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Conference Announcement

Chekhov on Stage and Page

Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

December 2-4, 2010

In honor of the 150th anniversary of Anton Chekhov's birth, the Slavic Department at Ohio State University, in conjunction with the North American Chekhov Society, announce an international conference devoted to Chekhov's work.

We welcome proposals for panels and individual papers as well as staged scenes and short plays from US, Canadian, and European scholars, writers and actors. Topics suggested so far include Chekhov and American Fiction (Lyudmila Parts, McGill University), Chekhov on the Pages of His Biographers (Galina Rylkova, University of Florida), and "Writing under the Influence of Chekhov" (Michelle Herman, OSU MFA program). Cinematic stagings of Chekhov (Maria Ignatieva, OSU) as well as interpretations in opera and ballet could be explored.

Please contact Profs. Angela Brintlinger and Irene Masing-Delic, Ohio State University (brintlinger.3@osu.edu and delic.1@osu.edu) or the NACS board, with your ideas and thoughts. The sooner the program begins to take shape, the sooner we will be able to apply for funding.

Editor's Note

This issue features two essays: one on “Poprygun’ia” and the other on *Ivanov*. Carol Apollonio (Duke University) offers a more complex reading of Chekhov’s story, an interpretation that was first explored in a paper that Carol read at the Chekhov Centennial Conference at Melikhovo in 2004. Then, John McKellor Reid, who is Principal Lecturer in Drama in the School of English and Drama of the University of the West of England, provides a perspective on Chekhov’s play that differs from the angle taken by Bradley Lewis in *The Bulletin* two issues ago. John’s essay is reprinted with the permission of *Modern Drama*, which first published it in its Spring 2006 issue, and of the Edwin Mellen Press, which published John’s book, *The Polemical Force of Chekhovian Comedies: A Rhetorical Analysis*, in 2007.

A review of a recent collection of articles follows as well as a select bibliography of books and articles on Chekhov published in the last two years.

Finally, for those who have not yet heard of the deteriorating condition of the Chekhov Museum in Yalta, I should like to refer you to the English website, www.yaltachekhov.org, set up by Rosamund Bartlett, Elena Michajlowska, and Alexander Walsh. The site explains in detail the problems of the museum and the campaign on its behalf. Donations are also accepted on the site.

Scenic Storytelling in Chekhov’s “Grasshopper”

Carol Apollonio
Duke University

The 1892 story “*Poprygun’ia*”, most commonly known in English as “The Grasshopper,” is one of the most autobiographical of Chekhov’s works.¹ In spite of the author’s protestations to the contrary, the reading public and Chekhov’s own friends recognized the prototypes of its characters in the painter Isaak Levitan and the artistic dilettante and salon hostess Sofia Kuvshinnikova, as well as in a number of other

¹ See the editors’ notes to the story in Volume 8 of Chekhov’s collected works, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem, Sochineniia* (Moskva: Nauka, 1977), t. 8, pp. 429-33, and Chudakov, “Poëtika i prototipy”.

members of their circle. The details of Kuvshinnikova's marriage, her activities in the art world, and her affair with the painter figure prominently in the story. The story's publication led to a scandal in Moscow's literary and artistic world and a public and painful rift between the author and those of his acquaintance who identified themselves as caricatured protagonists. This episode has been addressed in every biographical study, and the evidence does not need to be reproduced here. But the story's origins make it an excellent potential source for insights about the creative process, both in general and in the particular case of Chekhov.

It is remarkable that a story distinguished by its *correspondence to real life*—with all its complexity and abundance of fine details—should take the form of *a fable*, which is, after all, one of the simplest and most schematic of literary forms. Somehow Chekhov managed to make his heroine recognizable both as an individual and as the protagonist of Krylov's famous fable about the dragonfly (a.k.a. grasshopper)² and the ant. The grasshopper sings and dances all summer while the ant toils in preparation for the winter. When winter comes, the grasshopper, naturally, is left out in the cold. In Chekhov's story Olga is the frivolous grasshopper, and her husband, the gentle, hardworking and gifted doctor Dymov, is the ant. This literary relationship between story and fable is as well documented in the criticism as the story's origins in the Kuvshinnikova-Levitan love affair. It is immediately recognizable to the Russian reader in spite of the fact that the plots of the two works lead to very different outcomes: in Chekhov's story the ant dies, and the grasshopper lives to tell (or recall) the tale; in the fable it is the ant who will reap the fruits of his summer's labor.

Chekhov chose to combine obviously real-life material with a primitive literary model. It is in the nature of a fable to offer a moral message, and indeed, the external details of the story seem to offer readers a simple, obvious lesson affirming good and condemning evil. Diligence is rewarded, and betrayal condemned. A superficial reading

² The word itself, the feminine version of “попрыгунь,” calls to mind a number of insects. It translates variously as “fidget,” “flibbertigibbet,” or more literally, “scamperer.” The heroine of Krylov's fable is “Попрыгунья Стрекоза” (Scamperer-Dragonfly). Chekhov's title is translated into English variously as “The Grasshopper” (Garnett and Magarshack), “The Butterfly” (Hingley), and “The Fidget” (Pevear-Volokhonsky). For simplicity, I retain the “grasshopper” of the most prominent translations and of the English versions of Aesop's fable.

of the story identifies Olga as a flawed character whose frivolity and self-centeredness leads her into sin. For readers inclined to taxonomy, she exemplifies a prominent Chekhovian type, identified by the late Thomas Winner as the “narcissistic and beguiling woman, who deceives herself as well as others.”³ The prominence of this type in Chekhov’s work has naturally brought on frequent charges of misogyny, and the temptation to simplify the gender issues has brought down many good critics.⁴ On a more subtle level, given the fact that Olga is a would-be artist and her lover is a painter, the story can be read as a condemnation of artistic activity—which like Olga herself is superficial and concerned only with surfaces—as opposed to medicine, which gets to the essence of things. The surface simplicity—fabular and factual—of “The Grasshopper,” with these schematic oppositions between good and evil, works against an interpretation of the story as an example of literary realism.⁵ The point is well taken; on the other hand, the accusation of misogyny is in itself a reduction of artistic complexity to a superficial political message. And given the centrality in fable of the moral, it is significant, not to mention puzzling, that, though diligence is to be rewarded and art punished, it is *Dymov* who dies.

In one of the finest interpretations of “The Grasshopper,” George Pahomov traces the doctor’s simple virtues of industriousness and self-sacrifice to specific antecedents in Russian hagiography. The polarities of good and evil remain identified with the specific characters, as in the fable, but Dymov is no longer a simple front man for goodness. Rather, he is a *complex* front man for goodness. Juxtaposed with his frivolous, sinful wife, he represents a “subtle, passively affirmative repository of the traits that the foregrounded [and morally condemned] figure lacks” (34). Patient, tolerant, forgiving, and nurturing, Pahomov’s Dymov continues the self-sacrificing tradition of the Russian saints into a secular age.

³ Winner, p. 69.

⁴ For example, in a chapter of her book *Anton Chekhov and the Lady with the Dog* entitled “Misogyny,” Virginia Llewellyn Smith writes that in spite of some “rather sickening” aspects in Dymov’s character, “‘The Butterfly’ remains a damning indictment of woman’s triviality.” (pp. 19-20).

⁵ For Donald Rayfield, for example, the story is “marred by Tolstoyan defects in its overall scheme [...]; black is jet-black and white is snow-white. [...] ‘The Grasshopper’ reflects too well Chekhov’s intermittent misogyny and his distrust of aesthetes.”

In an equally subtle psychological interpretation, Douglas Clayton highlights the moral ambiguity and sense of balance that is so central to Chekhov's poetics. Examining the story's narrative structure, Clayton concludes that Olga is no guiltier than Dymov himself. "It is a story of two characters who are dependent on one another in an almost infantile way, and yet are unable to establish any real contact with each other and so become concerned instead with maintaining appearances." The simple moral message gives way to a complex artistic "vision that accounts for all the complexity of life and refuses to force reality into a procrustean bed of preconceptions."⁶

These superb interpretations respect the subtlety of Chekhov's reworking of the fable using modern material and make it impossible to return to a reading of the story as a mere transcription of everyday facts. Still, it would be folly to take Chekhov at his word when he denies the real-life background. Artists use the material at hand, and Chekhov was no exception. The solution is to treat this level of interpretation as a mere step along the way to a deeper understanding of the story as art. If "The Grasshopper" is a grafting of fable onto real life, then the question of how real life becomes art becomes central. "The Grasshopper" can, and will, be read as an allegory for the artistic process itself.

It seems counterintuitive to apply the primitive term "allegory" to Chekhov's complex narrative poetics. Nevertheless, a remarkable number of his works are strongly allegorical in nature. Characters whose wealth of physical attributes anchor them securely in the material world serve as repositories for particular values. So, for example: "A Nervous Attack" ("Припадок," 1888) can be read as an encounter of forces representing Art, Medicine, and Law; *Uncle Vanua* (*Дядя Ваня*, 1890-96): Art, Idleness, and Work (or Criticism and Art); "The Bishop" ("Архиерей," 1902): Institutional Religion and Spirit; "House with a Mezzanine" ("Дом с мезонином," 1896): Visual and Narrative Art⁷; *The Cherry Orchard*: (*Вишневый сад*, 1903-4): Love and Work; and so on. Chekhov makes it easy to propose such interpretations by giving his characters suggestive names (*Liubov'* [love] Ranevskaia; Elena (Helen of Troy; "*len*" [idleness]), or by identifying them more by profession than by name, as in "A Nervous Attack," where

⁶ Clayton p. 603.

⁷ See my "Art and Idleness: Chekhov's 'The House with a Mezzanine,'" *Russian Review* (July, 1999): 456-66.

the protagonist's brothel-crawling companions are identified by their academic areas of concentration: "the artist" and "the medic." Certain patterns emerge. Science is diligent; Art is lazy. Idleness is beautiful; Work is ugly. Love and Marriage can never occupy the same space. Practicality kills Love. What is interesting here is that all of these values are strongly represented in the author's own life. This of course will be true of any artist who writes about his own profession (and it is possible to argue that all art can be interpreted as being about itself⁸). But in Chekhov's case the clues are repeated too often, and they correspond to his own extra-artistic life too closely to be ignored. "The Grasshopper" features a marriage between a doctor (and academic) [Medicine and Science] and a dilettante artist who is having an affair with a painter [Art] and whose circle of friends includes representatives of all the arts: Music, Theater, Literature. . . . Chekhov was a doctor, a scholar, and a writer whose circle of artistic friends is duplicated in the story. The characters of the story are Chekhov himself, and "The Grasshopper" tells the story of its own creation.

One of Chekhov's master metaphors is that of the "shell." It appears in many stories, and figures as the central image in the famous "Man in the Shell" («Человек в футляре», 1898). The secret, inner truth of each individual is inaccessible to others, masked as it is by external appearances. In most of Chekhov's work, the gap between interior and exterior is shown to be unbridgeable. Only in "Lady with the Dog" (1899)—justifiably his most famous prose work—does Chekhov allow the inner life of two characters to achieve real, meaningful contact, in spite of, or indeed perhaps because of, the external shells—the physical distance, the moral strictures, the limits of language and convention—dividing them. In addition to its thematic function within his works, the metaphor of the shell applies on a higher level of abstraction as well. For the creative process entails enclosure—or veiling—of life essence in the tangible shell of artistic form. Visual art would of course be the most obvious example of this process. As we shall see, Chekhov subtly manipulates the means available in narrative—setting, point of view and plot—to communicate this message.

⁸ Maureen Quilligan's argument for a generic definition of allegory reacts against this all-inclusive approach (p. 15), but it is true that all literary art can be seen as programmed for allegorical interpretation. See Frye, p. 89.

“The Grasshopper” depicts the activity not of writers, but of painters, as they transform life into art. A Bohemian salon, the summer camp-workshop of itinerant painters, an artist’s studio—such are the backdrops for Olga’s story. Chekhov’s heroine herself is associated with perception and appearance; she is all exterior and marked by leitmotifs of clothing, decoration, and visual art. Her husband Dymov, the doctor, represents the true inner essence of human life, the body underneath the clothing, the body that needs to be studied, nurtured and cured. The human shell layers itself outwards, metonymically, from the body. Thus the decorations of Olga’s apartment represent simply another, more exterior shell, a projection of her soul, a shell which expands to the exterior landscape of her summer travels. Olga’s habitat and itinerary (her city home, her dacha, her trip down the Volga) serve as the story’s visible stage. As the plot moves forward, the stage shifts, but retains its distinguishing features.

The doctor’s work takes him *in the other direction*, into the body. In addition to his therapeutic work as a healer, he carries out research, probes into the bodies of sick people, and performs autopsies. We do not see his patients, and in fact the line between live and dead patients is not clearly drawn. For example, presumably both living and dead patients provide data for Dr. Dymov’s medical discoveries, and he shares fluids with patients in both states—saliva from the boy with diphtheria, blood from a cadaver. As his colleague Korostelëv reports in what is essentially the punch line of the story, his research leads to significant breakthroughs in the field of medical knowledge. In contrast to Olga, Dymov’s field of activity is offstage. He works elsewhere, in places *invisible and inaccessible* to the reader.

Olga’s summer journey into the countryside and back serves as the basic plotline. She accompanies a group of artists on a painting expedition down the Volga River.⁹ But there is a queasy circularity to her plot. Chekhov creates a subtle sense of *déjà vu* by repeating key elements in the succession of settings he creates for Olga’s story. Olga’s apartment in the city reflects her sense of the picturesque and her yearning for the Russian countryside—conventionally representing “real life:”

⁹ Such journeys down the Volga were part of a creation of a specifically Russian view of the “picturesque” in the latter half of the nineteenth century. See Ely’s fascinating article for a detailed discussion, including the role played by landscape artists in this movement.

Ольга Ивановна в гостиной увешала все стены сплошь своими и чужими этюдами в рамах и без рам, а около рояля и мебели устроила красивую тесноту из китайских зонтов, мольбертов, разноцветных тряпочек, кинжалов, бюстиков, фотографий... В столовой она оклеила стены любочными картинками, повесила лапти и серпы, поставила в углу косу и грабли, и получилась столовая в русском вкусе. В спальне она, чтобы похоже было на пещеру, задрапировала потолок и стены темным сукном, повесила над кроватями венецианский фонарь, а у дверей поставила фигуру с алебардой¹⁰ (PSS 8: 9).

She completely covered the walls in the drawing room with sketches, her own and others', framed and without frames, and she cluttered the area around the piano and furniture with objects: Chinese parasols, easels, various-colored rags, daggers, busts, photographs... She papered the walls of the dining room with cheap peasant prints, hung bast sandals and sickles on the walls, stood a scythe and a rake in the corner, and the result was a Russian folk-style dining room. She draped the ceiling and walls in the bedroom with dark cloth to make it look like a cave, hung a Venetian lamp over the beds, and placed a statuette with a halberd by the door.

The framing of the images and artifacts heightens the sense of their artificiality in this urban setting. Given the strong metonymic link to the hostess, the reader immediately judges Olga herself as trivial and superficial in her preoccupations. But the element of “artfulness” [искусственность], which dominates here, will gain profundity as the reader accompanies Olga out into the countryside, to the places where these objects originated. Her journey is not a mere summer romance; rather it is the story of the origins of art. The reader next views her through the eyes of her husband, who comes to see her at their dacha outside of town:

¹⁰ All citations from the story come from *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem*, Vol. 8. Henceforth page numbers are given parenthetically in the text.

На даче, очень неприглядной на вид, с низкими потолками, оклеенными писчею бумагой, и с неровными щелистыми полами, было только три комнаты. В одной стояла кровать, в другой на стульях и окнах валялись холсты, кисти, засаленная бумага и мужские пальто и шляпы, а в третьей Дымов застал трех каких-то незнакомых мужчин (13).

The dacha, which was quite unappealing in appearance, with its low ceilings and its walls covered with writing paper, and with its uneven, drafty floors, had only three rooms. The bed was in one of them; another was littered with canvases, paintbrushes, soiled paper and men's coats and hats; and in the third Dymov came upon three men who were strangers to him.

The details echo the décor in Olga's apartment, but are now "real." The dacha is an intermediate space, between city and country. Here the tools for the creation of art are the center of attention, and the dwelling, the shell separating and protecting its inhabitants from the elements, is unstable and porous. The shift in point of view is significant, for generally Olga's perspective has dominated in the story up until this point. Dymov has moved out of the secure domestic space of his married life, with its tame, shrunken decorative objects, into an uneasy, transitional location. From the husband's increasingly alienated perspective, human beings—his wife's artistic friends—are themselves objectified.

The settings continue to reinforce the emotional distancing. Olga's artistic journey leads her farther into the Russian countryside, to a painters' hut along the Volga. She has now physically entered the world that she had attempted to duplicate in the décor of her city apartment. Whereas before flat, visual, picturesque elements dominated, now the olfactory and tactile senses are put to work:

В избу вошла баба и стала не спеша топить печь, чтобы готовить обед. Запахло гарью, и воздух посинел от дыма. Приходили художники в высоких грязных сапогах и с мокрыми от дождя лицами, рассматривали этюды и

говорили себе в утешение, что Волга даже в дурную погоду имеет свою прелесть. А дешевые часы на стенке: тик-тик-тик... Озябшие мухи столпились в переднем углу около образов и жужжат, и слышно, как под лавками в толстых папках возятся прусаки ...(19).

The peasant woman entered the hut and lackadaisically began to light the stove for dinner. There came a burning smell, and the air turned blue with smoke. The artists entered in their filthy, high-topped boots, with their faces wet from the rain, looked over their sketches and comforted themselves by saying that even in bad weather the Volga had its charms. And the cheap clock on the wall went tick-tick-tick... Flies, suffering from the cold, crowded together in the corner near the icons, buzzing, and cockroaches rustled loudly in the thick portfolios under the benches.

It is hard to breathe. Chekhov's air is stuffy, smoky, smelly, and damp all at the same time. The only thing that remains of the city is the faint lexical ghost of Olga's husband in the blue smoke (*дым*—*Dymov*) that fills the room. There is no trace of art—not in frames or in the tools of the artists—just the assault of raw, unmediated material reality on the senses. Instead of her husband, it is the peasant woman who brings the food, and she brings it not to Olga, but to Riabovskii, and peasant dirt pollutes the food:

В это время баба осторожно несла ему в обеих руках тарелку со щами, и Ольга Ивановна видела, как она обмочила во щих свои большие пальцы. И грязная баба с перетянутым животом, и щи, которые стал жадно есть Рябовский, и изба, и вся эта жизнь, которую вначале она так любила за простоту и художественный беспорядок, показалась ей теперь ужасными (19-20).

Then the peasant woman brought him a plate of cabbage soup, carrying it carefully with both hands, and Olga Ivanovna saw both thumbs immersed in the soup. And the filthy woman with her cross-belted belly and the soup, which

Riabovskii started wolfing down, and the hut, and this entire life, which she had loved so much at first for its simplicity and artistic disorder, now seemed terrible to her.

In all three scenes, the basic props—peasant implements, artists and their sketches, paintbrushes, artistic clutter, the smell of cooking—have not changed. But everything is different now. The change in setting reflects a change in Olga’s consciousness, and on a deeper level, a movement into the depth of things under the visual surface.

Chekhov’s manipulation of setting is truly remarkable, and utterly appropriate for his message. The succession of scenes tells its own story—a story about the creation of visual art, the movement from art to material reality and, ultimately, back again (as the narrative genre permits, back again with *wisdom*)—in tandem with the sordid romance on the story’s surface. The theme of artistic inspiration and the hard work of creation is inextricably bound up in the story of a marriage, and here, too, the scenery reinforces the plot elements. Point of view is fluid. The plot progresses through a set of permutations of a single image of a wedding, presented in turn literally, symbolically, and ironically, with the heroine at the center both of the narrative itself and of each scenic image. As we shall see, Chekhov uses these staged pictures ultimately to subvert them and to reassert the power of narrative art.

We first see Olga—from outside—costumed in her wedding dress: ^аАртист говорил Ольге Ивановне, что со своими льняными волосами и в венчальном наряде она очень похожа на стройное вишневое деревцо, когда весной она сплошь бывает покрыто нежными белыми цветами” (8) (“The artist told Olga Ivanovna that with her flaxen hair and in her wedding dress she looked just like a slender cherry tree in the springtime when it is completely covered with tender white blossoms”). Then—out at the dacha—she stages a wedding, just like her own, with the same “shy, bear-like, strong, silent” groom (Dymov, too, is “bear-like”), herself in a pretty dress, and a trip to the newlyweds home after the wedding—all the same ingredients as her own Chapter I wedding, but now staged, fake, all visual, a setting for artists to paint: “Представь, после обедни венчанье, потом из церкви все пешком до квартиры невесты... понимаешь, роцца, пение птиц, солнечные пятна на траве и все мы разноцветными пятнами на

ярко-зеленом фоне — преоригинально, во вкусе французских экспрессионистов» (14) (“Just picture it, after mass the wedding ceremony, then everyone walks to the bride’s apartment...you understand, a grove, birds’ singing, patches of sunlight on the grass and all of us different-colored patches on a bright green background—so original, in the style of the French ‘expressionists’”). This wedding is a painting dreamed up by Olga herself, a painting of her own wedding. She is in the picture; and her husband serves as a link to the “real world”, where dresses and food are kept.

This series of *tableaux vivants* tells the story as powerfully as the surface of the narration does. Olga’s artistic journey—her plot—leads to a climax: her seduction by (or of) Riabovskii at what we will assume is the mid-point of the summer (a quiet July night). The setting, too, is a mid-point in the geography: the deck of a steamer on the Volga river, detached from the land—both of the city and of the landscape. It is a point of infinite beauty and promise, in a sublime natural setting, colorful, enigmatic, made for a painter. Perhaps this is the moment when, according to Christopher Ely, the distinctive view of Russian nature became firmly established: “By the 1890s the shift to a scenic representation of the Volga was complete: almost every guidebook represented the river as uniquely Russian, and especially picturesque, natural space” (675). The spirit of Russian nature has entered the world of landscape art. The elements of the wedding scene recur: Olga stands on the deck listening to Riabovskii’s seductive words and pictures, and, here she is yet again in her dress, the center of attention: “Когда она, не мигая, долго смотрела вдаль, ей чудились толпы людей, огни, торжественные звуки музыки, крики восторга, сама она в белом платье и цветы, которые сыпались на нее со всех сторон. Думала она также о том, что рядом с нею, облокотившись о борт, стоит настоящий великий человек, гений, божий избранник...” (15) (“When she stared into the distance for a long time without blinking, she seemed to see crowds of people, lights, the sounds of festive music, exclamations of delight, and there she was herself, in a white dress, with flowers sprinkling down on her from all sides. She also thought about the fact that here, next to her, leaning against the railing, stood a genius, a man of true greatness, one of God’s chosen”). Olga’s dream is truer than she knows; on the surface, the story offers no data to deny that Riabovskii is an artist of genius; and her dream is true on a deeper level, *whether the man is Riabovskii or her husband*. In the

former case Olga will have become a *painting*; on exhibit before an adoring crowd with the proud painter standing beside it; on the other, she is a famous man's wife.

Thus this is also the story of the painter's use and abuse, for the purpose of art, of a living, breathing, human being. In September Olga finds herself deposited onshore with the disillusioned, embittered and depressed Riabovskii on *his* territory:

После чая он, мрачный, сидел у окна и смотрел на Волгу. А Волга уже была без блеска, тусклая, матовая, холодная на вид. Всё, всё напоминало о приближении тоскливой, хмурой осени. И казалось, что роскошные зеленые ковры на берегах, алмазные отражения лучей, прозрачную синюю даль и всё щегольское и парадное природа сняла теперь с Волги и уложила в сундуки до будущей весны, и вороны летали около Волги и дразнили ее: "Голая! голая!" (17)

After tea, he sat gloomily by the window and looked at the Volga. And the Volga had lost her shine, was now dim, dull, and cold looking. Everything, absolutely everything served as a reminder of the approach of sad, gloomy autumn, and it seemed that nature had stripped the Volga of everything fancy and fashionable--the lush green carpets on the riverbanks, the diamond sparkles reflecting the sun's rays, the blue, limpid sky--and had packed it all away in trunks for next spring, and the crows flew around over the Volga and taunted her/it, "Naked! Naked!"

As in his most memorable works, Chekhov manipulates point of view to masterful effect. We see through the eyes of both the disillusioned artist and his "used" model, with the boundaries between them and the landscape blurred. The auditory elements reinforce the message: Olga *is* the Volga. Both are feminine; both have been the objects of Riabovskii's attention (the aggression of the artist and the lover); both are forlorn, sad, and drab. The Russian pronoun allows an ambiguity that the translator must eliminate; "it" (the Volga) is in fact "she" as well (*ona—ee*). Unclothed, unmasked, unclean, used

up, Olga has become part of the landscape.¹¹ The visual elements accumulate in an inimitable Chekhovian crescendo, only to climax in the sudden discordant shriek—the intrusion of the auditory element, the expansion into three dimensions— of the crows. The pointed ambiguity of the pronoun, the rhymes of their names¹², and even the epithet “naked” (*golaia*) merges Olga completely with the river: Olga-Volga, her name now is “Golaia”; like the riverbank stripped of its summer color, she too has lost her beautiful exterior shell, her wedding dress. The filth that she now sees everywhere is of course not only the Russian earth that lies under the surface cleanliness of landscape painting, purged by the artist’s manipulation of color and light, but also the impurity of her own moral transgression. No wonder she now craves husband and home. And somehow, though the painter is equally guilty, it is Olga that the reader condemns.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the sketch she takes to Riabovskii’s studio as a feeble excuse to see him is a still life (a *nature morte*—literally dead nature), and that she has been replaced in his studio with some other woman, a new source of inspiration. The woman is hiding behind a veiled painting on an easel in the studio, just where Olga herself used to hide—invisible, but framed. This is the studio echo of the Volga bank scene, where in the painters’ hut Olga was concealed behind a partition (17). Riabovskii’s new girlfriend is Olga’s own pale ghost. It seems clear by now that this is not simply the story of a frivolous woman’s love affair, but a record of the artistic process

¹¹ In his new study, *Seeing Chekhov*, Michael Finke offers a stimulating analysis of the importance of the motif of seeing and observing in Chekhov’s work both as a doctor and an artist. The theme was foremost on Chekhov’s mind, especially during the early and mid-nineties. Analyzing one of the longest stories of this time, “Three Years” (1895), Finke shows how a character—female, again—merges, not into the landscape, but into a Levitan-esque painting of the Russian landscape. This might be considered the end-point of the process, the “consumer’s” experience. See Finke, pp. 128-35. Though Finke’s analysis is highly relevant to our analysis of how life becomes art, “The Grasshopper” does not depict this moment of consumption of the finished work. Rather, in a sharp ironic twist, when she visits the artist’s studio, *Olga is jealous of Riabovskii’s next picture* (Ольга ревновала Рябовского к картине и ненавидела *ее* (the ambiguous pronoun can refer to both her and it [the painting])). And when a subsequent visit coincides with a visit by Riabovskii’s new lover, Olga looks straight at a painting (significantly not described), and sees only the *invisible* “other woman” hiding behind it (p. 22).

¹² Even allowing for the palatalized “l” of Olga’s name, the auditory resonance in the three words is striking.

from beginning to end. This plot proceeds as follows: Olga, nurturer of art, gathers artists around her until one of them is inspired enough by her to turn her into a painting. The wedding dress mutates into a stage-prop, then a painted costume. The process of turning life into art entails the removal of everything clean and picturesque from the surface of the painting, leaving behind the earthy, dirty, sinful essence. Olga's spirit enters the painting, or rather the space behind it, and her colorful exterior shell is projected onto its flat surface. The painting is complete. The exhausted artist has no further use for the model, and he will look elsewhere for inspiration. Olga's shipboard dream of being displayed at the center of attention of an adoring crowd, at the side of a "great man," turns out to be not a real-life dream of marriage, but a ghostly projection of a work of art that has not yet come into being—on exhibit to an adoring public. The fact that we do not ever see Riabovskii's picture itself, and that we are given to understand that it is a landscape, is no obstacle to this interpretation. It has, after all, been made quite clear that in the process of serving as the artist's inspiration, *Olga has merged with the landscape*.

Opposing exterior shell and interior essence we suggested that Dymov was the nurturer of the body. Indeed, he provides sustenance for Olga's body: shelter, food, and clothing (that summer dress). Dymov falls fatally ill with diphtheria, and Olga is overcome with anguish, guilt, uncleanliness, and *fear of exposure*. The story ends on a trope of reversal, which functions on multiple levels of the text. The deathbed scene represents an inversion of the initial wedding and salon scenes. The healer lies sick. The places of Olga's artist guests are now occupied by doctors, who are strangers to her, just as her guests were strangers to her husband's world. "Artistic disorder" has been replaced by medical disorder. Olga is disheveled and sloppily dressed. A strange man is snoring on her divan. And now, with everything turned inside out, Olga comes to her moment of "recognition," that point in tragic art where, as Aristotle explains, there takes place "a change from ignorance to knowledge, bringing the characters into either a close bond, or enmity, with one another, and concerning matters which bear on their prosperity or affliction."¹³ It is a moment of wisdom that only narrative can provide. Olga learns from

¹³ Aristotle, p. 43. This realization, of course, comes with Chekhovian irony. Moments of understanding are granted provisionally in his works, and are anchored in individual

Korostelëv (or at least is told by him) that her husband—not some painter—is a truly great man. As in the greatest tragic art, this recognition “occurs in direct conjunction with reversal.” (Aristotle 43). For Dymov is now all exterior, and she is all spirit, and as her nakedness before had filled the Volga landscape, now her guilt fills the room, spilling over onto the white canvas of the bed sheet. Dymov’s grief-stricken friend and colleague, Korostelëv, moans:

Добрая, чистая, любящая душа—не человек, а стекло! Служил науке и умер от науки. А работал, как вол, день и ночь, никто его не щадил, и молодой ученый, будущий профессор, должен был искать себе практику и по ночам заниматься переводами, чтобы платить вот за эти...подлые тряпки!

Коростелев поглядел с ненавистью на Ольгу Ивановну, ухватился за простыню обеими руками и сердито рванул, как будто она была виновата (30).

A good, pure, loving soul, not a man, but glass! He served science and died from science. And he worked like an ox, day and night, no one spared him, and a young scholar, a future professor, was forced to develop a practice for himself and do translations at night in order to pay for these...these loathsome rags!

Korostelëv looked at Olga Ivanovna with hatred, seized the sheet with both hands and tore it angrily as though it [*she*] were guilty.

He tears the sheet just as Riabovskii had slashed his canvas. In both cases it is an attack on Olga, for yet again, as in the Volga riverbank scene, the pronoun referent is ambiguous: the guilty one is *both* the sheet *and* Olga. The sheet, by its association with Olga’s guilt, is itself, a “loathsome rag.”

characters’ perceptions. Here, Olga’s understanding is mediated by the clearly biased and embittered Korostelëv.

This reading assigns all the guilt to Olga. She represents sin; her husband represents goodness. But things are not that easy in life, or in art that moves beyond fable. One man's saint is another's neglectful or impotent husband:

Молчаливое, безропотное, непонятное существо, обезличенное своею кротостью, бесхарактерное, слабое от излишней доброты, глухо страдало где-то там у себя на диване и не жаловалось. А если бы оно пожаловалось, хотя бы в бреду, то дежурные доктора узнали бы, что виноват тут не один только дифтерит. (28)

The silent, uncomplaining, incomprehensible creature, depersonalized by its meekness, without character, weak from an excess of goodness, was mutely suffering somewhere there on the divan in its room and not complaining. But if it were to complain, even in delirium, then the attending doctors would realize that it wasn't just diphtheria that was at fault here.

This Dymov is a completely neuter (even, considering the “ox” epithet, neutered), sexless man. A man who only serves his wife as a source of money and clothing is not, as Clayton points out, fully engaged. Between two people one is never completely at fault. This is not the story of two equal partners; rather, as the fabular structure implies, one partner is presented as all guilty, and the other is innocent and infantile as a child. Instead of begetting children, the husband stays out nights working, calls his wife “mama”, and feeds her. What one lacks, the other has in excess, and a strange sterility dominates at the center of their family life.

This modest story asks deeper questions about the relationship between art and nature. Dymov is a neuter being (referred to, for example, by the word “creature” [существо], so close to “essence”— [сущность]). But his death leaves him inert, just another physical object in Olga's city apartment. Meanwhile Olga *lives*. Dymov, like Chekhov himself, spent a lot of time doing autopsies, and as Chekhov famously said: “Когда вскрываешь труп, даже у самого заядливового спиритуалиста необходимо явится вопрос—где тут душа?» (Письма 3, 208) (“When you dissect a corpse, even the

most inveterate spiritualist must ask the question: where is the soul here?”). Indeed, the question remains as to the nature of the soul’s embeddedness in the body, and if we may put it this way, art’s embeddedness in material reality.

Chekhov does not grant his characters full understanding. We should not trust the narrator who says, “and the character realized... .”¹⁴ That is something that takes place on the surface level of the text. The moment of recognition in “The Grasshopper” is not Olga’s, but *ours*. We realize that what we have just read is an allegory for the creation of *narrative* art—an allegory in which storytelling, with its extra dimension of time, conquers the simple, flat reductionism of a landscape painting. True to Chekhov’s artistic credo, the story does not answer questions as to the relationships between essence (that neuter “being” that is so passive) and exterior (those dresses, those paintings, that flamboyant display). Deliciously, Chekhov does take revenge on the foibles of his acquaintances. But it is a revenge that uses the exterior shells of these real people, of their habitats, and of their stories, and elevates these earthbound creatures to serve immortal art.

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¹⁴ Chekhov limits his statements about the truth to what is observable in each individual case, rather than to the transcendent and general; we see only each character’s truth. See Kataev, especially p. 98.

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