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Mind the gap! – Chekhov 100 years on

✦ Кључне речи:
*Chekhov, adaptation,
assimilation, interpretation.*

Чланак представља покушај анализе проблема приликом превода Чехова на енглески језик. Аутор чланка поставља питање: да ли се у енглеском језику драме Чехова односе на период њиховог стварања, и покушава да то питање разреши.

For those of us familiar with the London Underground the warning ‘Mind the gap!’ needs no introduction. It is, as one arrives at a station, a recurring warning of foreboding, that something untoward is to befall one, that a gulf awaits to be transcended.

Chekhov died one hundred years ago this year. It therefore seems a fitting tribute to this exceptional man of letters to examine his output, to use a terribly hackneyed phrase, in relation to just that, the gap, or gulf of one hundred years. As the reader is one interested in style, idiom and manner I would like to examine a peculiar feature of Chekhov as a playwright, not that he is great for this I feel is beyond question, not that he is still read for this is only justified, and not why he is translated for he must surely rank among the greatest names in literature the

world (or worlds) over, but why, and this is not an imploring ‘why’, he has, and remains to be, so often been translated into English. As part of this introduction I would warmly welcome any response concerning the ‘volume’ of translations into other languages for, as far as my research has revealed, Chekhov, and here we unfortunately deal exclusively with his plays, enjoys an unprecedented number of English translators.

Chekhov is not difficult, here I obviously am not referring to the possible in-depth analysis of subconscious, conscious, overt, political, social etc. etc. etc. meaning. Whether there lies behind his plays something of a global, or Russian significance is not the purpose of this paper. What we are interested in is why a writer, brilliant though he is, has in his plays used a language so lucid

 2004

that he is utilized in beginners' courses of the Russian language and yet merits such a wealth of translations into English. To take *The Seagull* as an example we can wheel off thirteen, not including some quoted below: Marian Fell, New York, 1912; F.A. Saphro, Boston, 1922; Constance Garnett, London, 1923; Jennie Coven, New York, 1922; Rose Caylor, New York, 1930; Julius West and Marian Fell, London, 1939; Stark Young, New York, 1956; Elisaveta Fen, Harmondsworth, 1959; David Magarshack, London, 1960; Ann Dunnigan, New York, 1964; Ronald Hingley, London, 1967; E. K. Bristow, New York, 1977; Pam Gems, London, 1979. So what is the deal? What has Chekhov (as a playwright) got that Tolstoy, Turgenev, Gogol and Dostoyevsky have not? Complexity of language certainly not. Possibly because people 'know' that in Chekhov's plays 'nothing happens' the whole emphasis has therefore been subconsciously poured on the subtleties of seemingly simple sentences, while in his short stories content takes over from form. Here there are descriptive passages, a story of sorts and it is the direction rather than the discourse that captures the reader. Plays are seen and obviously heard, stories are silently read and individually imagined (and managed). So why so many translations? What has been missed? What crimes in desecrating the Russian language have been committed that almost every 5 years or so a 'new rendition' of Chekhov appears? I would like to examine a series of extracts – in a sense randomly chosen for the nature of the problem examined reflects itself in any given section of any of the 5 'major' plays – by way of exploring this unusual phenomenon, and as a consequence hopefully raising interest in the possible 'absurdity' of an overt quest for 'appropriation'.

As Chekhov is a product, one of the stock crowd pullers for the majority of 'serious'

theatres and performing companies he must appeal to an audience that is constantly in flux and 'different' in relation to experience, expectation and education. As Ronald Hingley has aptly pointed out 'From Chekhov's own early plays and from the bulk of pre-Chekhov drama in general the mature works differ, [...], in the relatively slight emphasis placed on action.' (Hingley 1980: xxiii), though this is too general a statement for 'the mature plays are not, as is sometimes suggested, entirely devoid of plot.' (Hingley 1980: xxiv). So we have some plot, and we have some 'slight emphasis' so let's examine whether this justifies the plethora of Chekhovs on offer in English.

The important thing is whether a translation is a historical document, by which one means something that is to capture a period, a time, a flavour belonging to a specific slice of human existence, a historical culture now dead or whether it is to constitute an upgrading, a revitalization, an infusion, in short a transplant of somebody else's ideas, conceptions and notions to *now* – and therefore something that requires not only a redressing of issues but a total reworking, modernization, re-scripting.

And for the translator we have basically the following tools, namely: *interpretation* by which one can understand the action of explaining the meaning of something; *adaptation* whereby we have the action of changing something to meet the needs of a new situation or recipient; and *assimilation*, the absorption and integration of an idea into a wider society or culture – by which I mean here the English speaking world.

That Chekhov is global is of no doubt. One only has to look at the write up for a production of *Die Seemeeu* in the South African *Weekly Mail and Guardian* of the 29th of November 1996 to realize that even a small town university like Stellenbosch, the gate-

way to the South African wine region, has Chekhov on its repertoire. Chekhov is everywhere precisely because he has achieved the ranking of set book.

Possibly because Chekhov is seen in the English-speaking world in terms of drama, his works neatly fit into the translation approaches suggested by Savory (1957: 48f)

- to produce either the forms or the ideas of the original
- to retain the style of the original or adopt a different style
- to retain the historical stylistic dimension of the original or to render it in contemporary form
- to produce a text which reads like an original or one that reads like a translation
- to add or omit words, phrases, clauses etc.

To put the matter into the mind of the translator we could examine what questions possibly could occur to the dramatist when writing a play and then ask ourselves whether the translator should not ask the self same questions and examine the self same approach if wanting to translate a piece for theatre:

1. Where am I physically when I'm delivering this monologue?
2. If I'm talking to someone in this piece, who is this person in my life?
3. Why am I telling this story?
4. You may have as many scenes and settings as you wish, but just be sure that the audience always knows where they are in your play.
5. At some point your audience should become aware of your point of view, of what you're trying to say.
6. To whom is the character speaking?

What a play should be and to whom its message should be addressed is nicely summed

up by Tolstoy, who felt that *Uncle Vanya* and *Three Sisters* weren't quite dramas.

"To evoke a mood," he said in an interview, "you want a lyrical poem. Dramatic forms serve, and ought to serve, quite different aims. In a dramatic work the author ought to deal with some problem that has yet to be solved and every character in the play ought to solve it according to the idiosyncrasies of his own character... But you won't find anything of the kind in Chekhov."

(quoted from Richard Galman's introduction in *Penguin Classics*' Peter Garson translation: XXXII)

With this Tolstoy pinpointed precisely those features that have made Chekhov's plays a core of modern drama. Like lyrical poetry, they favour mood over plot; there does not exist a 'problem' as such and when problems do arise, the playwright never appears to broach a solution. Chekhov's drama enabled him to present events on the stage 'just as complicated and just as simple as ... in real life,' as he famously wrote. 'People are sitting at a table having dinner, nothing more, but at the same time their happiness is being created, or their lives torn apart.'

The interest in writing this piece was heightened by Adam Kirsch's article entitled *Chekhov in America* published in *The Atlantic Monthly* of July 1997 vol. 280 pp. 110–112, where Kirsch examines a 'newish' translation of Chekhov into 'American' English:

But the most striking element in Schmidt's "American" translation is his attempt to put Chekhov's Russian into modern American idiom. There's no doubt that we sorely need such a translation; even the most casual dialogue can sound faintly absurd in the starchy British English of many popular

editions of Chekhov. Take, for instance, this exchange from Act I of *Ivanov* in Elisaveta Fen's Penguin translation. [...]

Schmidt turns this passage into something American actors can plausibly say onstage. (Kirsch 1997: 111)

440

So let's examine the passage in question (though not confining ourselves to Schmidt and Fen's translations): The bold is mine (GT) and for this extract from *Ivanov* I would like to concentrate on verbs and examine what possible stylistic 'difference' (if any) we have between the translators' choices. English language teaching favours, as a means of developing grammatical competency and the illustration of collocation, a form of exercise called an open cloze, for the lay man gap filling – this involves the completion of gaps by writing in one word, only one word fits each gap. The words to be supplied are on the whole structure words rather than vocabulary items e.g. prepositions, pronouns, linkers etc. For vocabulary development a four-option multiple choice cloze is adopted. Examining techniques for this latter task stress the importance of reading the sentence with each of the options in the gap and deciding upon which sounds best. Given the nature of the differences in the below passages it strikes one that ultimately we have no more to do than just this: Read through each option and decide which one sounds best. But the question is will every option sound the same to all?

The first of our extracts is one from *Ivanov* written 117 years ago:

АННА ПЕТРОВНА: (показывается в открытом окне). Кто здесь сейчас разговаривал? Это вы, Миша? Что вы так шагаете?

БОРКИН: С ВАШИМ Nicolas – voilà еще не так зашагаешь

АННА ПЕТРОВНА: Послушайте, Миша, прикажите *принести* на крокет сена.

(Чехов – Полное собрание...
том 12: 9)

Let's examine a verb or two, both straightforward yet rendered differently by the various translators considered, namely *шагать* (*шагаете*), and *принести*, and consider their definitions in a dictionary published 80 years after Chekhov's death in 1984 *Словарь русского языка* by the Soviet Academy of Sciences (1v volumes) (A. P. Yevgeneva) (the dryness of Newspeak being taken into consideration):

Шагать – Ступать, делать шаги при ходьбе. Идти (обычно размеренным шагом, энергично и т.п.)

Принести – Неся, доставит.

And in Smirnitskii's Russian-English Dictionary (*russko-angliiskii slovar'* Russkii Yazyk Moscow 1985) we have

Шагать – (ступать) step; (ходить) walk; (большими шагами) stride; (мерными шагами) pace

While Louis Segal (Lund Humphries & Co Ltd London 1942) has:

Шагать – to step, stride, to stride along, to walk with long strides; to tread, pace

Принести – 1. bring, fetch (Smirnitskii)

Принести – to bring, fetch (Segal)

In other words the same.

For the sake of the paper in examining the meanings of the words highlighted we will take two critically accepted dictionaries (both widely available) the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* and the *American Heritage Dictionary*. The verbs we are to examine are *to march*, *to stride*, *to stamp* (with their

various phrasal verb particles *out, about, up and down, around* etc.) which are the choices made by the translators of this extract of *Ivanov* for *Шагать* and *Принести*.

march (märch) *v.* **marched, march-ing, march-es.** —*intr.* **1.a.** To walk steadily and rhythmically forward in step with others. **b.** To begin to move in such a manner: *The troops will march at dawn.* **2.a.** To proceed directly and purposefully: *marched in and demanded to see the manager.* **b.** To progress steadily onward; advance: *Time marches on.* **3.** To be arranged in an orderly fashion that suggests steady, rhythmical progression. **4.** To participate in an organized walk, as for a public cause. —*tr.* **1.** To cause to move or otherwise progress in a steady, rhythmical manner: *march soldiers into battle; marched us off to the dentist.* **2.** To traverse by progressing steadily and rhythmically: *They marched the route in a day.*

stride *v.* **strode, stridden, striding, strides.** —*intr.* **1.** To walk with long steps, especially in a hasty or vigorous way. **2.** To take a single long step, as in passing over an obstruction. **3.** To stand or sit astride; straddle.

Stamp **1.** To thrust the foot forcibly downward. **2.** To walk with forcible, heavy steps.

(American Heritage Dictionary)

march **1** *v.* & *n.*

v. **1** *intr.* (usu. foll. by *away, off, out, etc.*) walk in a military manner with a regular measured tread.

2 *tr.* (often foll. by *away, on, off, etc.*) cause to march or walk (marched the army to Moscow; marched him out of the room).

3 *intr.* **a** walk or proceed steadily, esp. across country. **b** (of events etc.) continue unrelentingly (time marches on).

4 *intr.* take part in a protest march.

stride *v.* & *n.*

v. (past *strode*; past part. *stridden*)

1 *intr.* & *tr.* walk with long firm steps.

2 *tr.* cross with one step.

3 *tr.* *bestride*; *straddle*.

stamp *v.* & *n.*

v. **1** **a** *tr.* bring down (one's foot) heavily on the ground etc. **b** *tr.* crush, flatten, or bring into a specified state in this way (stamped down the earth round the plant). **c** *intr.* bring down one's foot heavily; walk with heavy steps.

(Concise Oxford Dictionary)

As synonyms for *stamp* we have: *tramp, stomp, stomp on, trample, tromp* but no *stride* or *march*

For *march* we have: *parade, step, stalk, stride, walk in step, tramp* but no *stamp*

For *stride* the synonyms are: *To walk with a steady and purposeful gait: march, parade, stalk, step, walk in step, tramp*

Let us examine a series of translations of Act 1 from *Ivanov* 1887:

ANNA: [seen through the open window].
Who's talking out here? You, Michael?
Why all the *marching about*?

BORKIN: Friend Nicholas is enough to make anyone's boots itch.

ANNA: I say, will you have some hay *put on* the croquet lawn?

BORKIN: [with a gesture of despair].
Leave me alone, please.

ANNA: Really, what a way to talk, it doesn't suit you a bit.

Ronald Hingley

Oxford World Classics 1998
(Translation dating from 1967)

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ANNA PETROVNA [appears in the open window]: Who was talking here just now? Was it you, Misha? Why are you *striding about* like that?

BORKIN: Trying to do anything with your Nicolas, *voilà* – is enough to make anyone *stride about*!

ANNA PETROVNA: Look here, Misha, have some hay *brought for* the croquet lawn.

BORKIN [waves his hand]: Leave me alone, please...

ANNA PETROVNA: Well, now, what does that tone... that tone of voice doesn't suit you at all.

Ann Dunnigan *Signet Classic* 1964

ANNA PETROVNA [appearing in the open window]: Who was talking here just now? Was it you, Misha? Why are you *striding about* like that?

BORKIN: Even that won't have got through to your Nicolas-*voilà*.¹⁾

ANNA PETROVNA: Listen, Misha, tell them *to bring* some hay to the croquet lawn.

BORKIN [gesturing with his hand]: Let me be, please.

ANNA PETROVNA: Really, what a tone of voice... That tone doesn't suit you at all.

Peter Carson

New Penguin Translation

Anna appears at the open window.

ANNA: Whose voice did I hear just now? Was it yours, Misha? Why are you *stamping up and down*?

BORKIN: Anybody who had anything to do with your Nicholas would *stamp up and down*.

ANNA: Listen, Misha! Please have some hay *carried onto* the croquet lawn.

BORKIN: [Waves his hand] Leave me alone, please!

ANNA: Oh, what manners! They are not becoming to you at all.

Gutenberg Project

– translator not credited

ANNA PETROVNA: Who was it talking here just now? Was it you, Misha? Why are you *stamping about like that*?

BORKIN: Anyone who had to deal with your cher Nicolas would *stamp about*!

ANNA PETROVNA: I say, Misha, will you have some hay *brought to* the croquet lawn?

BORKIN: Leave me alone, please.

ANNA PETROVNA: Tut-tut, what a tone of voice!

Elisaveta Fen *Penguin translation*.

ANNA: What's going on out there? Is that you, Misha? What are you *marching around like that* for?

BORKIN: Trying to talk sense into your friend Nicholas here. *Voilà*. Enough to make anybody *start marching*.

ANNA: Misha, I want some hay *brought up to* the croquet lawn; don't forget to tell them.

BORKIN: Oh, leave me alone, will you?

ANNA: How rude! Will you please not take that tone with me?

The Plays of Anton Chekhov

translated by Paul Schmidt

Harper Collins

So is there a difference? Anything to jump up and down about? Given the nature of the

1) Nicolas-voilà 'Nikolay here He is' (French) – from a popular ditty of the 1880s. The conversation of the upper classes in Chekhov's plays, as in life, was peppered with French names and words. *Peter Carson*

Russian, and the very clear implication of meaning in the definitions given whether one used a mono or bilingual dictionary (which is within the potential of most translators), it would be almost impossible to come up with anything besides the three options above. Which makes one ask as to whether *new* translators of Chekhov are closely following the original or those translations done before. For given the linguistic ease in reading Chekhov the gap filling exercise undertaken by translators on a daily basis of finding a word for the space could have equally, and possibly may have done, come up with an identical version to that which had been produced before; unless one was aware of previous translations which would (glaring mistakes excepted) influence one's choice and possibly search (again less so in the original) for reasons why a given choice failed to 'convey' the force of the original.

The second of our extracts is from *The Cherry Orchard* and involves the problems of the emotionally charged word *peasant*. A word that Kirsch goes on to have slight misgivings about:

At times, however, Schmidt's effort to make Chekhov sound more American leads him to word choices that a sensitive ear may find anachronistic. The risks in his approach are most evident in *The Cherry Orchard*, in which Lopakhin, the son of a serf, ends up buying the Ranevsky estate, to which his family once belonged. Class is the crucial element in the play; it's vital to recognize that Lopakhin is a peasant, on a level altogether different from the aristocratic Ranevskys. But Schmidt persistently refuses to use the word "peasant" in describing him. Take, for example, Lopakhin's speech in Act I, which establishes his love-hate relationship with Lyubov Andreyevna, the mistress of the estate. As Ann Dunnigan translates it, in the Signet

paperback edition, the class implications are clear. (Kirsch 1997: 111)

Любов Андреевна ... подвела меня к
рукомойнику, вот в этой самой ком-
нате, в детской. «Не плачь, говорит,
мужичок до свадьбы заживет...»

Мужичок... Отец мой, правда,
мужик был, а я вот в белой жилетке,
желтых башмаках. Со свиным
рылом в калашный ряд... Только
что вот богатый, денег много, а
ежели подумать и разобраться, то
мужик мужиком...

(Чехов – Полное собрание...
том 12: 9).

Lyubov Andreyevna ... led me to the
washstand in this very room, the nurs-
ery. "Don't cry, *little peasant*," she said,
"it will heal in time for your wed-
ding..."

Little peasant ... my father was a
peasant, it's true, and here I am in a
white waistcoat and tan shoes... I may
be rich, I've made a lot of money, but
if you think about it, analyze it, I'm a
peasant through and through.

(Dunnigan)

Schmidt opts for a term for Lopakhin
that is lacking in emotional charge:

"Don't cry, *poor boy*; you'll live long
enough to get married."

Poor boy ... Well, my father was
poor, but take a look at me now, all
dressed up, *brand-new suit and tan
shoes*... I'm rich now, got lots of money,
but when you think about it, I guess
I'm still a *poor boy from the country*.

(Schmidt)

How far one is able to go can be seen by
Adam Kirsch's reservations as to "Poor boy

from the country” which does not carry nearly the same emotional weight as “peasant.”

Elsewhere Schmidt has Lopakhin calling himself a “dirt farmer,” which has still different connotations. What Schmidt gains in Americanness here, he loses in psychological accuracy. And such word choices abound: “literacy programs” for “reading rooms,” “homeless man” for “tramp,” “freak” for “crank.” These words are so contemporary that they call attention to the translation, distracting us from the play itself. (Kirsch 1997: 112).

444

One could add to the list of possibly synonymous phrases the American term ‘white trash’

White trash *n.* *Offensive. Slang.* Used as a disparaging term for a poor white person or poor white people.

American Heritage Dictionary

Lopakhin could describe himself as being ‘white trash’ but then how far is one to go before this stops being Chekhov and becomes Chicago? Let us examine the self same passage in different translations remembering that we are to understand the word peasant according to *Oxford* as:

peasant – 1 a worker on the land, a farm labourer or small farmer, esp. a member of an agricultural class dependent on subsistence farming.
2 derog. a boor, a lout; a person of low social status.

And the *American Heritage Dictionary* as:

Peasant *n.* 1. A member of the class constituted by small farmers and tenants, sharecroppers, and laborers on the land where they form the main labor force in agriculture. 2. A country person; a rustic.

3. An uncouth, crude, or ill-bred person; a boor.

Lyubov Andreyevna, [...] she took me to the washstand, in this very room, in the nursery. ‘Don’t cry, *little mouzhik*, it’ll be quite well in time for your wedding,’ she said ... [Pause] My father was a mouzhik, sure enough; and here am I, in a *white waistcoat and brown shoes*... A silk purse out of a sow’s ear... With this difference, that I am rich, have plenty of money; but if you really think of it, I am just *a mere mouzhik*.

S. S. Koteliansky
Everyman’s Library

Mrs. Ranewsky, [...] She brought me over to the wash-stand here in this very room, the nursery as it was. ‘Don’t cry, *little peasant*,’ she said, ‘You’ll soon be as right as rain.’ [Pause] Little peasant. It’s true my father was a peasant, but here am I in my *white waistcoat and brown boots*, barging in like a bull in a china shop. The only thing is, I am rich, I have plenty of money, but when you really get down to it I’m just *another country bumpkin*.

Ronald Hingley
Oxford World Classics

Liubov Andryeevna, [...] took me to the washstand in this very room, the nursery it was then. ‘Don’t cry, *little peasant*,’ she said, ‘it’ll be better before you’re old enough to get married’. ... [Pause] ‘Little peasant’. ... she was right enough, my father was a peasant. Yet here I am – all dressed up in a *white waistcoat and brown shoes*... But you can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear. I am rich, I’ve got a lot of money,

but anyone can see I'm *just a peasant*, anyone who takes the trouble to think about me and look under my skin.

Elisaveta Fen *Penguin*

Madame Ranévsky, [...] brought me to the wash-hand stand, here, in this little room, in the nursery. 'Don't cry, little peasant,' she said 'it'll be all right for your wedding.' [A Pause] '*Little peasant!*' ... My father, it is true, was a peasant, and here am I in a *white waistcoat and brown boots*; a silk purse out of a sow's ear; just turned rich, with plenty of money, but still a *peasant of the peasants*.

Dover Thrift Editions
(translator not credited)

Lyubov Andreyevna, [...] she brought me to the washstand, in this very room, in the nursery. 'Don't cry, *little muzhik* (1), she said 'it'll be all right by your wedding-day...' [A Pause]

Little muzhik... Yes, my father was a muzhik and here I am in *white gloves and yellow shoes*. A pig in a baker's shop... But though I'm rich and have a lot of money, if you think a moment and work it out, I'm *muzhik through and through*...

translator's footnote (1) *muzhik*: Male Russian peasant, a word which can bear literal, affectionate or derogatory meanings.

Peter Carson *New Penguin*

The word *muzhik* does exist in English. *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998) gives its meaning as *A Russian peasant* and labels the entry as historical. This is of interest in the fact that the *latest* translation (first published 2002) decides to return the matter firmly to Russian soil.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary follows suit:

muzhik n. (also moujik) hist. a Russian peasant. [Russian muzhik]

While *The American Heritage Dictionary* gives us:

mu-zhik also **mou-jik** or **mu-jik** or **mu-zjik** n. A peasant in czarist Russia. [Russian, from *muzh*, man.]

445

Thus going as far as to define the time zone we are inhabiting. Peasant is derogatory. It is a word that causes problems for the English speaker when confronted with cultures and countries where peasants still exist. There are no peasants in Britain, never were in the United States so the pun *the peasants are revolting* carries no possible social retribution.

The second point raised by the extract is that of colour and clothing. Here, from the extracts selected, five stick with waistcoat which appears to be what he is wearing given the dictionary definition of *жилет(ка)*:

Короткая мужская одежда без воротника и рукавов, поверх которой носится пиджак, сюртук и.т.п. (Yevgeneva).

A definition which clearly points to a waistcoat or vest as the Americans call it. Something borne out by Smirnitskii and Segal with: *waistcoat*; *vest* **амет** and *vest*, *waistcoat* respectively. It does, therefore, demand more than a flight of fancy to arrive at Peter Carson's gloves. White or not. A choice that seems to go beyond either *adaptation whereby we have the action of changing something to meet the needs of a new situation or recipient; and assimilation, the absorption and integration of an idea into a wider society or culture* but one that borders on wishful

inventiveness. One can not write *waistcoat* (one could always try *vest*) because everyone else has gone for it (regardless of the fact that it is a waistcoat) and suit (permissible in the light of adaptation and assimilation) has already gone to someone only a few years previously (i.e. Paul Schmidt) so let's plum for anything that could possibly be white and worn at the turn of the century. Could one have gone for jacket, T-shirt, pullover etc. etc. All assuming it is white.

And though no two people see the exact same shade of a given colour, that one man's blue is another man's green, it seems interesting that not only do we have a mixture of boots and shoes but everything from brown, through tan to yellow. Dictionaries show up the dangers:

Жёлтый: Имеющий окраску одного из основных цветов спектра – среднего между оранжевым и зеленым; цвета яичного желтка, золота

(Yevgeneva).

brown (broun) *n.* *Abbr. br. Color. 1.* Any of a group of colors between red and yellow in hue that are medium to low in lightness and low to moderate in saturation

The American Heritage Dictionary

brown *adj., n., & v.adj.* 1 having the colour produced by mixing red, yellow, and black, as of dark wood or rich soil.

Concise Oxford Dictionary

“Translation is a kind of activity which inevitably involves at least two languages and two cultural traditions.” (Toury 1978: 200). But what is of interest here is that Chekhov has transcended the ‘two cultural traditions’

of Russia and England and has now become a national product which must conform to individual varieties of English. In the way that we have Microsoft word spell checkers for every conceivable branch of the English language including: Australia, Belize, the Philippines, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Jamaica, Canada, Malazia, New Zealand, South Africa, Singapore, Trinidad, United Kingdom (but interesting no Scottish, Welsh, Geordie etc. variations) the USA (but no ‘southern drawl’, Boston English, Black American etc.) Zimbabwe, we could speculate about the possibility of ‘national’ editions of Chekhov.

Still, when translating Chekhov, too contemporary is better than too literary. Even when a word or phrase sticks out, Schmidt's language is vigorous and comprehensible; reading it, we feel that these characters are not just beautiful, sad souls but real people. For a playwright as frequently misunderstood as Chekhov, this is perhaps the greatest service that any translator could have performed. A generation from now Schmidt's American English may sound as antiquated as Elisaveta Fen's British English, but until then Schmidt's Chekhov should be the first choice for any American reader (Kirsch 1997: 112).

What is of interest is the way that the need to retranslate Chekhov derives from a generation-orientated reaction to previous texts, not the original Russian but earlier translations which appear dated. Given the fact that Chekhov died in 1904, it appears a curious phenomenon, for his English contemporaries, and here we'll stick to plays, like for instance Oscar Wilde who died from cerebral meningitis on the 30th November 1900 (just four years earlier than Chekhov himself and at a similar age, Wilde was 46, Chekhov 44) are not rewritten, modernized, made more in tune with a ‘given idiom’ yet still are performed. The difference lies in the

fact that Chekhov is foreign and therefore the datedness of the language does not add an element of history, it does not evoke a period widely understood to be linguistically distinct but rather grates on the ear and raises questions of authenticity re. the original. Besides having now a national label, Chekhov has also gone through a process of resocialization. His characters can no longer speak as their turn of the twentieth century originals but must now communicate effectively with people whose dress, life style and world outlook are a hundred years, literally, removed from the world Chekhov observed. So why translate? The ideas are straightforward, wouldn't it just be easier to write a play 'based on an idea by Anton Chekhov'?. And this has also been achieved, an example being Thomas Kilroy's translation of *The Seagull* published by Methuen London in 1981.

With Kilroy's *The Seagull* set in the West of Ireland it is not an enormous flight of fancy to imagine translations arising that set *Uncle Vanya* et al in the Australian outback, in the slum areas of Kingston, or the wind swept isolation of South Island. If assimilation takes its hold Masha, Olga and Irena might stop their longing for Moscow, and move on to Manchester, Melbourne or Milwaukee.

Let us examine a selection of translations of the opening page of *The Seagull* and the stage instructions to set the scene:

Часть парка в имении Сорина. Широкая аллея, ведущая по направлению от зрителей в глубину парка к озеру, загорожена эстрадой, наскоро сколоченной для домашнего спектакля, так что озера совсем не видно. Налево и направо у эстрады кустарник. Несколько стульев, столик.

Только что зашло солнце. На эстраде за опущенным занавесом Яков и другие работники: слышатся

кашель и стук. Маша и Медведенко идут слева, возвращаясь с прогулки

(Чехов – Полное собрание... том 13: 5).

The park on Sorin's estate. A wide path, leading away from the audience to a lake in the background, is blocked by a rough stage, put up for an amateur dramatic performance. It hides the lake from view. To left and right of this stage, bushes. A few chairs and a small table.

The sun has just set. Jacob and other workmen can be heard hammering and coughing on the stage behind the drawn curtain. Masha and Medvedenko come in, left, on their way back from a walk

(Hingley 1998: 67).

The park on Sorin's estate. A wide avenue leads towards a lake in the background. A rough stage erected for an amateur theatrical performance has been built across the avenue and conceals the view of the lake. There are bushes close to the stage, right and left, and in the foreground a few chairs and a small table.

The sun has just gone down. Yakov and some other men are working on the stage behind the curtain; they can be heard hammering and coughing. Masha and Medvedenko, returning from a walk, enter from the left.

(Fen 1986: 119)

A lawn before the Desmond house in the West of Ireland. There is a view of a lake in the distance, between the trees. A simple wooden platform has been erected, complete with a front

curtain, now closed. A sound of men working may be heard from behind the curtain

(Kilroy 1981: 9).

The park on *Sorin's* estate. A *wide alley*, leading away from the auditorium to a lake in the back of the park, is blocked by a stage, hurriedly put together for an amateur theatrical performance, so that the lake cannot be seen. Shrubs to the left and right of the stage. A few chairs, a small table.

The sun has just gone down. On the stage, behind the drawn curtain, *Yakov* and other workmen; coughing and hammering are heard. *Masha* and *Medviedenko* enter from left, returning from a walk

(Sznycer 1974: 47).

The scene is laid in the park on *Sorin's* estate. A *broad avenue* of trees leads away from the audience toward a lake which lies lost in the depths of the park. The avenue is obstructed by a rough stage, temporarily erected for the performance of amateur theatricals, and which screens the lake from view. There is a dense growth of bushes to the left and right of the stage. A few chairs and a little table are placed in front of the stage.

The sun has just set. *Jacob* and some other workmen are heard hammering and coughing on the stage behind the lowered curtain. *Masha* and *Medviedenko* come in from the left, returning from a walk

(Project Gutenberg
Etext of the *Sea-Gull*).

Here the words *alley*, *avenue* or *path* are secondary to the transportation of ideas un-

dertaken by Kilroy. The breadth of difference between

Alley: 2 a path or walk in a park or garden.

Avenue: b a tree-lined approach to a country house.

Path: 1 a way or track laid down for walking or made by continual treading.

Concise Oxford Dictionary

Alley: 2. A path between flower beds or trees in a garden or park.

Avenue: b. *Chiefly British.* The drive leading from the main road up to a country house.

Path: 1. A trodden track or way.

The American Heritage Dictionary

pales into insignificant when one realizes that Chekhov is geographically no longer in Russia but on the west coast of Ireland, that Sorin is no longer the estate owner but a certain Mr. Desmond. So why the need to accredit Chekhov with the work if it bears only a passing resemblance to the original? Cynically one could say because Chekhov sells, Chekhov is highbrow, Chekhov is good and for those who want to feel themselves part of an intellectual establishment a knowledge of the literary canon is essential for full membership. That this process becomes all the harder the greater the temporal gap between us and the literary greats, is borne out by the need to produce 'modern' language versions of national classics. So now one can read or listen to Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* in Nevill Coghill's modern English rendering. Something similar appears to be happening (or to have happened) to Chekhov though here the original presents no mysteries, footnotes and explanatory glossaries are not required, and where the modern 'rendering' takes its cue from appears not

to be the original but that collective body of previous translations which need to be 'improved upon' even if the changes possible are merely cosmetic.

Chekhov died one hundred years ago and it seems a fitting time to possibly lay the ghost to rest; to objectively stand back and say that with the exception of the odd synonym, a smattering of 'newer' idioms and the endless play with word order and modified punctuation there is nothing left to be done. What Chekhov had to say has been said in English and in numerous different ways, yet all of them basically the same. The essence has been captured.

As long ago as 1925 D. S. Mirsky in his *Contemporary Russian Literature* expressed the '...irritation aroused in him by Chekhov's English enthusiasts, whom he regards as shallow and uninformed. His wish to deflate them may possibly have biased his critical judgement in places, though it has enabled him to perform the useful task of indicating certain other important Russian writers – such as Leskov – who have received less than their share of attention outside Russia' (Hingley 1950: 217).

For Mirsky himself was to contrast Chekhov's reputation in England and Russia:

'In Russia, Chekhov has become a thing of the past, of a past remoter than even Turgenyev, not to speak of Gogol or Leskov.' (quoted from Hingley 1950: 217).

From the need to 'retranslate' it appears that to a twenty-first century English-speaking audience Chekhov's turn-of-the-century Russia also appears too distant for comprehension, though this has not led to an abandonment of his plays. When one alights at a London Underground station the gap seems to be rather an exaggeration, much ado about nothing. So it seems with Chekhov. His Russian makes him as understandable today as when he wrote it. His human types as noticeable in everyday life now as then. But it is still Chekhov we are reading and therefore it should read like Chekhov, not like Arthur Miller or some latter day saint. If things become so distant that they lose clarity then they should be let be. Not dissected, resewn and infused with an artificial contemporariness. For then you do not have the original but a replica, a reproduction. Chekhov's plays are simply upgraded and reworked to fit them into the modern idiom by bridging an imaginary gap. But rather like the proverbial sword one has to ask how much is still Chekhov.

резюме

Σ Осторожно, пропасть! – Чехов спустя 100 лет

Настоящая статья представляет собой попытку рассмотреть феномен Чехова в переводах на английский язык, раскрыть причины довольно частой переводимости произведений данного писателя. На основе анализа нескольких английских переводов поднимается вопрос о том, где в данный момент живет Чехов, 100 лет после ухода его из жизни: в России или же в каком-то районе аглийской языковой территории. В работе затрагиваются вопросы ассимиляции, адаптации и согласованности в переводах.

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450

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