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Temporality and Historicity in Čechov's *The Cherry Orchard*

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Abstract

This article explores the ways in which historicity is constructed in Čechov's last play and the ways the play relates to a certain phase of Russian modernization. These ways are primarily temporal. Firstly, the vast historical perspective of the play is shown to be constructed with the help of diverse conceptions of time, which to some extent are connected with social classes. Secondly, the strong sense of historical movement inherent in the play is shown to be constructed by contradicting two different kinds of temporalities: the provincial town chronotope, which pertains to a pre-modern conception of time, and the demand for a goal-oriented action, which pertains to a modern conception of time. Both of these temporalities appear problematic in the context of the play. Furthermore, the play is seen as a critique towards teleological thinking, influential in Russia of the times. Besides scrutinizing *The Cherry Orchard*, the article also touches upon the problem of temporality in Čechov's prose.

Keywords: Anton Čechov, *The Cherry Orchard*, temporality, conceptions of time, history, modernity, modernization.

This article explores the ways in which historical time is constructed in Čechov's last play, *The Cherry Orchard* (*Višnevyy sad*, 1904; hereafter, also VS) and the ways in which the chronotope of the play is connected with a certain phase of Russian modernization. These ways are primarily temporal.

By analyzing the play's culturally and historically formed conceptions of time in relation to modernity, I hope to show how the socio-historical mentality of the modernizing Russia of the last decades of the nineteenth century is discussed and commented on in Čechov's text. Temporality is here seen as a fundamental part of the existence of the modern self, and

to my knowledge, this is a new approach to Čechov's work (see also Klapuri 2007).¹ Thus, I claim that Čechov's work has a distinctive sense of historicity and locality, although this is not acknowledged, when the play's themes are seen as universally valid.

In practice, the entire idea of examining Čechov's play from the viewpoint of modern temporality and historicity has its roots in Michail Bachtin's writings on historical time coming alive in Goethe:

Visible traces of man's creativity, traces of his hands and his mind: cities, streets, houses, works of art, technology, social organisations etc. The artist reads in them the complex intentions of people, generations, epochs, nations, social-class groups. [...] Finally there are socio-economic contradictions – from elementary, immediately visible contrasts [...] to their more profound and refined manifestations in human relations and ideas. These contradictions necessarily push visible time into the future. The more profoundly they are revealed the more essential and wide-ranging is the visible fullness of time in the images of the artist-novelist. [...] The contradictions of contemporary life, having lost their absolute, God-given, eternal nature, reveal a historical multitemporality – remnants of the past, and rudiments and tendencies of the future. (Bachtin 1986b, 25–6)

I have quoted Bachtin here at length, as my understanding of historical time becoming visible in Čechov's play has similarities with his writing concerning Goethe. However, it has to be underlined that Bachtin, "that

¹ In his admirable book *Poëtika Čechova* A. P. Čudakov touches upon temporal aspects in the writer's prose, too (Čudakov 1971). Besides, B. I. Zingerman has in his monograph on Čechov's plays devoted an entire chapter to the aspect of time (Zingerman 1988). Later, Gary Saul Morson proposed some viewpoints from which to look at the peculiarities of Čechovian time in his study on the relation between narrative and freedom (Morson 1994), and Daria A. Kirjanov has delved into the problem of memory in Čechov's prose (Kirjanov 2000). Even more recently, Peter Alberg Jensen has written on some aspects of time in Tolstoj and Čechov (Jensen 2006). This is just to name a few of the studies on the problem of time in Čechov. However, in none of these studies, which have been very helpful for my research, are Čechov's temporal aspects seen in relation to the modern self or in the context of the Russian historically contemporary situation.

man for all seasons" (Shepherd 2006, 33), is here used only as a point of departure, and his writings are not applied to Čechov as such.²

The *topos* of Čechov's plays is typically a small town or an estate, on which a bourgeois or an upper class family leads a monotonous, provincial life, whose routines remain the same from day to day. In Čechovian language this is the time of "philosophizing", in Bachtin's language it would be the Flaubertian-type chronotope (Bachtin 1986a, 280). This is the background time also of *The Cherry Orchard*.

As such, this kind of temporality seems to have no historical development whatsoever. However, there is a strong presence of the modernization of society in the play. The marks of modernization tie the story-world in a concrete way to a very specific social and historical context, Russia in the middle of the process of modernization. These marks may be of various kinds – they are visible in changes in social hierarchy, such as in Lopachin's rise from being the grandson of a serf to the owner of the legendary orchard, or in the new spatial and temporal accessibility, made possible by the railway. Most importantly, however, the marks of modernization become visible in the experiences and conceptions of time of the characters.

Modernity, as the concept historian Reinhart Koselleck has noted, means the emergence of a new, historical conception of time in which time is open towards the future: in modernity, men work in the present by using knowledge about the past to achieve important goals in the future (Koselleck 1985, 268). Thus, time is regarded as a resource in the pursuit of a desired state of affairs that may be even something that never existed before. What holds true for history is valid also for individuals: it is characteristic for the modern individual to think of his living and acting as a pursuit of goals that will be realized only in the future.

The effective sense of historical change in *The Cherry Orchard* lies particularly in this contrasting of the two temporalities: the slow-move-

² There is a strong consensus, especially in British Bachtin studies, that applying Bachtin's thinking in diverse disciplines is a hazardous business, and at least since the mid-1990s it has been recognised that a careful investigation of the intellectual contexts, origins and sources of Bachtin's thought should be carried out (see, e.g., Tihanov 2000, 5–6; Brandist 2002, 1–5; Shepherd 2006, 32–3). On the Marxist and Cassirerian underpinnings of Bachtin's concept of the Goethean historical time, see Brandist 2002, 152–4.

ment time, which pertains mostly to a past-orientated conception of time (in the characters of Ljubov' Andreevna, Gaev, and Firs), and the demand for goal-orientated action, which pertains to a modern conception of time (in the characters of Lopachin, Trofimov, Jaša and Anja). It has to be noted that the entire drama of Čechov's play is gathered around this demand for immediate and goal-orientated action to keep the orchard, and the inability of the main characters to produce it, even though they are shown how to act in the modernizing society.

In addition, the distinct historicity of *The Cherry Orchard* is also due to Čechov's decision to connect different conceptions or experiences of time with different social classes. In the play, these various kinds of conceptions of time are examined through the symbol of the orchard; that is, by showing what meanings the orchard has for the characters and how the characters act to save the garden and the values it represents. Let us next have a look at how this temporality works in the play.

First, the older generation of the gentry, Ljubov' Andreevna and Gaev, and the old servant Firs, offer a nostalgic perspective on the past. However, we must note that this attitude is not only due to their social class, as their past-orientated experience of time is also influenced, for instance, by their actual age. For them, the orchard is something quite extraordinary – it is their whole way of living, their own past.

Гаев (отворяет другое окно). Сад весь белый. Ты не забыла, Люба? Вот эта длинная аллея идет прямо, точно протянутый ремень, она блестит в лунные ночи. Ты помнишь? Не забыла?

Любовь Андреевна (глядит в окно на сад). О, мое детство, чистота моя! В этой детской я спала, глядела отсюда на сад, счастье просыпалось вместе со мною каждое утро, и тогда он был точно таким, ничто не изменилось. (Смеется от радости.) Весь, весь белый! О сад мой! После темной ненастной осени и холодной зимы опять ты молод, полон счастья, ангелы небесные не покинули тебя... Если бы снять с груди и с плеч моих тяжелый камень, если бы я могла забыть мое прошлое!

Гаев. Да, и сад продадут за долги, как это ни странно... (VS, 329)

We can now see that there is a problem in this past-orientated attitude. Time after time, Ljubov' Andreevna could act to save the orchard. Every

time, she refuses to. Instead of following the merchant Lopachin's empathetic advice, Ljubov' Andreevna gives away her little money to neighbours, servants, and passers-by. The gentry's plans for saving the garden are questioned, too, as in the context of the represented modernizing society, the presence of which is felt in Lopachin's more up-to-date plans for saving the orchard, Gaev's strategies seem anachronistic:

Гаев. Молчу. (*Целует Ане и Варе руки.*) Молчу. Только вот о деле. В четверг я был в окружном суде, ну, сошлась компания, начался разговор о том о сем, пятое-десятое, и, кажется, вот можно будет устроить заем под векселя, чтобы заплатить проценты в банк.

Варя. Если бы господь помог!

Гаев. Во вторник поеду, еще раз поговорю. (*Варе.*) Не реви. (*Ане.*) Твоя мама поговорит с Лопахиным; он, конечно, ей не откажет... А ты, как отдохнешь, поедешь в Ярославль к графине, твоей бабушке. Вот так и будем действовать с трех концов — и дело наше в шляпе. Проценты мы заплатим, я убежден... (*Кладет в рот леденец.*) Честью моей, чем хочешь, клянусь, имение не будет продано! (*Возбужденно.*) Счастьем моим клянусь! Вот тебе моя рука, назови меня тогда дрянным, бесчестным человеком, если я допущу до аукциона! Всем существом моим клянусь!

Аня (*спокойное настроение вернулось к ней, она счастлива*). Какой ты хороший, дядя, какой умный! (*Обнимает дядю.*) Я теперь покойна! Я покойна! Я счастлива! (VS, 332–3)

The actual selling of the orchard influences several characters. It rather concretely means the loss of several jobs – for Varja, for servants, especially for Firs, who in the end is left dying in the house as everyone thinks he has been sent to hospital, but no one cares enough to make sure he has left. Finally, one must not forget the fact that the orchard is not just a piece of land but has connotations such as the innocent past and the whole of Russia: «Вся Россия наш сад» (VS, 346).

It is tempting to scrutinize the core action of *The Cherry Orchard* in the context of prosaics, which is Gary Saul Morson's and Caryl Emerson's term for a slow pace of development and which has its roots

both in Bakhtin's thought³ and in the Russian literature of the Realist era (Morson and Emerson 1990, 23–36; Morson 1997, 126–8). According to the prosaic point of view, every little move should be weighed in light of the particular situation and carry with it ethical responsibility. It is the very small moments of everyday life that make the great changes in human life, not the radical moments of crisis (as often in Dostoevskij, for a counterexample).⁴

Seen from a temporal point of view, it is possible to say that this kind of prosaic attitude, which includes the ethical responsibility of the everyday action, is exactly what the Čechovian heroes lack. None of the characters in *The Cherry Orchard*, Lopachin excluded, sees the actual sale of the orchard as happening slowly, with every small choice made by its owners. For them, the orchard is sold only when Lopachin actually buys it. Thus, the characters' inaction has ethical consequences as well. This kind of irresponsible action is common for many of Čechov's characters, both in his prose and plays. Besides *The Cherry Orchard*, it is most notably present in *The Three Sisters* (*Tri sestry*, 1901), in which the sisters refuse to take action to move to the Moscow of their dreams and in which Baron Tuzenbach's death, which could have been prevented by several characters, is barely noticed.

It is common knowledge that the socio-historical developments and thoughts in Russian literature have been eagerly commented on and discussed, since in Russia the role of the writer has traditionally been also the role of an active social thinker. Ever since Belinskij, in literary criticism the ethical aspect of literature has been underlined, too. Čechov's refusal to take such an explicit stand is widely known (see, e.g., Morson 1995, 44–8). However, by analyzing the culturally and historically de-

³ The Bakhtinian connection of Morson's and Emerson's concept has been criticised, mainly because of the fuzziness of Bakhtin's conceptions of 'great time' and 'small time', which Morson and Emerson use in an unproblematic way (see, e.g., Shepherd 2006, 34).

⁴ Later, Morson developed the term yet further and named it "tempics" (Morson 1997, 128–34; 1999, 278–83). This concept takes account of the temporal, non-stable character of some literary texts. Morson suggests it could be used alongside of the traditional term "poetics", which, according to Morson, only is suitable for analyzing texts that do not have a strong temporal character (Morson 1999, 305).

pendent conceptions of time, it is quite possible to see that Čechov's work, too, has ethical dimensions.

It is mainly Lopachin who has a perspective of the active present moment and the near future. In this respect, Lopachin's goal-orientated thinking is indeed quite typical for modernity. In most of the cases, Lopachin also acts as he teaches – in a goal-orientated, effective way, characteristically trying to keep up with the public clock-time of modern society:

Лопачин. На дворе октябрь, а солнечно и тихо, как летом. Строиться хорошо. (Поглядев на часы, в дверь.) Господа, имейте в виду, до поезда осталось всего сорок шесть минут! Значит, через двадцать минут на станцию ехать. Поторапливайтесь. (VS, 361)

Yet, even though he seems to cope with the demands of the modernizing society, and even is a spokesman for them, his relationship with the historical change is twofold. For example, he has difficulties with keeping pace with public time: although he has an obsessive relationship with his watch, he is often late and falls asleep at inappropriate moments (VS, 318). Thus, although he is shown as striving to act as a member of the capitalist class in a modernizing society should, using time as a resource to fulfil one's plans, he is also shown to be unable to act this role. It is important to note in this respect that his relationship with his own position as a self-made man is problematic, too: on the one hand, he feels he will always be the barely literate peasant (VS, 318), on the other, having bought the orchard, he publicly celebrates (VS, 358–9). Furthermore, for all the rational aspects of marriage, he ultimately cannot propose to Varja (VS, 366–8). His situation is further complicated by his clearly empathetic feelings for both Ljubov' Andreevna and the orchard. Thus, it is also in Lopachin's ambiguous figure that the possibility of a modern self to have control over his or her life is called into question.⁵

⁵ The question of modernity in Čechov is still largely virgin soil. Although Čechov's work has already been scrutinized in relation to its discursive context (e.g., Kataev 2004), it has not been put into the context of modernity. However, Peter Alberg Jensen and Andrej Stepanov have referred to this kind of problematic in Čechov's texts (Jensen 1997, 149–50; Stepanov 2005, 353).

Consequently, it is in the figure of Lopachin that we may discern the crucial importance of individualization in the Čechovian characterization. It has to be bore in mind when analyzing Čechov's work that the characters both in his prose and plays are first and foremost particular individuals, not typical representatives of their social classes (see, e.g., Kataev 2002). By scrutinizing the socio-historically determined conceptions of time, represented in *The Cherry Orchard*, I do not claim that these conceptions were primarily connected with the social classes. Lopachin certainly does have some characteristics of a stereotypical bourgeois of the nineteenth-century realistic literature. However, it is particularly those features of his with no specific relation to his social background that make him a figure with which to empathize: his beautiful hands, noticed by Trofimov, and his sensitiveness to Andreevna's loss.

Besides Lopachin, the future-orientatedness of the represented modernizing society is problematized in the character of Trofimov. For him, the orchard's past is connected with slavery and suffering souls, and in the future, the orchard should be open for everyone. In fact, for him, the whole of Russia is going to be an orchard with an open access, no matter whether one is of humble or noble birth (VS, 346). Trofimov is the only character of the play to speak for the radical ideas of the times, and in Soviet readings of *The Cherry Orchard*, it was especially his utterances that guaranteed the play's – and indeed, the whole of Čechov's oeuvre's – much sought-after “revolutionary” character (Tulloch 1980, 24).

Aileen M. Kelly has in her study on the counter-traditions in Russian thought included Čechov together with Bachtin and Hercen in the so-called Anti-Utopian tradition, which she sees as opposed to all the determinist and utopian lines of thought so influential in the Russia of the times (Kelly 1999, 12–16). In the same way, Gary Saul Morson has analyzed Čechov in the context of an Anti-Intelligentsialist tradition (Morson 1995, 39–50, especially 44–8).⁶ However, as a whole, the socio-historical criticism to be found in Čechov's texts is not intended towards any specific school of thought, although it is true that Social Darwinism is quite often the target (see also Dolženkov 1998). One has also to bear in mind that neither Čechov's criticism nor his thought in general

⁶ It is worth noting that both Morson and in particular Kelly rely almost exclusively on evidence which could be called extraliterary: on Čechov's letters and notebooks.

follows any specific “ism”, as A. P. Čudakov has already noted (Čudakov 1971, 71, 73–5).

Of course, it is in Trofimov’s figure that the utopian thoughts are most strongly questioned, through his own inaction and through other characters’ observations. In the represented socio-historical context of the play, with all the obstacles on the way towards revolution and in a country in which modernization is only in its childhood, the radicalism of Trofimov seems idealistic, even naively so. Modernization seems much more problematic in the Russian context than in the Western one, and radicalism merely makes it considerably worse. Apart from Trofimov, there is only young Anja who seems to be interested in direct action. An additional point worth making is that the servants show no interest in such deeds. This irony is felt most strongly in old Firs’ attitude: he would rather have stayed a serf than become a servant (VS, 344).

Thus, with the help of the symbol of the orchard, the reader, and the audience, is offered several conceptions of time, and a critique of them, especially towards teleological thinking, influential in the Russia of the times. At the same time, the ability of an individual to act in a rational and goal-orientated way, typical for modernity, becomes problematized in Čechov’s play.

Furthermore, with the help of diverse conceptions of time, to some extent connected with different social classes, the historical perspective of the play is made very wide. Consequently, although the events of the play take place in a couple of months, the historical period approximately from the 1830s at least to the Revolution of 1905 is covered. In addition, from the retrospective and historically informed viewpoint of the twenty-first century, we are also able to sense the later history, the whole of the Soviet era, as present in the play. Together with the strong contrast of the two diverse temporalities, this wide historical perspective contributes to the strong sense of temporal movement in the play.

This kind of historicity seems to be a peculiarity of Čechov’s plays, most notably the last two, *The Cherry Orchard* and *The Three Sisters*. This is probably due to the fact that in realist short-story writing this kind of temporal contrast may have been more difficult to achieve. Indeed, Čechov’s move from a short story writer to a dramatist might have something to do with his growing interest in depicting the new socio-

historical mentality, the change from the era of endless waiting to the eve of change, pregnant with the future

Nevertheless, in Čechov's prose there are temporal techniques at work, as well. In his short stories, particularly in the post-Sachalin ones, there is usually a contrast between the experience of time of the characters and the conception of time inherent in the event structure of the text. To take an example, in *The Duel* (*Duël'*, 1891), the characters understand their lives deterministically, because they do not rely on their own experience of life but on theoretical schemes: on the one hand, Tolstoyanism, and on the other, Social Darwinism. However, events ultimately proceed quite unexpectedly, and at the end of the story the main characters understand that it is impossible to see human life as predetermined.

The scheme is quite similar to Čechov's other prose of the post-Sachalin phase, such as *The Three Years* (*Tri goda*, 1895), in which life turns out differently and full of surprises for the main characters. In another story of the mid-nineties, *My Life* (*Moja žizn'*, 1896), living according to Tolstoyanism is revealed to be the wrong answer, whereas learning to live according to one's own principles appears a better idea. The scheme is further illustrated by the famous story *Lady with a Lapdog* (*Dama s sobačkoj*, 1899), where a Don Juan type falls seriously in love, contrary to his plans – although this change is, characteristically for Čechov, quite ambiguous. Even the late *The Betrothed* (*Nevesta*), from 1903, proceeds in the same way: a young girl, encouraged by a family friend, leaves her bourgeois provincial life to study in Petersburg; in the course of time she understands the narrowness of the family friend's advice, and begins to find her own view of the world.

In these stories, it is the small trivia of everyday life that make up the major changes in the characters' worldview (Popkin 1993, 46–51), and as always in Čechov, these major changes are shown to be only in their early stages, in process, and thus not finalized. Whereas in the earlier realistic prose the characters' story more or less ended at the end of the story, in Čechov the story frequently begins only at the end.

In conclusion, an analysis of the temporal aspects in *The Cherry Orchard* reveals the Čechovian subject to be in various ways bound to the traditional society and its hierarchies. However, there is in the play a rather strong assumption of rational action in order to reach goals, an

assumption which the characters are shown to be quite unable to fulfil. Modernization itself is represented in the play neutrally, as something inevitable, but its problems are shown in a sensitive way. Thus, it can be concluded that although Čechov is not generally considered to be a historically orientated writer, his texts, most notably *The Cherry Orchard*, nevertheless offer a relatively insightful view of the modern individual and on the historical mentality of Russia on the eve of changes.

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