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Function of *Theatrical Gesture* in Chekhovian Poetics of Negation on the Basis of Selected Short Stories by A. P. Chekhov

19th century was a period of dynamic changes in the field of literature; it was the time which has given rise to the many experiments aimed at defining the role of art. One of the core problems was also the notion of a new, educated recipient who was to understand the meaning of a work and cross its transient boundaries to grasp the metaphysical sense. A. P. Chekhov belonged to the group of 19th century artists who studied the problem of perception and emphasized the importance of intuition and instinct in the process of creation. Being both a physician and an author helped him to master his method of deep realism with its ecological view of the human being focused on the relationship between the physical and spiritual.

My paper proposes the interpretation of Chekhov's short stories as the attempt to explore the function of the category of *theatrical gesture*, which allows us to see his prose of 80s and 90s as the anticipation of Chekhovian poetics of negation exposed in his dramas during the period of the Great Theatre Reform. *Theatrical gesture* is treated as the peculiar key for decoding the text, the tool that can reveal the role of „the emptiness“ in his texts. Lotman's notion of the *meaningful absence*, which is emphasized in the analysis, seems to be an adequate metaphor exposing the creative exploitation of contrastive elements in his stories, whose interdependence and juxtaposition can create the source of the dynamics of the text, interpenetration of *profanum* and *sacrum*.

Key words: theatrical gesture, negation, spirit and matter, corporeality, meaningful absence, synchrony, harmony and disharmony of gesticulation.

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Anton Pavlovich Chekhov is considered by some scholars to be the first green ecological writer, the first to insist that the destruction of nature is far more serious a catastrophe than the loss of traditional morality or individual unhappiness. Others in turn emphasize that the artistic world of A. P. Chekhov is the dream of harmony and holistic interpenetration of opposite values, the reality in which equally important are the spirit and the matter, the individual

and the environment, the gesture and the emotion. The dramaturgy of Chekhov allows the reader to discover the crucial role of characters' gesticulation, which leads the recipient of his work towards the analysis of the true meaning of their words, redefines the opinions implying that the dramas of the author of *The Seagull* are focused on the spiritual world neglecting sensory impressions (Waligorska-Olejniczak 2009: 107). The absence of sensory elements which are anticipated and prepared by descriptions in the text, the dominance of spiritual sphere over corporeal one in Chekhov's dramas, which can be understood and defined by the Lotman's notion of *meaningful absence*, do not prove the priority to the first. It rather reminds of the characteristic for Chekhov's works coexistence of the excess and the emptiness, and the leading role of the recipient of his art who is to solve questions and dilemmas presented in the dramas, explain apparent contradictions. It seems that the active role of the reader, constituting the basis for the creative experiments of the Great Theatre Reform, is assumed by A. P. Chekhov also in case of his short stories written in the 80s and 90s. It is worth mentioning that all his Russian contemporaries and successors were convinced that his short stories were works of true genius, while many insisted that his plays were the result of bungling incompetence, not radical insight (Rayfield 2000: 26). This article is aimed to show that Chekhov's short stories and characteristic types of characters appearing in them can be regarded as a kind of announcement of the revolutionary techniques used more effectively in his dramas. A lot of his prose concentrates on domineering figures of women who make the first impression of being dependant on men; however the closer insight into their environment shows that main vectors in the text are most often directed towards female characters, which manifest their own spiritual and corporeal nature. The above feature of Chekhovian stories motivates us to propose a thesis that symmetry and synchrony of the characters' gesticulation is the core aspect of Chekhov's works as a whole, it is a fundamental value which can be treated as the peculiar key for decoding the text, the source of its dynamics revealing the continuous juxtaposition of *profanum* and *sacrum*.

In the dialogues of Chekhovian dramas emotional reactions are described as physical movements, the same seems to be the case also in his short stories. One of the most telling gestures is probably walking with the dog in the story *The Lady with the Dog*. When we think about it for a while and take into consideration events happening later on in the story the gesture starts to resemble the behavior of a model on a catwalk, which should not be treated as neutral. Apart from the fact that it sells the designer's product presented during a fashion show it sells also the body of a person wearing it, therefore it cannot stay unnoticed or neglected since it is the body precisely selected to present the particular outfit in the best way. Similarly, the lady's strolling in an atmosphere of boredom must lead to a kind of love affair; the reader subconsciously feels that her body cannot be left unattended; inevitably, it must become a subject of someone's interest. The main male character is attracted to her by a mysterious force, tempting thought of an easy and short adventure as well as a belief that he can dominate

over the woman, who, after all, belongs to a lower race. The sense of sight seems to play the most meaningful role here. Initially, Dmitri Dmitritch Gurov paid attention to the entire posture of walking Anna, when they made acquaintance he started to notice details such as intriguing grey eyes or delicate neck, which could be regarded as a symbol of submissiveness, inexperience and naivety of the young woman. At first, however, he perceives her as "a fair-haired young lady of medium height", always walking alone in the same *béret*, always with the same white Pomeranian dog running behind her, tall, erect, with dark eyebrows, staid and dignified. Anna's appearance constitutes for experienced Gurov a source of precious information. He can read "her expression, her gait, her dress, and the way she did her hair told him that she was a lady, that she was married, that she was in Yalta for the first time and alone, and that she was dull there". He is attracted to her but his assessment of the situation and his own vision of the potential affair turn out to be wrong for he starts the relationship with the assumption that it is to be a short and meaningless episode which will be under his full control. Surprisingly, the plan resulted in the things different than he had expected, the affair changed into the relationship due to which he metaphorically put his head in a noose. The events proved that he was not from a higher race as he thought of himself. One could even say that when he truly engaged with Anna he almost discovered feminine features in his personality, he started to feel vulnerable, weak and old, not able to live alone; his behavior towards Anna started to resemble the movement of a satellite revolving around a planet.

In *The Lady with the Dog* one can notice not only the lexis which is typical for the mature dramas of A. P. Chekhov such as characteristic key words: „sultry indoors“, „dust“, „dullness“, „monotonous days and unnecessary talks“, but also the kinetics of the characters which could be considered the signature mark of his works. Besides, other parallel feature between Chekhov's dramaturgy and his short stories would be obviously the lack of typical plot and focus on routine activities (Flath 1999: 491). In his short stories the priority is also given to the word not the action, although it seems that the monotony of arrivals and departures, the rhythm of the movements to and from a place constitute the deliberate artistic tool building up the appropriate atmosphere and the true meaning of the discussed prose. In the beginning, as it was mentioned above, Anna Sergeyevna walks alone, then the main characters are always seen together, they are characterized by the phrases such as: „both walked quickly“, „they went out“, „they looked down at the sea“, „they went for walks“, „they found a cab and drove to Oreanda“, „Gurov and Anna Sergeyevna still stood as though waiting to see some one else come from the steamer“. They cease to function separately. The initial phase of the relationship, during which the reader could turn attention to distinct movements of the woman and the man, is gone:

Then he looked at her intently, and all at once put his arm round her and kissed her on the lips, and breathed in the moisture and the fragrance of the flowers; and he immediately looked round him, anxiously wondering whether any one had seen them.

The dynamics of the characters' behavior, the synchronic language of their bodies tell the recipient of Chekhov's story about the emotional development of Anna and Dmitri, which is accompanied by the description of the beauty of the impressionistic landscape. The problem of nature in Chekhov's stories has been explored by many scholars so far, therefore we would like to turn our attention only to the world of impressions available to the reader through the characters' sense of sight, taste and smell.

Chekhovian characters are influenced not only by the way of women's movements; the senses are also stimulated by the taste of food, colors, shapes, sounds. The meaningful gesture in *The Lady with the Dog* is eating a watermelon in silence, which takes place immediately after the first sexual encounter of the main characters and is accompanied by Anna's remorse and Gurov's irritation with her words. The redness of the fruit could be read as the sign of the consummation of their relationship as well as the emblem of the strength of their engagement and the importance of the very moment of their closeness, which might be associated with the category of Bunin's *instant*, distinguished in the prose of the Russian Noble prizewinner. Opposite emotions are evoked, however, by the memory of a whole plateful of salt fish and cabbage which comes to mind after Gurov's come back to Moscow. The vision of this specific dish builds up the image of life in a big city, where people spend time in restaurants eating and playing cards, feel flattered at entertaining distinguished lawyers and artists, become accustomed to vulgarity and animal nature of their own instincts forgetting about sincerity and honesty. Similar meaning may be associated with visual impressions remembered by Gurov from previous, unhappy romances including his own marriage. Dullness and banality of those relationships seem to be expressed here as the memory of the lace of the women he did not love, the vision of scales and something unpleasant versus the softness of the fabric worn by a desired woman.

„From the past he preserved memories of careless, good-natured women, who loved cheerfully and were grateful to him for the happiness he gave them, however brief it might be; and of women like his wife who loved without any genuine feeling, with superfluous phrases, affectedly, hysterically, with an expression that suggested that it was not love nor passion, but something more significant; and of two or three others, very beautiful, cold women, on whose faces he had caught a glimpse of a rapacious expression - an obstinate desire to snatch from life more than it could give, and these were capricious, unreflecting, domineering, unintelligent women not in their first youth, and when Gurov grew cold to them their beauty excited his hatred, and the lace on their linen seemed to him like scales“.

The smell of love in Chekhov's short stories is the smell of perfume, autumn or wind. The corporeality manifested in the story discussed so far does not understate the importance of spiritual values, Chekhov does not usurp the right to moralize or suggest the priority to the matter or the spirit in the life of the human being (Reid 1998: 609). His dramas and short stories do not contradict

each other; the message contained in them rather tends to persuade that both realities are interconnected and inseparable. The opinion seems to be confirmed by the words of the author of *The Cherry Orchard* written to his friend A. S. Suvorin: „The materialistic movement is not a school or tendency in the narrow journalistic sense; it is not something passing or accidental; it is necessary, inevitable and beyond the power of man... Outside matter there is neither knowledge nor experience, and consequently there is no truth“.

Matter and corporeality seem to constitute for Chekhov fundamental phenomena, contemplating their meaning can be treated as the introduction and invitation to the discussion on the nature of the human being. They open the world of new cognitive opportunities leading to questions concerning the importance of everyday activities and the issues of the expressible and inexpressible realities. In this context the most telling dialog becomes the conversation of Gurov and the official while coming back from the doctors' club:

„If only you knew what a fascinating woman I made the acquaintance of in Yalta!“

The official got into his sledge and was driving away, but turned suddenly and shouted:

„Dmitri Dmitritch!“

„What?“

„You were right this evening; the sturgeon was a bit too strong!“

The above conversation makes the main character aware of insincerity and falseness of verbal relations in the society, turns his attention to double layers of almost all aspects of human existence stimulating the discussion about one of the core problems of Chekhov's works, namely the issue of the relationship between the individual and the environment, the problem of free will and the behavior imposed by the environment. Social requirements of a situation very often lead to the complete inertia of the human being, metaphorically take possession of him or her, which is particularly noticeable in Chekhov's dramaturgy, for example in the characters of Prozorov sisters. The relationship of the individual and the environment shown both in Chekhov's stories and his dramas are most often characterized by the lack of synchrony of movements, there is no mutual communication and understanding, the kinetics of the characters' behavior signals what is missing or anticipated, what should take place given different circumstances or personalities. The works of Chekhov can be described in this context by the behavioral approach; his look at the characters is rather uncritical, dominated by calm and precise observations, which resembles the behavior of a doctor analyzing patients' symptoms, not rushing with the diagnosis. Human emotions expressed in Chekhovian gesticulation are usually complex mental states, but they are active not passive (Tait 2000: 90). Female characters created by Chekhov as a general rule are also active individuals, although they often seem dependant on men, which could be confirmed by the title character of the story *The Lady with the Dog*. Anna could be considered the model example of the Chekhovian woman, whose personality is reflected and

developed in different literary variations, which can be found in the dramas and other prose works.

One of the variations could be the main character of the short story entitled *The Chemist's Wife*, the character described by the combination of leitmotifs and gestures typical for her type of background and social situation. Her emotions are hidden in nervous movements of her body, routine gestures performed only to keep the arms and body engaged in some kind of activity, although they would like to move in a different way, do other things.

She had gone to bed and got up again three times, but could not sleep, she did not know why. She sat at the open window in her nightdress and looked into the street. She felt bored, depressed, vexed . . . so vexed that she felt quite inclined to cry -- again she did not know why. There seemed to be a lump in her chest that kept rising into her throat.

Apart from strong emotions expressed in words: „inclined to cry“, „jump in her chest“, „depressed“ and „vexed“ she is also characterized by the expectation of something, the anticipation of a new and surprising event. Similarly to Anna from the previous story, who walked with the dog to find some adventure provoking men and longing for their attention, the body of the chemist's wife also seeks fulfillment, an encounter, some kind of refreshing adventure which would allow forgetting about her snoring husband. The men she meets at night at her shop resemble other male characters in Chekhov's dramas, they turn out to be rather clumsy, awkward, they make the chemist's wife laugh telling her simple jokes and flirting. It seems, however, that they are good at talking but worse at making quick decisions or acting, they are less courageous than Chekhovian women. Apart from sleeping Tchernomordik, whose main interest in life is money and his store, the reader can analyze the behavior of the officers coming by the chemist's. Their gesticulation is also characterized by the lack of energy and boredom with life.

Soon afterwards two figures wearing officers' white tunics came into sight: one big and tall, the other thinner and shorter. . . They slouched along by the fence, dragging one leg after the other and talking loudly together. As they passed the chemist's shop, they walked more slowly than ever, and glanced up at the windows.

When they meet Tchernomordik's wife their behavior starts to be aimless and immature, they resemble boys teasing a girl, the recipient of the story may notice significant disharmony between the words and movements of the characters. Before and during the conversation with the chemist's wife they use the words such as „the little woman is asleep“, „tossing with the heat, her little mouth half open“, „one little foot hanging out of bed“, „you're a fairy“, „a peach“, „you wouldn't find a pineapple like that in the island of Madeira“, „what a flirt you are“, although their gestures do not follow these words, they are not emotionally or physically engaged in what they are saying. „The customers stared fixedly at her back; the doctor screwed up his eyes like a well-fed cat, while the lieutenant was very grave“. The atmosphere is full of erotics, the

officers sit and drink red wine with her, exchange silly remarks and „at last after much talk and after kissing the lady's hand at parting, the customers went out of the shop irresolutely, as though they were wondering whether they had not forgotten something“. The habitus of their behavior includes mostly static gestures which are in accordance with the fundamentals of professional conduct, savoir vivre respected by the people of this type of social background. When one of the officers, Obtyosov, comes back to the chemist's store having decided to break the accepted rules of relationships with married women it is too late for a change. The husband is awake and the wife is again entangled in routine activities, crying, complaining about her fate and helping her unloved husband at work. Before the closing episode, however, she overcomes the schematism of passive behavior ascribed to Chekhovian women. Out of the characters' triangle it is her who is an active factor, the one who is ready to engage, men cannot abandon their world of safe and conventional gestures. The chemist's wife could be associated with dionysiacal excess of energy and courage, whereas the male group of characters is mostly described by the lack of vitality, the negation of natural instincts and emotional preferences. The corporeality and sensuality of the female character is visible and experienced by the officers almost at her every movement. In addition, this specific feature is emphasized by her clothes – „she threw on her dress, slid her bare feet into her slippers“, she „was flushed and rather excited“, „after uncorking the bottles, she dropped the corkscrew“, she laughed and talked „flushing and assuming a serious expression“.

Her heart throbbed, there was a pulsing in her temples, and why she did not know. . . . Her heart beat violently as though those two whispering outside were deciding her fate.

Behaving in this way she puts herself in the position of an object not a subject. Instead of being a deciding factor in a relationship she treats herself here as a problem which must be decided on by the officers, she disrespects her own status and situation.

In the short story mentioned above Chekhov seems to touch not only the issue of femininity and masculinity, he ironically treats also other diametrically different problems present in life of a typical Russian couple, which are encoded in *theatrical gestures* of various characters. It is worth mentioning the issues of the opposites such as being young and old, matter and spirit, fulfilment and insatiability or the problem of morality of Russians and foreigners. The view of the author of *The Seagull* seems to be in accordance with the very vivid opinion of D. S. Merezhkovsky, emphasizing the completeness of these categories, complexity and complementary character of cosmos:

Our time must be defined by two opposing features – it is a time of extreme materialism and, at the same time, of the most passionate idealistic outbursts of spirit. We are present at a great, significant struggle of two views of life, two diametrically opposed world views.

The confirmation of the above opinion may be found in the story called *Ariadne* which seems to touch almost all the problems discussed so far. The text

clearly constitutes the polemics with the philosophy of Leo Tolstoy included, among other things, in his *Kreutzer Sonata*. Chekhov's look at female and male characters in this story seems to be very mundane, set in the realities of Russian family life, devoid of illusions and solemnity, which do not work in everyday life. The main character, Ariadne, is another version of the Chekhovian woman dominated by uncontrollable sensuality, permanent need to be admired and respected, not knowing any higher values or practical aspects of everyday life. Seemingly, Ariadne could be regarded as the embodiment of Solovyov's notion of passive femininity. She is exclusively driven by the needs of her body and physical beauty, which can be seen, for example, in her insatiate appetite. She consumes huge amounts of food during the day and even at night, which in a way harmonizes with her animal nature of the female who dominates each male approaching her. The story teller describes her as a tigress, which constitutes a good metaphor of the predatory nature of hers as well as of her exceptional beauty, which is often mistaken by people for nobleness, outstanding talents and the beauty of an ideal vision. On the contrary, the story teller is shown as the perfect complement to her; in the beginning, he is against everything sensual, he tries to be motivated only by the traditional values of a spiritual man, therefore he is referred to by Ariadne as „queer fellow“, „prudent as an old woman“, „a mush“, „old man“ etc. It seems that the problem of each character here is the lack of emotional intelligence, a kind of psychological disability constituting an obstacle which does not allow the full development of characters' personality. This specific polarity, the typical balance of opposite realities, noticeable also in A. P. Chekhov's dramaturgy, seems to be shaken in *Ariadne*. It is not possible to understand the meaning of the story and the characters if we divide their artistic world into categories such as black and white or matter and spirit. The character which was initially placed morally and ethically higher than Ariadne is seduced by her charms and does not satisfy her animal appetite. Chekhov, however, contrary to Tolstoy, seems not to condemn the instinctive behavior, he rather persuades that it naturally becomes a part of human life. Aiming and longing for the fulfillment of an ideal vision, which cannot come true in life, should be treated as a lie, Chekhov rejects it as living in a false dream. The very idea is argued most broadly in all of Chekhov's mature dramas, in particular in *The Seagull*, which is considered by some scholars and critics as the amusing parody of the mystical ideals of Solovyov's followers.

They claim that Chekhov's comedy has a materialist bias which is visible for example in the approach to the „seagull“, which seems to be a symbol of the failure of symbolism exposing the process of symbol-making within the play to varying degrees of irony. *The Seagull* can also be seen as Chekhov's wry comment on popular love mysticism, drawing attention to the pathological effects of the idealist cult. Many characters behave as if love were, in Trigorin's words, „the only thing that can bring happiness on this earth“. At the structural level, the human carousel of unrequited lover pursuing unrequited lover is designed to point up the wastage and futility of idealism. Whether „love“ is refracted

through Masha's masochism, Trigorin's compensatory yearning for a „pure soul“ or Trepliov's motherlessness – the motives for „love“ are not spiritual or mystical but human. With almost Feuerbachian irony of understanding and tenderness Chekhov persuades us to see that every form of idealism has its roots in human need. Similar message seems to be the core of *Ariadne* emphasizing the fact that there is no separation between human and non-human, the whole world is one living organism whose structure is identical with human mind, in which rational and irrational must coexist in perfect harmony.

The above brief analysis of the selected short stories of A. P. Chekhov shows that matter and spirit are inseparable in the artistic world of his works. The verbal layer of the stories is confirmed, broadened or sometimes even replaced by the picture of the characters' gesticulation, which in the dramas is seen mostly as the deformed reflection of the ideal. The characters' gestures in Chekhov's short stories seem to be more energetic, the corporeal nature of the body cannot be denied, although the spectrum of the movements is also rather limited, „economical“ body language anticipates the specifics of the tools used in Chekhovian dramas. The deep realism of Chekhov's literary method is not easy, the recipient of his texts must be prepared for the search beyond the plot, finding the hidden meaning of the reality which is not shown or happening on stage, which brings us to the Lotman's concept of *the meaningful absence* metaphorically representing the lack of the sign which is crucial for the content, intended kinetic „economy“ or „the loss of energetic potential“. The characteristic notion describing the nature of repetitive movements of the characters of Chekhov's short stories could be the symbol of the pendulum representing the relationship between opposite values, the dichotomic nature of the gesture of reaching and withdrawing, which finds its best realization in *The Seagull*, but can be easily distinguished also in the discussed short stories, especially in *The Chemist's Wife*. The above analysis leads us to the aesthetics of the Great Theatre Reform and Chekhov's unquestionable achievements in the field of changing the Russian theatre. It seems that the prospect of the text specification through the insight into the theatrical gestures of the characters of Chekhov's short stories emphasizes the importance of the category of the engaged interpreter of the text and the broad range of universal meanings revived in the process of interpretative ritual rotating between the spiritual and the materialistic of human existence.

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