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The Still Undiscovered Chekhov, or
It Is Highly Recommended that Translators Get a
Background in Philology.

In 1998, Seven Stories Press published *The undiscovered Chekhov: thirty-eight new stories by Anton Chekhov*¹. It was a great success. A few years later the new stories became forty-three², then fifty-one³. For a long time labelled an immature writer, the young Chekhov was eventually revealed to English-speaking readers. Surprisingly enough, almost a century after his death many of Chekhov's early masterpieces were still not translated. In his *Introduction*, the translator Peter Constantine explains how this happened. «As Chekhov specialist Julie de Sherbinin points out in a letter to *Harper's Magazine* (February 1998), "The gaps in English translation of his early work can be attributed to various factors: these stories were long considered products of an 'immature' writer, they are rich in colloquialisms and wordplay and thus are hard to translate, and they often depend on cultural context for their humor". Since Chekhov's death in 1904 there have been many translations of his other prose pieces. During the Bloomsbury years, Constance Garnett established his position as an international literary figure by publishing seventeen volumes of her Chekhov translations – 201 stories. The quantity of Chekhov's work was so great that Garnett had to make a selection, and her selections have subsequently remained largely uncontested. Consecutive generations of Chekhov translators have not veered far from her choice of stories, only occasionally introducing new, untranslated material»⁴. In fact, going beyond the canon established by Constance Garnett, Constantine was able to enlarge

¹ Chekhov, A.P., *The undiscovered Chekhov. Thirty-Eight new stories*, translated by P. Constantine, New York, Seven Stories Press, 1998.

² Chekhov, A.P., *The undiscovered Chekhov. Forty-Three new stories*, translated by P. Constantine, New York, Seven Stories Press, 2000.

³ Chekhov, A.P., *The undiscovered Chekhov. Fifty-One new stories*, translated by P. Constantine, London, Duck Editions, 2001

⁴ Chekhov, A.P., *The undiscovered Chekhov. Thirty-Eight new stories*, translated by P. Constantine, New York, Seven Stories Press, 1998: XIV-XV.

and enrich Chekhov's image by introducing dozens of his humorous stories from the early 1880s.

Moreover, Constantine explains how he found this literary treasure: «My work on this book began two years ago in the Slavic and Baltic division of the New York public library. I was looking through a heavy bound volume of *Budil'nik* issues from 1880. The magazines had a very progressive, almost late-Edwardian look, much like early issues of the British magazine *Punch*. The drawings were colored, which surprised me, and after the middle of 1880, the lettering on the title pages was flushed with gold. Just as I was wondering how a fin-de-siècle printer could have managed that, I noticed a short story signed "A. Chekhov" – Alexander Chekhov, Anton's older brother. In the next few issues there were more "A Chekhov" signatures, and quite a few "Arteopod," an alias Alexander often used. And then came the first stories by "Antosha Chekhonte" – Anton Chekhov. To my surprise, the New York Public Library has all the Moscow and St. Petersburg magazines in which Chekhov was first published: *Budil'nik*, *Strekoza* (Dragonfly), *Oskolki*. As I began reading Chekhov's early stories in context, a very different image of him jumped off the page. The initial picture in my mind of the sedate literary elder with monocle and cane (the picture of Chekhov used on most book covers) disappeared, and a younger, livelier, more energetic image of the writer took its place. I soon found that the New York public library has one of the world's best collections of turn-of-the-century and earlier Russian material. Some of its rare books are not even available in the Russian state library»⁵.

Later on, «The New York Times» published two of these stories, *Sarah Bernhardt comes to town* and *On the train*⁶, while a reproduction of Constantine's *Introduction* was printed in *The Guardian* on April 14, 2001. On January 17, 1999, Edward Lewine, currently speechwriter for the Mayor of New York City, wrote in «The New York Times» the article *Making it work*. The man who tracked down Chekhov, where Constantine is described «bent over some copies of an 1880's Moscow magazine called *Budilnik* [...] in the Slavic and Baltic division of the New York Public Library». Two months later, Harvard professor Donald Fanger positively reviewed the book (*Back*

⁵ *Ibidem*: XVIII-XIX.

⁶ Cf. *Undiscovered Chekhov*: <https://www.nytimes.com/books/first/c/chekhov-undiscovered.html>.

by popular demand, «The New York Times», March 14, 1999) and in the same year Peter Constantine was awarded the National Translation Award for his book.

Let us now take one of these beautiful stories, entitled *Sud* (*The Trial*). As explained in the last pages of Constantine's book⁷, this story was first published in 1881 in a magazine called *Zritel'*. Now, if you take this issue from the shelves of the New York Public Library and check the original with Constantine's translation you will find that the two texts are different, beginning with the title. In Chekhov's original, entitled *Sel'skie kartinki. a) Sud* [*Country pictures a) The Trial*], the young hero Mitrofanij is a clerk, his father is a nurse, the court is a council of village elders, and many of them take part in the youth's punishment. At the end of the story, after his moral victory over his father, «The clerk drinks, lifts his bluish nose high into the air, and with a heroic flourish walks out of the hut»⁸.

In Constantine's translation, entitled simply *The Trial*, the young hero Serapion is an apprentice barber, his father is a shopkeeper, the court is made of few village elders, and only the father punishes the youth. At the end of the story, there is one more scene, where «Fortunatov the policeman paces up and down the courtyard, his face red, his eyes goggling, muttering: 'More! More! Give it to him'»⁹. Many expressions are different, the heroes are different, the end is different, the perspective is different. Why? What happened?

It happened that, in 1899, a famous Russian publisher of German origin, Adolf Marks, asked Chekhov for a selection of his best stories for the first edition of his *Sochineniia* [*Collected Works*]. Chekhov prepared a preliminary selection, made a lot of changes, cut out the original humour, and edited the stories according to his new mood. Later, he decided to exclude some of the stories from the collection. *The Trial* was one of these stories. The proofs of this preliminary version still exist, they are in Moscow, at

⁷ Chekhov, A.P., *The undiscovered Chekhov. Thirty-Eight new stories*, translated by P. Constantine, New York, Seven Stories Press, 1998: 197.

⁸ Antosha Chekhonte [A.P. Chekhov], *Sel'skie kartinki. a) Sud*, in: «*Zritel'*» 14 (1881): 2-3.

⁹ Chekhov, A.P., *The undiscovered Chekhov. Thirty-Eight new stories*, translated by P. Constantine, New York, Seven Stories Press, 1998: 25.

the Russian State Library¹⁰. Beginning with Soviet Academic edition of Chekhov's *Complete Works (Polnoe sobranie sochineniĭ, Moscow 1974-1982)*, the second version of *The Trial* was presented not only as the final variant of this story, but also the author's final word on the piece. From a philological point of view, this is greatly disputable. This version was never published, moreover the author himself decided to exclude it from publication. As far as we know, Chekhov's last will was this exclusion.

However, if you take the first volume of this Soviet edition – considered the most reliable Chekhov edition – among the stories written between 1880 and 1882, you will find precisely this second version (pag. 95-99). Only at the end of the book, in the so-called critical apparatus (pag. 512-516), will you find the version published by Chekhov in 1881.

Peter Constantine, strangely enough, translated the second, unpublished version of the story. He translated *The Trial* for his *Undiscovered Chekhov* not as the young Chekhov published in the magazine *Zritel'* in 1881, but rather he translated *The Trial* of the 1899 version.

Let us take just another story, one of professor Fanger's favorites – *Intrigi [Intrigues]*. After the first publication on the magazine *Oskolki* in 1887, it was actually included in Marks' edition (1899). However, twelve years later Chekhov decided to rewrite it according to his new mood. Consequently, he made numbers of stylistic changes, included title, humorous last names, titles of pseudo-scientific articles. In a word, he changed the humorous tone of the story into a more serious, existentialistic, Chekhovian tone. This late version is the one published in the main part of Volume VI of the Russian *Complete Works* of Chekhov (pag. 360-364)¹¹ while the first one was confined again to the critical apparatus (pag. 577-578). In *The Undiscovered Chekhov*, Constantine included the translation of the later, serious version of the story, not of the early one.

¹⁰ A.P. Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniĭ i pisem v tridtsati tomakh*, Moskva, Nauka, 1974-1982, t. I, 1974: 569.

¹¹ *Ibidem*: t. VI, 1976.

This is true not only for *The Trial* and *Intrigues*. Eleven stories out of thirty-eight come from later editions; 71 pages out of 179 do not refer to the first editions, and thus do not reveal the young Chekhov.

«The items collected in *The Undiscovered Chekhov* – wrote professor Fanger – prefigure the later work in their range of characters, tones and settings»¹². Regarding these eleven stories, this is incorrect. They do not prefigure Chekhov's later work, they *are* Chekhov's later works in their range of characters, tones and settings.

Chekhov specialists such as Aleksandr Chudakov wrote entire books focusing on the differences between the early and the late Chekhov¹³, and particularly on the different poetics of the two versions of stories like *The trial*¹⁴. Of course, their works are based on a clear distinction between the two versions, a distinction that translations like Constantine's contribute to remove.

Constantine's sources remained unchecked. Neither professor Fanger, nor the judges of the National Translation Award decided to take the old Russian magazine down from the library shelves.

If the main problem of this case is that eleven stories were translated from the wrong versions, and that the American system does not seem able to prevent this kind of mistake, it suggests also a more interesting, hermeneutical consideration. When a translator does not apply the simple, philological principle of translating what he declares to translate, he is relying on others' conclusions that he cannot verify.

In other words, when you translate from the *Polnoe sobranie sochineniï*, or from text derived from this edition, you necessarily depend on its editors' decisions and choices. The Soviet philologists who assembled Chekhov's *Polnoe sobranie sochineniï* decided that the first variants of these stories were simply *initial* [*pervonachalnye*], and the second ones were *definitive* [*okonchatel'nye*]¹⁵; therefore, they published the second variants in the main part of the volume entitled *Sochineniïa 1880-1882* [*Works*

¹² Cf. Fanger, D. *Back by Popular Demand*.

¹³ Chudakov, A.P. *Poëtika Chekhova*, Moskva, Nauka, 1971.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*: 19.

¹⁵ See, for example, Chekhov A.P. *Polnoe sobranie sochineniï i pisem v tridtsati tomakh*, Moskva, Nauka, 1974-1982, t. I, 1974.: 569, 592, 595, 596-7.

1880-1882]. Taking for granted their choice, Constantine translated these versions. Editing *The Trial*, Bel'chikov and Gromov, who were in charge of the first volume of *Polnoe sobranie sochineniï*, changed *Ja polozhil ikh vcheras' v kardon* into *Ja polozhil ikh vcheras' v karman, vletaet zhena Kuz'my Egorova* into *vkhodit zhena Kuz'my Egorova, Nam ne v pervoi-s* into *Nam ne vpervoi-s* and so on. Taking for granted that the *Polnoe sobranie sochineniï* version accurately followed the original, Constantine was obliged to accept their disputable or incorrect choices.

The young Chekhov is still to be discovered, at least as far as these eleven stories are concerned. Furthermore, it is highly recommended that translators get a background in philology.

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In the photograph of the issue n.14 of «Zritel'», page 2, you can see in the Content (Soderzhanie) the name Antosha Chekhonte, the originale title *Sel'skie kartinki*. a) *Sud* and, on the right, the name of the nurse's son Mitrofanij. You can compare it with *Undiscovered Chekhov*, page 19: here the title is *The Trial* (i.e. *Sud*) and in the last line you will find the name of the shopkeeper's son Seraphion.

