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What is Chekhov's Siren Whispering to Us? On the Unavoidability of the 'Impossible' Creation of the Humanities

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Abstract

WHAT IS CHEKHOV'S SIREN WHISPERING TO US? ON THE UNAVOIDABILITY OF THE 'IMPOSSIBLE' CREATION OF THE HUMANITIES

The focus of my reflections on hermeneutics and the humanities is the short story or comic tale by Anton Chekhov entitled "The Siren" (1887) where we encounter two irreconcilable conceptions of representation; the story contains within it a philosophical aporia, but makes no attempt one way or another to resolve it. I believe that the non-metaphysical "adhesion" of this aporia is precisely its humour. Is such a humorous hermeneutics of uncertainty (of oneself) or such a comic approach to what we call the humanities, which is not sceptical because it to a certain extent a priori affirms the world as well as one's own imperfection, at all possible? If I understand Chekhov correctly, then he confronts us with the problem of the unavoidability of precisely this "impossible" creation of the humanities.

The focus of my reflections on hermeneutics and the humanities will be the short story or comic tale by Anton Chekhov entitled 'The Siren' (1887).

Let us first consider the plot: During a break in a courtroom session, while they are waiting for the chairman to write his dissenting opinion, just before they are due to go home to dine, a group of magistrates listens to a description by the court secretary of a magnificent dinner. His portrayal of this splendid dinner, which appeals to the experience and dreams of each one of them, means that the writing of the dissenting opinion is made impossible, since all the listeners, including the magistrate who was writing it, leave the room (and the secretary's description) in a hurry. Only the secretary remains behind 'tidying up the papers'.¹

It is nearly four o'clock when 'the magistrates gathered in the conferring room to take off their uniforms and have a short rest' (148) and, significantly, they are not particularly hungry. We find ourselves in a transitory place, between the courtroom and their homes, and a transitory time, between the magistrates' routine work and their equally routine meal. And we learn nothing in the story about these routine things. We do not know what the court case is about, we do not know the reasons for the filing of the dissenting opinion, and, as a consequence, we do not know what kind of judicial opinion the chairman is preparing. On the contrary: four o'clock is approaching but from the moment the eponymous Siren begins his speech, 'physical' time will be measured only according to the destroyed sheets of paper on which the dissenting opinion was to have been – but never is – written. In short: a crucial translocation occurs in the story. The events associated with physical time are subject to an extreme marginalization, whereas the transitory space and time grow to monstrous proportions. And what is more, from the perspective of this monstrous space and time, it is impossible to speak of physical time, it is simply negated. We find ourselves in a hiatus in time as well as in a hiatus between spaces. Metaphorically speaking, it is a time and space that anticipates waiting for Godot, or Kafka's search for Sense, except that Chekhov's waiting and searching are crowned by success, although only in the seductive speech of the Siren. They are therefore attained and questioned simultaneously.²

A large proportion of the story is taken up by the utterances of Zhilin, the court secretary, a fellow 'with a sugary expression' (149), spoken in a low voice and after a time in a whisper directed towards each listener individually, so that his statements are as though personal but at the same time heard and listened to by them all. How do we know that these utterances throw each of his listeners off balance? What actually happens? To be precise: nothing. Zhilin describes the splendid dinner, calling on his own experiences and the

¹ A. Chekhov, *The Comic Stories*. Chosen and translated by H. Pitcher. London: André Deutsch 1998, p. 148–153; p. 153. All references will be to this edition; further page references will be given in the text in round brackets.

² This hiatus in space and time, which is 'filled' with what is imagined and in which there ensues an 'adhesion' to the aporia of representation (which I shall discuss later in this essay), is a characteristic trait of all Chekhov's writing. It is similar with his 'comic' conception of being in the world.

experiences of his individual interlocutors. For him, the point of departure is the feeling of wolfish hunger experienced after great physical exertion (hunting with hounds or travelling a long distance in a rough peasant cart), which intensifies the closer you get to home, triggering the culinary imagination well before you reach there.

This introduction by the Siren sets the model for the whole story.

First, it constructs a powerful opposition between spirit and body, thought and physiology, consciousness and desire (which is strongly associated with what is imagined), where physiology, the body and desire enfeeble and dominate, or even negate the opposing elements (spirit, thought, consciousness). Here are a couple of quotations: 'If you [...] want to have a good appetite, don't ever think about anything intellectual; anything learned or intellectual always spoils the appetite' (149). Or, even more explicitly: '[...] where food's concerned, scholars and philosophers are the lowest of the low, and quite frankly, even the pigs eat better' (149). Furthermore, one of the characters in the story (Mookin) is 'a young man with a languid melancholy expression, reputed to be a philosopher at odds with circumstances and seeking the purpose of life' (148), who, like all the other listeners, will eventually flee the place of Zhilin's descriptions.

Second, the Siren's speech anticipates the fundamental role that will be played in filling the hiatus in time by what is imagined: 'Once when I was travelling, I closed my eyes and imagined sucking-pig with horse-radish, and got such an appetite that it made me quite hysterical' (149). Thus to the oppositions mentioned above we should add one more: what is imagined versus what is realized, where what is imagined wields power over the body, over physiology.

Third and last, the secretary's introduction indicates how eating is inextricably associated with 'home', with returning home, with the domestication of the world. But since what is imagined has been separated from what is realized, the domestication of this world becomes a task that is impossible to carry out. The notion of magnificent food-and-home is separated from home as a place of residence and life, and from consumption. Or to put it in a more radical way: food, as fulfilment, and home, as domestication, remain possible only in what is imagined, in appearance only.

Most of the text, as I suggested above, is taken up by that magnificent dinner, which indicates that our interpretation of it should be inclined to treat it as an evocation of desire, as being concerned with hunger – evoked chiefly through the act of relating or representing, and with the fictionalization and aestheticization of hunger (including the still life: 'And what about sterlet in a ring' [151]), that is: with the phantasm of consuming food. Chekhov might thus be enrolled, on the one hand, into the tradition of Anthelme Brillat-Savarin and his *La Physiologie du Goût* (*The Physiology of Taste*, 1825) and, on

the other, into Freud's analysis of 'the joy, pleasure and delight' of food.³ The dishes described by these writers and analysed by Freud refer, as in Chekhov, to a remembered consumption of food, imagined, virtual, which appeals to the intersubjective, retentive property of memory. Freud, through his cooking, returns – on the one hand – to his own biography and writes it, yet – on the other – he tries through his cooking recipes, which are not entirely serious, to find a way of domesticating the world (Freud's hermeneutics, at least in one of its versions, was always oriented towards understanding what was foreign or 'other' – and hence also to what follows from that: the restoration and appropriation of what is 'other'). But in Chekhov, since memory and imagination are closely linked to the bodily, indeed they totally dominate it, these phantasm-events evoke sensations that are as much shared ones (in the end *all* the listeners submit to the power of what is imagined) as ones that are strictly individual and ascribed to a single and only a single character in the story. In other words: what the Siren whispers (what they share in common) is immediately translated into unrepresentable, individual sensations. Therefore the dishes of Brillat-Savarin and Freud are repeatable (they are cooking recipes; they are the recovery of lost time, home and history, though treated – at least in Freud's case – somewhat tongue in cheek), but Chekhov's dinner both is and is not repeatable. As a consequence, Chekhov's phantasm both can and cannot provide the basis for a catalogue of food, for the making present of home or history, because it reveals itself as difference. In other words: the desire evoked in Chekhov's story is both possible and impossible to satisfy. What is imagined triggers hysteria as much in the colloquial sense quoted above as in the psychoanalytic: the consummation of an unbearably delayed and irreparable loss.

An interpretation of the phantasm, however, encounters certain curious aspects of the story which need to be considered: for example, the fact that all the characters are men and that the phantasm of the dinner is clearly constructed as a masculine one. This is most obvious in the closing paragraphs of the story when, as the conclusion to the dinner, after drinking the 'home-made fruit liqueur', you may sink into a state of bliss:

[...] it's a good idea at the liqueur stage to light a cigar and blow rings, and you'll have wonderful fantasies of being a generalissimo or married to the most beautiful woman in the world, and this beautiful creature spends her whole day floating beneath your windows in this amazing pool full of goldfish, and as she floats past, you call out: 'Come and give me a kiss, darling!' (152)

This 'most beautiful woman in the world' swimming in the goldfish pool is also a substitute, in the Russian language, for a Siren (Russian does not distinguish between 'mermaid' and 'siren'); she is a myth that has been do-

³ S. Freud, *Freud's Own Cookbook*. Edited by J. Hillman and Ch. Boer. New York: Harper Colophon 1985, p. 1. 'Joy! pleasure! delight!' are the opening words of the book's Introduction. This book seems to be a kind of mystification or compilation done by its editors: J. Hillman and Ch. Boer, nevertheless it is useful for my interpretation.

mesticated and appropriated, all the more so as the phantasmal home has been transferred to Australia and the dreamer is relaxing on 'a lovely soft ostrich' (152). A gendered reading of the story also opens up another possible way of understanding it, likewise in connection with the Siren of the title, who in Russian is gendered feminine (in accordance with her Greek prototype), whereas the character playing the role of the Siren in the story is a man. However, I shall spare myself any extended attempt to link the hysteria with voyeurism, homoeroticism or masturbation, as the horizon of my interpretation. I shall simply add that another curious aspect of this phantasm – and here Chekhov differs dramatically from Brillat-Savarin and Freud, as well as from Ancient classical tradition – is the lack of social accompaniment to the virtual food; instead there reigns a solitude satisfied with itself, the self-satiability of pleasure. Finally, last but not least, one is struck by the total invisibility of the producers of the dinner (the people who laid the table, the waiters, the cooks). Pleasure according to Chekhov cannot be associated in any way with work, and in this respect it is entirely sterile. Everything happens of its own accord, ready-made and flawless. We are presented in fact with a realized utopia.

When you're nodding off and feeling drowsy all over, you'll enjoy reading the political news – look, Austria's come a cropper, France is in someone's bad books, the Pope's stuck his neck out – it's really enjoyable (153).

And this all happens because pleasure fills the hiatus in time and space, hence it is u-topian, beyond place (literally: in no-place).

Does such an analysis of pleasure define the horizon within which the story can be understood? Partly, but only partly, because so far it has been deaf to three further questions posed by the story. The first question concerns the eponymous Siren. And a provisional answer must be to refer it to Homer's *Odyssey*. What do Homer's Sirens say or sing – two female figures endowed,⁴ to say the very least, with an inhuman power of destruction? One possible answer that emerges from Chekhov's reworking of Homer is that the Sirens sing of fulfilment, arouse our sleeping desire, intensify it and say an emphatic 'yes'. They exploit the fact that 'We do not so much understand the entities which are talked about; we already are listening only to what is said-in-the-talk as such. What is said-in-the-talk gets understood; but what the talk is about is understood only approximately and superficially. We have *the same thing* in view, because it is in *the same* averageness that we have a common understanding of what is said'.⁵ Chekhov's Siren at this stage in our reading is Heidegger's 'idle

⁴ As Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback noticed in her book *Lovtäl till intet. Essäer om filosofisk hermeneutik*, Glänta production: Logis nr 5 Pathos 2006, p. 92, Homer used the feminine form of dualis, *Seirénoiin* (in Kirke's Siren-story). The Polish translation: Idem, *Pochwała nicości. Eseje o hermeneutyce filozoficznej*, przeł. L. Neuger, Hermeneia t. 1, przedmową opatrzył M.P. Markowski, Kraków 2009.

⁵ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*. Translated by J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell 1967, p. 212 (Chapter Five: Being-in as Such, p. 169–224; paragraph 35: Idle Talk, p. 211–214). 'Idle talk' is the translation of the German 'Gerede'.

talk', translated into a kitschy phantasm of male masturbatory pleasure. But another explanation is also possible: it is idle talk that reveals how consumption is possible only within and via itself, that is within and via precisely idle talk.

It is also striking that the reference to Homer occurs exclusively in the title, apparently without anchorage in the story itself. The removal of the mythical sequence of the Sirens from any mention of Odysseus, his crew, or the threat posed by the Sirens, is striking. Chekhov's story silently entrusts this essential fund of knowledge to the reader-interpreter. But then the absence of Odysseus, of the ship's mast, of the consciousness of threat, becomes significant for understanding. It is an absence, however, in the relating of the story, which is shifted, cast – thanks to the title – onto the interpreter.

The second question is about time and space – it concerns Chekhov's being in-between, that is in the space and time where human desire 'takes hold'. Within the horizon of this question lies the unsolvable problem of the ending: do the magistrates flee from their desire, or do they, on the contrary, run out of the room in order to satisfy it? And is such satisfaction possible at all? And as a consequence: do they rush home, as anticipated at the beginning of the story, or have they already taken up residence within the phantasm and never reach home?

Finally, the third question concerns the story's humour, not only and not mainly as the linguistic 'furnishing' of the text, as a kind of writing technique (which Chekhov brings to perfection), but as a way of being-in-the-world, as a method of reading and interpreting, of being and reading-in-uncertainty.⁶ For we have to consider of course the fact that 'The Siren' is a comic tale, which means that it realizes certain techniques of comedy known since classical times (and described in Aristotle's *Poetics*). Chekhov's story is therefore openly and deliberately of an inferior genre: trivial, obscene, where the phantasm makes fun of its own kitschy nature. It is a degraded myth. We cannot say in this case, however, that the alienating effect of the comedy (as Aristotle understood it) produces a therapeutic catharsis, i.e. that it may be the culmination of the interpreter's journey. Quite the contrary – it is only when the interpreter unbuttons his uniform, or accepts along with the story, that he is situated in the hiatus in time and space, that he will be exposed to the voice of Chekhov's Siren. And that's not all: the interpreter should be hungry, but not too hungry. For only then will he be seduced, if only for a moment, by the descriptions of the appetizers, soups, alcoholic drinks, smells, tastes, because they are not only trivial but also genuinely tempting. He must be open to the sensuality of the world. In other words, according to Chekhov, the interpreter must participate

⁶ It is interesting that the category of certainty, treated usually in the context of the critique of Cartesianism and its consequences for civilization, ignores in total silence – in the works of all post-Heideggerian interpreters for example, Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Was ist Wahrheit* the logical and existential opposition to certainty, i.e. uncertainty, moving on, or rather leaping on, at once to the 'positiveness' of its own exposition of the so-called category of 'truth'.

in the community of desire, which is also at the same time *not* a community because the desire is personal. But it expresses itself through representations, including also literary ones, as for example in Chekhov's story. For the story could be understood as an exposure of the dual role of representation. On the one hand, representation is mimetic replacement, a substitute for something else. Let us say, as in Husserl, that the retentive attributes of consciousness allow the evocation of that splendid dinner-home, while the protensive attributes 'foreshadow' the anticipated meal and the going home. When understood in this sense, the members of the court flee from the 'empty' here and now in order to return home and consume their dinner. On the other hand, let's say as in Freud, representation is an imagined notion or image and suggests nothing beyond itself, thus creating only the appearance, or illusion of 'truthfulness'. According to this understanding, the members of the court flee from the 'empty' here and now in order to chase ad infinitum the phantom of dinner and home, while Chekhov represents – through this presented representation – the lethally seductive nature of literary representation.⁷

I think that everything that I have written so far is just as correct as it is incorrect. This project of understanding within the hiatus in time and space as well as in the community of desire demands a place for humour (or facetiousness), which is not neglect of Heidegger's being or its overlooking, but which allows rather for affirmative participation in the world, mutual understanding, Heidegger's 'care', while protecting us at the same time from a – frequently moralizing – certainty of ourselves. For indeed in Chekhov's comic tale we encounter two irreconcilable conceptions of representation; the story contains within it a philosophical aporia, but makes no attempt one way or another to resolve it. I believe that the non-metaphysical 'adhesion' of this aporia is precisely its humour. Is such a humorous hermeneutics of uncertainty (of oneself) – or such a comic approach to what we call the humanities, which is not sceptical because it – to a certain extent *a priori* – affirms the world as well as one's own imperfection, at all possible? If I understand Chekhov correctly, then he confronts us with the problem of the unavailability of precisely this 'impossible' creation of the humanities.

⁷ In discussing the problem of representation, I am drawing on Michał Paweł Markowski's study 'O reprezentacji (On Representation)' in *Kulturowa teoria literatury. Główne pojęcia i problemy (Cultural Theory of Literature: Main Concepts and Problems)*, ed. by M.P. Markowski and R. Nycz, Kraków 2006, p. 287–330. The fullest treatment that I know of the subject is: M.P. Markowski, *Pragnienie obecności. Filozofie reprezentacji od Platona do Kartezjusza (The Desire for Presence: Philosophies of Representation from Plato to Descartes)*, Gdańsk 1999.