

STEPPE AS A POSITIONAL MASTERPIECE. REGARDING CHEKHOV'S INNOVATIVE STYLE

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Abstract. The article deals with the concept of the positional style as applied to Chekhov's works in general and his story, *Steppe*, in particular. The main goal is to show (1) how one can benefit from applying the positional methodology to the literary analysis and (2) how this may change a traditional perception of characters, plot, and the role of artistic devices. To that end, the parallels between the positional style in chess game and literary analysis are drawn. The theoretical part is followed by a textual analysis of the *Steppe*.

Keywords: the positional style, *Steppe*, characters' predisposition, Yegorushka, St. George Yegorushka, Георгий Победоносец

«Степь» как образец позиционного стиля. К вопросу о новаторстве Чеховского стиля

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Аннотация. В статье рассматривается концепция позиционного стиля применительно к произведениям Чехова в целом и к его рассказу «Степь» в частности. Основная цель состоит в том, чтобы показать (1), что нового привносит понимание позиционного стиля в литературный анализ и (2) как это может изменить традиционное восприятие персонажей, сюжета и роли художественных образов в известных произведениях литературы. С этой целью проводятся параллели между позиционным стилем в шахматной игре и литературным анализом. За теоретической частью следует текстовый анализ «Степи».

Ключевые слова: позиционный стиль, «Степь», predisposition героев, Егорюшка, Георгий Победоносец

Lack of understanding of Chekhov's aesthetic goals provoked severe criticism among his contemporaries. Although *The Steppe* (Step', 1888) did "open a new page in the history of Chekhov's art of writing" and "its artistic merits amazed Chekhov's most sensitive contemporaries, such as Pleshcheev, Saltykov-Shchedrin, and Garshin" [Gromov 1958: URL], the story was nevertheless considered a failure by some major critics and writers. Unlike Garshin, who after reading it declared that "a new, first-rate writer has appeared in Russia" [Gromov 1958: URL], Grigorovich couldn't see "the meaning" of it, and he was not alone. "The leading populist critic N. K. Mikhailovsky saw a senseless conglomeration of accidental episodes" in Chekhov's stories, and in his letter to Chekhov regarding *The Steppe* he "strictly reproached him for his 'saunter with no particular direction and no particular purpose'" [Papernyi 1976: URL].

Critics did not realize that these parts not only made up a system, but also formed some specific conditions for Yegorushka's predisposition to emerge. In order to see better what kind of technique was introduced by Che-

khov let us discuss briefly the appearance of his revolutionary style in light of the game of chess.

The rise of Chekhov's "amorphous," "static" narrative, "sluggishly developing" plot-lines, and "excessive," "unnecessary" "characters, episodes and details," "not connected with the main clashes" had coincided in time with the introduction of the positional style to the game of chess [Zubareva 2015: 51]. The style was called positional owing to its focus on the formation of the position on the chess board rather than on combinations. Remarkably, the appearance of the positional style coincided in time with the appearance of Chekhov's bewildering style of writing.

It is precisely at that moment that the chess world was shaken by a new way of playing chess. The father of the positional style, Wilhelm Steinitz, a chess writer, theoretician, and the first undisputed world chess champion (1886–1894), elaborated and established a theoretical ground for the style that revolutionized the game of chess.

At first, the new style was ridiculed and criticized because of its "inert" and "cowardly" nature which deprived the game of the sparkling attacks and spectacular collisions which had characterized the prevailing combinational style. The mainstream style that excited viewers consisted of offensives, crafty combinations, and a constant preparedness of the players to pounce upon the opponent's king, wiping out all obstacles in their way and stopping at nothing. In his book on aesthetics, Vladimir Volkenstein compares the combinational style in chess to a drama, with sharp collisions, peripeteia, and adventures. On the contrary, the positional style is described as something boring, dull, and inert.

Chess masters raised their eyebrows at the slowly developing positional moves on the chess board. And so did Chekhov's critics who didn't know how to appreciate his leisurely developing narrative with no sparkling conflicts. "The world did not comprehend how much Steinitz had given it; even chess players did not comprehend it. And yet his thought was revolutionary," wrote German mathematician and philosopher Emanuel Lasker, a twenty-seven-year World Chess Champion [Lasker 1947: 189].

The style's focus was on making step-by-step improvements of the position directed toward achieving small advantages. The accumulation of these advantages was important for preparing a better predisposition for survival and development in the unknown future. Analogously, by thoroughly elaborating positions for his characters Chekhov predisposed them to certain outcomes. It was not a particular idea or a plot, but a developing of artistic positions that interested Chekhov as a writer.

Lasker explained the difference between the combinational idea and positional planning in the following way: "The thought which gives life to a combination is called the idea, the thought behind the positional play is called the plan. The idea has a point which surprises, which changes at one blow the state of affairs; the plan has breadth and depth which are imposing and which, by slow, methodical building, give structure to the position" [Lasker 1947: 189].

The positionality of Chekhov's works varies from piece to piece. It increases in his later works, achieving its boiling point in *The Steppe*. What makes

The Steppe a truly positional piece is its rich canvas with loosely related gestalts whose meaning is revealed through the position they have formed. Indeed, from the point of view of plot development, many of the characters, images, and episodes are excessive and redundant. From the point of view of the formation of the position, all of them are necessary. The steppe in the story is a carrier of multiple religious, historic, and folkloric allusions, the careful positioning of which in the narrative serves to create a truly panoramic view of the whole and this allows one to have a broader view of the picture in general and the main character in particular.

In the eyes of the majority, however, *The Steppe* was nothing but “a simple description of little Yegorushka’s journey along the steppe” [Gromov 1958]. Defending *The Steppe*, Pleshcheev remarked that the absence of plot as an external element did not presuppose the absence of the inner content of a story that he called “an inexhaustible spring of inner substance” [Gromov 1958]. This explanation, however, was not enough: since the style was innovative in essence, it required strictly theoretical terms. Unfortunately, the terms were not elaborated and all the arguments came out vague, intuitive and mostly empirical.

The twentieth century did not change much, at this point. Chekhov’s most challenging works were still considered “difficult” [Rodnyanskaya 2006: 442] and lacking ideas. For instance, Sergei Balukhatyi claimed that *The Steppe* was filled with redundant details and descriptions, which covered the absence of a great idea. Maurice Valency criticized the “redundant” characters in *The Seagull*, calling them “needless complexities which serve mainly to obscure the narrative, and are doubtless vestiges of the method of interlacing plot-lines which is characteristic of the French well-made play. But whereas in the tradition of Scribe the subordinate plots are integrated with the main plot which they serve, and generally help to resolve, in *The Seagull* these adjuncts lead nowhere and resolve nothing” [Valency 1966: 158].

On the other hand, critics such as L. P. Gromov, A.P. Chudakov, V. B. Kataev, Robert Louis Jackson, Michael Finke, and many others have contributed tremendously to an understanding of the poetic nature of Chekhov’s “difficult” stories and plays. Could it be that critics of the magnitude of Grigorovich and Balukhatyi were simply deaf to the poetry in prose? Of course not. Rather, as professionals, they wanted to justify in strict logical terms the meaning of the poetic wave that like a turbulent river “flooded” the plot, and action, and conflict, washing away the idea of the story.

The appearance of new methodologies made it possible to speculate about the meaning behind such puzzling and problematic artistic innovations. Thus the “plotless redundancy” of which Chekhov was formerly accused finally attained a positive meaning as “poetic” prose. Missing was a “redundancy theory” that would be explanatory rather than descriptive.

Generally speaking, “redundancy” is the main feature of the positional style that is based on expansionism: the formation of the position entails a preservation of the diversity that is a source of the system’s future development.

The “redundancy” in Chekhov’s works serves to elaborate positions through which the character would move toward his future.

The question of the future is closely associated with uncertainty. Methods of overcoming uncertainty oscillate from fortunetelling to computing probability and the rule of thumb. Unfortunately, they have not always been successful. The positional style in chess was invented as an antidote for uncertainty, since it taught one to make moves on the chess board in the absence of the knowledge of the opponent’s plan.

In literary fiction, uncertainty occurs, first of all, in regard to open endings, the purpose of which is to draw the reader’s attention to the characters’ future. *The Steppe* has such an open ending. The story ends with a question about Yegorushka’s future. “What would that life be like?” the narrator wonders in the finale, and his question simultaneously becomes the reader’s starting point: now he must “depart” anew to see what kind of predisposition was developed during Yegorushka’s journey.

The question of Yegorushka’s future is related directly to his predisposition to form, in Jackson’s terms, “meaning and values.” In predispositioning theory, the term “predisposition” refers to an assessment of the system’s potential in regard to its future development. To find out to what extent the system is predisposed to a certain outcome, all the parameters structuring its potential must be measured and integrated. A probabilistic approach would not work, at this point, since probabilities are based on statistics, and there are no statistics for unique cases: every character is unique, and so is every work, writer, and human being. As Katsenelinboigen explains, when “we reduce a unique situation to some previously known one by stripping the former of its specific unique features,” we perform “a pretty risky procedure since the specific features of a unique event could be quite significant, and eliminating them might result in a drastically distorted estimate of the likelihood of the situation occurring” [Katsenelinboigen 1997: 28]. He argues that attempts to pronounce two systems similar fail, “because the criteria for similarity are not clear” [Katsenelinboigen 1997: 28].

In the beginning, Yegorushka is positioned between a dreamer, Father Christopher, and the practical Kuzmichov. The external position somehow corresponds to

Yegorushka’s internal state. Like Father Christopher, he is imaginative and sensitive to beauty. Like Kuzmichov, he is surprisingly practical. His practicality is revealed in the grocery store, where he talks with the owner about prices, expressing an interest in business. The reader wonders which of these two qualities will predominate in the future. Another apparent contradiction in the character is that Yegorushka loves to think creatively, and yet he is reluctant to engage in study. He leaves home against his will, with no desire to dedicate himself to the learning process. He is not a Lomonosov, as Father Christopher humorously dubs him. Unlike the famous scholar, Yegorushka prefers to learn through observing and imagining. His associative thinking betrays his artistic nature. Without studying, however, he may not develop his talents fully. So, will

he eventually overcome his resistance to hard work, or will he remain a dreamer for the rest of his life?

Only referring to Yegorushka's potential may one find answers. Yegorushka's development is shown through his "step-by-step improvement" [Katsenelinboigen 1997: 28] on his way to achieving his goals.

At least three goals—two external and one internal—are ascribed to this character.

The external goals include the intermediate goal of reaching Toskunova's house and the final goal of applying for school. The internal goal is not formulated in the text. Instead, it becomes a property of the context formed by the etymology of Toskunova's last name. Derived from *toska* (boredom), her name implies that Yegorushka's journey may end in the kingdom of boredom. So, withstanding boredom, overcoming its poisonous tentacles becomes Yegorushka's internal goal. Is he equipped for succeeding?

On a larger scale, fighting boredom is the internal task of almost every character in the story. The metaphor of "boredom" appears too often to be missed by the interpreter. There are two main nouns in the text which signify boredom: *skuka* and *toska*. In addition, the story includes a number of expressions, such as "out of boredom" (*ot nechego delat'*), etc. Throughout the story Chekhov creates a vast gallery of characters—strong and weak, smart and stupid, tender and violent—all of whom at some point become prisoners of boredom. Some characters fight boredom by entertaining others, as Panteley does with his horrific stories about merchants and robbers. At the same, this becomes the way for them to escape their own imprisonment in the kingdom of boredom. Yegorushka entertains himself, too, but unlike others he uses his internal capacity. His entertainment comes from within as a result of his ever-working, rich imagination. As soon as he gets bored, his imagination chases boredom away.

Chekhov intentionally positions Yegorushka next to Father Christopher, who is distinguished by the same amazed look. "Father Christopher never left off gazing with wonder at God's world, and smiling" (Works 7: 18. Garnett's transl.). This suggests that imagination is not a prerogative of age but rather of type of mind.

A more wild type of entertaining oneself is represented by characters such as Deniska and Dymov. The fight between Dymov and Yegorushka, who stands up for the church-singer Yemel'ian, whom Dymov is harassing, [Senderovich 2002: 194-5] ends with Dymov yelling, "I'm bored!" This exclamation is indicative—it reveals once again who Dymov's true enemy is.

The quarrel with Dymov serves to illuminate new qualities in Yegorushka which until now were hidden. One would never expect that little, sensitive, imaginative, and homesick boy confront the strongest and most violent man. Fighting Dymov, Yegorushka reveals himself as a defender, not a debauchee. He defends his intrinsic values and his moral convictions, and so he evolves from Yegorushka to a little Yegorii, i.e., begins to resemble his namesake, St. George.

One of the myths regarding St. George describes his victory over the dragon. In the implied space of the story, this “dragon” has multiple appearances. One of the “heads” is boredom that eats the world from within, destroying people’s souls, minds, and even lives. Another “head” represents religious intolerance. The episode with the Jewish lady, who presents the Christian boy with a big rye cookie made in the shape of a heart, conveys the symbolism of reconciliation between the two religions. Taking the cookie, Yegorushka becomes a carrier of the heart of another religion. When he departs, he “shifts” the cookie in his pocket and falls asleep, “just as he did in his bed at home.” The cookie-“heart” given to him by the Jewish woman and the feeling of home are positioned so close together in the text that it suggests a metaphoric reconciliation of Judaic-Christian values through Yegorushka.

Contrary to expectation, Yegorushka doesn’t eat the cookie. First, he tries to find out its material value by asking the owner of the grocery store to tell him the price of such cookies. It turns out that Yegorushka’s cookie is twice as expensive as the other ones in the store. He puts it back into his pocket and remembers about it only after the rain melts it into a paste. A feeling of compassion pierces him as he looks at the melted “heart,” and at that moment his own heart melts as well.

The episode ends in a humorous yet symbolic way: a white dog that presumably belongs to Varlamov eats the “sticky plaster” from Yegorushka’s hand. In the beginning of the story Yegorushka had regretted that he had no whip to lash at Varlamov’s dogs like Deniska did. His earlier “heartless” fantasy transforms into a “pacific” act in the end: he doesn’t chase the dog away, but instead allows it to eat the formerly heart-shaped cake. And even if he acts on impulse, without thinking about it, the meaning of this transformation should not be underestimated.

The green rag in which the cookie is initially wrapped connects the space of action and the implied space. As Senderovich suggests, the color green in Chekhov’s works is associated with the dragon [Senderovich 1985]. Before giving the cookie to Yegorushka, the Jewess unwraps the rag. The unwrapping of the “heart” before “little George” may be interpreted as yet another victory of St. George over the dragon, if by dragon we mean religious and cultural intolerance.

In conclusion, critics have often argued that Yegorushka plays the auxiliary role of a “bolt” in an otherwise disjointed narrative about a journey. “The plot of *The Steppe* develops without any inner connection to the main character’s personality,”

Chudakov writes. “Yegorushka plays mostly the part of a certain bolt in the plot-composition unity through which the descriptions of nature, people as well as the narrator’s speculations, are provided. And the same has been noted by all other critics” [Chudakov1971: 117–18]. Needless to say, such view of the character impoverishes the greatness of Chekhov’s work and simplifies his vision as a writer and a citizen. The positional approach to the literary character opens new horizons for the interpreter. As to *The Steppe*, it allows one to see

better the formation of Yegorushka's potential and his predisposition to become another fighter of the "dragon" that threatens to destroy his homeland.

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