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VIRGINIA WOOLF, CHEKHOV, AND "THE RAPE OF THE LOCK"

That Virginia Woolf found the fiction of Anton Chekhov central to the modern view is clear not only from her several early reviews of his work but from her attention to him in the seminal essay, "Modern Fiction" (1919). In technique as well as subject, Chekhov's fiction embodied the shift in emphasis which she felt must alter the traditional conception of fiction in England. Chekhov's concentration on the complexities of the soul rather than external incident; his discard of the climax as well as the "happily-ever-after" ending; his blurring of the distinctions between humor and pathos, character and event; his obsession with loneliness and the difficulty of genuine communication—all these reinforced Virginia Woolf's then-growing conviction that fiction must reflect the author's "attempt to come closer to life, and to preserve more sincerely and exactly what interests and moves them, even if to do so they must discard most of the conventions which are commonly observed by the novelist"¹

In addition to her implication and discussion of Chekhov in her published work, one of the most curious evidences of Woolf's absorption in the Russian writer appears in an unpublished review written in 1925—the same year in which her comments on "the Russian point of view" appeared in the first *Common Reader*. The occasion for the review, entitled "Tchekhov on Pope" was the publication of a new, limited edition of Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*. Though logic fails to supply a connection between the eighteenth-century English poet and the nineteenth-century Russian story-teller and dramatist, Virginia Woolf's own imagination, immersed in Russian literature at the time, created this curious link.

Woolf began the review by suggesting the dilemma of the critic or

writer of her generation who attempts to discuss Pope: "It is a new thing for us common readers that we have no critic to keep us on the rails."² In the preceding century Matthew Arnold had been the arbiter of value; in his assertion that "'Dryden and Pope are not classics of our poetry, they are classics of our prose,'" as well as in his contention that literature should be a criticism and an interpretation of life, Arnold had given subsequent critics and readers of his age "something hard to hit against if [they] disagreed, something firm to lean upon if [they] acquiesced." (MS, p. 1) Woolf then asserted that this heritage was no longer viable for her own generation, for "these sayings get out of date. We want new sayings to hit against or lean upon." (MS, p. 1)

Most curiously, the new frame of reference which Virginia Woolf recommended for contemporary readers was not a critic but a writer of plays and stories, not an Englishman but a Russian: "In default of critics to keep us up to date we can only flounder about in the flood, or lay hold of whom we can to interpret Pope for us—Probably in our generation we read Pope by the light of Tchekhov. It may be Proust; it may be Wells; it may be Tchekhov. Probably for many of us it is Tchekhov."³ Woolf explained that Chekhov was the successor to Arnold in terms of spirit rather than actual critical precepts, since English literature had been as profoundly affected by its exposure to Russian literature as by interpretive criticism.

For the Russian infection has permeated English literature since the days of Matthew Arnold. Our insularity has gone. And when chance throws the Rape of the Lock in our way—chance in the persuasive guise of the Haslewood Press, whose edition is all that one can ask for—we read the Rape of the Lock through the Russian mist. (MS, p.2)

In the revised typescript of this review, Woolf revealed her own recent introduction to the "Russian mist", correcting the second sentence to read, "And when chance in the persuasive guise of the Haslewood Press throws the Rape of the Lock in our way, probably we shall just be shutting Tchekhov's [sic] Letters or have just been seeing *The Cherry Orchard*. Inevitably the Russian germ will be in our veins, the Russian mist in our souls."⁴ (The presence of this atmosphere was very definite during the time of Woolf's writing; not only had fifteen volumes of Constance Garnett's translation of Chekhov appeared between 1916 and 1924, but five of his plays—including *The Cherry Orchard*, an earlier production of which Virginia Woolf reviewed for the *New*

Statesman in 1920—were being staged in London during one six-month period in 1925-1926.)

What had begun as a review of the new edition of Pope's poem thus evolved in a spontaneous "stream-of-consciousness" manner, tracing Virginia Woolf's own private associations from Pope to Chekhov, and from those to her general absorption in Russian literature. Though the manuscript is only the rough draft which—given its unevenness—understandably never reached publication, it is a unique record not only of Woolf's critical approach in process, but also of her unlikely comparison of the two writers.

The important contribution which the 'Russian mist' made to one's reading of Pope's poem, in Woolf's view, was the peculiar sense of expansion and largeness which she had consistently emphasized in other remarks on Russian writers: the romantic conception of the freedom of the soul which the enormity of Russia inspired in many English readers of the day is common to her reactions to works as dissimilar as Chekhov's "The Steppe", Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, and Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*. She equated the sense of physical space with its psychological counterpart, noting in this essay that,

Like other mists this miasma from the vast plains of Russia enlarges what it rests upon. It may be the peasant, it may be the field, it may be the heart. What a relief! Our ligatures are loosened, our prejudices relaxed; we feel ourselves expanding... (MS, p. 2)

The effect of the Russian atmosphere was so pervasive that, "just as our English fields become vast lakes of mist on an autumn morning, so the heart expands under the Russian influence, the features spread, the boundaries disappear." (MS, p. 2). Certainly the very influence to which Woolf referred was acting upon her own perception of Pope's poem in this instance: the boundaries between Russian and English literature were temporarily forgotten. Furthermore, her preference for Russian literature reflects a prevailing attitude during her own time. The reaction to the naturalism of Zola and Flaubert, as well as the interest in psychology which Freud and Bergson generated in the early years of this century, had helped to precipitate a climate of change which nourished and popularized the Russian literature then appearing in translation. Virginia Woolf reminded her audience that "It is not the bright star of France that shines upon us but the cloudy Russian moon." (Typescript, p. 1).

She further described the sweeping effects of Russian literature upon English minds and, by implication, upon her own mind. Under its influence,

English minds become democratic—if to love the poor and hate the rich is democratic; certain results seem to follow, in England at any rate—certain judgements are passed and doctrines laid down... Our hearts should be filled with love towards our fellows. A stigma attaches to the idle rich. (MS, p.3)

Moreover, the powerful effect of the “new” literature yielded almost visceral changes; waxing romantic, Virginia Woolf suggested that “The heart is found to be more tumultuous than English literature had divined: under the Russian magnifying glass its boundaries are fluid; and the horizon is all a welter of wind and waves with all the booming and singing in our ears.” (MS, p.3).

The contrast between the infinite reaches of the Russian steppes and the infinitesimal items on Belinda’s dressing table in *The Rape of the Lock* frames the next point in Woolf’s discussion. Returning reluctantly to the subject at hand, she queried, “In such a world as this, what place is there for Pope? How can we reconcile it with our consciences to spend an hour over *The Rape of the Lock*, which it will be remembered, deals with such frivolities as locks of hair and ladies’ dressing tables and the aristocracy?” (MS, p. 3) The centre of the Russian world is the complexity of the soul, while “the centre of this world is a dressing table; and the objects we are invited to consider are hair pins, combs, and teacups.” (MS, p. 3) Virginia Woolf scorned the altered perspective in which “the world has shrunk to the size of a pin head; and after looking at the world through the Russian magnifying glass we can hardly distinguish the tiny objects upon which we English once upon a time looked so complacently.” (MS, p. 3f) These comments reflect a strange departure from the author’s customary stance, particularly given her own admonition, “Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small.” (“Modern Fiction,” p. 190) And, as if to decipher further the shift in emphasis from the dressing table to the steppes, from the eighteenth century to this one, Woolf irrelevantly added, “Pope, after all, had not lived through the war.” (MS, p. 4)

Following the arguments which seem to reduce Pope’s poem to so much trivial phrase-making, Woolf resumed a more objective evaluation

of *The Rape of the Lock*—or at least attempted to do so. She implied that, once one had made the large adjustment of perspective from the Russian expanses to Belinda's combs and pins, one could discuss the poem's merits within its own context. Moving from macrocosm to microcosm, "we gradually perceive—can it be imagination merely?—that the objects, frivolous as they are, nevertheless positively glow." (MS, p. 4) Though she argued that one should "counter conscience" when it reminded one that the world of *The Rape of the Lock* is corrupt and ephemeral, her own conscience demurred; a subsequently deleted line in the manuscript—no doubt affected by the author's susceptibility to the Russian mist—reads, "But, after all, what is mere beauty of material objects in a world riddled with suffering and sin?" (MS, p. 4) Pope is rather inhospitably measured against the combined powers of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and other unnamed Russian writers!

Woolf's tone gradually mellows into a humorous ambivalence which continues throughout the essay; her preference for the Russian point of view obscures her attempt to discuss Pope objectively. Momentarily, she suggested, "the insidious devil, Beauty", takes possession of the reader and distorts his sense of values. (MS, p. 5) However, beyond the minute world which Belinda inhabits, "there are human beings. They have, presumably, souls. Whence this laughter, this happiness, this frivolity then?" (MS, p. 5) The conflict between two such disparate worlds—the steppe and the dressing table—is ultimately irreconcilable. Woolf conceded that "our sentiments are not unmixed. There is the oddest conflict in the atmosphere: a concussion above our heads, of honour, and new brocade, laughter, and something which is not laughter..." (MS, p. 5) In discerning between the conflicting values, Virginia Woolf chose the more serious, abstract ones of the Russian view, beside which she saw Pope's world as trivial. "We feel (for the author does not trouble to instruct us) something transient in river parties, something foolish in the human race, born to perish in beauty." (MS, p.5)

The author acknowledged the possibility that a reader of Pope's poem might also be swept away by certain striking phrases: "A few lines about insignificant and imaginary beings—Sylphs and Sylphides—places us beyond the bounds of reason." (MS, p. 7) The clarity, exactitude, and economy of some lines (which she quotes in the essay)

are justifiably admired; they "will burn in memory and lure us back" when the poem is closeted in a bookcase. However, those impressions are fleeting; "a little thought brings confusion. After all, what information do they convey? What reason is there for our pleasure? ...What good have they done us or prompted us to do? This breach once made in our defenses a whole horde of doubts swim in." (MS, p. 8f) These comments are very uncharacteristic of Virginia Woolf, for whom a utilitarian justification for a work of literature was unthinkable. She defended this unusual position with an even less defensible argument *ad hominem*: in a paragraph which was subsequently revised, she described Pope's character as "spiteful, lazy, vindictive, mean, the only excuse for this is in his frailty and the fact that he was not in a public school." (MS, p. 8) The revision softens these adjectives; instead she asks, "When we adopt the oyster view, and hold that the beauty of the pearl justifies the disease, how can we rejoice in lines, however, that sprang from a diseased soul?" (MS, p. 9)

At first one might speculate that Virginia Woolf was writing more in jest than in earnest in this draft. However, her attitude toward Pope was consistently unsympathetic. Three years after this review was written, she portrayed Pope in negative terms in the fantasy, *Orlando*: in an angry mood, "darts of malice, rage, triumph, wit, and terror, (he was shaking like a leaf) shot from his eyes. He looked like some squat reptile set with a burning topaz in its forehead."⁵ Orlando nevertheless invites the poet to her home, influenced by the ambiance of the eighteenth century to worship him. However, upon discovering her illusion, she exclaims, "Deformed and weakly, there is nothing to venerate in you, mush to pity, most to despise." (*Orlando*, p. 186) Orlando's disgust later fades, but the author's does not; several pages later in *Orlando* she added, "Never was any mortal so ready to suspect an insult or so quick to avenge one as Mr. Pope." (p. 194)

Even if these lines in *Orlando*—or those in the review—were written in attempted jest or satire, Woolf's prejudice remains. In both instances her admiration for some parts of Pope's poetry competed with her dislike of his personality. Moreover, it seems obvious that while writing the review of the new edition of Pope's poem she found herself unsympathetic to her subject, a reaction intensified by her concurrent—and more compelling—immersion in the atmosphere of Russian literature. Her review ends on an inconclusive note, for the comparison

between two such dissimilar writers (none of Chekhov's works are actually named in the comparison) raised questions which she found difficult to resolve, even without acknowledging her dubious critical position:

And yet once, shutting the book [*The Rape of the Lock*] one begins to think. These are the questions that we ask ourselves, which, setting the Rape of the Lock against Russian literature, or that version of Russian literature which prevails in this island, should we write well or ill, magnify or minify; should we hate the rich or love the poor, does it matter which, what constitutes good writing, what bad; what does love mean; is love the same for Russians and for English—and are we eternally damned for believing that there is as much love of his kind in the diseased little man—as much service, and as much—virtue—as in all the books of all the Russians? (MS, p. 9)

The author's humor has finally gained the upper hand: Woolf satirizes her own earlier seriousness, recognizing her ambivalence as well as her tendency to exaggerate the virtues of the Russian writers at the expense of Pope. Furthermore, she was aware of the difficulty of assessing the Russians honestly, given not only the confusion of popular opinion and the distorting effect of uncritical emotion, but the inevitable limitations of reading a literature in translation. Woolf concluded the essay with the apology, "Not that we want to throw a stone at them [the Russians]—no. Only at the popular idea of them." (MS, p. 9) Or, as she had acknowledged in the essay, "The Russian Point of View",—written shortly before this review of Chekhov and Pope—"the mind takes its bias from the place of its birth, and no doubt, when it strikes upon a literature so alien as the Russian flies off at a tangent far from the truth."⁶

Footnotes:

1. "Modern Fiction," *The Common Reader*, (first series), The Hogarth Press, London, 1925, p. 190. Subsequent references are shortened to "Modern Fiction" and the page number.
2. MS of a review by Virginia Woolf, "The Rape of the Lock: Tchekhov on Pope", from *Articles, Essays, Fiction and Reviews, 1925-1941*, Holograph Notebook I, April 25, 1925, The Berg Collection, The New York Public Library, p.1. (Quoted with the kind permission of Quentin Bell and The New York Public Library). Pagination in the text refers to my own numbering of the nine pages numbered 251, 253, etc., through 267, in Woolf's MS. Subsequent references are incorporated in the text with the abbreviation MS and page number.
3. p. 1 of MS. The inconsistencies in the spelling of Chekhov's name are Woolf's own, as are the inconsistencies in the italicizing of titles.
4. Typescript, p. 1, of the same manuscript, "The Rape of the Lock: Tchekov on Pope," with Virginia Woolf's own ms. Corrections. (Referred to hereafter in text as "typescript.")
5. *Orlando*, The Hogarth Press, 1928, p. 184. Subsequent page references are incorporated in the text.
6. *The Common Reader*, p. 231.