NOTES

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Realia and Chekhov's "The Student"

In his book О мастерстве Чехова A. B. Derman devotes the ninth section of Chapter 8 to a study of the attitude displayed by Chekhov towards what the critic calls realia. The term denotes those instances where a writer of fiction has employed in his work factual material which can be verified in real life. As Derman points out, Chekhov, like Pushkin before him, was not slow to criticize any author who tolerated inaccuracies in respect of realia. For example, Chekhov accuses Leikin, editor of the journal Критика, of describing partridges as inhabiting trees inside a forest, whereas in reality they are to be found only at the edge of woodland.

Chekhov's early religious upbringing left him with an impressive knowledge of ecclesiastical regulations and traditions, and Derman gives examples of his use of it in his criticism of other authors. Thus the short story writer, Khlopov, is chastised by Chekhov for including in one of his works a scene wherein a church guardian (церковный попечитель—the term itself does not exist) himself transfers a reader from one church to another; only a bishop, Khlopov is told, would have the authority to do such a thing. Again, the same writer has his reader intone a prayer at the end of the story: "Bless, my soul, O Lord, and be joyful...." Chekhov comments that there is no such prayer and gives the correct version: "Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name." 2

Derman goes on to emphasize further Chekhov's strict and exacting attitude towards factual accuracy and quotes from a letter of the writer's in which he complains about a stage-set planned for a production of The Cherry Orchard. The cherry trees, Chekhov writes, should not be shown growing in a small yard as intended, because in such a place there would not be sufficient sunlight for them to grow. 3 Derman finally comments that: "In truth, one can go no further than this in the struggle for realist verisimilitude!" 4

2. Letter of 13 Feb. 1888. (All dates in the notes are given in Old Style.)
3. Letter to Ol'ga Knipper of 20 Nov. 1903.
4. Derman, p. 162. All translations from the Russian in the essay are my own.
The purpose of the present note is in no way to disprove or even disagree with Derman’s general point concerning Chekhov’s liking for factual correctness. Chekhov’s stories from this point of view can indeed only rarely be faulted. In his depiction of medical phenomena, for example, he was able to draw upon his training as a doctor and reproduce clinical symptoms in his stories with great attention to accuracy and detail. He refers proudly to this fact in commenting upon his handling of both mental illness in “An Attack of Nerves” and the birth scene in “The Name-Day Party.”

Although the present essay is by no means intended as an exposé of Chekhov’s mistakes in the given field, nevertheless, his general fastidiousness with regard to realia renders particularly interesting any noticeable factual discrepancies which may appear in his work. A minor example concerns Zinaida Fedorovna’s reference to Balzac’s Le Père Goriot in Tale of an Unknown Man. She recalls that at the end of the French novel the hero threatens Paris and says: “Now we are through!”—and thereafter begins a new life. In just the same way, she continues, she will look from the train for the last time at St. Petersburg and say: “Now we are through!” Yet Zinaida Fedorovna’s rhetoric is based on a misinterpretation of Rastignac’s phrase, “A nous deux maintenant!,” a phrase used not to suggest any hostile separation from Paris, but intended to herald his even greater involvement in the life of the city.

The above remarks describe and illustrate the general approach to be taken in the examination of Chekhov’s “The Student” which follows. For a work of such brevity—three or four pages in most editions—it presents us with much of relevance to the given field of interest.

It is first worth recalling the bare facts of the story. A theological student, Ivan Velikopol’skii, is walking home on the Friday of Holy Week from a shooting expedition. Hunger, the cold weather, thoughts of his parents’ poverty and illness, all combine to create a feeling of pessimism: life has always been full of misery and always will be. On his way he stops at some vegetable plots to talk to the two women who tend them, a mother and daughter. Standing by their fire in the open air, the student is reminded of the fire at which the apostle Peter warmed himself on the night he denied his friendship with Christ. He tells the women the biblical story and the

5. See letter to A. N. Pleshcheev of 13 Nov. 1888.
8. Chekhov frequently uses the rhetorical device exemplified here, where a quotation from a work of literature—or even from a casual anecdote—is repeated with reference to the personal situation of the hero. In this instance, we have no way of knowing whether the misinterpretation of Balzac is Chekhov’s own or his heroine’s; but this is a consideration secondary to the rhetorical design of the passage as a whole.