters during the epidemic, Chekhov's body was allotted a refrigerated car to travel across the Russian Empire. At the border crossing in Verzhbolovo, the coffin with Chekhov's body was moved from the German car to a Russian refrigerator car for transporting fresh oysters.³

While it was definitely better for the coffin to travel in a car designed to protect a highly perishable commodity,⁴ Chekhov's contemporaries, who came to meet the train first in St. Petersburg and then in Moscow, were all shocked by the sight of a "dirty green" car bearing the inscription "For Oysters." Even ten years after the event, the famous literary historian Semën Vengerov (1855-1920) could not think without a shudder about his first impressions of meeting the infamous train at Warsaw Station in St. Petersburg:

We all made our way toward the woeful car containing the remains of the beloved writer and were absolutely flabbergasted to see the now famous inscription on the side of the car with A.P. Chekhov's casket - "Car for Oysters."

Yes, one has to die at the right time, too... And what a story the departed great writer could have written, based on this...⁵

From that day onward, the "oyster car" became associated with Chekhov's death and has been traditionally interpreted either as "an apotheosis of vulgarity" (Maxim Gorky and many others)⁶ or as an amusing little twist of fate reminiscent of Antosha Chekhonte's style, a sign of Chekhov's ability to control life even after his own death: "even after [Chekhov] is dead, life goes on as if it were tuned to one of his scripts."⁷ Some commentators, like Dmitrii

¹ "Iz nauchnogo mira," *Moskovskie vedomosti*, July 5, 1904: 4.

² "Chekhov i Moskva," *Moskovskie vedomosti*, July 5, 1904: 4.

³ One can find a detailed account of the events surrounding the transportation of Chekhov's body from Badenweiler to Moscow in M. Dolinskii and S. Chertok, "Poslednii put' Chekhova," *Russkaia literatura*, no. 2 (1962). Unfortunately, both authors are silent about how exactly and why Chekhov's body was placed in the refrigerator car. I am grateful to Michael Finke and Radislav Lapushin for bringing this article to my attention.

⁴ George Pakhomov made this point at the AAASS meeting in Toronto, November 2003.

⁵ S. A. Vengerov, "Vagon dlia ustrits," *Solntse Rossii*, 1914, June, no. 228, 25.

⁶ M. Gorky, "A. P. Chekhov," in *A.P. Chekhov v vospominaniakh sovremennikov* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1960), 506.

⁷ See Katherine Tiernan O'Connor's "Chekhov's Death: His Textual Past Recaptured" in *Studies in Poetics, Commemorative Volume: Krystyna Pomorska (1928-1986)* (Columbus, Ohio: Slavica Publishers, 1995), 40.

Merezhkovskii, believed that the oyster car was Chekhov's well-deserved punishment for his lack of faith and for his groping for non-existence and universal destruction and chaos.⁸

I would like to suggest yet another interpretation of the oyster finale of Chekhov's life. According to Knipper's memoirs, the night preceding Chekhov's peaceful death was horrendous on all accounts. Chekhov's heart was failing him. He was gasping for breath and urged Knipper to open the door to the balcony. She reluctantly complied, watching with terror "as a thick, milky fog outside was rising up to our floor and, like some viscous ghosts of the most fantastic shapes, crawled into the room, flowing all over it – and this all night long... [...] In order that Anton Pavlovich wouldn't notice, on regaining consciousness, that I wasn't sleeping and kept a watch over him, I had a book in my hands, pretending to read. At one point, coming to, he asked me, 'What are you reading?' and, since the little volume of Chekhov's stories was open at 'A Strange Story,' I gave him the title. He smiled and said quietly, 'You silly thing, who on earth ever carries around their husband's books with them?' and lost consciousness again."⁹ "There is, needless to say," Katherine O'Connor writes, "no story entitled 'A Strange Story,' although there is his story 'A Boring Story,' ('Skuchnaia istoriia'), which is probably what Olga meant to say but which she failed to name correctly."¹⁰ As O'Connor observes, Knipper had plenty of opportunity to correct her mistake, but even the later editions of her memoirs retain her reference to "A Strange Story." What if Knipper was indeed reading "A Strange Story" and not "A Boring Story" as O'Connor suggests? While "A Boring Story" is a story by Chekhov, "A Strange Story" ("Strannaia istoriia") is a story that Ivan Turgenev wrote in Germany in 1869 and belongs to his so-called fantasy tales.

Turgenev's story tells about a seventeen-year-old girl, Sophie, who after her mother's death leaves her wealthy family to tend to a holy fool, Vasilii. She sees him as her role model because she respects what she calls his "true" spirituality and devoutness. They travel from one place to another, with no possessions and little to eat. During their last encounter, the narrator sees that the body and the feet of the holy fool are covered with ulcers, which Sophie is trying to treat with butter that she was lucky to get from one of Vasilii's admirers. When Sophie is eventually made to return to her family, she stops talking and dies shortly after. The narrator is clearly moved and impressed by Sophie's inner strength and determination. Given the fact that Knipper, according to people who knew her well, was a pleasantly selfish and self-centered woman, it is easier to imagine her reading about Turgenev's female character, whose mission in life – tending to a sick but extraordinary man – would have seemed similar to hers in Badenweiler, than about the old professor Nikolai Stepanovich in "A Boring Story."¹¹ In fact, Knipper's reference to the thick milky fog spilling into their room is almost a direct reference to an episode in Turgenev's story, when the narrator meets Vasilii for the first time during one of his séances and is induced to see the spirit of his old tutor:

Then [Vasilii] disappeared again, as if a fog had enveloped him, appeared... and disappeared again... appeared again, and then I was within the range of his labored, almost wheezing breathing... A fog descended again, and

⁸ D. S. Merezhkovskii, "Chekhov i Gorky" [1906], *A. P. Chekhov. Pro et contra* (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Russkogo khristianskogo gumanitarnogo universiteta, 2002).

⁹ Knipper's letter to her mother is quoted in A. P. Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v tridsati tomakh* (Moscow: Nauka, 1983), *Pis'ma*, vol. 12, 378-79.

¹⁰ O'Connor, *op. cit.*, 43.

¹¹ See Vasilii Shverubovich, *O starom Khudozhestvennom teatre* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1990) and Sof'ia Piliavskaia, *Grustnaia kniga* (Moscow: Vargius, 2001).

suddenly, out of this fog, beginning with his white hair standing on end, there gradually began to emerge old Descaire's head.¹²

Did Chekhov in his delirium realize that his wife was referring not to his story but to the story by Turgenev? If he did, this may offer another possible reading of his smile in response to Knipper's words. When Chekhov was 26, he also took part in a séance. There he saw the spirit of Turgenev who told him that his life was "drawing to a close." Turgenev always loomed large for Chekhov. Not only critics, but also Chekhov himself never stopped comparing his works to those by Turgenev.¹³ In 1903, on several occasions, he informed Knipper that he was immersed in rereading Turgenev's works, only to conclude that Turgenev was hopelessly outdated.¹⁴ This comment notwithstanding, Chekhov was no doubt intimately familiar with the details of Turgenev's life. Although he parted with many books in the course of his life, Chekhov retained the first 1884 edition of Turgenev's letters. No doubt, he knew them well. He repeatedly made fun of Turgenev's last letter to Tolstoy, in which the younger writer was famously called "the great writer of the Russian land" and was urged to resume writing fiction, by addressing various female actresses as "great actress of the Russian land" ("*velikaia aktrisa zemli russkoi*").

The letters that Turgenev wrote during the last year and a half of his life, when he was suffering from his incurable disease, are strikingly Chekhovian, or, to be more precise, Chekhov's intimate letters from the last 4-5 years of his life are steeped in Turgenev's ordinary humanness, forgiveness and understanding. Turgenev noticed the first symptoms of his disease (spinal cancer) in March 1882 and soon became immobilized. He was particularly upset that he had to postpone indefinitely his plans to go to Russia the following summer. The doctors were telling him that there was nothing seriously wrong with him, although he might have to spend months and even years in bed.¹⁵ At first Turgenev was frustrated and bored ("my personal life has stopped"), but then he found strength to resign himself to his new situation, comparing himself to "an oyster that nobody can eat." He also wrote in his letters, "As it turns out, one can go on living even when one is incapable of standing, walking and riding." "Look at oysters. They live like this. I have even come to the conclusion that it is quite all right [...] being an oyster."¹⁶ But during his last months Turgenev suffered excruciating pain and was seriously contemplating suicide.

Turgenev died on August 22/September 3. Nearly a month later, on September 19/October 1, his coffin was put on a train from Paris to Berlin and to Verzhbolovo. In fact, in Verzhbolovo, much to the surprise of the representative of the funeral commission, Turgenev's body arrived "without any accompanying people [who, as it turned out, had all been detained at the border crossing] and without any documentation, except for the luggage declaration, which stated '[number] 1 – dead body,' no name, no last name!"¹⁷ In Verzhbolovo, Turgenev's coffin had to remain for another 3 days so that it arrived in St.

¹² I. S. Turgenev, "Strannaia istoriia," *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v dvadtsati vos'mi tomakh* (Moscow-Leningrad: Nauka, 1965), vol. 8, 147.

¹³ In *The Seagull*, Chekhov even makes his allegedly successful Trigorin suffer from an inferiority complex. He tells Nina: "You know what my friends will say as they file past my grave? 'Here lies Trigorin. A good writer, but no Turgenev.'" Anton Chekhov, *The Essential Plays*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 29.

¹⁴ A. P. Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v tridtsati tomakh, Pis'ma*, vol. 10, 70, 194; vol. 11, 184.

¹⁵ On Turgenev's death see L. S. Utevkii's pioneering *Smert' Turgeneva. 1883-1923. Trudy Turgenevskogo obshchestva* (Petersburg, Atenei, 1923).

¹⁶ These particular excerpts from Turgenev's letters from the first 1884 edition of his letters are quoted in Utevkii, *op. cit.* 21-25.

¹⁷ M. M. Stasiulevich, "Pokhorony I. S. Turgeneva," *Vestnik Evropy*, November 1883, 439.

Petersburg exactly on Tuesday, September 27/October 8, as had been previously planned by the funeral commission and as had been deemed appropriate by the authorities.¹⁸ As both Stasiulevich's and Utevsii's reports suggest, the circumstances surrounding Turgenev's death and his funeral became a hotly discussed issue among Russian intellectuals. Turgenev died in the little French town of Bougival, near Paris, surrounded – to the dismay of many Russians, including his friends – “only” by his adopted family, the family of his life-long passion and the famous opera singer, Pauline Viardot. Utevsii's monograph contains generous praise of the Viardot family, explaining that Turgenev had been given a lot of love and care when he required them most.

In 1874, young Vengerov approached Turgenev with some queries related to his work *Russian Literature through its Contemporary Representatives: Ivan Sergeevich Turgenev* (*Russkaia literatura v ee sovremennykh predstaviteliakh: Ivan Sergeevich Turgenev*, 1875). He was particularly interested in finding out why it had taken Turgenev so long to liberate his serfs. In response, Turgenev wrote what he called a “candid” letter. When he received Vengerov's monograph in 1875, Turgenev was disappointed both with Vengerov's interpretations and his writing style. More important, he was appalled by Vengerov's decision to publish Turgenev's private letter without his permission.¹⁹ His growing annoyance with Vengerov led Turgenev to inform Vengerov in 1875 that their views on literature and art “were completely different.”²⁰ Apparently, in 1904, and later in 1914, Vengerov did not recall the references to oysters in Turgenev's letters. If he had, he might have felt better about the infamous inscription “For Oysters” on the funeral car.²¹

If one subscribes to the idea of Chekhov shaping life even after his death, it is tempting to see the oyster car in the light of Harold Bloom's theory of literary influence. The younger writer, according to Bloom, must “swerve” from the work of his predecessors to prove his superiority.²² Chekhov's allegedly and seemingly meaningless and boring trip to Germany and back may well have been an audacious swerve toward superiority. Did Chekhov think about Turgenev during his last days in Badenweiler? Even if he didn't, the oyster car that carried his body from Verzhbolovo to St. Petersburg and then to Moscow strangely reaffirmed his filial-like bond with Turgenev.

From 1904 onward Chekhov has been seen by the reading public not as someone inferior to Turgenev, but as his equal and even as a more talented writer. “Chekhov's death

¹⁸ Ibid., 436-37.

¹⁹ See Turgenev's letters to Vengerov and commentaries in I. S. Turgenev, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v dvadtsati vos'mi tomakh, Pis'ma*, vol. 10, 256, 620, 621; vol. 11, 85-87, 92, 174, 490-492, 495, 542.

²⁰ Ibid., vol. 11, 174.

²¹ Isadora Duncan (1878-1927) firmly believed that oysters were somehow linked to artistic disposition and creativity. See her recollection of her pre-natal existence: “The character of a child is already plain, even in its mother's womb. Before I was born my mother was in great agony of spirit and in a tragic situation. She could take no food except iced oysters and iced champagne. If people ask me when I began to dance, I reply, “In my mother's womb, probably as a result of the oysters and champagne – the food of Aphrodite. [...] I was born by the sea, and I have noticed that all the great events of my life have taken place by the sea.” Isadora Duncan, *My Life* [1927] (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1955), 9. See also the discussion (with references to the findings of R. D. Timenchik) of the associative series “pearls,” “molluscs” and “oysters” in the texts by Innokentii Annenskii and Turgenev in Aleksandr Kushner's “Sredi liudei, kotorye ne slyshat,” *Apollon v trave* (Moscow: Progress-Pleiada, 2005), 319-320. In the 1960s, Anna Akhmatova admitted to a younger interlocutor of hers, that all her life she found herself in an impossible situation: “One can't even slightly praise me, because I am extremely vulnerable, like an oyster.” G. V. Glekin, “Vstrechi s Akhmatovoi: Iz dnevnikovykh zapisei 1959-1966 godov,” *Voprosy literatury*, no. 2 (1997). Interestingly, the critic Erikh Gollerbakh described Nikolai Gumil'ev's manner of speaking in the early 1910s as also related to oysters: “His voice jumps from bass to almost descant, drawing words out and swallowing them like oysters.” Gollerbakh, *Gorod muz.* (Leningrad, 1930), 132.

²² Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 2nd edition (New York/Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997).

has shown that Russian society loves him more than we could ever imagine,” Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko reported to Konstantin Stanislavskii on July 25, 1904. “Never during his life was he put on the same level with Pushkin, Tolstoy and higher than Turgenev, but today this is done almost unanimously.”²³ Interestingly, in 1908, in the commemorative issue of *Teatr i iskusstvo* devoted to Turgenev, the critic Vladimir Botsianovskii compared Turgenev to a lovable and memorable but, nevertheless, secondary character in Chekhov’s *Cherry Orchard*. Turgenev’s last days in Bougival reminded Botsianovskii of the old sick Firs, left behind by his masters in a deserted house:

Fate tore [Turgenev] away from the only thing dear to him [his family estate Spasskoe] and, in return, gave him essentially nothing...

The same way it treated Firs, fate separated Turgenev from his beloved “Cherry Orchard” and trapped him inside walls, which his groans took a long time to penetrate and be heard... They were heard only toward the end of his life or, rather, after his death...²⁴

Turgenev was arguably the first great Russian writer who had been expected to die “at home,” but died away from home. In its turn, Chekhov’s death marked a further development in such “expectations.” From then on few writers – including Tolstoy – were expected to die in their own beds or even to find their resting place in their homeland. Thus it is not surprising that Chekhov’s younger contemporary Boris Zaitsev (1881-1972), who spent the last fifty years of his life in France, described in 1954 the time he and his wife spent from meeting the coffin with Chekhov’s remains at Nikolaevskii Station in Moscow to the actual burial ceremony not as “an apotheosis of vulgarity” (as described by Gorky) or as one of Chekhov’s practical jokes but “as some kind of an ever-lasting pilgrimage” and epiphany. He recalled: “A departing cloud, raindrops falling from trees, the fragment of a rainbow intersecting the cloud like a peacock’s tail, the gold of the church cupolas, the shiny crosses, swallows shooting through the air, the grave, and the crowd of mourners – all of those were Chekhov departing this life for the eternal rest at the New Virgin Convent, where he would come from clinics, when he felt better, and stand modestly close to the wall inside the cathedral listening to the liturgy and the nuns’ singing.”²⁵ A perfect, not a boring day.

²³ Nemirovich-Danchenko is quoted in A.P. Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v tridtsati tomakh, Pis'ma*, vol. 12, 233.

²⁴ Vl. Botsianovskii, “Pamiati I. S. Turgeneva,” *Teatr i iskusstvo*, 33 (1908): 563.

²⁵ Boris Zaitsev, “Chekhov,” in *Dal'koe* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1991), 387.